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## Reports

## Enclothed cognition

Hajo Adam, Adam D. Galinsky\*

Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208, USA

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## ABSTRACT

We introduce the term “enclothed cognition” to describe the systematic influence that clothes have on the wearer’s psychological processes. We offer a potentially unifying framework to integrate past findings and capture the diverse impact that clothes can have on the wearer by proposing that enclothed cognition involves the co-occurrence of two independent factors—the symbolic meaning of the clothes *and* the physical experience of wearing them. As a first test of our enclothed cognition perspective, the current research explored the effects of wearing a lab coat. A pretest found that a lab coat is generally associated with attentiveness and carefulness. We therefore predicted that wearing a lab coat would increase performance on attention-related tasks. In Experiment 1, physically wearing a lab coat increased selective attention compared to not wearing a lab coat. In Experiments 2 and 3, wearing a lab coat described as a doctor’s coat increased sustained attention compared to wearing a lab coat described as a painter’s coat, and compared to simply seeing or even identifying with a lab coat described as a doctor’s coat. Thus, the current research suggests a basic principle of enclothed cognition—it depends on both the symbolic meaning and the physical experience of wearing the clothes.

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“What a strange power there is in clothing.”

~Isaac Bashevis Singer

Nobel Prize winning author Isaac Bashevis Singer asserts that the clothes we wear hold considerable power and sway. In line with this assertion, bestselling books such as *Dress for Success* by John T. Molloy and TV shows like TLC’s *What Not to Wear* emphasize the power that clothes can have over others by creating favorable impressions. Indeed, a host of research has documented the effects that people’s clothes have on the perceptions and reactions of others. High school students’ clothing styles influence perceptions of academic prowess among peers and teachers (Behling & Williams, 1991). Teaching assistants who wear formal clothes are perceived as more intelligent, but as less interesting than teaching assistants who wear less formal clothes (Morris, Gorham, Cohen, & Huffman, 1996). When women dress in a masculine fashion during a recruitment interview, they are more likely to be hired (Forsythe, 1990), and when they dress sexily in prestigious jobs, they are perceived as less competent (Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Branstiter, 2005). Clients are more likely to return to formally dressed therapists than to casually dressed therapists (Dacy & Brodsky, 1992). And appropriately dressed customer service agents

elicit stronger purchase intentions than inappropriately dressed ones (Shao, Baker, & Wagner, 2004).

Yet, the clothes we wear have power not only over others, but also over ourselves. Although identity scholars have long theorized that wearing clothes means assuming a particular identity that elicits corresponding behaviors from the wearer (Stone, 1962), this second facet of the power of clothing has received far less attention in scholarly work. Indeed, research on the effects of clothing on people’s own perceptions and behavior is relatively scattered and disintegrated. Most of this research has focused on the deindividuating effects of clothes, but this literature has not always produced consistent effects. For example, wearing large hoods and capes makes people more likely to administer electric shocks to others (Zimbardo, 1969), whereas wearing a nurse uniform makes people less likely to administer these shocks (Johnson & Downing, 1979), a contradiction that deindividuation scholars have been struggling to reconcile (Lea, Spears, & de Groot, 2001; Spears, 1995). Furthermore, from a color psychology perspective, research has shown that professional sports teams wearing black uniforms are more aggressive than sports teams wearing non-black uniforms (Frank & Gilovich, 1988). Finally, from a self-objectification perspective, research has found that wearing a bikini makes women feel ashamed, eat less, and perform worse at math (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998).

We propose a potentially unifying framework to understand these past findings and to parsimoniously capture the impact of clothing on the wearer’s perceptions and actions. Specifically, drawing from research on embodied cognition, we introduce the term

\* Corresponding author at: Northwestern University, 2001 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208, USA. Fax: +1 847 491 8896.

E-mail address: [agalinsky@kellogg.northwestern.edu](mailto:agalinsky@kellogg.northwestern.edu) (A.D. Galinsky).

“encloded cognition” to designate the systematic influence of clothes on the wearer’s psychological processes and behavioral tendencies.

### Encloded cognition

Traditional theories of cognition argue that cognitive representations are based on amodal, abstract content. In contrast, theories of embodied cognition (e.g., Barsalou, 1999, 2008; Glenberg, 1997; Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005) argue that cognitive representations are based on modal, perceptual content that is based in the brain’s sensory systems for perception (e.g., vision, audition), action (e.g., movement, proprioception), and introspection (e.g., mental states, affect). As physical experiences become schematized into multimodal representations stored in memory, these physical experiences form an integral part in shaping cognitive representations of abstract concepts and acquire symbolic meaning. Thus, physical experiences can trigger associated abstract concepts and mental simulation through this symbolic meaning.

