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# The Psychology of Nakedness

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The human mind sees minds everywhere. Show us a collection of bouncing balls and we hallucinate agency; a glance at a stuffed animal and we endow it with a mood; I'm convinced Siri doesn't like me. The point is that we are constantly translating our visual perceptions into a theory of mind, as we attempt to imagine the internal states of teddy bears, microchips and perfect strangers. Most of the time, this approach works well enough. If I notice someone squinting their eyes and clenching their jaw, I automatically conclude that he must be angry; if she flexes the zygomatic major – that's what happens during a smile – then I assume she's happy. The point is that a few cues of body language are instantly translated into a rich mental image. We can't help but think about what other people are thinking about.

But this intricate connection between mind theorizing and sensory perception can also prove problematic. For instance, when people glance at strangers who look "different" – perhaps they dress funny, or belong to a different ethnic group – they endow these strangers with less agency, a fancy term for the ability to plan, act and exert self-control. Or consider a 2010 fMRI [experiment](#) that found that when men glance at "sexualized" women they exhibit reduced activation in parts of the brain typically associated with the attribution of mental states. These are obviously terrible habits – a hint of cleavage shouldn't make us care less about someone's feelings, nor should a different skin tone – but we mostly can't help it. We judge books by the cover and minds by their appearance. We are a superficial species.

And this brings me to a fascinating new paper by an all star team of psychologists, including Kurt Gray, Joshua Knobe, Mark Sheskin, Paul Bloom and Lisa Feldman Barrett. The scientists nicely frame the mystery they want to solve:

Do people's mental capacities fundamentally change when they remove a sweater? This seems absurd: How could removing a piece of clothing change one's capacity for acting or feeling? In six studies, however, we show that taking off a sweater—or otherwise revealing flesh—can significantly change the way a mind is perceived. In this article, we suggest that the kind of mind ascribed to another person depends on the relative salience of his or her body—that the perceived capacity for both pain and planned action depends on whether someone wears a sweater or tank-top.

In order to understand why sweaters and tank-tops influence the kind of minds we perceive, it's important to know about the different qualities we imagine in others. In general, people assess minds – and it doesn't matter if it's the "mind" of a pet, iPhone or deity – along two distinct dimensions. First, we grade these minds in terms of *agency*. (Human beings have lots of agency; goldfish less so.) But we also think of minds in terms of the ability to have *experience*, to feel and perceive. The psychologists suggest that these dual dimensions are actually a duality, and that there's a direct tradeoff between the ability to have agency and experience. If we endow someone with lots of feeling, then they probably have less agency. And if someone has lots of agency, then they probably are less sensitive to experience. In other words, we automatically assume that the capacity to think and the capacity to feel are in opposition. It's a zero sum game.

What does all this have to do with nakedness? The psychologists demonstrated it's quite easy to shift our perceptions of other people from having a mind full of agency to having a mind interested in experience: all they have to do is take off their clothes. Take the first experiment by Gray, et al., which showed 159 undergraduates a variety of photos. Some of these photos were of an attractive female named Erin, appearing in either a headshot or a bikini. Other students looked at a handsome man named Aaron, glancing at either his face or sculpted bare chest.



Erin Face



Aaron Face



Erin Body



Aaron Body

After looking at these pictures and reading a brief description of Erin/Aaron, subjects were asked to evaluate the mental capacities of the person. They answered six questions, which took the form,

“Compared to the average person, how much is Erin capable of X.” The X was filled in by various agency-related capacities, such as “self-control,” “acting morally,” and “planning” and a slew of experience-related capacities, such as “experiencing pleasure,” “experiencing hunger,” and “experiencing desire.” Participants answered these six questions on a 5-point scale from 1 (Much Less Capable) to 5 (Much More Capable).

It turns out that a glimpse of flesh strongly influences our perception of Erin/Aaron. When the pictures only showed a face, they had lots of agency. But when we saw their torso, we suddenly imagined them as obsessed with experience. Instead of being good at self-control, they were suddenly extremely sensitive to hunger and desire. Same person, same facial expression, same brief description – but a hint of body changed everything.

In another experiment, the researchers varied the volunteers’ mindsets, sometimes asking them to look at photos as if they were on an online-dating website, focusing on attractiveness, and sometimes asking them to look at the photos as if they were hiring for a professional job, focusing on the mind. Once again, thinking about how “sexy and cute” someone is – those are bodily attributes – led students to endow them with more experience and less agency. The opposite held when people were asked to evaluate intelligence and efficiency.

