Staying Warm in the Winter: Seeking Psychological Warmth to Reduce Physical Coldness

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The current studies test whether people are motivated to engage in psychologically warm events when they feel physically cold. We suggest that psychological warmth and physical warmth are two means for satisfying the same goal of reducing a feeling of coldness.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
On a cold, snowy night, there is nothing better than sitting by the fire and drinking a hot cup of cocoa. It is a basic human drive to seek physical warmth when feeling cold. This research explores whether there also exists a drive to seek psychological warmth when feeling cold. On a cold, snowy night, are people especially interested in having a romantic dinner with a loved one or a phone conversation with a dear friend? More broadly, we ask: When people are physically cold, are they motivated to engage in psychologically warm activities?

Psychologically warm events are positive experiences that promote a feeling of social connection. Recent research on embodied cognition suggests that a link exists between physical warmth and psychological warmth (IJzerman & Semin, 2009; Williams & Bargh, 2008; Zhong & Leonardelli, 2008). For instance, people perceive a target individual to be “warm” (e.g., kind and charitable) when they are holding a hot cup of coffee (Williams & Bargh, 2008), they perceive themselves to be socially close to others when they are in a warm room (IJzerman & Semin, 2009), and they report feeling physically cold when they are socially excluded (Zhong & Leonardelli, 2008).

In this research we suggest that psychological warmth, like physical warmth, is perceived as a means of reducing the feeling of coldness. As a result, people are more interested in engaging in psychologically warm activities when they are physically cold. This argument goes beyond the “metaphor” or “priming” domain of embodied cognition research. Instead of asking whether activities will be perceived as psychologically warmer or colder, we focus on the goal-oriented nature of the phenomenon and test whether feeling cold motivates people to seek psychological warmth. We suggest psychological warmth and physical warmth are two means for satisfying the same goal of reducing a feeling of coldness.

Study 1 supports the basic prediction by showing that cold participants are especially interested in psychologically warm activities. Specifically, participants who completed a questionnaire outside in the cold in a Midwestern city’s winter showed more interest in warm events than in non-warm activities, but those who completed the study inside a heated building were equally interested in warm and non-warm activities. Study 2 extends the work to real-world behavior. Beginning a romantic relationship is perhaps the most powerful tool for forging social connection. We find that participants are more likely to start relationships in cold weather than end them. In Study 3, we primed people either with the goal of reducing physical coldness or the concept of coldness. The results showed that priming people with the goal of reducing physical coldness led to greater interest in both physically and psychologically warm events (relative to non-warm events), but priming people with the concept of coldness did not, suggesting that it is the motivation to reduce coldness that is central to people’s interest in warm events. Finally, in Study 4, to test whether psychological warmth and physical warmth are two means for satisfying the same goal of reducing a feeling of coldness, we asked participants to fill out the same questionnaire as in Study 1 either outside in the cold or inside a heated building. However, half of the participants were reminded that they would step into a heated building momentarily. We replicated the results of Study 1 in the no-reminder condition, showing that people showed greater interest in psychologically warm events if they were feeling physically cold than if they were not feeling cold; but this increased interest in psychologically warm events is reduced when participants were reminded that their motivation to reduce coldness will be met through physical means, indicating that psychological warmth and physical warmth are two means for satisfying the same goal of reducing a feeling of coldness.

Our findings support the argument that while people satisfy their physical goals through physical means, the mapping between mind and body also leads them to satisfy their physical goals through psychological means. This research adds to the growing body of work supporting a theory of embodied cognition, and specifically to work suggesting that the mental concepts of psychological warmth and social connection are deeply rooted in the sensorimotor experience of physical warmth. In addition, the present work goes beyond demonstrating a conceptual mapping between the physical sensation of warmth and the psychological experience of warmth. It highlights the role of goals and motivation in the link between the mind and the body. We find that this link leads people to satisfy their physical goal with actions that could satisfy the matching psychological goal. Namely, when people are motivated to reduce physical coldness, they show interest in events that promote psychological warmth.