

Research: Red has long ceased to be red...

Research on the influence of colour on, for example, thought processes has failed to lay bear any consistent effects. But it has long been suspected that people are stimulated by the colours red and orange, and that the colours blue and green have a comforting effect. This was more or less based on the idea that the colour red facilitates information processing in our brain.

Researchers at the universities of Rochester (USA) and Munich (D) have recently showed that seeing the colour red also has two negative effects:

- We perform below par on so-called cognitive tasks (these are tasks involving logical thought processes, such as IQ tests);
- Worse still: seeing the colour red would even give us the urge to avoid cognitive tasks altogether.

Researchers ran a total of six experiments that involved respondents working on different tasks, such as solving anagrams (for example: what word can you make with the letters NIDRK; solution: DRINK). Another task was to complete number series. The experiments used different colours (one used red, green and black, and another red, green and white). The actual use of these colours also differed; ranging from a red cover sheet to the use of this colour on the pages on which the test task was explained. In all situations, respondents turned out to put in the worst scores when the colour red was used; no significant differences were observed between the other colours. There were also no differences between men and women that are worth mentioning.

Researchers furthermore used EEGs to show that seeing the colour red triggers an urge to avoid cognitive tasks. Seeing the colour red sets off increased asymmetric activity in the frontal cortex (activity on the right; none on the left). This mental reaction points at avoidance. In short: these experiments showed through both cognitive tests and physiological studies that the colour red has a negative effect on the ability to complete cognitive tasks, and that people even want to steer clear of such tasks when they are accompanied by the colour red.

Reference(s)

Elliot, A.J., Maier, M.A., Moller, A.C., Friedman, R., Meinhardt, J. (2007), Color and psychological functioning: the effect of red on performance attainment. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, vol.136, no.1, p.154-168. *

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