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Violations of Moral Standards versus Emotional Reactions: How is Outrage Generated?

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Abstract

Outrage has often been interpreted as a shorthand for “moral outrage,” anger upon a moral standard being violated (Batson et al., 2007). We ask whether a violation of a moral standard is necessary for producing outrage or whether other variables can also produce it. By presenting participants with a series of potentially outrage-inducing scenarios and measuring their emotional responses, we seek to identify the predictors of outrage. We find that anger and disgust are the strongest predictors of level of outrage compared to sense of threat, level of surprise, level of uncomfortableness, severity of the moral violation, and how much one values the moral being violated. Mediation analyses suggest that moral violations do not mediate the effects of anger and disgust on outrage. However, anger and disgust do mediate the effect of moral violations on outrage. Our findings suggest that moral violations elicit anger and disgust, which in turn produce feelings of outrage.