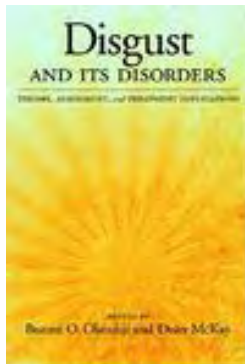


Disgust: From the Evolutionary to the Disordered

A review of



Disgust and Its Disorders: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment Implications

by Bunmi O. Olatunji and Dean McKay (Eds.)

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009. 324 pp.

ISBN 978-1-4338-0397-0. \$69.95

Reviewed by

[Craig Marker](#)

[Gillian Cohen](#)

Disgust, considered by some to be one of the primary emotions experienced and expressed universally by all humans, was first introduced as a subject of study by Charles Darwin in his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and*

Animals (1872/1998). However, since its rather famous introduction into scientific literature, disgust has been largely ignored until only recently. Perhaps some people found the topic of disgust to be, well, disgusting and thus not worthy of rigorous academic exploration and experimentation.

However, Bunmi O. Olatunji and Dean McKay have put together a compelling collection of authors who are fighting to help disgust find its rightful place in the world of scientific research. To the best of our knowledge, Olatunji and McKay's volume is the first comprehensive book that presents background information, current research, and future implications and directions for the study of disgust.

Disgust and Its Disorders: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment Implications is a highly inclusive, scholarly, and well-written book that will no doubt become known as a seminal work in the disgust literature.

Yet, disgust should not be of interest just to those focusing their interests on emotions. Disgust has cultural and societal implications, and it influences human behavior on a daily basis. Disgust affects more than a person's food choices: It has specific implications as to whom one chooses as a friend, what religion a person adheres to, and one's sense of morality, to name but a few. *Disgust and Its Disorders* discusses how disgust influences our habits and preferences; it is so ingrained in the human way of life that most people do not pause to consider that disgust underlies so many everyday decisions.

Disgust has clear evolutionary origins. An animal that spat out and then learned to avoid bad-tasting or rotten food had an increased chance of long-term survival. In today's incarnation, though, disgust has taken on many different

functions beyond assisting basic survival. As discussed throughout the book, disgust is typically conceptualized as being made up of multiple domains. Typical domains are food, animals, sex, body products, space, death, and morals/outgroups; each of these domains encompasses a wide variety of stimuli that have the potential to evoke disgust. While every society has differences when it comes to foods, objects, people, and customs that provoke a disgust reaction, all disgust has developed from a basic evolutionary rejection-and-avoidance mechanism.

Disgust is acquired through a combined effect of numerous mechanisms, including genetics, learning, culture, and life experiences. Disgust has distinct and unique neural pathways devoted to its forms and expressions, and there are many physiological responses to disgust that occur reflexively. Additionally, disgust has a unique physiology that sets it apart from other similar emotions, such as anxiety. The disgust reaction is typically coupled with a decrease in heart rate, supporting its existence as an emotion separate and distinct from fear, which is associated with an increase in heart rate and arousal. (The book provides an explanation of these effects, but readers can also see Olatunji and Sawchuk, 2005, for a more in-depth review.)

In addition to chapters on the background, physiology, neuroanatomy, and theoretical underpinnings of disgust, *Disgust and Its Disorders* contains chapters written by highly knowledgeable authors on the role that disgust plays in various psychological disorders. The study of disgust promises to shed new light on the development and treatment of a wide range of debilitating psychological

disorders, from phobias of animals and injection injuries to obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), eating disorders, and sexual disorders.

While each chapter in this volume proposes future research directions still unexplored in each domain of disgust research, this volume also has direct implications for clinicians. The authors illuminate potential vulnerabilities for the development of disgust-related psychological disorders, as well as new avenues for treatment. For example, in OCD, some individuals do not benefit from the traditional exposure and response prevention (ERP) treatment. It is possible that disgust, unlike anxiety, is not as easily extinguished through traditional ERP. By focusing a portion of treatment specifically onto a client's maladaptive disgust reactions, it may be possible to more thoroughly and effectively eliminate OCD symptoms, in addition to his or her anxiety.

However, while this volume serves as a highly comprehensive beginning to the in-depth exploration of the development, response patterns, and disorders of disgust, it has one noticeable omission. While one chapter is devoted to a cross-cultural perspective on disgust, very little is mentioned on the role of disgust in stereotypes, prejudice, and ingroup/outgroup social relations. For example, Hodson and Costello (2007), in their study of attitudes toward immigrants, found disgust sensitivity to be a critical component in the experience of and development of negative attitudes toward individuals who differ significantly from oneself.

While disgust, indeed, has specific applications in the fields of psychophysiology, neuropsychology, and psychology (evolutionary, developmental, clinical,

cognitive, and behavioral), its influence on social and cultural psychology is also immense. For people with a curiosity about human nature, a desire to pursue a new avenue of research, or a desire to understand themselves or others better, this book provides an excellent springboard from which to jump.

References

- Darwin, C. (1998). *The expression of the emotions in man and animals*. London: HarperCollins. (Original work published 1872)
- Hodson, G., & Costello, K. (2007). Interpersonal disgust, ideological orientations, and dehumanization as predictors of intergroup attitudes. *Psychological Science*, 18(8), 691–698. [PsycINFO](#) [Article](#)
- Olatunji, B., & Sawchuk, C. (2005). Disgust: Characteristic features, social manifestations, and clinical implications. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 24(7), 932–962. [PsycINFO](#) [Article](#)