An increasing amount of research supports the embodied cognition perspective: for example, the physical experience of cleansing oneself is associated with the abstract concept of moral purity (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). Because of this symbolic meaning, it has been shown that physical cleansing influences judgments of morality (Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008). In a similar vein, experiencing physical warmth increases feelings of interpersonal warmth (Williams & Bargh, 2008), walking slowly activates the stereotype of the elderly (Mussweiler, 2006), nodding one’s head while listening to a persuasive message increases one’s susceptibility to persuasion (Wells & Petty, 1980), holding a pen in the mouth in a way that activates the muscles associated with smiling leads to more intense humor responses (Strack, Martin, & Stepper, 1988), carrying a heavy clipboard increases judgments of importance (Jostman, Lakens, & Schubert, 2009), clean scents increase the tendency to reciprocate trust and to offer charitable help (Liljenquist, Zhong, & Galinsky, 2010), and adopting an expansive body posture affects one’s sense of power and associated action tendencies—more so than being in a powerful role (Huang, Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Guilory, 2011).

We argue that just like physical experiences, the experience of wearing clothes triggers associated abstract concepts and their symbolic meanings. In particular, we posit that wearing clothes causes people to “embody” the clothing and its symbolic meaning. Consequently, when a piece of clothing is worn, it exerts an influence on the wearer’s psychological processes by activating associated abstract concepts through its symbolic meaning—similar to the way in which a physical experience, which is, by definition, already embodied, exerts its influence.

Although embodied cognition and encloded cognition thus operate in similar ways, there is an important difference. In embodied cognition, the link between a physical experience and its symbolic meaning is direct, as it is the physical experience itself that carries the symbolic meaning. In other words, the symbolic meaning is always automatically embodied because it directly stems from the physical experience. In encloded cognition, the link between a physical experience and its symbolic meaning is indirect, as it is the clothes that carry the symbolic meaning. In other words, the symbolic meaning is not automatically embodied because it stems from the clothes—so it is not realized until one physically wears and thus embodies the clothes.

This distinction between embodied cognition and encloded cognition indicates that encloded cognition involves the co-occurrence of two independent factors: the symbolic meaning of the clothes and the physical experience of wearing the clothes. Hence, we propose a basic principle of encloded cognition—the effects of clothing

on people’s psychological processes depend on both a) the symbolic meaning of the clothes and b) whether people are actually wearing the clothes.

Overall, we hypothesize that wearing a piece of clothing and embodying its symbolic meaning will trigger associated psychological processes. It should be noted that there is an important distinction to be made between encloded cognition and material priming effects. Material priming refers to the phenomenon that simply being exposed to a physical item (e.g., a boardroom table) can increase behaviors consistent with the symbolic meaning of that item (e.g., a competitive orientation) (Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004). We argue, however, that actually wearing a piece of clothing and having the accompanying physical experiences (e.g., seeing it on one’s body, feeling it on one’s skin, etc.) will make it significantly more likely for the piece of clothing to influence the wearer’s psychological processes, above and beyond basic material priming effects. That is, embodying the clothing’s symbolic meaning is a critical element in our encloded cognition perspective.

Our argument is consistent with work showing that people who take the perspective of a stereotyped group are significantly more likely to display stereotype-consistent behaviors than people who are merely primed with a stereotyped group (Galinsky, Wang, & Ku, 2008). It is also consistent with research showing that embodying power by adopting an expansive body posture is significantly more likely to influence power-consistent action tendencies than merely priming power (Huang et al., 2011). Just as the effects of perspective-taking and embodied power are not reducible to a basic behavioral priming process, we propose that the effects of encloded cognition are not reducible to simple material priming effects.

