

Our perceptions of masculinity and femininity are swayed by our sense of touch

January 11 2011

Gender stereotypes suggest that men are usually tough and women are usually tender. A new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, finds these stereotypes have some real bodily truth for our brains; when people look at a gender-neutral face, they are more likely to judge it as male if they're touching something hard and as female if they're touching something soft.

Several studies have found recently that we understand many concepts through our bodies. For example, weight conveys importance; just giving someone a heavy clipboard to hold will make them judge something as more important than someone who holds a light clipboard. Michael Slepian, a graduate student at Tufts University, and his colleagues wanted to know if this was also true for how people think about gender.

For one experiment, people were given either a hard or a soft ball to hold, then told to squeeze it continuously while looking at pictures of faces on a computer. Each face had been made to look exactly gender-neutral, so it was neither male nor female. For each face, the volunteer had to categorize it as male or female. People who were squeezing the soft ball were more likely to judge faces as female, while people who handled the hard ball were more likely to categorize them as male.

The same effect was found in a second experiment in which people wrote their answers on a piece of paper with carbon paper underneath; some were told to press hard, to make two copies, and some were told to press lightly, so the carbon paper could be reused. People who were

pressing hard were more likely to categorize faces as male, while the soft writers were more likely to choose female.

"We were really surprised," says Slepian, who cowrote the study with Max Weisbuch of the University of Denver, Nicholas O. Rule at the University of Toronto, and Nalini Ambady of Tufts University. "It's remarkable that the feeling of handling something hard or soft can influence how you visually perceive a face." The results show that knowledge about social categories, such as gender, is like other kinds of knowledge—it's partly carried in the body.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Our perceptions of masculinity and femininity are swayed by our sense of touch (2011, January 11) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-01-perceptions-masculinity-femininity-swayed.html>

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