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Body Posture and Perceptions of the Homeless

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Author Note

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Abstract

Does the posture of people experiencing homelessness affect our judgments about them? Is our perception of their capability or approachability affected by whether they are standing or sitting? To investigate this question experimentally, photographs featuring 5 men and 5 women in 5 different posture positions (standing, leaning, squatting, sitting, and laying) were presented to 50 participants in an online survey. Participants rated the pictures on a scale of 1-4 in response to 3 different questions: (1) How capable do you imagine this person feels? (2) How safe do you imagine this person is to approach? (3) If this person asked you for \$1, how likely would you be to give it? The results suggest that posture affects ratings across these questions. Pictures of people in less upright positions were judged as less capable and less safe and were slightly more likely to receive a \$1 donation. These results will inform our understanding of how those experiencing homelessness are perceived and might be useful for breaking stereotypes.

Body Posture and Perceptions of the Homeless

In the past four years there have been over 1,200 homeless individuals living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (“Pittsburgh Mercy Health System,” 2017). According to the 1996 National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC), 14.4% of homeless individuals report “recent engagement in any type of panhandling” (Lee & Farrell, 2003). Such individuals that choose to panhandle can typically be found in downtown areas and are stereotypically recognizable by cardboard signs, clinking cups of change, or piles of belongings. Pedestrians who walk by can choose whether or not to interact. These passersby may be driven away by social discomfort and safety concerns or motivated to engage by philanthropic philosophies of service and charity. What happens in a person’s mind when he or she notices a homeless individual on the street? Although many factors relating to a panhandler’s appearance undoubtedly influence passerby responses, the current study manipulates a relatively novel variable- posture.

Previous research shows that people’s posture can reflect their feelings towards something or whether they like or dislike something (Waldron, 1975). Various poses express negative or positive attitudes. Additionally, posture can be a good indicator of depression (Riskind & Gotay, 1982). Posture seems to play a role in judgments about other individuals’ situations or internal states.

In order to understand the effects of posture specifically on passerby judgments, the present study measures posture’s influence on the rating of a person’s helplessness, approachability, and likelihood to receive a monetary donation. It is predicted that lower postures (laying and sitting) will be rated as more helpless, more approachable, and more likely to receive a monetary donation as compared to more upright postures (standing and leaning).

Method

5 men and 5 women were photographed in 5 different posture positions (standing, leaning, squatting, sitting, and laying) to create a total of 50 picture stimuli. Each were between 18-22 years of age. They were instructed to wear jeans and a sweatshirt and all posed in front of the same brick wall on a street in downtown Pittsburgh. 10 of the 50 pictures were randomly presented in an online Qualtrics survey so that each model was seen only once and each posture position twice- once in a male and once in a female. The survey was posted on Facebook and taken by 50 participants, men and women, over the age of 18. Participants rated the pictures on a scale of 1-4 in response to 3 different questions:

(1) *How capable do you imagine this person feels?*

1-Very helpless, 2-Somewhat helpless, 3-Somewhat capable, 4-Very capable

(2) *How safe do you imagine this person is to approach?*

1-Very dangerous, 2-Somewhat dangerous, 3-Somewhat safe, 4-Very safe

(3) *If this person asked you for \$1, how likely would you be to give it?*

1-Very unlikely, 2-Somewhat unlikely, 3-Somewhat likely, 4-Very likely



Figure 1. Example of the stimuli a participant might see in a survey. The pictures would be randomized and not order by gender or posture.

