Embodiment in judgment and decision making: Of fishy smells, dirty hands, and sticky luck

Recent psychological research shows that complex cognitive processes are grounded in evolutionarily older sensory processes in ways that are often reflected in metaphors. As a result, incidental sensory experiences can profoundly affect judgment and decision making. For example, incidental fishy smells can undermine trust, reduce investment in economic cooperation games, and improve critical reasoning; conversely, socially induced suspicion enhances the sensory perception of fishy smells. Moral transgressions leave a “dirty” feeling and induce a desire to clean; conversely, physical cleansings can remove traces of the past, metaphorically “wiping the slate clean”. Cleaning one’s hands with an antiseptic wipe (but not a moisturizing wipe) can metaphorically remove those traces, resulting in less doubt about past decisions; reduced cognitive dissonance; less influence of recent streaks of good or bad luck on current risk taking; and a reduced impact of sunk cost. I review select findings from my lab and discuss their implications for the conceptualization of decision processes.