

The Sweet Smell of ... Fairness?

A new study suggests that people act more charitably and fairly toward one another when they are in a clean-smelling environment. Can a more ethical workplace be achieved simply by restocking the janitor's closet? Possibly, but not everyone agrees.

By Michael O'Brien

Sniff. Sniff. What's that citrusy scent?

Smells like fairness and charity to me.

What many of us may already know subconsciously has recently been proven by researchers in an academic study: People act nicer when they're in a clean-smelling environment.

Katie Liljenquist, assistant professor of organizational leadership at Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Management, is the lead author of "The Smell of Virtue: Clean Scents Promote Reciprocity and Charity" in the upcoming issue of *Psychological Science*, along with co-authors Chen-Bo Zhong of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and Adam Galinsky of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

From an organizational standpoint, the research offers two pieces of relevant office application, Liljenquist says.

"How can you promote good behavior? We'd argue that having a clean environment and making sure things are tidy may have all sorts of benefits," she says.

"And the other angle is: What kind of image are you promoting? It's compelling evidence that shows that maintaining a clean image goes further than just the physical; it affects people's perceptions of competence and how desirable you are as a workplace."

Liljenquist says the researchers were looking for a way to examine different aspects of moral behavior when they decided to see what role smell plays in how people act in ethically challenging situations.

The researchers sprayed citrus-scented Windex in one room, but not another, before playing a "classic trust game," she says, noting that previous studies have found that many people find citrus and pine to be "clean" scents.

The study participants were teamed with an "anonymous partner" in another room (who was really just one of the researchers). In one experiment, participants received money from their partners and then had to decide how much of it to either keep or return to their partners, who had trusted them to divide it fairly.

The participants in the clean-scented rooms were less likely to exploit the trust of their partners, returning a significantly higher share of the money, says Liljenquist. People in the clean-scented room gave back an average of \$5.33 from the \$12 they were given, compared to just \$2.81 from those in the other room.

"The underlying mechanism is that, when you're in a clean environment, subtle cues are activated on an awareness level that subconsciously activates the moral clause," she says. "Any time you're exposed to physical cleanliness, you have a clear association to what's clean and what's dirty, and you can activate that moral lens -- and that seems to regulate people's behavior in a positive direction."

A second experiment dealt with how people's sense of charity could be affected by scent. Liljenquist says the researchers used a campus volunteer organization at BYU called Net Impact.

"One of groups they work with is Habitat for Humanity," she says. "So we asked participants: 'Would you want to donate money to the cause?' " In the clean-scented room, more people were interested in donating both time and money.

Participants surveyed in a citrusy atmosphere were significantly more interested in volunteering (4.21 on a 7-point scale) than the other group (3.29), while nearly one-quarter (22 percent) of those in the scented room said they would donate money, compared to only 6 percent of the other group.

Follow-up questions confirmed that participants didn't notice the scent in the room and that their mood at the time of the experiment didn't affect the outcome.

Michael [Warech](#), an organizational psychologist and president and founder of [Warech Associates](#), based in Morristown, N.J., says he was "a little surprised, but not completely" by the results of the research.

"I'm aware of prior research on scents and their ability to enhance positive aspects; that's been around for awhile. But this research pushes it a little further, though, by looking at outcome variables instead of behaviors," he says.

[Warech](#) says the research could have significant implications for teamwork, especially in functions or work teams, such as self-directed work teams, that require a high level of interdependence.

"That's a line of research that should be explored a little more because certainly [teamwork] is a dynamic in organizations these days," he says.

But [Warech](#) holds less hope for the ability of organizations to negate unethical activities by using a scent.

"I just think that donating is something that is less compelling of a behavior than stealing," he says. "If someone is going to embezzle, I don't think they're going to think twice if the place smells nice. Whereas it could enhance a positive aspect, it won't deter a negative impact."

Avery Gilbert, a sensory psychologist from Montclair, N.J., and author of *What the Nose Knows: The Science of Scent in Everyday Life*, takes his critique a step further, calling Liljenquist's study "drive-by research."

He says that he doesn't "think much of this study and so wouldn't recommend that anybody make decisions based on it."

Writing on his [The First Nerve](#) blog, Gilbert says, "Team Liljenquist thinks Windex smell produced a more 'virtuous' result without the conscious awareness of the participants. But can a person be said to behave virtuously when he is unaware of doing so? Am I virtuous when the wind pulls a \$5 bill from my pocket while I'm distracted and floats it into the hands of a hungry orphan? Hardly. Yet by Liljenquist's logic, I'm a saint."

Despite the hype the research has generated, he writes, "this study isn't about virtue or godliness, nor does it engage morality at a conceptual level. This paper is about a smug idea for controlling the behavior of others for their own good without their awareness. It's about encouraging charity at the point of a trigger spray."

But, if HR executives are willing to push on that spray, Liljenquist suggests the addition of a pine or citrus scent would be an easy way "to promote ethical behavior. ... Aside from the cleanliness component, [keeping a clean environment] is cheap and unobtrusive, unlike surveillance cameras" or other tools organizations use to monitor employee ethics.

"Companies often employ heavy-handed interventions to regulate conduct, but they can be costly or oppressive," says Liljenquist.

"For HR, it's so much better to emphasize [to employees] that the vast majority of people are honest instead of the terrible big cases [of fraud and ethics violations]. If you have that [positive] model, then you're likely to act in the same way," she says. "It's important to emphasize the good, and how the vast majority is pursuing the high road, so people don't use this as an excuse point to take liberties."

Overall, [L Warech](#) says, it is imperative to imbue a sense of right and wrong in an organization.

"It's really related to successful business outcomes. You don't have to look too far to see what happens when you don't act ethically," he says, alluding to the ethical collapses at organizations such as Enron and Lehman Bros.

"It's all about setting the example from the top and holding people accountable," he says. "Make sure your senior leaders are demonstrating those behaviors the organization wants. As soon as you don't hold someone accountable, then things start to fall apart."

Liljenquist says she was a little surprised by the reception her research received, with the story being picked up by magazines and newspapers across the country and the world.

"[The research] definitely resonated with people," she says, "and as far as businesses are concerned, anything that can promote pro-ethical behavior is a good thing. It makes it unique in terms of reaching an audience."

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