Results

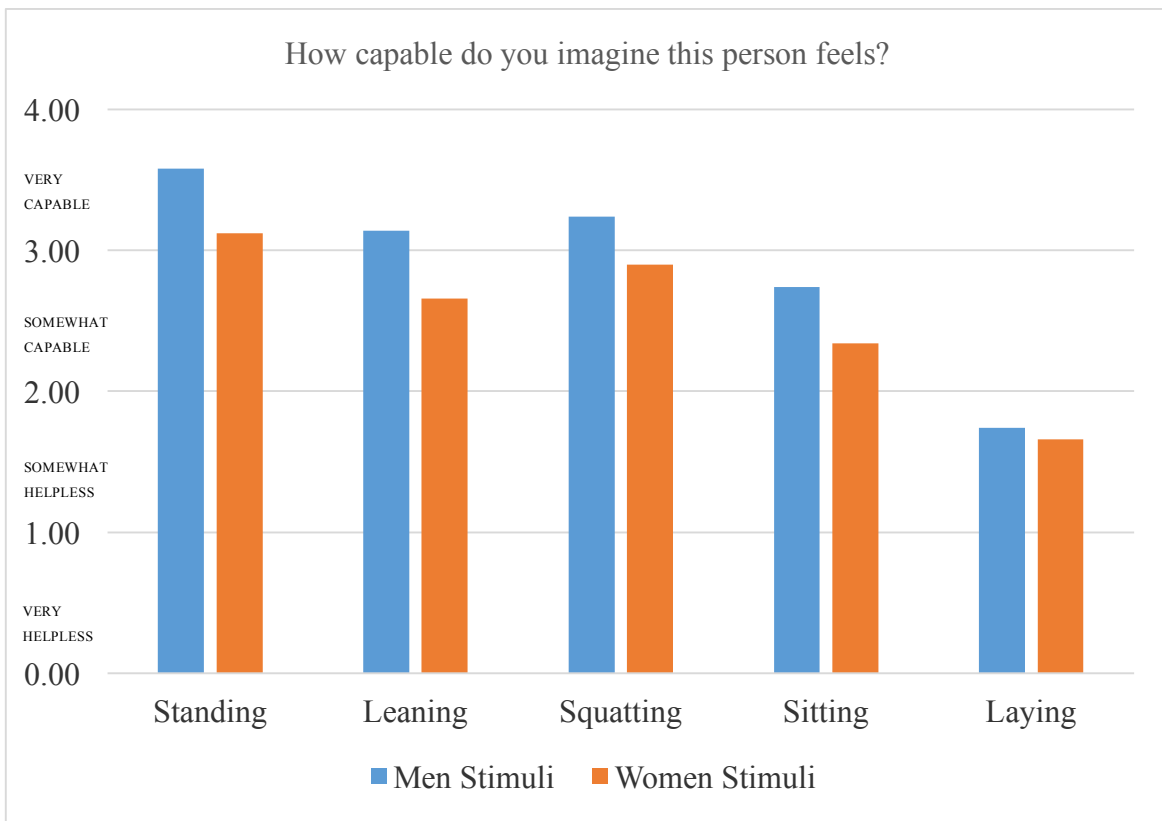


Figure 2. Capability Ratings for Men and Women Stimuli

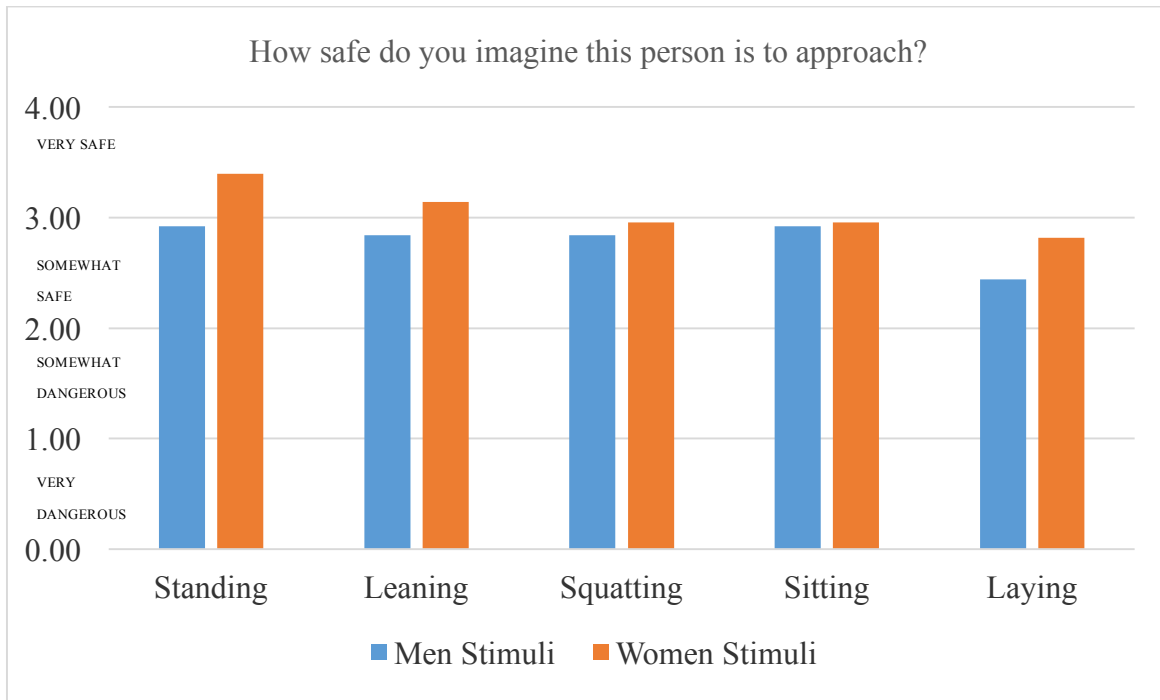


Figure 3. Safety Ratings for Men and Women Stimuli

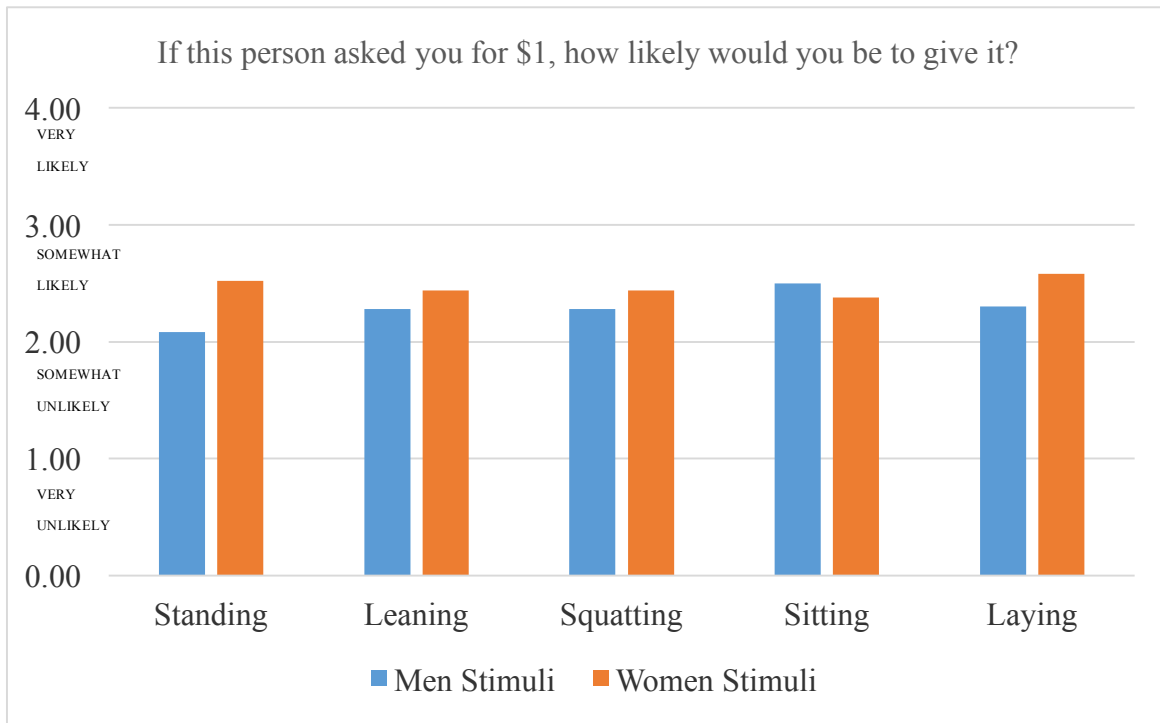


Figure 4. Monetary Donation Ratings for Men and Women Stimuli

Discussion

The present experiment sought to study posture's role in a passerby- panhandler situation. The results suggest that posture does have an affect on passerby judgments and that men and women on the streets are assessed differently.

Men were rated as more capable and less safe than women, but all stimuli were given low ratings for monetary donations. This makes sense because, despite advances in women's rights, there might still be higher expectations for men to work and take care of themselves and/or their family. Men also tend to be perceived as more physically threatening than women. However, regardless of gender, most people seem to dislike giving money to strangers. This could explain why most participants were somewhat unlikely to give \$1.

This study showed a direct relationship between the uprightness of posture and capability ratings. The more upright a position, the more capable the stimulus was rated. This makes sense because a person in an upright position could theoretically be perceived as having more symbolic and physical mobility compared to a person sitting or laying, who might appear more passive and helpless. Sitting and laying are more stationary positions, indicating that a person is not moving.

