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Sanctity and Self-Protection: Linking Moral Foundations Theory and Fundamental Motives

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Abstract

Moral foundations theory proposes that we rely on a set of moral intuitions when making moral judgements (Graham et al., 2013). The sanctity/degradation moral foundation serves to protect one from pathogens, and it is activated by events that indicate potential exposure to illness, such as sexual deviance, which leads to feelings of disgust. This foundation is also activated by foul smells and filth, which leads to harsher moral judgements of sanctity-related moral transgressions (Schnall et al., 2008). The fundamental motives model describes a set of modules that serve evolutionary functions and become activated to motivate behavior (Kenrick et al., 2010). The self-protection motive serves to protect one from harm, and it becomes activated by cues of danger, such as angry faces, and to pathogen exposure cues, such as visible sores. We will be examining whether activating the self-protection motive might lead activate the sanctity moral foundation. We expect that those who are primed with a threat (i.e., activating concerns of self-protection) will make harsher judgments of sanctity-related moral transgressions than will those who were not so primed. Participants will read either a story that primes self-protection (home invasion) or a control story (lost keys). They will then read a series of paragraphs of moral violations and rate the extent to which they find them morally wrong.