

# Not in my backyard: The Psychological Significance of Arbitrary Political Borders

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## Research Summary

When reports of a new strain of influenza began surfacing from Mexico in April 2009, money-changers on the Mexican side of the US/Mexican border began wearing rubber gloves and face masks. Yet 50 feet to the north, a worker was observed “changing pesos into dollars with his bare hands, and not a stitch covering a smile that turns rueful when he’s asked why” (Vick, 2009). Another individual was observed pulling the cloth mask from around her neck and stuffing it into her purse as she entered the US. “They all do,” claimed a border agent watching nearby (Vick, 2009). Although “pathogens do not recognize the geopolitical boundaries established by human beings” (Emerging Infectious Diseases - Center for Disease Control, 2003), these examples suggest that people’s intuitive reactions to them may.

What might explain this seemingly irrational behavior? One clue comes work by Rozin and others on the intuitive “laws of sympathetic magic,” and in particular, the “law of contagion” (Rozin et al., 1986). The laws of sympathetic magic refer to the basic concepts that people apply to understand the world around them, and the law of contagion in particular is the lay theory that when two objects are connected, the essence of one transfers to (and in the case of a negative essence, contaminates) the essence of the other. The law is rooted in reality: a toxin (such as the H1N1 influenza virus) that comes in contact with an object (such as a human being) can indeed contaminate that object, as the recent “swine flu” pandemic illustrates. However, a key feature of the law of contagion is that it is applied even when the “connection” is merely arbitrary or symbolic, and no actual or meaningful contamination is possible. For instance, participants show reticence at eating a cookie if it has come in incidental contact with a tampon (even if the tampon is sterilized, Morales and Fitzsimons, 2007), and feelings of disgust at the notion of drinking from a cup that was once used by a Nazi (even if it has been thoroughly washed, Rozin et al., 1986).

A corollary to the law of contagion is that *disconnection* provides a barrier to essence transfer (in the case of a negative essence, a barrier to contamination). Here too, the belief is grounded in reality: gloves and masks can indeed prevent the transfer of a toxin (such as the H1N1 virus) to another object (such as a human), as the money-changers south of US/Mexican border well realize. However, here too the “law” is likely to be applied even when the disconnection is merely arbitrary or symbolic, and no actual or meaningful barrier exists. For instance, paper toilet seat covers provide no proven protection against STDs, yet for many convey a (false) sense of protection from the perceived toxicity of a public toilet seat.

In much the same way, we argue, political borders may provide a sense of isolation and protection even if the boundary is merely arbitrary or symbolic. Returning to the “swine flu” example, the fact that the vast majority of cases have occurred in Mexico may provide money-changers on the US side of the border with a “dubious sense of reassurance” (Vick, 2009) because they are on the “safe” side of the border.

The present research was designed to test this hypothesis. Specifically, we propose that people tend to treat arbitrary political borders as if they are meaningful physical boundaries, a tendency with a range of implications from the small (such as where consumers purchase groceries) to the large (such as how people respond to a pandemic).

In Study 1, participants were presented with one or more scenarios in which a potentially hazardous industrial site was being built near their home. In some conditions an arbitrary political border (that is, one that did not correspond to any meaningful physical barrier) separated the two and in another condition it did not. We found that participants were less concerned about the potential health hazards posed by the site if they were “protected” by a political border. Study 2 was a conceptual replication involving a positive stimulus (a park) demonstrating that borders not only provide a (desired) feeling of protection from a noxious stimulus, but also (as the law of contagion predicts) an (undesired) feeling of an isolation from a pleasant one. Finally, Study 3 extended the results of the previous studies by examining actual behavior. Participants played a videogame in which the object of the game was to traverse a distance as quickly as possible. We found that participants choose sub-optimally slow routes in an effort to minimize border crossings (despite the fact that the borders were clearly merely symbolic). Along the way, we ruled out several alternative interpretations for the results, such as the possibility that the border might be interpreted as corresponding to a meaningful physical boundary, and the possibility that graphical depictions of borders on maps might create a visual illusion increasing perceived distance.

#### References:

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Table 1  
Summary of Study 1 and 2 Results

Scenario	No Border	Border	Difference
<b>Study 1 (negative stimuli)</b>			
Nuclear power plant (n = 181)			
How worried would you be about suffering the ill effects of a nuclear disaster?	5.62	4.64	-0.98*
How bothered would you be about the plant being built?	5.91	4.66	-1.25*
Suppose the plant were to experience a meltdown. How worried would you be?	7.82	6.84	-0.98*
Would you prefer the plant to be built further away from your home?	8.85	8.30	-0.55 <sup>†</sup>
<i>Average</i>	7.05	6.11	-0.94*
Oil drilling (n = 80)			
How bothered would you be about the proposed drilling?	6.50	5.72	-0.78
How worried would you be about the negative environmental influences?	6.95	5.83	-1.12 <sup>†</sup>
<i>Average</i>	6.72	5.88	-0.84 <sup>†</sup>
Nuclear power plant follow-up (n = 80)			
Ideal distance (in miles) between home and nuclear power plant	1637	1192	-445*
<b>Study 2 (positive stimulus)</b>			
Park (n = 76)			
How much would you like the park to be built in the proposed location?	8.28	7.32	-0.96*
How happy would you be if the park were built in the proposed location?	8.18	7.41	-0.77*
How often would you use the park if it were built in the proposed location?	7.69	6.95	-0.74
<i>Average</i>	8.05	7.23	-0.82*

\*  $p < .05$

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$

Note: Unless otherwise noted, all responses were on an 11-point scale.