### Experimental overview

In the current research, we tested our encloded cognition perspective with respect to lab coats. Lab coats are the prototypical attire of scientists and doctors. Wearing a lab coat thus signifies a scientific focus and an emphasis on being careful and attentive—attributes that involve the importance of paying attention to the task at hand and not making errors. To confirm that people indeed associate a lab coat with attention-related concepts, we recruited 38 people (16 female, 22 male; average age: 36.47 years) from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk website (see Buhrmeister, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) to participate in a short online survey. Participants were shown a picture of a white lab coat similar to the one used in the experiments reported in this article. Participants rated the extent to which they associated the lab coat with attentiveness, carefulness, responsibility, and a scientific focus on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). An association was considered to exist if it was rated significantly above the midpoint of the scale (see Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Results confirmed that participants held strong associations between a lab coat and each of the attention-related constructs, all  $t_s > 5.36$ ,  $p_s < .001$ . We thus hypothesized that wearing a lab coat increases performance on attention-related tasks.

In the current research, we explored two dimensions of attention: selective attention and sustained attention. Selective attention is the ability to focus on relevant stimuli and ignore irrelevant ones, and sustained attention is the ability to maintain focus on a continuous activity (Davies, Jones, & Taylor, 1984). Experiment 1 tested whether wearing a lab coat influences selective attention using a Stroop task (Stroop, 1935). Experiments 2 and 3 looked at sustained attention using a comparative visual search task (Pomplun, Reingold, & Shen, 2001).

Across the experiments, we tested our core hypothesis that encloded cognition depends on two independent factors—actually wearing the clothes and the symbolic meaning of the clothes. In

Experiment 1, we varied whether participants wore a lab coat. In Experiments 2 and 3, we varied whether participants wore a lab coat as well as the lab coat's symbolic meaning by describing it as a doctor's coat or as a painter's coat.

### Experiment 1: physically wearing a lab coat

#### Method

##### Design and participants

Fifty-eight undergraduates (41 females, 19 males; average age: 20.29 years) at a large university in the Midwestern United States participated in the experiment. They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: wearing a lab coat vs. not wearing a lab coat.

##### Procedure and experimental manipulation

In the *wearing-a-lab-coat condition*, participants were asked to wear a disposable white lab coat. To provide a cover story, the experimenter told participants that other participants in prior sessions of this experiment had been wearing lab coats during lab construction. Although the construction had been completed, the experimenter told participants that they still needed to wear the lab coat so all participants in the experiment would be in the same situation. In the *not-wearing-a-lab-coat condition*, participants completed the tasks in their own clothes.

##### Dependent measure

To measure selective attention, we administered a Stroop task (Stroop, 1935) and instructed participants to indicate as quickly and accurately as possible whether a series of letter strings was presented in red or blue on a computer screen. The task consisted of 50 trials: 20 incongruent trials in which the meaning of the letter string interfered with the task of naming the color (i.e., "RED" in blue or "BLUE" in red), and 30 non-incongruent trials in which the meaning of the letter string did not interfere with the task of naming the color (i.e., "XXXX" in red or blue, "RED" in red, or "BLUE" in blue). The order of trials was random. We measured whether participants indicated the right color as well as the time they took to complete each trial. Selective attention was assessed by contrasting performance on incongruent trials (which tested the ability to focus on relevant stimuli while ignoring irrelevant stimuli) with performance on non-incongruent trials (e.g., Smith, Jostmann, Galinsky, & Van Dijk, 2008).

#### Results

We entered error rates in the Stroop task into a 2 (lab coat: lab coat vs. no lab coat)  $\times$  2 (trial type: incongruent vs. non-incongruent) mixed-model ANOVA, with the second factor within-subjects. Indicating a Stroop effect, participants made more errors on incongruent trials than on neutral trials,  $F(1, 57) = 19.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2_p = .26$ . Consistent with our hypothesis, this effect was moderated by a significant interaction effect,  $F(1, 57) = 5.42$ ,  $p = .02$ ;  $\eta^2_p = .09$  (see Fig. 1). Participants in the wearing-a-lab-coat condition made around half as many errors as participants in the not-wearing-a-lab-coat condition on incongruent trials,  $F(1, 57) = 4.33$ ,  $p = .04$ ;  $\eta^2_p = .07$ , but the same number of errors on non-incongruent trials,  $F < 1.19$ ,  $p > .28$ . The time participants took to complete each trial did not vary across conditions,  $F_s < 0.32$ ,  $p_s > .57$ .

