

The Behavioral Immune System: Current Concerns and Future Directions

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## Abstract

The behavioral immune system is a motivational system that helps minimize infection risk by changing cognition, affect, and behavior in ways that promote pathogen avoidance. In the current paper, we review foundational concepts of the behavioral immune system and provide a brief summary of recent social psychological research on this topic. Next, we highlight current conceptual and empirical limitations of this work, and delineate important questions that have the potential to drive major advances in the field. These questions include predicting the ontological development of the behavioral immune system, specifying the relationship between this system and the physiological immune system, and distinguishing conditions that elicit direct effects of situational pathogen threats versus effects that occur only in interaction with dispositional disease concerns. This discussion highlights significant challenges and underexplored topics to be addressed by the next generation of behavioral immune system research.

Perhaps no other factor in our evolutionary history has shaped human behavior more than the consequences of pathogen and parasitic infection. Even today, close to one quarter of all deaths around the world are due to infectious disease—a rate more than double that from violence or injury (WHO, 2015). In light of these substantial costs, people and other animals have evolved a broad range of responses intended to cope with pathogens, including cultural adaptations such as food handling practices (Billing & Sherman, 1998; Henrich, 2015) and biological adaptations such as sickness behavior (Dantzer & Kelley, 2007). The most specialized of these adaptations is the constellation of biological mechanisms comprising the physiological immune system. Although activation of the physiological immune system is remarkably efficient at managing pathogenic threats, it is metabolically costly and imperfect. Inflammatory responses following infection, for example, contribute to diseases of aging (Conner & Grisham, 1996; Khansari, Shakiba, & Mahmoudi, 2009) and immune activation temporarily inhibits the ability to solve other adaptive problems, such as attracting a mate or caring for offspring (Dantzer, 2001; Hart, 1988). In light of these drawbacks, another set of defensive mechanisms function to mitigate the threat of disease *before* infection occurs—a behavioral immune system (Murray & Schaller, 2016; Schaller, 2011; Schaller & Park, 2011).

In this article, we briefly review theory and research on the behavioral immune system, and the implications of this system for classic domains of social psychology. We then raise a number of unresolved questions, empirical concerns, and directions for future work within this growing literature.

### The Behavioral Immune System

The term ‘behavioral immune system’ describes a complex suite of cognitive, affective, and behavioral mechanisms that ultimately help prevent pathogen transmission in the face of recurrent infectious disease threats. Proximately, this system functions by detecting threat-relevant cues in the environment and activating responses aimed at diminishing those threats. As with many evolved threat management systems, behavioral immune activity is marked by both contextual sensitivity and biases that aid adaptive responding.

Because not all situations afford identical levels of infection-related threat, nor all people identical levels of infection-related vulnerability, the behavioral immune system exhibits *functional flexibility*—sensitivity to the costs and benefits of pathogen avoidance (e.g., Schaller & Park, 2011; Schaller & Neuberg, 2012; Schaller, Park, & Kenrick, 2007). For example, people who perceive themselves more vulnerable to disease express more ethnocentrism and less sociability—two behavioral immune manifestations—in response to pathogen cues than do those who perceive themselves less vulnerable (Mortensen et al., 2010; Navarrete & Fessler, 2006; Park, Schaller, & Crandall, 2007). This type of personal and contextual sensitivity, where factors implying vulnerability predict stronger responses and factors implying relative safety predict muted responses, characterizes many of the findings in this literature. The behavioral immune system is also marked by a tendency to *overgeneralize*—it is prone to activation even in cases where pathogen threats are absent. Because the specific symptoms caused by pathogens are ever-changing and highly variable, evolution of a system to perfectly classify individuals who do and