There was also a direct relationship between the uprightness of posture and safety ratings. The less upright a position, the less safe the stimulus was rated. While this initially surprised the researchers, it might reflect the strangeness of less upright positions. Sitting or laying on the streets might not typically be perceived as normal behavior so these posture positions might scare away potential donators.

The data in this study does have some limitations. First, the men's outfits were not completely controlled in the stimuli. Two men wore shorts instead of jeans. One man was wearing business shoes and another sandals while the rest wore tennis shoes. Second, the women

were photographed on a different day than the men. The lighting was not the same and there was a piece of littered food on the ground in the women's pictures. Additionally, it was snowing the day the women were photographed and snowflakes can be seen in some of the stimuli. If this experiment were to be repeated, the men and women should all wear the same kind of outfit and be photographed on the same day.

Nevertheless, the results suggest that posture affects ratings across these questions. For example, people in less upright positions were judged as less capable and less safe and were slightly more likely to receive a \$1 donation. These findings could shed light on a homeless individual's chance of receiving help. A panhandler's postural position may affect a pedestrian's assessment of their helplessness or safety, but will not make a pedestrian more likely to make a \$1 donation. These results are also informative for organizations that serve and advocate for the homeless. It seems that most people are unlikely to give money to strangers. Further studies could inquire into the reasons behind this phenomenon or test whether passerby might be more willing to give food or clothing in place of money.

References

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