### Experiment 2: the importance of symbolic meaning

The results of Experiment 1 demonstrate that wearing a lab coat leads to increased selective attention on a Stroop task. Although

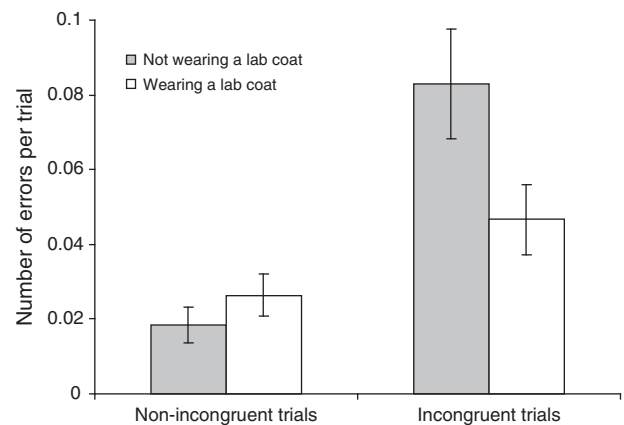


Fig. 1. Selective attention (number of errors per trial in the Stroop task) as a function of experimental condition and trial type. Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  SEM.

these results are highly consistent with our encloded cognition perspective, our model proposes that encloded cognition involves two components: physically wearing the clothes and the symbolic meaning of the clothes. In Experiment 1, the two components were confounded, and the second component—the role of the symbolic meaning of the lab coat—was assumed rather than explicitly examined.

The goal of Experiment 2 was to parse out these components and show that both wearing the clothes and the symbolic meaning of the clothes are collectively necessary conditions for encloded cognition to occur. To test our full model, we manipulated the symbolic meaning of the lab coat by associating it with medical doctors or artistic painters (for whom paying close attention to the task and maintaining focus is not as important). Furthermore, to rule out that any effects would be driven by mere priming effects, and to show that it is essential to actually wear the lab coat, we also included a condition in which participants would see, but not wear, a lab coat associated with medical doctors. Finally, we wanted to complement Experiment 1 by examining another dimension of attention, namely sustained attention. We used a comparative visual search task that required participants to maintain focus on a continuous activity.

#### Method

##### Design and participants

Seventy-four undergraduate students (47 female, 27 male; average age: 19.85 years) at a large university in the Midwestern United States participated in the experiment. They were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: wearing a doctor's coat vs. wearing a painter's coat vs. seeing a doctor's coat.

##### Procedure and experimental manipulation

In all conditions, participants were told that local officials across the United States are thinking about making certain clothes mandatory for certain professions in their municipalities, and one purpose of the experiment was to see what people think about the clothes. In the *wearing-a-doctor's-coat condition*, participants were asked to wear a disposable white lab coat described as a medical doctor's coat. In the *wearing-a-painter's-coat condition*, participants were asked to wear the same disposable white lab coat, but this time it was described as an artistic painter's coat. In the *seeing-a-doctor's-coat condition*, participants simply saw a disposable white lab coat described as a medical doctor's coat displayed on a table in the laboratory. In all conditions, participants

answered questions about the coat (e.g., how the coat would look on doctors/painters) before proceeding to the sustained attention task.

#### Dependent measure

To measure sustained attention, we administered four comparative visual search tasks (e.g., Pomplun et al., 2001). Each task displayed two pictures next to each other on a computer screen. The pictures were identical except for four minor differences (see Appendix). For each pair of pictures, participants were told that there were four differences, and they were instructed to write down as quickly as possible as many differences as they could find. We measured the number of differences participants found as well as the time they took to complete all tasks. Sustained attention was assessed by adding the number of differences participants found across the four tasks.

#### Results

We submitted the number of differences found to a one-way ANOVA, which yielded a significant main effect for experimental condition,  $F(1, 73) = 4.34, p = .02; \eta^2_p = .11$  (see Fig. 2). Consistent with our hypothesis, participants in the wearing-a-doctor's-coat condition found more differences than participants in the wearing-a-painter's-coat condition,  $F(1, 51) = 7.03, p = .01; \eta^2_p = .12$ , and participants in the seeing-a-doctor's-coat condition,  $F(1, 46) = 6.65, p = .01; \eta^2_p = .13$ . The number of differences found did not vary across the latter two conditions,  $F < 0.02, p > .91$ . The time participants took to complete all tasks did not vary across conditions,  $F < 0.47, p > .63$ , demonstrating that the effects were not due to mere persistence but resulted from heightened attention during the task.

#### Experiment 3: beyond mere exposure

The results of Experiment 2 demonstrate that wearing a lab coat leads to increased sustained attention on a comparative visual search task and that this effect depends on both whether the clothes are worn and the symbolic meaning of the clothes: Participants displayed greater sustained attention only when wearing a lab coat described as a doctor's coat, but not when wearing a lab coat described as a painter's coat or when seeing a lab coat described as a doctor's coat.