do not harbor pathogens would be impossible. Evolved responses to such signal detection problems often rely on liberal identification criteria when targeting potential threats, what is known as the ‘smoke detector principle’ (Haselton & Nettle, 2006; Nesse, 2005). Just as a smoke detector can sound an alarm in response to benign cues such as cooking fumes, a number of non-infectious physical and mental abnormalities can act as cues to the presence of pathogens in others, including disfigurements (Ackerman et al., 2009; Miller & Maner, 2011), disabilities (Park, Faulkner, & Schaller, 2003), obesity (Lund & Miller, 2014; Park et al., 2007), and elderly appearance (Duncan & Schaller, 2009; Miller & Maner, 2012). Although innocuous cues trigger many false alarms, the costs of these may be relatively small and outweighed by the costs of potentially missing true disease threats.

Outputs generated by the behavioral immune system can be characterized as either *proactive* or *reactive*—an important distinction receiving only recent attention in the literature. Reactive responses emerge in the presence of information connoting an immediate infection risk, such as smelling a foul odor or seeing someone with open sores. These responses generally take the form of avoidant or prophylactic behaviors (Curtis, de Barra, & Aunger, 2011; Tybur, Lieberman, Kurzban, & DiScioli, 2013), such as restricted sexual attitudes (Duncan, Schaller, & Park, 2009; Murray, Jones, & Schaller, 2013; Schaller & Murray, 2008), positivity toward condom use (Tybur et al., 2011), and avoidance of people possessing cues heuristically associated with illness (Park et al., 2003; 2007). Proactive responses, in contrast, are aimed at managing the long-term threat of illness. Certain habitual actions such as hygiene behavior—

which exist both universally and across species—qualify as proactive management of persistent bacterial and viral threats (e.g., Curtis & Biran, 2001). More distally-proactive, pathogen threat amplifies the importance people place on a potential mate’s physical attractiveness, symmetry, and secondary sex characteristics, all indicators of health (e.g., Gangestad & Buss, 1993; Hill, Prokosch, & DelPriore, 2015; Jones et al., 2012; Lee & Zietsch, 2011; Young, Sacco, & Hugenberg, 2011). This preference decreases the risk of pathogen exposure because healthy people are relatively less likely to be infected themselves, and also provides ‘next-generation’ protection for offspring because these mates are relatively more likely to possess and transmit high levels of genetic immunocompetence (Stevenson, Case, & Oaten, 2011; Tybur & Gangestad, 2011). Such work suggests that reactive and proactive behavioral immune responses help protect individuals, their offspring, and slow the rate of horizontal disease transmission within groups.

### **Influence of the Behavioral Immune System on Social Psychology**

Research on the behavioral immune system has revealed two key social consequences of system activation: (1) increased aversion and avoidance of unfamiliar and outgroup targets, and (2) strengthened cohesion with familiar and ingroup targets. These outcomes are relevant for many processes traditionally examined in social psychology, some of which we briefly review next (also see Table 1).

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Table 1 about here  
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### *Interpersonal Perception*

A variety of early-stage cognitive processes are recruited in the identification of potential pathogenic threats. Because of the risks of interpersonal contagion, visual attention is oriented toward people bearing cues to infection. For instance, perceivers find it more difficult to visually disengage from faces possessing physical abnormalities, even ones that only heuristically connote disease (Ackerman et al., 2009). People higher in disease concern also report greater distinctions between ingroup and outgroup members, and are more likely to classify ambiguous, unfamiliar targets as threatening (e.g., Makhanova, Miller, & Maner, 2015; Miller & Maner, 2012; Reid et al., 2012).

### *Judgment and Decision-making*

In addition to early-stage processes, infectious disease threats affect inferences, judgments, and decisions about both people and objects. Most broadly, these influences motivate choices that help perceivers avoid exposure to unfamiliar stimuli that may offer contamination dangers (e.g., Inbar & Pizarro, 2014; Peng, Chang, & Zhou, 2013). For example, pathogen concerns increase the perceived risk of uncertain decisions (Prokosch et al., 2017), leading to reduced desire for social affiliation (Sacco, Young, & Hugenberg, 2014) and devaluation of consumer products that have previously been in contact with strangers (Huang et al., 2017). As a



potential solution to infection threat, these concerns also motivate desire for health- and appearance-improving products and behaviors (Ackerman, Tybur, & Mortensen, in press).