This research helps to clarify a longstanding debate about what happens we look at other bodies. Kant, for instance, argued that “sexual love makes of the loved person an Object of appetite; as soon as that appetite has been stilled, the person is cast aside as one casts away a lemon which has been sucked dry.” In other words, looking at a naked person filled us with sexual desire, and that desire induced a form of mindblindness. Instead of seeing the individual as having agency, he or she became a means to an end, nothing but a vessel for our satisfaction. Kant was describing a phenomenon known as objectification, in which seeing a body turns the entire person into a physical object. This idea is frequently invoked when describing studies like [this](#), which found that women are far more likely to appear in magazine advertisements as an attractive body, while men are typically represented by their faces.

But the psychological reality turns out to be a bit more complicated. While seeing a body reduces perceptions of agency, it actually enhances perceptions of experience. As a result, Gray et. al. argue that objectification is a misleading term:

The idea that a body focus can lead to both decreased and increased mind stands in contrast to the term “objectification,” because it suggests that people seen as bodies are not seen as mindless objects but, instead, as experiencers: someone more capable of pain, pleasure, desire, sensation, and emotion but lacking in agency. In other words, focusing on the body does not lead to de-mentalization but to a **redistribution** of mind.

Of course, this doesn't mean that the redistribution of mind can't do damage. If you're a female applying for a job, the sometimes sexist tendency of men to focus on the body will unfairly diminish perceptions of agency and intelligence; you will be punished for having breasts. Although the woman won't be literally objectified, the redistribution of mind will still make her much less likely to be hired.

This work also raises important philosophical questions. Ever since Descartes, it's been suggested that people are natural dualists, dividing the world into an immaterial realm full of souls and a physical world full of objects. This simple framework, however, appears to be a bit too simple. Instead, the psychologists propose that humans are actually Platonic dualists, following Plato's belief that there are two distinct types of mind: a mind for thinking and reasoning and a mind for emotions and passions. What's surprising is how easily we switch between these different mental capacities. All it takes is a peek of skin before a thinker morphs into a feeler.

PS. Totally speculative musings: I wonder how the invention of clothing influenced our theories about the human mind? Did we become more focused on human agency? And how does this research possibly explain the influence of climate on cognition?



Jonah Lehrer is a contributing editor at Wired and the author of *Imagine*, *How We Decide* and *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*. He's also contributed to the New Yorker, the NY Times Magazine and WNYC's Radiolab.

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Discussion

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**Thea Boodhoo** • 9 months ago

After seeing the photos it seems like the test wasn't giving any information about clothed vs unclothed. It could be a contextual assumption. When asked to judge Erin, we don't just think "omg skin", we think, "What kind of person models in a bikini? And she looks like she's enjoying it" (although she is a model and was paid to look that way).

It could also be saying a lot about how we perceive people at different distances - the top photos are merely cropped, but the perception is that we are physically closer to the person, at a distance where their face would fill our vision. At that distance, we are generally conversing, so we have to turn on the parts of our brains that understand the other person as a thinking being. At a distance where we can see most of their bodies, we have to rely more on body language, which is only particularly good at conveying feeling.

I think the study is flawed, the conclusions are flawed, and the article is especially flawed. Although it is all very interesting.

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**Andrew S** • 9 months ago • parent

Thea's comment's are dead on. It's studies like this that turned me away from experiemental psychology as an undergrad--even as a teenager I could see how hopelessly flawed the assumptions, methodology, and deductions from the entire field are.

That's not to say that experimental psychology can't be done well--but rather to say that it almost never is. It's depressing, as a professional researcher myself, that even an "all star team of psychologists" makes such obvious mistakes. 99% of published psychology research is fundamentally flawed.

And as long as I'm ranting, let me mention the single most endemic flaw in academic psychology: using nothing but university undergraduates as research subjects. (I knew even before checking the paper, but there it is: "One hundred fifty-nine participants...were recruited in on-campus dining halls and compensated with the gratitude of the experimenter.") Something like 98% of academic research is done purely on teenagers, then automatically extrapolated to the population at large.

Does anyone over the age of 30 really believe that hormone-fuelled students with little to no real world experience share the mindset of their parents? One portion of the study asked participants to imagine they were hiring the models "for a professional job". Had any of the research subjects ever hired an employee? Should we assume that a 20-year old's assumptions about hiring bear significant similarity to a 40 year old team manager?

Sheesh.

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