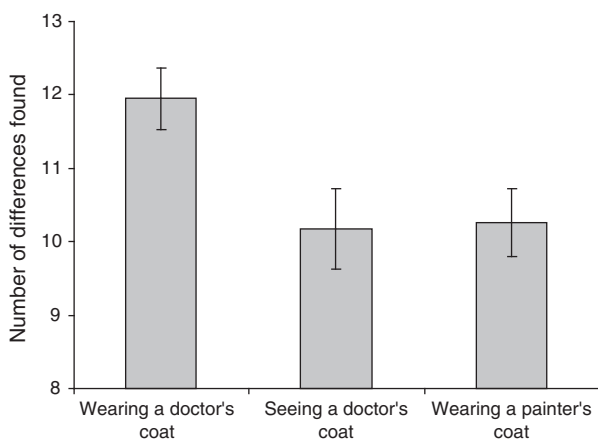


Fig. 2. Sustained attention (number of differences found in the comparative visual search tasks) as a function of experimental condition. Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  SEM.

One intriguing finding from Experiment 2 is that there was no difference in sustained attention between participants who wore a lab coat described as a painter's coat and participants who saw a lab coat described as a doctor's coat. This finding may appear surprising because research on behavioral priming suggests that being primed with a doctor's coat should result in an increase in sustained attention. One potential explanation for the lack of a typical priming effect is that the prime was not strong enough in the seeing-a-doctor's-coat condition: Participants only saw the lab coat displayed on a table when they entered the laboratory, but they did not see it during the remainder of the experiment. Indeed, many studies have found that the amount of exposure to a primed construct determines the strength of its effects (Bargh & Pietromonaco, 1982; Higgins, 1996). Hence, it is possible that the difference in sustained attention between the wearing-a-doctor's-coat condition and the seeing-a-doctor's-coat condition was not caused by wearing the coat per se, but by the difference in how long participants were exposed to the coat. In addition, wearing the lab coat involves both the physical experience of wearing the coat and the connection of the coat to the self. Hence, it is possible that the effect of wearing the lab coat on sustained attention was not caused by the physical experience of wearing the coat, but by establishing a connection between the self and the coat.

The goal of Experiment 3 was to address these two issues and provide further evidence that the physical experience of wearing a piece of clothing has an effect above and beyond being merely primed with it. We therefore included a condition in Experiment 3 in which participants did not wear a lab coat described as a doctor's coat, but they were still exposed to the lab coat for the same amount of time and they still created a connection between the self and the coat.

#### Method

##### Design and participants

Ninety-nine undergraduate students (62 females, 37 males; average age: 20.02 years) at a large university in the Midwestern United States participated in the experiment. They were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: wearing a doctor's coat vs. wearing a painter's coat vs. identifying with a doctor's coat.

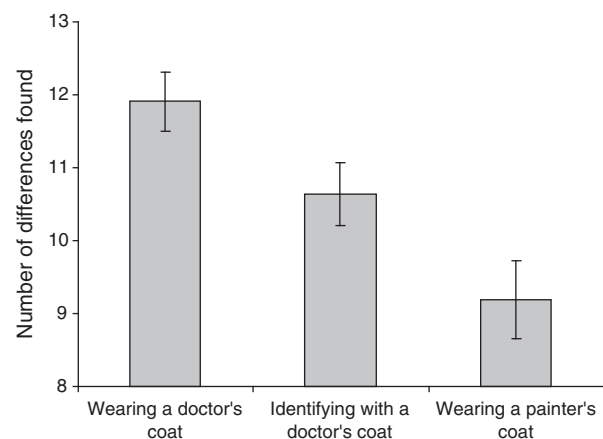


Fig. 3. Sustained attention (number of differences found in the comparative visual search tasks) as a function of experimental condition. Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  SEM.



