

Ancestral thinking

Psychologists have shown previously that thinking about our own mortality - 'where we're going' - prompts us to shore up our cultural world view and engage in self-esteem boosting activities. Little researched until now, by contrast, are the psychological effects of thinking about where we came from - our ancestors.

Anecdotally, there's reason to believe that such thoughts are beneficial. Why else the public fascination with genealogy and programmes like the BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are?* Now Peter Fischer and his colleagues at the Universities of Graz, Berlin and Munich have shown that thinking about our ancestors boosts our performance on intelligence tests - what they've dubbed 'the ancestor effect'.

'Normally, our ancestors managed to overcome a multitude of personal and society problems, such as severe illnesses, wars, loss of loved ones or severe economic declines,' the researchers said. 'So, when we think about them, we are reminded that humans who are genetically similar to us can successfully overcome a multitude of problems and adversities.'

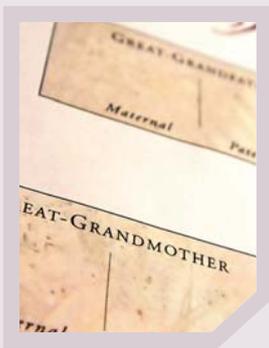
An initial study involved 80 undergrads spending five minutes thinking about either their 15-century ancestors, their great-grandparents or a recent shopping trip. Afterwards, those students in the two ancestor conditions were more confident about their likely performance in future exams, an effect that seemed to be mediated by their feeling more in control of their lives.

Three further studies showed that thinking or writing about their recent or distant ancestors led students to actually perform better on a range of intelligence tests, including verbal and spatial tasks (in one test, students who thought about their distant ancestors scored an average of 14 out of 16, compared with an average of 10 out of 16 among controls). The ancestor benefit was mediated partly by students attempting more answers - what the researchers called having a 'promotion orientation'.

These benefits weren't displayed by students in control conditions that involved writing about themselves or about close friends. Moreover, the ancestor effect exerted its benefit even when students were asked to think about negative aspects of their ancestors.

'We showed that an easy reminder about our ancestors can significantly increase intellectual performance,' the researchers said. 'Hence, whenever people are in a situation where intellectual performance is extraordinarily important, for example in exams or job interviews, they have an easy technique to increase their success.'

Fischer and his colleagues emphasised their research is at an exploratory phase. Future work is needed to find out what other benefits thinking of ancestors might have, and also to uncover other possible mediating factors, which they speculated might have to do with 'processes of social identity, family cohesion, self-regulation or norm activation elicited by increased ancestor salience.'



In the *European Journal of Social Psychology*



Volunteers and sampling issues

In the February issue of *Personality and Individual Differences*

Psychology has a serious problem. You may have heard about its over-dependence on WEIRD participants - that is, those from Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich Democracies. More specifically, countless psychology studies involve undergraduate students, particularly psychology undergrads. Apart from the obvious fact that this limits the generalisability of the findings, Edward Witt and his colleagues provide evidence in a new paper for two further problems, this time involving self-selection biases.

Just over 500 Michigan State University undergrads (75 per cent were female) had the option, at a time of their choosing during the spring 2010 semester, to volunteer either for an online personality study, or a face-to-face version. The data collection was always arranged for Wednesdays at 12.30pm to control for time of day/week effects. Also, the same personality survey was administered by computer in the same way in both experiment types, it's just that in the face-to-face version it was made clear that the students had to attend the research lab, and an experimenter would be present.

Just 30 per cent of the sample opted for the face-to-face version. Predictably enough, these folk tended to score more highly on extraversion. The effect size was small ($d = -.26$) but statistically significant. With regard to the more specific personality traits, the students who chose the face-to-face

version were also more altruistic and less cautious.

What about choice of semester week? As you might expect, it was the more conscientious students who opted for dates earlier in the semester ($r = -.20$). What's more, men were far more likely to volunteer later in the semester, even after controlling for average personality difference between the sexes. For example, 18 per cent of week one participants were male compared with 52 per cent in the final, 13th, week.

In other words, the kind of people who volunteer for research will likely vary according to the time of semester and the mode of data collection. Imagine you used false negative feedback on a cognitive task to explore effects on confidence and performance. Participants tested at the start of semester, who are typically more conscientious and motivated, are likely to be affected in a different way than participants who volunteer later in the semester.

This isn't the first time that self-selection biases have been reported in psychology. A 2007 study, for example, suggested that people who volunteer for a 'prison study' are likely to score higher than average on aggressiveness and social dominance, thus challenging the generalisability of Zimbardo's seminal work. However, despite the occasional study highlighting these effects, there seems to be little enthusiasm in the social psychological



Beneficial effects of political scandal?

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community to do much about it.

So what to do? The specific issues raised in the current study could be addressed by sampling throughout a semester and replicating effects using different data collection methods. 'Many papers based on college students make reference to the real world implications of their findings for phenomena like aggression, basic cognitive processes, prejudice, and mental health,' the researchers said. 'Nonetheless, the use of convenience samples places limitations on the kinds of inferences drawn from research. In the end, we strongly endorse the idea that psychological science will be improved as researchers pay increased attention to the attributes of the participants in their studies.'

Barely a day goes by without some political scandal or other splashed across the papers. Critics argue this obsession with tittle-tattle distracts the electorate from more important policy issues. '...a fiercely independent media is the guarantor of democracy,' Will Hutton wrote in 2000, before warning that the British media's obsession with scandal 'paradoxically, may be beginning to endanger it [democracy]'.

A new study by Beth Miller at the University of Missouri-Kansas City challenges the assumption that scandal is a distraction. Every two days, she presented 413 undergrads with a newspaper article containing information about a policy position held by a mayoral candidate. Then, 1 to 14 days later, she tested the students' memory for the candidate's

policies. The important twist was that for half the participants, the fourth of five newspaper articles, rather than being about a policy, was about a scandal involving the candidate – in particular, his confession to an extra-marital affair.

The assumption of many would be that this story would distract participants from the drier, but arguably more important, detail of the politician's policies. Similarly, in psychological terms, it might be argued that the scandalous information would displace the earlier memory traces associated with policies, especially since negative information is known to be particularly memorable and attention-grabbing.

An alternative prediction, however, is that the salience of

the scandal would actually benefit all other memories associated with the politician. This is consistent with the idea that memory is an 'associative network' made up of interconnected nodes. By this account, activation of one node – the one representing scandal – will spill over and raise the activation in all related nodes, thus benefiting participants' memory for the mayoral candidate's policies.

Miller found that more policy-related information was recalled by participants who read about the scandal, consistent with the associative-memory account. Moreover, compared with participants in the scandal condition who forgot about it (the scandal), those who remembered it were also more likely to remember policy information – reinforcing the idea that the scandal memory had benefited policy memories. As you might expect, although the scandal benefited participants' memory for policies, it also negatively affected the participants' evaluation of the candidate.

'While these results do not suggest that candidates can engage in scandalous activities without consequence, they do suggest that the depiction of the public as blind to anything but scandalous information seems to be an exaggeration,' Miller said. 'The results...suggest that exposure to scandalous information...may have beneficial side-effects not previously explored.'



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