

New York, New York: Study Determines Difference Between Abstract and Concrete Jungle

January 01, 2008

The Big Apple, a densely populated metropolis of more than 8.2 million people in the 332 square miles of blocks, boroughs and buildings, could have been named metaphorically by outsiders as a fertile land of opportunity. New York City, in other words, can be considered concretely as a geographical location with a large population, but it also can be viewed symbolically as the gateway to America.

While both of these descriptions are accurate, they are based on an individual's perception of, and even physical distance from, the city. Princeton psychologist Daniel Oppenheimer and graduate student Adam Alter argue that people tend to perceive objects as being more abstract when those stimuli are difficult to process mentally, known as cognitive disfluency, or are physically further away.

“But a stimulus does not need to be in Los Angeles for a New Yorker to construe it abstractly,” explained Alter. “When a stimulus feels far away, even when it isn't actually far away, it also might seem more abstract.” This psychological distance to which the author refers can be manipulated using a vague stimulus, such as an italicized font. In the first study of the series, the psychologists already had shown that italicized and other disfluent fonts prompted the sensation of psychological distance.

A second study supported this phenomenon when the psychologists asked questions related to New York City in disfluent fonts. As predicted, the participants tended to answer with more abstract comments than those who received clearly printed questions. In another experiment, participants played the game Balderdash, which required them to generate definitions for obscure English words. The psychologists discovered that participants created more abstract definitions for hard to pronounce words like euneirophrenia than for familiar sounding words, such as beestings.

The results, which appear in the February 2008 issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, show that cognitive disfluency can be caused by psychological as well as physical distance. Using this research-based theory, it is safe to assume, therefore, that people residing in Tokyo have a more symbolic notion of New York than New Yorkers have of themselves.