

“Emotion and Decision Making”

Humans naturally dispose of objects that disgust them. Is this phenomenon so deeply embedded that even incidental disgust – i.e., where the source of disgust is unrelated to a possessed object – triggers disposal? Two experiments were designed to answer this question. Two film clips served as disgust and neutral primes; the objects were routine commodities (boxes of office supplies). Results revealed that the incidental disgust condition powerfully increased the frequency with which decision makers traded away a commodity they owned for a new commodity (more than doubling the probability in each condition), thereby countering otherwise robust status quo bias (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Decision makers were unaware of disgust’s impact. Even when warned to correct for it, they failed to do so. These studies presented real choices with tangible rewards. Their findings thus have implications not only for theories of affect and choice, but also for practical improvements in everyday decisions.