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Stephen Colbert's 'Truthiness' Scientifically Validated

Submitted by News Account on 24 January 2008 - 11:30am. Psychology

'Truthiness,' according to fount-of-all-important-wisdom and television host Stephen Colbert, represents the human preference to follow our intuition despite the presence of actual facts or evidence - and the more ambiguous an answer to a question, the more likely an individual will believe it is truthful.

Psychologists Rick Dale of the University of Memphis, Michael Spivey of Cornell University and the late Chris McKinstry affirmed this when they asked college students questions that ranged in levels of vagueness and tracked their corresponding arm movements to clicking 'yes' or 'no' on a computer screen.

Specifically, questions such as "is murder sometimes justifiable?" are considered ambiguous and could cause the sensation of being 'pulled' in both directions at once; however, questions like "can a kangaroo walk backwards?" have a high probability of 'no' responding.

The results of participants' cursor movements suggested that the human brain thinks and acts at the same time, in contrast to what many researchers previously assumed: That the decision-making process was completed by the cognitive subsystem, or the brain's thought center, before it was shared with other parts of the brain.

"These dynamic data showed that participant arm movements had lower velocity and curved more toward the alternative response box during 'no' responses than during 'yes' responses—suggesting that we experience a general bias toward assuming statements are true," the authors explained.

The findings suggest that the mind and body do in fact work together and the resulting collaboration may prompt us to lean toward 'truthiness.'

Article: Chris McKinstry, Rick Dale, Michael J. Spivey (2008)
Action Dynamics Reveal Parallel Competition in Decision Making
Psychological Science 19 (1), 22–24. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02041.x

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