

David Brooks



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Matter Over Mind

Over the next few weeks, this blog may have a distinct Harvard bias. This is not only because I am kissing up to the alpha school, but recently I had a fantastic visit to the [Harvard Decision Science Lab](#), run by Jennifer Lerner, and I got to meet several of the researchers there.

For example, I got to hear Amy Cuddy of the Harvard Business School, describe her research. I pause to describe Cuddy's background because I've been struck by the number of people I meet in the general field of brain and behavioral research who have suffered some form of personal trauma.

Daniel Kahneman is one of the several senior figures in the field who survived the Holocaust. Nassim Taleb, of Black Swan fame, had his homeland, Lebanon, ravaged by war. Dan Ariely, the prominent behavioral scientist, was badly burned while serving in the Israeli military. Cuddy was a student at the University of Colorado at Boulder who suffered severe head trauma as a result of a horrible traffic accident in Wyoming.

Her IQ temporarily fell two standard deviations. She had to struggle to regain the abilities she had lost, and when she returned to college as a 22-year old junior, she found she had a passion for social psychology.

The breadth of Cuddy's research is described in [a smart article](#) in Harvard Magazine. For example, in cooperation with Susan Fiske and Peter Glick, Cuddy has thought a lot about the [distinction between competence and warmth](#). People often assume that competence and warmth are inversely related, she points out. People seem to presume that people who are really competent don't need to be nice. Warm people are often judged to be less competent than they really are.

We value warmth over competence when evaluating others, she has found, but when we judge ourselves, we value competence over warmth. We want others to see us as competent, not just nice.

The research Cuddy described to me has to do with how we present ourselves. In a [paper published in Psychological Science](#), Cuddy, Dana R Carney and Andy J. Yap put research subjects in different poses and measured their hormone levels.

They put 42 subjects in high-power poses (legs apart, hands assertively on hips, that sort of thing) for a mere two minutes and found that their testosterone levels shot upwards and their cortisol levels decreased. Then they gave these people a chance to play a gambling game and found that being in the high power pose made them much more aggressive later on.

In other words, changes in behavior create changes in mindset. If you act powerfully, you will begin to think powerfully. Cuddy theorizes that some people are a bit more assertive than others, naturally, but by behaving in assertive ways and adopted assertive poses, they magnify their advantages. Imagine, she asks, what sitting in a CEO's chair must do to you after a few years.

She also found that at Harvard Business School male students were more likely to adopt power poses than female students. When they raised their hand to answer a question, their arm shot straight up. Women were more likely to bend their arm at the elbow, thus thrusting their hand more timidly and taking up less space.

If you want to improve your mentality, take up a lot of space. I do this through frequent trips to the Five Guys hamburger chain, but this is not the optimal method. It's better to spread your arms and keep your feet apart on the floor.

This brings to mind a study I have long wanted some researcher to perform. I would like somebody to figure out when models in Vogue stopped smiling. What year did they adopt that harsh, aggressive look? Similarly, what year did they begin posing (in pants) with their legs spread aggressively apart? When, in short, did power poses replace warmth poses? And what does it say about social change? Cuddy could probably tell us.