### *Close Relationships*

Concern about infectious disease plays an important role in our romantic pursuits as well. Chronic concerns and markers of situational threat such as high ecological pathogen prevalence increase the value people place on physical attractiveness (e.g., Ackerman et al., in press; Gangestad & Buss, 1993; Lee & Zietsch, 2011; White et al., 2013), and lessen preference for mates with sex-divergent or abnormal visual features (e.g., Lee, Brooks, Potter, & Zietsch, 2015; Little, DeBruine, & Jones, 2011). Cues of pathogen prevalence (both real and perceived) are also associated with more cautious and restrictive sexual attitudes and behaviors among those hoping to avoid infection (Murray et al., 2013; Schaller & Murray, 2008), but more sexual opportunism among those who perceive their own physiological immune functioning as insufficient for survival in pathogen dense ecologies (Hill et al., 2015).

### *Stereotyping and Prejudice*

Perhaps the most intriguing and well-studied outcome of behavioral immune activity involves stereotyping and prejudicial attitudes expressed toward outgroup members. People facing illness risks are more likely to stigmatize individuals possessing cues heuristically associated with disease (Crandall & Moriarty, 1995; Faulkner et al., 2004; Huang et al., 2011; Miller & Maner, 2012; Mortensen et al., 2010; Navarrete & Fessler, 2006; Park et al., 2007; Peterson, 2017; van Leeuwen, Park, Koenig, & Graham, 2012). For instance, the early stages of

pregnancy, which are marked by suppressed immune functioning and thus infection vulnerability, are associated with increased exhibition of ethnocentrism (Navarrete, Fessler, & Eng, 2007). These types of attitudes may facilitate avoidance of people who possess novel pathogens or practices unsuited to managing local pathogen threats.

#### *Group Processes and Cultural Norms*

Finally, the behavioral immune system plays a role in shaping intragroup attitudes and behaviors. For example, research shows that disease threats are associated with greater conformity to social norms (Murray & Schaller, 2012; Wu & Chang, 2012) and higher levels of disgust—an emotion that motivates pathogen avoidance (Huang, Ackerman, & Newman, in press; Oaten et al., 2009; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1993; Tybur et al., 2013)—predict greater sensitivity to moral violations (e.g., Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009; Jones & Fitness, 2008; Murray, Kerry, & Gervais, in press; Tybur et al., 2009; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). At the cross-cultural level of analysis, pathogen prevalence also predicts greater emphasis on moral and social norms (Murray, Trudeau, & Schaller, 2011; van Leeuwen, Park, & Koenig, 2012), including aversion to physical contact during culturally-normative rituals (Murray, Fessler, Kerry, White, & Marin, 2017). Pathogen threat may even be at the root of many fundamental dimensions of culture, from individualism/collectivism (Fincher, Thornhill, Murray, & Schaller, 2008) to social and political orientation (Murray, Schaller, & Suedfeld, 2013; Terrizzi, Shook, & McDaniel, 2013; White, Kenrick, & Neuberg, 2013) to religious belief (Fincher & Thornhill, 2008, 2012).

### **Current Empirical Concerns**

The last 15 years of behavioral immune system research have provided a wealth of new knowledge regarding the long reach of human's pathogen management psychology. As the field matures, however, it faces several significant challenges and unanswered questions (Gangestad & Grebe, 2014; Tybur, Frankenhuis, & Pollet, 2014). Further, the field is currently lacking theoretical models that account for the sometimes contradictory effects documented in the literature (Faulkner et al., 2004; Gelfand et al., 2011; Murray & Schaller, 2012; Tybur et al., 2016). Issues such as these need to be addressed empirically to advance our understanding of the structure and functioning of the behavioral immune system.

