

New study reveals powerful people rely on their gut 'motor' feelings when making judgments

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A new series of studies by academics at Royal Holloway, University of London and at University of London College found that people who have social power are strongly influenced by internal body cues stemming from their motor system when making judgements about preferences of paintings, objects, movements or letter sequences.

The research, which was recently published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* looked at how the easiness of high power individuals' motor actions impacted their [judgments](#). The findings are based on four experiments in which almost 400 [people](#) participated.

To illustrate, in the experiments people wrote about situations in which they had power over someone else or in which someone else had power over them. Each experiment then targeted a different motor action. For example, one experiment trained people's extra ocular muscles - the muscles that move the eyes - to later see specific movements of a dot on a screen. When the eye muscles were trained to see the movement (and thus when perception was easy), the movement was liked more than when the muscles were not trained to see the movement (and thus when perception was more difficult). However, this was only the case for people in the powerful group, not for people in the powerless group: they liked all movements equally well. In another experiment people had to say how much they like letter dyads that are typed with two fingers from different hands (e.g., FJ) compared to letter dyads that are typed with the

same finger from the same hand (e.g., FV). Letter dyads typed with two fingers from different hands are easier to type - and powerful, but not powerless participants indeed liked them more.

Dr Karl-Andrew Woltin from the Department of Psychology at Royal Holloway, who led these studies, said: "There is more and more evidence that the powerful more strongly rely on internal cues when making judgments. Our research shows this for motor cues and preference judgments, but other research has also found the powerful to more strongly rely on other internal cues. For example, feelings of hunger predicts the amount of food eaten by powerful but not by powerless individuals; and feelings of easiness or difficulty associated with memory impacts judgments of powerful but not powerless individuals.

"Together with these findings, our research suggests that the powerful more strongly rely on gut feelings and internal cues when they make judgments about what they like, what is true, and what they should do. Sometimes it is good to be in touch with your feelings. But sometimes this can lead people astray and result in suboptimal judgments".

Dr Woltin and Dr Guinote, the researchers who ran these studies, argue that this bias of power holders has more far-reaching consequences than previously considered. "We need to make sure that the power holders at various levels - be it in organisations or in politics - are aware of this potential bias so that they can counteract it if necessary," says Dr Guinote.

Dr Woltin concluded: "Our findings suggest that mechanisms need to be put into place that make sure [power holders](#) do not favour internal cues over other information available to them when they make important decisions."

Provided by Royal Holloway, University of London

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