



Norbert Schwarz

University of Southern
California, USA

9 MARCH 2021

Situated embodiment:
Of bitter tastes and weighty arguments

Abstract:

Incidental sensory experiences can influence judgments of unrelated targets in ways that are consistent with familiar metaphors. Influential theoretical approaches assume that these effects are obligatory and show limited cultural variation due to the similarity of human bodily experience across cultures. Challenging these assumptions, the impact of sensory experiences on metaphorically related judgments shows considerable situational and cultural malleability. For example, a book seems more important when its heft is increased through a concealed weight. But this effect is only observed when “importance” is on perceivers’ minds while they hold the book, e.g., because they hold the book while making the judgment or the whole study was introduced as being about importance. When the importance judgment is posed immediately after they put the book down, the preceding sensory experience has no influence. Similarly, bitter taste grounds thought about adversity in many cultures, but does so in culture-specific ways. In English, “bitter” refers to the experience of unfair treatment, whereas “eating bitterness” refers to endurance in the face of hardship in Chinese. Indeed, tasting something bitter increases self-reported motivation for Chinese but not for Anglo-Canadian participants; conversely, it decreases perceived fairness for Anglo-Canadian but not for Chinese participants. Chinese students living in Canada acquire the host country’s metaphorical interpretation over the course of 4 to 5 years, but only exhibit it when tested in English, not when tested in Chinese. The pattern of cultural differences is consistent with a generally observed higher emphasis on self-improvement in China versus self-enhancement in Canada. Supporting this conjecture, the fairness judgments of Chinese students in Canada follow the Anglo-Canadian pattern when a self-enhancement motive is induced, and the effort judgments of Anglo-Canadian students follow the Chinese pattern when a self-improvement motive is induced. The observed variations in the impact of sensory experiences on metaphorically related judgments follow the logic of knowledge accessibility.