In the following sections, we highlight three issues that are paramount to advancing research in this area: (1) the interface between physiological and behavioral immune activity, in particular which physiological factors are associated with or mediate psychological outcomes, (2) the lifespan development of the behavioral immune system, and (3) when we should expect to observe main effects versus interactions between situational threat cues and chronic disease concerns.

#### **I. Linking the Physiological and Behavioral Immune Systems**

To provide a functional defense against infection, both behavioral and physiological immune systems must work in concert. How these systems interact to effectively prevent or manage pathogenic threats is a relatively new question for the field. One barrier to quick resolution of this question involves the complexity of the physiological immune system.

Although called a 'system,' this is actually an extremely complex set of systems, each of which is governed by its own set of rules, hormones, cells, and signaling proteins. These different systems are united by shared function (to detect, contain, and kill invading agents), yet each is somewhat distinct, making study of the behavioral-physiological relationship difficult to assess empirically. For example, an immunologist asked how to best measure immunocompetence (to assess its relationship with the behavioral immune responses), might typically reply: "Which part do you want to know about?" A somewhat similar case could be made about the complexity of the behavioral immune system. This 'system' also involves multiple psychological processes whose individual relevance depend on the specific inputs and outputs being examined. For instance, different emotions (e.g., disgust, worry, anger) and cognitions (e.g., vulnerability beliefs, group stereotypes) may underlie changes in interpersonal vs. intrapersonal perception.

Although difficult to conduct, research examining the dynamics between the physiological and behavioral immune systems is needed to move the field forward. Of particular importance is modeling the degree to which these systems are complementary (working in tandem, providing overlapping functions) or compensatory (activation of one predicting decreased activation of the other). We describe each of these viewpoints below.

A complementary relationship implies that, relative to people whose early development was marked by little investment in immune functioning, people who have invested more in immune building should show stronger physiological *and* behavioral activity in response to infection threat. This positively correlated organization of the two systems reflects a common

underlying immune quality, which could emerge as a function of interpersonal differences in gene frequencies, stability and resource richness of the developmental environment, or proximate somatic integrity (as influenced by injury, sleep loss, etc.). According to this perspective, for example, we should find that individuals residing in high illness risk ecologies invest heavily in both behavioral and physiological forms of pathogen defense. Although evidence for a complementary organization is limited, several studies have found that pathogen threat cues (e.g., sneezing people) not only activate behavioral avoidance strategies, but also may trigger a physiological immune response, perhaps in preparation to fight off infection (Makhanova et al., 2017; Schaller, Miller, Gervais, Yager, & Chen, 2010; Stevenson, Hodgson, Oaten, Barouei, & Case, 2011). Additionally, sex differences in immune functioning exist, with women showing both relatively greater BIS and PIS responsivity (e.g., Bouman, Heineman, & Faas, 2005; Druschel & Sherman, 1999; Duncan et al., 2009), suggestive of redundant systems.

A compensatory organization, on the other hand, implies that decreased activation of one system is balanced by increased activation of the other. For example, Miller and Maner (2011) found that recently ill participants (who therefore have temporarily reduced physiological immune activity; Hendaus, Jomha, & Alhammadi, 2015) displayed heightened attention to and avoidance of disfigured individuals, a common behavioral manifestation of behavioral immune activation. Others find similar effects in women during the first trimester of pregnancy when the physiological immune system is suppressed (Navarette et al., 2007). More recent evidence indicates that an active behavioral immune system may allow downregulation of basal

inflammation, suggesting that behavioral activation may help prevent chronic inflammation and promote long-term health and longevity (Hill et al., 2017; see also Kandrik et al., 2017).