### Procedure and experimental manipulation

In all conditions, participants were told that local officials across the United States are thinking about making certain clothes mandatory for certain professions in their municipalities, and one purpose of the experiment was to see what people think about the clothes. In the *wearing-a-doctor's-coat condition*, participants were asked to wear a disposable white lab coat described as a medical doctor's coat. In the *wearing-a-painter's-coat condition*, participants were asked to wear the same disposable white lab coat, but this time it was described as an artistic painter's coat. In both conditions, participants were asked to write an essay about their thoughts on the coat (e.g., how the coat would look on doctors/painters). In the *identifying-with-a-doctor's-coat condition*, participants saw a disposable white lab coat described as a medical doctor's coat displayed on the desk in front of them throughout the entire experiment. In this condition, participants were asked to write an essay about how they identify with the coat (e.g., how the coat represents them and has a specific, personal meaning).

### Dependent measure

The dependent measure was sustained attention, which was assessed in the same way as in Experiment 2.

### Results

We submitted the number of differences found to a one-way ANOVA, which yielded a significant main effect for experimental condition,  $F(1, 98) = 8.89, p < .001; \eta^2_p = .16$  (see Fig. 3). Consistent with our hypothesis, participants in the *wearing-a-doctor's-coat condition* found more differences than participants in the *identifying-with-a-doctor's-coat condition*,  $F(1, 67) = 4.60, p = .04; \eta^2_p = .07$ , who in turn found more differences than participants in the *wearing-a-painter's-coat condition*,  $F(1, 63) = 4.48, p = .04; \eta^2_p = .07$ . As in Experiment 2, the time participants took to complete all tasks did not vary across conditions,  $F < 1.42, p > .24$ , demonstrating that the effects were not due to mere persistence but resulted from heightened attention during the task.

Thus, identifying with the doctor's lab coat increased the level of sustained attention, consistent with a typical priming effect. However, consistent with our encloded cognition perspective, wearing the coat when it was described as a doctor's coat had an effect over and above simply being exposed to and identifying with it.

### Discussion

The current research provides initial support for our encloded cognition perspective that clothes can have profound and systematic psychological and behavioral consequences for their wearers. In Experiment 1, participants who wore a lab coat displayed increased selective attention compared to participants who wore their regular clothes. In Experiments 2 and 3, we found robust evidence that this influence of clothing depends on both whether the clothes are worn and the symbolic meaning of the clothes. When the coat was associated with a doctor but not worn, there was no increase in sustained attention. When the coat was worn but not associated with a doctor, there was no increase in sustained attention. Only when a) participants were wearing the coat and b) it was associated with a doctor did sustained attention increase. These results suggest a basic principle of encloded cognition: It involves the co-occurrence of two independent factors—the symbolic meaning of the clothes and the physical experience of wearing them.

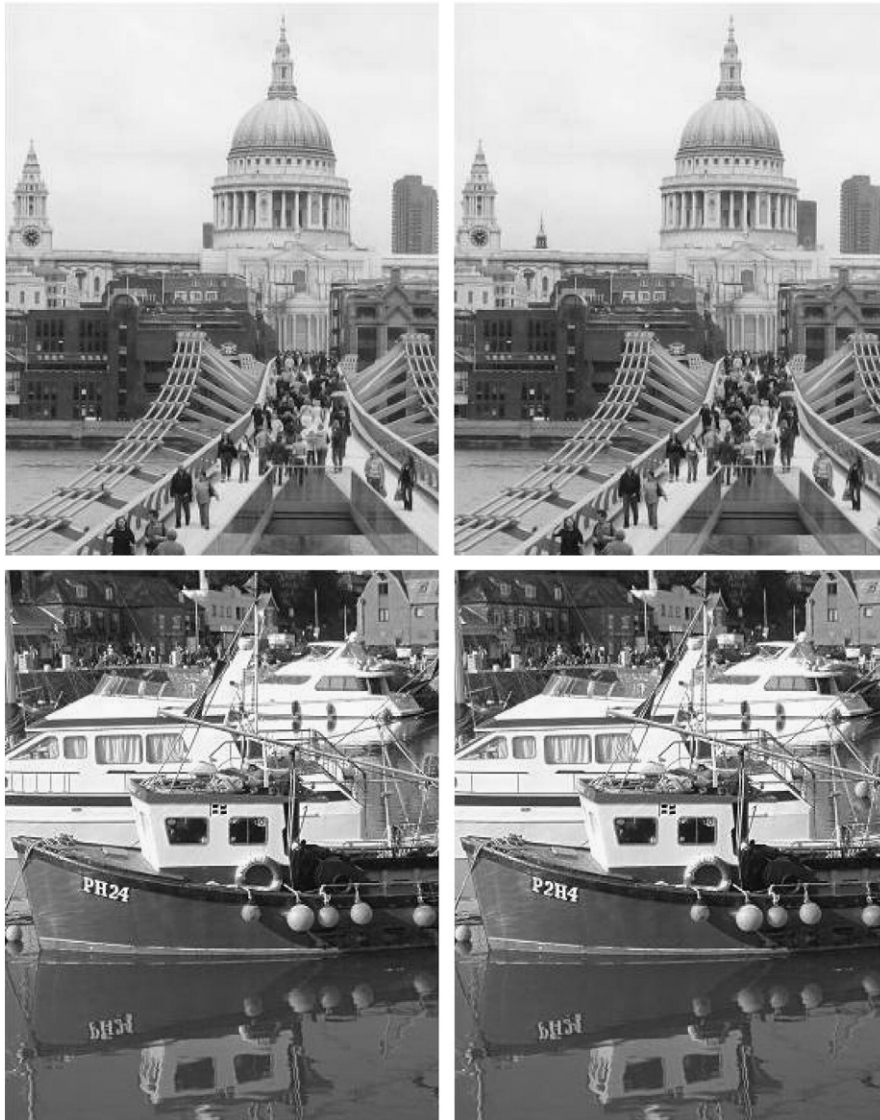
These findings indicate that the effects of wearing a piece of clothing on the wearer's psychological processes cannot be reduced to a simple material priming process (Kay et al., 2004), and thus

