

The Link Between Weight and Importance

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study has demonstrated what we must have known all along at some level: that there is a link between the physical act of carrying heavy objects and the abstract concept of importance.

Importance and weight have long been associated through common metaphors. "Weighty" issues are more important than issues that don't "hold much weight". We are "weighed down" by problems, and we "weigh up" arguments. "Light" reading materials are thought less important than "weightier" tomes.

The new study, by Nils B. Jostmann, Daniel Lakens, and Thomas W. Schubert, shows the association is more than a linguistic oddity. They set up a series of experiments in which different groups of volunteers were asked to perform tasks while carrying either a 2.3 or 1.5 pound clipboard. Even the heavy clipboard was not heavy enough to be uncomfortable or to change the volunteers' mood or disposition.

In the first experiment 40 volunteers were asked to estimate the value of several currencies in relation to the euro. The researchers found that subjects holding the heavy clipboard valued the other currencies more highly (implying greater importance) than those holding the lighter clipboards.

Next, Jostmann and his colleagues asked 50 student volunteers to give their opinions on a situation in which the university was preventing students from speaking out about a grant. Judgment was again affected, with the students holding the heavy clipboards considering the issue

more important.

In the third experiment the researchers asked 49 volunteers to give their opinion on Amsterdam and its Mayor. The results showed the weight did not affect their opinions of the city or the Mayor, but those carrying the heavier weight were more likely to make an association between the two. The researchers had expected to see a [correlation](#), and they therefore concluded the subjects with the heavier weight had given the matter more thoughtful consideration.

In the fourth experiment 40 pedestrians chosen at random were asked about a subway being constructed. They were given three arguments regarded as weak and three considered strong, and were asked to choose the best arguments. The result was that those with the heavy clipboards were more polarized towards the strong arguments, while those with the light clipboards were more likely to be undecided and less confident.

All the experiments demonstrated a positive link between carrying a heavier weight and importance. Jostmann and his colleagues believe the origin of this lies in childhood, since we all learn it takes more effort and strength to lift a heavy object than a light one. Since lifting a heavy weight takes more concentration and thought, our brains come to associate the physical processes of lifting heavy weights with importance.

The study is linked to the field of embodied cognition, which proposes our experiences are rooted in the body's interactions with its environment. Altering physical aspects of the body (such as carrying a heavy weight) affects the mind, our thoughts, ideas, and abstract concepts such as importance.

[More information: Weight as an Embodiment of Importance; Psychological Science; DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02426.x](#)

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