Together, these different lines of research suggest that the behavioral and physiological immune systems may work together to serve as a first line of defense against pathogens, with behavioral activity being the preferred mode of illness avoidance in environments where the behavioral management of pathogens is likely to be effective, in cases where the physiological immunity is suppressed (Miller & Maner, 2011; Navarette et al., 2007), and in contexts where longevity is favored (Hill et al., 2017). The physiological immune system, on the other hand, is likely to be the favored form of defense in environments where behavioral management of pathogens is unlikely to be effective (e.g., working as a nurse in a hospital), where behavioral activity would be costly to fitness (e.g., being the parent of a sick child; in the face of a sexual opportunity), or among those prioritizing outcomes other than longevity (see the following life history section). Further research is needed to examine the dynamic relationship between these systems, as well as the benefits and drawbacks associated with each form of pathogen avoidance.

Another opportunity for advancement involves the need to bridge behavioral immune research with research from psychoneuroimmunology on psychological and behavioral mechanisms (sickness behavior) that function to help fight infection. Sickness behavior is characterized by anhedonia, social withdrawal, and decreases in exploratory, foraging, and sexual activity (Dantzer & Kelley, 2007). Although originally believed to be a maladaptive byproduct of infection, this change in motivational states is now understood to reflect a well-

orchestrated constellation of behaviors that function to conserve energy, mitigate further bodily damage from infection, and avoid injury or predation while in a weakened state (Dantzer, 2001; Dantzer & Kelley, 2007; Kluger & Rothenburg, 1979; Medzhitov, Schneider, & Soares, 2012). Combining behavioral immune research with insights from psychoneuroimmunology sparks a number of novel questions whose answers will be essential to maturation of the field (see Clark & Fessler, 2014). Do certain forms of behavioral immune activation reflect a pre-emptive sickness behavior? How does chronic inflammation impact behavioral immune outcomes such as person perception, sensation seeking, and risk tolerance? What specific physiological mechanisms are involved in particular behavioral outcomes?

Relatedly, a number of assumptions about self-perceived illness vulnerability need to be validated using actual immunological functioning measures. The perceived vulnerability to disease scale (PVD; Duncan et al., 2009) is an index of infection resistance perceptions and chronic pathogen concerns. Although the PVD scale is widely used in behavioral immune research (e.g., Faulkner et al., 2004; Prokop, Usak, & Fančovičová, 2010; Navarrete & Fessler, 2006; Welling et al., 2007), little is known about the degree to which scales like this one reflect actual immunological vulnerabilities. Do people who perceive themselves more vulnerable to illnesses *actually* have less immunocompetence than people who perceive themselves less vulnerable? Developing a valid self-report measure of immunocompetence (if such a measure can be created) will be an important next step in enhancing our understanding of the dynamic relationship between behavioral and physiological immune systems.

## II. Life History Investment in the Behavioral Immune System

In an ideal world, organisms could devote a boundless supply of energy to physiological and behavioral immune defenses as well as to solutions for the myriad other adaptive problems they face (predator avoidance, child care, etc.). Furthermore, activation of these systems would be free of collateral costs, such as DNA damage from inflammation or social isolation from avoiding others who potentially harbor infectious agents. We do not inhabit such an ideal world, however. Each of us has a limited pool of bodily resources that can be dedicated to managing pathogen threats and any pathogen management strategy that one might adopt will involve tradeoffs. Individual differences in the development of pathogen management strategies are therefore expected to vary based on features of the person and the situation that influence the costs and benefits of investing in pathogen defense versus alternative activities.

The idea that organisms make tradeoffs when allocating energetic resources to the various activities inherent in survival and reproduction is at the heart of *life history theory*, a predictive framework from the biological sciences. Broadly speaking, life history theory predicts that organisms will allocate bodily resources in ways that best promote fitness within their local ecology (this is a developmental process, not necessarily an agentic one) (Del Giudice, Gangestad, & Kaplan, 2015). Although this theory has been most frequently applied to address questions of developmental timing, sexual debut, and reproductive timing, life history theory can also be used to derive predictions about contexts that favor investment in a more or less active behavioral immune system.