they add important explanatory variance above and beyond material priming effects. Furthermore, the results of Experiment 3 suggest that the effects of wearing a piece of clothing cannot be reduced to the wearer simply feeling identified with the clothing. Instead, there seems to be something special about the physical experience of wearing a piece of clothing, and this experience constitutes a critical component of encloded cognition. One open question, however, is whether encloded cognition is different in kind or different in degree from a basic identification process. On the one hand, it is possible that wearing a piece of clothing is qualitatively different from identifying with a piece of clothing through other means (e.g., by writing about it or by imagining oneself in it). On the other hand, it is possible that wearing a piece of clothing is simply a more potent method of identifying with its symbolic meaning, and that explains why wearing a lab coat produced a stronger effect on sustained attention than being identified with it in Experiment 3.

Our results open new directions within the growing research on embodied cognition. First, research on embodied cognition has mostly focused on *what* we think (i.e., judgments of morality, importance, or power), but the current research broadens the scope of outcome variables by examining *how* we think (i.e., attentional processes). Second, our encloded cognition perspective allows for the explicit exploration of the importance of symbolic meanings in the relationship between physical experiences and cognitive processes. Because embodied cognition research looks at physical experiences that have inherent symbolic meanings, the role of symbolic meanings is typically assumed rather than explicitly examined. In encloded cognition, however, the physical experience of wearing the clothes and the symbolic meaning of the clothes are two independent factors, which allowed us to keep the physical experience constant while manipulating the symbolic meaning. Indeed, in Experiments 2 and 3, participants who wore a supposed doctor's coat and participants who wore a supposed painter's coat were in fact wearing the same coat and had the same physical experience, yet, their performance on an attention-related task differed depending on the coat's symbolic meaning. The current research thus provides the first explicit evidence for the vital role of symbolic meanings in the influence of physical experiences on cognitive processes.

Beyond contributing to research on embodied cognition, we believe that an encloded cognition perspective can provide a parsimonious and potentially unifying explanation for the scattered findings on the effects of clothing found in the literature. For example, people who wear nurse uniforms maybe be less likely to administer electric shocks because wearing a nurse uniform might trigger associated concepts of caring and altruistic behavior. In contrast, people who wear large hoods may be more likely to administer electric shocks because wearing a large hood or other types of identity-concealing clothes might conjure up images of robbers, terrorists, and aggressive or deviant behaviors. An encloded cognition perspective has the potential not only to explain and extend prior research findings, but also to stimulate future research on the impact of clothing on cognitive processes. Does wearing the robe of a priest or judge make people more ethical? Does putting on an expensive suit make people feel more powerful? Does putting on the uniform of a firefighter or police officer make people act more courageously? And, perhaps even more interestingly, do the effects of physically wearing a particular form of clothing wear off over time as people become habituated to it? Answering these kinds of questions would further elucidate how a seemingly trivial, yet ubiquitous item like an article of clothing can influence how we think, feel, and act. Although the saying goes that clothes do not make the man, our results suggest that they do hold a strange power over their wearers.

Appendix





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