



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on October 7, 2009

## Can Reading Kafka Make You a Better Patriot?

Worried about the long-term psychological effects of enduring the senseless policies of one absurd administration after another? Afraid of the potential cerebral damage caused by this never-ending parade of prancing donkeys and bellowing elephants? Well, take heart, Patriot, and fear no more! A new study published in the journal *Psychological Science* suggests that in the aftermath of oddities, inexplicable behavior, and cacophonous coincidences comes a sharper mind and a heightened sensitivity to one's surroundings.



On October 6, the *New York Times* reported the findings of a study being conducted by researchers from the University of California, Santa Barbara and the University of British Columbia. According to scientists at these institutions, a person whose brain is stimulated by nonsensical stories or a string of numbers without a discernible pattern will more easily and quickly uncover more complex patterns in problems presented to them afterwards. In a recent experiment conducted by Dr. Travis Proulx from the University of California, Santa Barbara and his partner, Steven J. Heine of the University of British Columbia, 20 university students were read "The Country Doctor," an absurd story written by renowned author of absurdist fiction, Franz Kafka. In the story, a dentist sets off on his horse to treat a boy who is complaining of a toothache. Upon arriving at the boy's home, the dentist finds the boy is in fact toothless. The horses begin to rear and stomp, the boy's family becomes irritated, then the doctor re-examines the boy and discovers he has teeth after all. Nonsense. After hearing the story, the students are asked to find patterns in a series of 45 strings of letters. This sort of experiment is designed to test a subject's skill of implicit learning, that is, learning without being aware that one is being taught. The students who were read the Kafka story were able to identify 30 percent more of the letter strings and almost twice as likely to do so correctly than a second group of students who read a traditional short story.

The researchers were astonished by the width of the gap between the two groups of participants. While they expected their theory to be borne out by the experiment, the evidence gathered from it was stronger than they anticipated. "The fact that the group who read the absurd story identified more letter strings suggest that they were more motivated to look for patterns than the others," Dr. Heine told the *New York Times*. "And the fact that they were more accurate means, we think, that they're forming new patterns they wouldn't be able to form otherwise," he continued.

The area of the brain believed to be active during such experiences is called the anterior cingulate cortex. The level of activity in that section of the brain increases markedly when a person is faced with unraveling a disquieting situation or interpreting an object or occurrence that seems out of order or in disarray. Studies on this phenomenon suggest that the more consistently the anterior cingulate cortex is stimulated, the more skillful a person is in identifying complex patterns and solutions not as readily apparent to others who have not been so stimulated.



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While there is much promise in reports of this sort with regard to improving one's ability to recognize and process patterns and to find and implement solutions to problems, there is much work that still needs to be done before drastic alterations are approved in school curricula. For example, there is no evidence that this sort of approach to sharper cognitive skill is helpful at all with regard to explicit learning such as memorizing Latin declensions. There are other studies that suggest that when in the midst of the bizarre, humans may grasp desperately for order and may create it where none actually exists. There is, these studies suggest, a powerful human compulsion to neatly organize the world.

So, all in all, as you stand on the sidewalk watching the daily procession of one naked emperor after another, followed by all their jesters and fawning attendants, try to remember that you may be becoming keener and more aware of subtle, hard to find but crucial connections among the decisions and policies that those who make them would have you believe are mere coincidences.



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