

College students implicitly judge interracial sex and gay sex to be morally wrong

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Some moral intuitions arise from psychological processes that are not fully accessible to consciousness. For instance, most people disapprove of consensual adult incest between siblings, but are unable to articulate why—they just feel that it is wrong (Haidt, 2001). More generally, there is evidence for at least two sources of moral judgment: explicit conscious reasoning and tacit intuitions, which are motivated by emotional responses (Greene et al., 2001) and learned associations (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

We explore here the question of whether there exist implicit moral judgments that contravene people's explicit beliefs. To test this, we used a phenomenon noted by Knobe (2003)—people are more inclined to say that a behavior was performed *intentionally* when they regard that behavior as morally wrong (see Leslie et al. 2006; Nadelhoffer, in press; Young et al. in press; see Knobe, in press, for a review). We constructed vignettes that describe actions that many people find objectionable, but which our subjects—liberal North American students—were expected to explicitly describe as blameless. We were interested in whether their intentionality judgments would nonetheless reflect moral disapproval, and also whether this implicit disapproval would be predicted by a basic affective characteristic of our subjects—disgust sensitivity.

### *Method*

We tested 44 undergraduates at the University of California, Irvine. All subjects received a packet containing three separate vignettes (one per page) about an agent who knowingly encouraged an outcome<sup>1</sup>. Half of the subjects received “implicit transgression” scenarios that described an agent who caused the sorts of effects that many people would view as morally

wrong: (1) a director who makes a music video that had the effect of encouraging French-kissing in public among gay men and (2) a vice-president of advertising who approves an ad campaign encouraging interracial sex. The other half of the subjects received vignettes describing the promotion of (presumably) morally neutral behaviors: (1) a director who makes a music video encouraging French-kissing in public among heterosexual couples, and (2) a vice-president of advertising who approves an ad campaign encouraging the placement of gardenias in one's office. In both cases, these effects were described as side effects—the agent knew about the effect, but this was not the primary goal of his behavior.

Immediately following each vignette, all subjects were asked the following questions: (1) Did [Person A] *intentionally* encourage [Behavior X]? ( $1 = \text{not at all}$ ,  $7 = \text{definitely}$ ), and (2) Is there anything wrong with [Behavior X]? (*circle: yes or no*). All subjects received the vignettes and questions in the order described above.

Subjects then completed the short-form disgust sensitivity scale, (Haidt, McCauley & Rozin, 1994). This contains 8 items relating to core disgust, including items such as “I try to avoid letting any part of my body touch the toilet seat in a public restroom, even when it appears clean.” All 8 items were averaged to form a disgust sensitivity index (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.66$ ).

### *Results and Discussion*

As predicted, none of the subjects judged either the interracial sex story or the gardenia planting control to be wrong. A substantial minority (27%) of the subjects judged the gay kissing scenario to be wrong, but even more (45%) judged the heterosexual kissing story to be wrong.

The results from the intentionality measure are shown in Figure 1. We subjected the intentionality judgments to a 2 (within subjects: vignette) X 2 (between-subjects: implicit

transgression vs. control) mixed-design Analysis of Variance. The analysis revealed the predicted main effect—despite explicitly claiming that they were either not wrong at all (inter-racial sex) or less wrong than the control condition (gay kissing), subjects viewed the encouragement of the behaviors in the implicit transgression condition as more intentional than the control items across the two vignettes,  $F(1, 42) = 7.44, p < .01, \eta^2 = 0.15$ . There was no interaction effect of vignette x condition, indicating that both vignettes were treated equally. Given that other studies that used virtually identical sentences found intuitions of intentionality correlated with intuitions of moral wrongness (see Knobe, in press, for a review), this suggests that our subjects found our vignettes to be morally wrong—despite their explicit responses.

