

Thoughts of money soothe social rejection

Handling cash also eases physical pain.

Lucas Laursen

Handling or even contemplating money can relieve both physical pain and the distress of social rejection, according to a study by Chinese and American psychologists¹. But remembering cash one has spent intensifies both types of hurt.

The findings suggest that the mere thought of having money makes people feel physically stronger and less dependent on the approval of others to satisfy their needs. "Money activates a general sense of confidence, strength, and efficacy," the researchers propose.

The study backs up previous experiments² in which experimental subjects who had been subconsciously primed with thoughts of money were less likely to ask for help on difficult tasks.

"Previous work hadn't gone as far as to link reminders of money to something at a physical perceptual level," explains Kathleen Vohs of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, who was involved in both past research and the present study, which was published in *Psychological Science*¹.

Easing the pain

Psychologist Xinyue Zhou of Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou ran half a dozen experiments with groups of between 72 and 108 students, to test how subconscious thoughts of gaining or losing money affected their resistance to both the pain of social rejection and the pain of immersing their fingers in hot water.

Students played a computer game called *Cyberball*, in which players think they are playing catch with three other individuals. These are actually being controlled by the computer, which eventually refuses to throw the ball to the human player. The game is normally used by psychologists to provoke feelings of exclusion. The students who had physically handled money before playing, thinking they were completing a finger-dexterity task, reported feeling less distress on a standard social self-esteem scale than those who had handled blank pieces of paper.

In another experiment, students who counted money before plunging their fingers into hot water reported lower pain levels than those who had counted paper. The money-handling students also reported feeling stronger than the paper shufflers did.

The researchers asked some students to write down their recent expenses before playing *Cyberball*, while others simply wrote about the weather. Those who had written about their expenses reported feeling greater distress when they were excluded from the virtual game.

That social exclusion and physical pain yielded parallel reactions supports an emerging idea in psychology, that some of the brain's tools for processing social interaction evolved by adapting pre-existing systems that dealt with physical pain, the researchers add.

"We know that social exclusion has all sorts of negative consequences for behaviour," says psychologist Nathan DeWall of the University of Kentucky in Lexington. So it might be worth exploring in a future study whether thinking about money could "reduce the effect of exclusion on aggression", he says.

Dan Ariely, a behavioural economist at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, suggests that money is also a way for people to regain a feeling of control. "It would have been great to test how this sentiment changed over time," as the economy slipped into recession, he says. Such a study might reveal a fluctuating exchange rate between money's soothing value and the links to social behaviour.



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References

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2. Vohs, K. D., Mead, N. L., & Goode, M. R. *Science* 314, 1154-1156 2006.

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It is fascinating to read that such a study has been conducted. As a child I often counted large bundles of notes over and over again because of the soothing effect it left on me. It is somewhat reassuring to know that I am (was) not the only one on whom money had such an effect.

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