

Mind vs. Body? Dualist Beliefs Linked with Less Concern for Healthy Behaviors

July 24, 2012

Many people, whether they know it or not, are philosophical dualists. That is, they believe that the brain and the mind are two separate entities. Despite the fact dualist beliefs are found in virtually all human cultures, surprisingly little is known about the impact of these beliefs on how we think and behave in everyday life.

But a new research article forthcoming in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), suggests that espousing a dualist philosophy can have important real-life consequences.

Across five related studies, researchers Matthias Forstmann, Pascal Burgmer, and Thomas Mussweiler of the University of Cologne, Germany, found that people primed with dualist beliefs had more reckless attitudes toward health and exercise, and also preferred (and ate) a less healthy diet than those who were primed with physicalist beliefs.

Furthermore, they found that the relationship also worked in the other direction. People who were primed with unhealthy behaviors – such as pictures of unhealthy food – reported a stronger dualistic belief than participants who were primed with healthy behaviors.

Overall, the findings from the five studies provide converging evidence demonstrating that mind-body dualism has a noticeable impact on people's health-related attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, these findings suggest that dualistic beliefs decrease the likelihood of engaging in healthy behavior.

These findings support the researchers' original hypothesis that the more people perceive their minds and bodies to be distinct entities, the less likely they will be to engage in behaviors that protect their bodies. Bodies are ultimately viewed as a disposable vessel that helps the mind interact with the physical world.

Evidence of a bidirectional relationship further suggests that metaphysical beliefs, such as beliefs in mind-body dualism, may serve as cognitive tools for coping with threatening or harmful situations.

The fact that the simple priming procedures used in the studies had an immediate impact on health-related attitudes and behavior suggests that these procedures may eventually have profound implications for real-life problems. Interventions that reduce dualistic beliefs through priming could be one way to help promote healthier – or less self-damaging – behaviors in at-risk populations.