

Hidden Metaphors Get under Our Skin

Our surroundings can trigger figurative thinking and influence behavior

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By Tori Rodriguez



Image: Clayton Hansen, Getty Images

Look around. Do you see four walls or an expansive vista? The answer could influence your ability to think creatively. A growing body of research suggests that our sensory experiences can trigger metaphorical thinking, influencing our insights and behavior without us even realizing it. New research reveals ways we might be able to harness these subconscious forces.

Consider, for example, the metaphorical idea that the heart is warm and emotional and the head is cool and rational. In a study in August in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, researchers led their subjects to believe they were investigating how people answer questions when using their nondominant hand. To ensure they did not use their dominant hand, the participants were instructed to place their dominant index finger either on their temple or on the left side of their chest. Participants who pointed at their head answered test questions more accurately, and those who pointed at their heart were more likely to let emotions sway their decisions in a moral dilemma. The finding adds to a rapidly growing list of metaphor effects: past studies have found that seeing forward motion can propel us to “move forward” in a metaphorical sense and that feeling smooth textures makes a difficult social interaction feel easier (or go more “smoothly”).

In all these studies, the influence of the embodied metaphors evaded conscious awareness—the study subjects did not notice the connection between their sensations and

their subsequent decisions or feelings. Yet researchers think we might be able to wield this effect by altering our surroundings and habits, such as choosing office art that evokes forward motion. “If you're actively touching an object with the expectation that it will change your view of a situation, it might not work right away,” explains Joshua Ackerman, a psychologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a co-author of the smoothness study. “But if you make such behavior a habit, you will gradually stop thinking about the connection, and it will then have a stronger effect.”

In a similar vein, freeing yourself from perceived constraints may indeed facilitate “thinking outside the box.” In a series of experiments published in May 2012 in *Psychological Science*, scientists tested participants' creative thinking while they literally sat inside or outside a cardboard box. Other participants either walked freely or along the path of a rectangle.

Subjects who were outside the box in either sense scored higher on standard measures of creative thinking. Study co-author Angela Leung, associate professor of psychology at Singapore Management University, says you might be able to encourage your own creativity by eliminating constraints to movement, such as by roving around a room or wandering through a park. The key is variety and spontaneity: “If you want to be more creative, run freely outside and do it randomly for the day. Get away from your typical route, time of day, music or even your pace,” Leung says.

In any situation, consider your surroundings, sensory perceptions and actions—they might be influencing your thought process via the subtle metaphors embedded in daily life.