

Power outage: A loss of social power distorts how money is represented

June 7 2010

Retail therapy can soothe the defeat of losing a major client, the rejection of not getting a promotion or even the embarrassment a high-powered executive might feel after receiving a speeding ticket. Spending money to uplift a damaged ego provides more than comfort; it restores the equilibrium of what lies at the foundation of Western culture - power and social hierarchy.

New research from Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University (in the journal [Social Psychology and Personality Science](#), published by SAGE) reveals that a sense of powerlessness, even if only temporary, can affect how people physically represent monetary objects. The authors' findings have profound implications within all facets of Western culture, ranging from how a marketer should package goods to how policymakers can affect positive change.

"A person's sense of power is an extremely pervasive feeling in everyday life," said Adam Galinsky, the Morris and Alice Kaplan Professor of Ethics and Decision in Management at the Kellogg School. "Our findings provide evidence that the relationship between size and value shapes an individual's physical representation of a given object that is associated with power and status. In particular, there is a prevailing association in Western culture that 'bigger' is always 'better,' which is why the powerless will often literally view money as physically larger."

In "The Accentuation Bias: Money Literally Looms Larger (and Sometimes Smaller) to the Powerless," Professor Galinsky and Associate

Professor of Marketing Derek Rucker and Doctoral Candidate David Dubois, examine how one's position within a [social hierarchy](#) can alter their physical representation of valued objects. For the powerless, the subjective value of monetary items is intensified and the physical representations of those items are distorted based on whether there is a positive (bigger is better) or negative (smaller is better) value relationship. For example, a powerless individual will tend to represent a desired house as larger, because the size-to-value relationship of the housing category is positive.

To establish evidence of a power-influenced accentuation bias, four experiments were conducted that explored how one's place in a power hierarchy alters their representation of valued objects. In the first three experiments, powerless participants physically drew various objects associated with value, such as quarters or poker chips, as larger than powerful or baseline participants. However, in the fourth experiment, when value was inversely associated with size (i.e. smaller objects were more valuable), subjects physically drew their corresponding objects as smaller. For example, cell phones or other nano-technologies are more valuable the smaller they are.

"Our studies experimentally manipulated power to show that there is a causal link between power and how we represent the world of value," said Professor Rucker. "More important are the implications these findings have for policymakers who can help to change the size-to-value relationship in order to motivate positive behavior for the common good. Altering the size-to-value relationships associated with such things as over-sized vehicles or fast food value meals might have a lasting effect on the environment as well as our health."

More information: "The Accentuation Bias: Money Literally Looms Larger (and Sometimes Smaller) to the Powerless" will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Social Psychological and Personality Science*

(SPPS).

Provided by SAGE Publications

Citation: Power outage: A loss of social power distorts how money is represented (2010, June 7)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2010-06-power-outage-loss-social-distorts.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.