One interesting implication of this framework is that investments in pathogen defense should be governed by tradeoffs that implicitly weigh the fitness costs and benefits of behavioral investment (an *avoidance* strategy) against the fitness costs and benefits of investment in the physiological immune system (a *management* strategy). For instance, individuals from relatively controllable, predictable ecologies should invest more energy in the development of a robust behavioral immune system than those from unpredictable, highly pathogenic ecologies. This is because the costs associated pathogen avoidance are lower (i.e., people can effectively control exposure to germs) and the benefits are greater (i.e., decreased somatic damage from inflammation). Consistent with this idea, a growing body of research finds evidence for increased investment in inflammatory activity among those from unpredictable early life environments (Miller et al., 2009; Miller, Chen, & Parker, 2011). This suggests that uncontrollable environments may promote the development of a pathogen management (rather than avoidance) strategy. However, research is needed to examine whether this investment is accompanied by reduced allocation to the behavioral immune system. In addition to offering new insights into situational factors that contribute to development of the behavioral immune system, such research may provide clues into the relationship between the physiological and behavioral immune systems (see preceding section).

A second hypothesis falling from this conceptual framework is that investment in the behavioral immune system should vary depending on an individual's life history strategy—an ecologically-contingent developmental pattern emerging in response to specific features of the

early childhood environment (Belsky et al., 1991; Kuzawa, McDade, Adair, & Lee, 2010). Early-life environments characterized by high levels of harshness and unpredictability (e.g., low SES, inconsistent or low-quality paternal investment) sensitize people to “faster” life history strategies. These strategies are characterized by expedited physiological and sexual development, earlier sexual debut, and high mating relative to parenting efforts (Belsky, Houts, & Fearon, 2010; Chisholm, 1993; Ellis, 2004; Murray, Gildersleeve, Fales, & Haselton, 2017). Early-life environments that are more benign and predictable, on the other hand, tend to encourage “slower” life history strategies, which are characterized by delayed maturation, later sexual debut, and higher parenting compared to mating effort (Ellis et al., 2009; Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005).

Combining these insights with research on the behavioral immune system yields the prediction that individuals who favor slower life history strategies may favor increased investment in behavioral relative to physiological forms of immunity. Investment in the behavioral immune system can promote long-term health and longevity by limiting the frequency of physiological immune activity and its corresponding inflammatory response (both of which tax the body and contribute to diseases of aging). Individuals who follow faster life history strategies, on the other hand, may exhibit decreased investment in the development of an active behavioral immune system because longevity is of reduced importance and pathogen avoidance behaviors can conflict with goals relevant to a fast strategy (e.g., unrestricted sexual activity, risk-taking behaviors) (e.g., Borg & de Jong, 2012). Consistent with this idea, women—who

have relatively slower life history strategies due to their relatively greater investment in child-bearing and rearing—tend to have a more finely-tuned behavioral immune response than men (Druschel & Sherman, 1999; Duncan et al., 2009). These predictions notwithstanding, much remains to be learned about how life history-relevant features of the person and situation influence development of the behavioral immune system.

### **III. Situational Threats, Individual Differences, and Person by Situation Interactions**

The behavioral immune literature documents a diverse array of triggers for pathogen-avoidant cognitions and behaviors. The most obvious of these triggers are situational cues, such as coughing or sneezing people, media reports about disease outbreaks, or disgusting sights and smells. Reactivity to situational cues is of clear adaptive significance given they signal the potential presence of infectious agents in the immediate environment. A second type of trigger is more personality-based: wide individual differences exist in chronic concerns about disease transmission and germs (e.g., differences in disease anxiety, perceived infection vulnerabilities, or disgust sensitivity). Although the roots of these individual differences are currently not well understood, interpersonal variation likely reflects both intrapersonal and ecological trade-offs. Intrapersonally, people vary in their ability to cope with infection as well as in their tendency to engage in behaviors that exacerbate or mitigate the chance of pathogen exposure (McDade, 2005; Round & Mazmanian, 2009). Ecologically, people exist in physical and social environments that dictate the frequency of pathogen contact (e.g., climatic variation, cultural norms; Guernier et al., 2004) and the means by which this contact can be managed (e.g.,