Finally, we explored the relationship between disgust sensitivity and judgments of intentionality<sup>2</sup>. In the implicit transgression condition, intentionality ratings were correlated with disgust both for the gay kissing vignette ( $r = .44, p < .05$ ) and for the interracial sex vignette ( $r = .47, p < .05$ ). There was no significant correlation for the control condition of the first of these vignettes, but we obtained an unexpected negative correlation for the control condition of the second vignette ( $r = -.46, p < .05$ ), suggesting that people who are high in disgust are also especially likely to think that planting gardenias in one's office is a good thing to do. We confess to being mystified by this finding.

The positive correlations with disgust are interesting in two ways. First, they suggest that the intentionality effect is the product of subject's own moral assessments of the described scenarios, not their judgments about what other people would think. And second, they are consistent with the view that some moral reactions, particularly in the domains of race and sex, are motivated by feelings of disgust (see Bloom, 2004).

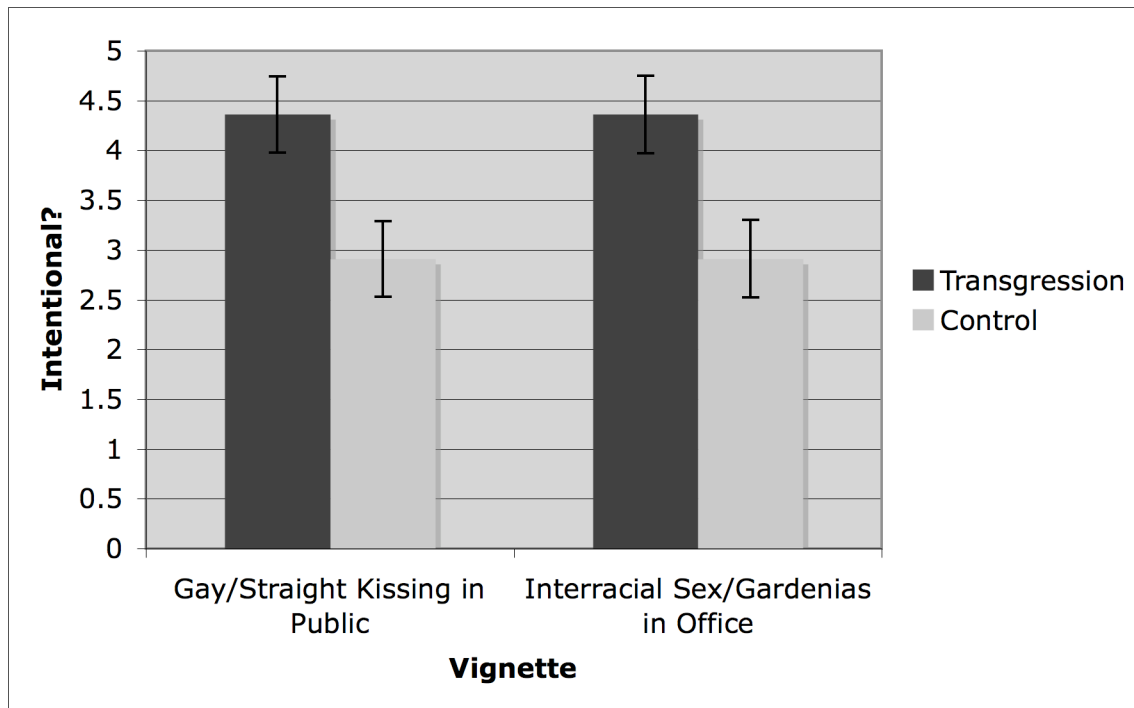
This present study demonstrates the viability of a new measure of implicit moral judgments. Future work might use this measure to further investigate the relationship between implicit and explicit judgments.

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Figure 1. Judgments of Intentionality by Condition



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Explicit judgments about the impermissibility of the scenarios were not related to disgust sensitivity in the control or transgression conditions ( $t$ 's  $<.4$ , *ns*).

<sup>2</sup> For the last vignette, participants viewed the control condition as impermissible—causing us to abandon this vignette as a plausible test of our hypothesis.

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