

How a sweaty t-shirt gives clues about human disgust reactions

23 February 2016, by Anna Ford



Psychologists at the University of Sussex have found that a person's core disgust response is reduced if the source is within their own social group.

In the study published today in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the team from the University of Sussex and colleagues from the University of St Andrews compared reactions of students to sweaty t-shirts bearing a logo from their own university as well as one from a separate institution.

The results showed that the reaction to 'core disgust' was reduced when students were asked to smell a sweaty t-shirt bearing their own university's logo.

Dr John Drury, Reader in Social Psychology in the

School of Psychology at the University of Sussex, explained: "This reduction in the response to core disgust from a stimulant from within a person's own social group is significant because it helps us to understand how group behaviour becomes possible. Essentially, it frees people to cooperate with each other, and to work together effectively."

The psychologists conducted two experiments. In the first, students from the University of Sussex were shown t-shirts bearing their own university's logo as well as t-shirts bearing the logo of Brighton University. In the second experiment students from the University of St Andrews had to smell a sweaty t-shirt that either had a St Andrews logo, a Dundee University logo (a local separate university, equivalent to Brighton University in the first study) or no logo.

The reduction in disgust was evidenced by participants walking more slowly to wash their hands after handling the familiar t-shirt and pumping the soap dispenser fewer times.

Core disgust is "embodied presence of another" – represented in this case by a smelly, sweaty t-shirt - as opposed to moral or sexual disgust.

Anne Templeton, PhD student in the School of Psychology, the University of Sussex, who ran the second study added: "These findings suggest that disgust isn't just a matter of sensory information (what we see and touch and smell) but of our social relationship to the source. This helps explain, for instance, why we experience less disgust when our own children are sick on us or when we change their nappies."

Professor Stephen Reicher of the University of St. Andrews, the lead author on the paper, said: "Disgust is an emotion which plays a fundamental role in keeping us distant from others and from things that might harm us such as infection.

"But, by the same token, it can stop people coming together when that is necessary. After all, you won't work effectively with others if you can't stand being in the same room with them. You can't pull together if you can't bear to touch others. So the reduction of physical [disgust](#) is a basic mechanism which is necessary for groups to come together, to cohere successfully and to work together effectively."

More information: Stephen D. Reicher et al.
Core disgust is attenuated by ingroup relations,
Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences
(2016). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1517027113](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1517027113)

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