

Muscular men prefer an unequal society

October 11 2018, by Mia Ulvgraven



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Men with large upper bodies have a tendency to favour inequality in society and a limited redistribution of resources. This is the conclusion drawn by Professor Michael Bang Petersen and Associate Professor Lasse Laustsen from the Department of Political Science in a study published in the journal, *Political Psychology*.

"The results challenge the belief that our political views are formed by logic and reason alone. Instead, our views seemingly reflect intuitions produced by a Stone Age mind," says Michael Bang Petersen.

Modern man thinks with his caveman brain

The new study concerns humans, but takes a theoretical starting point in one of the most well-documented findings in the study of animals: Physical strength shapes the conflict behaviour of animals. If animals are larger and stronger than their rivals, they are prone to attempt to assert themselves in the struggle for status and resources. However, if they are weaker than their rivals, they are likely to withdraw from the conflict. According to the latest research results from Aarhus BSS, the same logic applies to modern men when they reason about political conflicts regarding the redistribution of resources in society.

"This logic was adaptive under the conditions of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, as stronger men here would have been able to secure resources on their own. But it's an irrational way of dealing with modern day political resource conflicts. Today, [physical strength](#) is highly unlikely to affect how big a share of society's resources you are able to acquire. However, our data shows that physical strength nonetheless continues to affect men's political attitudes toward redistribution," says Lasse Laustsen.

According to the researchers, the new results may explain the paradox of why some men with limited financial resources still favour financial inequality although they would, in fact, benefit from a greater redistribution of resources.

"Our analysis suggests that these men expect to be able to rise in the hierarchy on their own. And once they reach the top of the hierarchy, an unequal society will increase their chances of maintaining that position,"

says Laustsen.

No link between women's physical strength and attitudes

The study involves both men and women, but when it comes to women, there is no link between physical strength and political attitudes.

According to the researchers, this complies with the assumption that our approach to modern politics is regulated by ancestral human instincts. Just like other male animals, men have used their physical strength to achieve status, while throughout evolution, women have developed other strategies that take their lower physical strength into account.

"For that reason, the fact that the correlation is not found in women is an important result in itself," says Petersen.

The researchers believe that their results emphasise the value of involving animal behaviour and the theory of evolution in the study of political behaviour.

"It's important knowledge if we wish to understand how our political attitudes are formed. They are not just based on reason. Our intuitions are adapted to a different environment than the one we live in today. Our skulls house a Stone Age mind, and we need to appreciate that we are just one animal species among a host of others. Also in our approach to modern politics," says Laustsen.

Attitudes and physical strength—what affects what?

The researchers cannot say with absolute certainty that the effect is purely one-way—from physical strength to political [attitude](#). The effect can also go the other way.

"We cannot rule out that men with right-wing attitudes are also more prone to go to the gym. That being said, however, there are strong indications that attitudes are actually shaped by physical strength and not the other way round," says Petersen.

Previous research has shown that men become more aggressive as their physical strength increases. Other studies have shown that there is a correlation between men's physical strength and their attitudes toward inequality even when exercise habits are taken into account. In addition, the new study includes an experiment conducted among a group of men who trained their upper bodies for two months. During this period, these men became more positive toward inequality.

The study builds on data from 6,349 people of different nationalities. Danish residents comprised 1,875 of the respondents, and the rest were Belarussians residing in Lithuania, Americans, Venezuelans, Ukrainians and Poles. The data was collected between 2012 and 2017. During this period, when conducting studies on various political attitudes, the researchers also measured and asked respondents about their physical strength.

"Now, we have gathered this data in one overall analysis. This also enabled us to revisit studies that I have conducted previously," says Petersen.

Previous studies have explored the correlation between men's physical strength and their attitude toward the level of equality in society. However, the results pointed in different directions. In a former study, Michael Bang Petersen found that physical strength only increased support toward inequality among wealthy men, while it decreased support for inequality among men of limited financial means.

"This study builds on a much larger dataset, and our measurement of

physical strength is more objective than in the previous study. In an international context, this is the most comprehensive study of its kind, and it shows a consistent positive correlation between men's physical strength and their attitude toward inequality," says Petersen, who apart from his position at Aarhus BSS is also affiliated with the interdisciplinary Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies.

The data comes from 12 studies that applied a variety of methods. Some studies relied on questionnaires, and participants were asked to evaluate their own strength compared to others of the same sex. Other studies were conducted in the laboratory, and researchers were able to obtain objective measures of such variables as chest strength and handgrip strength.

"The objective laboratory studies actually show a stronger correlation between physical strength and [political attitudes](#) than the respondents' own subjective evaluations. This supports that raw physical [strength](#) is, indeed, the decisive factor," Laustsen concludes.

More information: Michael Bang Petersen et al, Upper-Body Strength and Political Egalitarianism: Twelve Conceptual Replications, *Political Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/pops.12505](https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12505)

Provided by Aarhus University

Citation: Muscular men prefer an unequal society (2018, October 11) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-10-muscular-men-unequal-society.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.