cooking, food taboos; Henrich, 2015). Individual differences in disease concern are therefore likely to emerge from these various influences over ontogeny (e.g., Gangestad, Haselton, & Buss, 2006; Wang, Michalak, & Ackerman, in press). For instance, growing up in a pathogen dense environment may be accompanied by chronic concerns about germs, to the extent that these concerns are effective at mitigating infection.

Much of the research on behavioral immune system outputs finds person by situation interactions, where individuals' responses to situational cues of pathogen threat differ based on their chronic levels of perceived vulnerability to infection risk. For example, people high in chronic pathogen concerns might more readily detect or respond to situational cues of threat, whereas people lower in such concerns may be less sensitive or reactive to situational cues. The literature now documents an array of such interactive effects (see Murray & Schaller, 2016). In contrast, other outcomes manifest as main effects of situational cues or chronic concerns. As of this writing, no model or explanatory framework currently accounts for *why* (or when) behavioral immune responses should be exhibited as main effects or person-by-situation interactions. This is a question of growing importance, yet it is a question without a satisfactory answer (Tybur et al., 2014). Next, we suggest some speculative possibilities.

One possibility pertains to input differences. That is, certain types of situational disease cues may be generally more evocative than others. Stronger disease threat manipulations may evoke behavioral immune responses in the majority of individuals regardless of dispositional factors. Weaker manipulations, on the other hand, may only evoke disease-avoidant responses in

people chronically averse to pathogen threats. For example, experimental manipulations using pictures and vignettes of disease-relevant stimuli find that responses are dependent on individuals' reactivity to pathogen cues. For example, Miller and Maner (2012) had participants read vignettes about highly pathogenic environments and found situational by dispositional interactions on interpersonal and intergroup perceptions. Under control conditions, those higher in perceived vulnerability to disease set more lenient thresholds for categorizing targets as obese, whereas disease primes made these thresholds more lenient for all participants (Miller & Maner, 2012). Such interactive results are common (see also Ackerman et al., in press; Duncan & Schaller, 2009; Mortensen et al., 2010). A different pattern emerges in research studies employing other manipulations, however. For example, Murray and Schaller (2012) and Murray and colleagues (2017) had participants discuss at length the time in their life when they felt most vulnerable to disease-causing bacteria and germs, and in doing so partly controlled for individual differences in reactivity to specific disease cues. In both of these studies, main effects of experimental condition and dispositional worry about disease emerged (on sensitivity to normative and moral violations, respectively) but no interaction occurred between the two. Thus, theoretical refinement is needed to systematically account for which types of experimental procedures are likely to result in which types of effects.

A second possibility is that the presence of main versus interactive effects may be due to output differences—differences in the outcome variables of interest. Ephemeral variation in perceived disease threat has been linked to variables ranging from person and face perception to

prejudice to sexual attitudes, and these diverse domains vary widely in their psychological strength, attitudinal malleability, and relevant psychological mechanisms. It is possible that main effects of situational disease cues are more likely to emerge for relatively malleable outcomes. Examples of such variables include conformist attitudes to abstract art, liking for people who defy social norms, self-evaluation of appearance, or social categorization of novel faces (Ackerman et al., in press; Makhanova et al., 2015; Murray & Schaller, 2012; Wu & Chang, 2012). Interactive effects instead may emerge for variables that are more impervious to perceptual or attitudinal change, such that situational disease cues are only influential in concert with high dispositional worry about disease. Consistent with this logic, interactive effects emerge for outcomes such as desire for future sexual variety, attitudes towards promiscuous sexual behavior, and self-reported social surgency (Hill et al., 2015; Mortensen et al., 2010; Murray et al., 2013). Again, however, not all results conform to this pattern.

