

What makes a market transaction morally repugnant?

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Many people find it morally impermissible to put kidneys, children, or doctorates on the free market. But what makes a market transaction morally repugnant in the eyes of the public? And which transactions trigger the strongest collective disapproval? Researchers from the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and the Robert Koch Institute have addressed these questions. Their findings, published in *Cognition*, offer new entry points for policy interventions.

Would you be willing to sell a kidney or be paid to spend time on a date? If not, then you are not alone. Many people find the idea of selling and buying human organs, children, sex, or doctorates morally repugnant. But what are the psychological mechanisms behind these feelings? Which aspects of a [transaction](#) do people find most repugnant? A research team from the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and the Robert Koch Institute has investigated these questions.

"Our aim was to uncover the psychological drivers of people's feelings of repugnance towards such transactions," says Christina Leuker, lead author

and researcher at the Robert Koch Institute, and associate research scientist in the Center for Adaptive Rationality at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. "Once we know what makes a market transaction morally repugnant in the eyes of the public, we are in a better position to predict how people might respond to novel transactions, such as those arising from technological advances in the field of human genetic engineering."

To shine a light on the psychology of repugnance, the researchers conducted two online surveys in the United Kingdom, in which a total of 1,554 respondents judged 51 market transactions in terms of their repugnance and 21 other characteristics. These included the extent to which the transaction triggers anger or disgust, is harmful to society, affects the dignity of the seller, or leaves people open to exploitation.

The researchers found similar patterns of repugnance judgments across the respondents in both studies. Three transactions—selling rights to hunt [endangered animals](#), selling brides, and selling voting rights—triggered the strongest collective disapproval. Moreover, the authors were able to identify five aspects that appear to underlie feelings of repugnance. One was moral outrage: The more moral outrage a transaction triggers, the more disgust and anger people feel, the less empathy they have for those engaged in the transaction, and the more harmful they think the transaction is to society.

The four other drivers of repugnance identified by the research team were the extent to which people want a transaction to be regulated; the extent to which a transaction's worth can or cannot be translated into a monetary value; the extent to which the transaction may exploit disadvantaged individuals; and the extent to which sellers are exposed to unknown risks or are unable to fully anticipate the consequences of the transaction.

Analyses showed that the degree of moral outrage was also a good predictor of the desire for regulation: Many transactions that triggered strong moral outrage were also characterized by a strong perceived need for regulation.

The researchers highlight that their approach can provide new entry points for policy interventions. "Transactions that prompt similar degrees of public repugnance may do so for very different reasons—and this has implications for policy interventions," says Ralph Hertwig, Director of the Center for Adaptive Rationality at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. "For instance, if the main driver of repugnance toward a transaction is that it leaves disadvantaged individuals open to exploitation, an effective policy response may be geared toward protecting those who are vulnerable. If unknown risk is the main cause of repugnance, the policy may instead focus on reducing and clearly communicating potential risks."

The researchers also identified mismatches between the judged repugnance of a transaction and its current legal status. "For instance, UK respondents considered carbon emissions trading and selling permits to shoot rare animals highly repugnant, yet both are legal in their country," says Christina Leuker. "Such mismatches may be grounds for policy makers to reevaluate those transactions."

More information: Christina Leuker et al, What makes a market transaction morally repugnant?, *Cognition* (2021). DOI: [10.1016/j.cognition.2021.104644](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2021.104644)

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