

Psychology

Cleanliness is next to godlessness

Soaping away your outer dirt may lead to inner evil

PUBLIC displays of untidiness, such as graffiti, may promote bad behaviour (see previous story), but when it comes to personal cleanliness the opposite appears to be true. A study just published in *Psychological Science* by Simone Schnall of the University of Plymouth and her colleagues shows that washing with soap and water makes people view unethical activities as more acceptable and reasonable than they would if they had not washed themselves.

Dr Schnall's study was inspired by some previous work of her own. She had found that when feelings of disgust are instilled in them beforehand, people make decisions which are more ethical than would otherwise be expected. She speculates that the reason for this is that feeling morally unclean (ie, disgusted) leads to feelings of moral wrongness and thus triggers increased ethical behaviour by instilling a desire to right the wrong. However, as the cleanliness and purification rituals found in many religions suggest, physical cleanliness, too, is linked to moral behaviour, so she decided to investigate this as well.

To do so, she conducted two experiments. The first asked 40 volunteers to unscramble sentences. Half were given sentences containing words associated with purity and cleanliness, such as "pure", "washed", "clean", "immaculate" and "pristine". Those given to the other half contained only neutral words. The volunteers were then asked to describe how they would rate a series of acts on an ethical scale ranging from zero (perfectly okay) to nine (very wrong). These varied from taking money found in a lost

wallet, via eating a family's dead dog to avoid starvation, to using a kitten for sexual arousal.

The second experiment exposed 44 volunteers to a three-minute clip from "Trainspotting", a film that is well known for eliciting feelings of disgust, to make them all feel unclean. The volunteers were then asked to describe how they would rate the same series of acts as in the first experiment. However, after watching the clip and before being exposed to the ethical questions, half of the participants were told that the room in which they were to do the rating was a sterile staff space that needed to be kept clean. They were therefore asked, please, to wash their hands with soap and water when entering.

The researchers report that those who were given the "clean" words or who washed themselves rated the acts they were asked to consider as ethically more acceptable than the control groups did. Among the volunteers who unscrambled the sentences, those exposed to ideas of cleanliness rated eating the family dog at 5.7, on average, on the wrongness scale, whereas the control group rated it as 6.6. Their score for using a kitten in sexual play was 6.7; the control group individuals gave it 8.3. Similar results arose from the handwashing experiment.

Physical purification, in other words, produces a more relaxed attitude to morality. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Pontius Pilate is portrayed in the Bible as washing his hands of the decision to crucify Jesus. Something to think about for those who feel that purification rituals bring them closer to God.