A third possibility pertains to sample differences. Participants from different ecologies or cultures may have differentially-calibrated sensitivity to disease cues based upon pathogen prevalence within their local or developmental environments (e.g., de Barra et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2017). At least one study suggests, however, that the zero-order relationship between actual local levels of disease threat and sensitivity to disease cues is either non-uniform or nonexistent: in a sample of over 11,000 participants in 30 countries, Tybur and colleagues (2016) did not find evidence for a relationship between levels of disease within the local ecology and average levels of disgust sensitivity. However, this non-relationship does not imply that

ecological factors are irrelevant to other outcomes or to overall calibration of the behavioral immune system.

A final possibility is that the smattering of both interactive and main effects in the behavioral immune system literature is simply due to statistical issues. As is increasingly evident in the broader social psychological literature, meta-analyses reveal that effect sizes resulting from experimental primes are often small (e.g., Weingarten et al., 2016). This area of research, much like other areas, would therefore benefit from meta-analyses of the various outcomes reviewed earlier, as well as the behavioral immune literature as a whole, in order to help researchers make correct decisions about study implementation. Terrizzi and colleagues (2013) took this approach in meta-analyzing the association between chronic disease concern and social conservatism and found an overall effect size in the small to medium range. As the field matures, increased use of such techniques along with modern methodological refinements (e.g., Funder et al., 2014) should more clearly inform questions of when and to what extent behavioral immune activity will be found.

### **Conclusion**

Recent research on the behavioral immune system has revealed its connections to diverse social psychological phenomena. The empirical concerns identified here represent, we believe, opportunities for major advancements that will help to integrate research across areas of psychology and across disciplines as well. The behavioral immune literature is a still-growing area of investigation—one which may only now be entering its prime. We look forward to the

new contributions this work can provide for our understanding of physiology, personality, and social psychology.

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Table 1. Behavioral Immune System Research in Social Psychology.

<b>Social Psychological Domain</b>	<b>Behavioral Immune System Findings and Predictions</b>	<b>Relevant Literature</b>
Interpersonal Perception	Overgeneralization of cues associated with disease; greater attention to these cues	Ackerman et al. (2009); Makhanova, Miller, & Maner (2015); Reid et al. (2012)
Judgment and Decision-making	Avoidance of controllable risk; devaluation of objects and environments associated with unfamiliar people; desire for health and attractiveness improvements	Ackerman, Tybur, & Mortensen (in press); Huang, Ackerman, & Sedlovskaya (2017); Mortensen et al. (2010); Prokosch, Gassen, Ackerman, & Hill (2017)
Close Relationships	Greater preference for healthy, symmetrical, attractive mates; desire for novel sexual partners (in women)	Gangestad & Buss (1993); Hill, Prokosch, & DelPriore (2015); Murray, Jones, & Schaller (2013); Tybur & Gangestad (2011); Young, Sacco, & Hugenberg (2011)
Stereotyping and Prejudice	Aversion and stigmatization expressed toward outgroup members, especially those associated with dirtiness and disease	Faulkner, Schaller, Park, & Duncan (2004); Huang, Sedlovskaya, Ackerman, & Bargh (2011); Navarrete & Fessler (2006); Park, Schaller, & Crandall (2007)
Group Processes and Cultural Norms	Higher conformity to cultural norms; increased collectivism; more social conservatism; stringent punishment for violating moral norms	Fincher, Thornhill, Murray, & Schaller (2008); Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen (2009); Murray, Kerry, & Gervais (2017); Murray & Schaller (2012); Murray, Schaller, & Suedfeld (2013); Murray, Trudeau, & Schaller (2011); Thornhill, Fincher, & Aran,

