

Research Digest



The
British
Psychological
Society

Free every fortnight

Issue 123 Contents

- P.1 Fluency of our own actions influences our judgements of others
- P.2 Negative false memories more easily implanted than false ones
- P.3 Volunteer staff are surprisingly committed
- P.4 Dear World: What kind of a person blogs?
- P.5 Worldwide, pride and shame are expressed in a similar way
- P.6 Why so many people perish needlessly in emergencies

Further information

Email the editor: [christianjarrett\[@\]gmail.com](mailto:christianjarrett@gmail.com)

Visit the Digest blog: www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog

Download a free Digest poster: <http://tinyurl.com/59c63v>

Subscribe free at www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog



Free every fortnight

Fluency of our own actions influences our judgement of others

Last year the psychologists Steven Tipper and Patric Bach asked students to perform an identification task with a difference. Two men were shown either kicking a ball or typing at a keyboard. Crucially, the students had to signal their recognition of the men by either pressing a keyboard key or pushing a foot-pedal. The interaction between the men's activities and the students' mode of response led to some intriguing effects.

If a man was shown typing and students had to respond with a keyboard key, they were not only faster and more accurate, they also subsequently rated that man as more academic than other students who responded with a foot-pedal. (Similarly, a foot-pedal response to a man kicking a football led him to be rated as more sporty).

At first Tipper and Bach interpreted these effects in terms of the brain's mirror-neuron system, which is active when someone else is seen performing a given movement or that movement is enacted by oneself. The idea was that the sight of a man typing triggered neural, key-pressing activity that was then accentuated by the student's own use of a key. All this key-pressing activity was then thought to bias judgement over how academic the man was.

But now a follow-up study has debunked that explanation and shown that the effects have to do with response fluency, rather than having anything to do with the specific actions performed.

This time students always responded with a computer key, but sometimes the key was on the same side that the men's heads appeared in the photos, while other times their heads and the key were on opposite sides. This kind of stimulus-response compatibility is known to influence how quickly and easily participants can respond.

For instance, one man's head might be presented on the same side as the student's key response when he was shown typing, but on the opposite side when he was depicted kicking a ball. This man would then be identified more easily when shown typing on the keyboard than when kicking, and would subsequently be rated as more academic and less sporty than if the key / head position arrangements had been the other way around.

In other words, the researchers think the students were sensing how easily they had responded and that was then subconsciously impacting their judgement of the men's characters. It's as though the students had confused the fluency of their own response with how fluently they believed the men had performed their key press or football kick.

"Such findings have implications for how people interact, especially during joint activities," the researchers told us. "For instance, if you want your boss to think you are particularly skilful at some joint task, it is best to perform this in a way that allows him to undertake his aspect of the task easily. Your boss's more fluent processes will be attributed back to your performance."

TIPPER, S., BACH, P. (2008). Your own actions influence how you perceive other people: A misattribution of action appraisals. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44(4), 1082-1090.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2007.11.005>
Author weblink: <http://tinyurl.com/6j8d9f>



Free every fortnight

Negative false memories more easily implanted

Children develop false memories for a negative event more readily than they do for a neutral one. Henry Otgaar and colleagues, who made the new finding, said their work has real world implications for anyone working with child witnesses: "The argument that is sometimes heard in court - i.e. this memory report must be true because it describes such a horrible event - is, as our data show, on shaky grounds."

Seventy-six children aged between seven and nine years were asked to recall details about a true event that had happened to them the previous year (e.g. that their class had to perform a musical), and either a neutral fictitious event (moving classrooms) or a negative fictitious event (being wrongly accused of copying a classmate's work).

The children were asked about the events, true and fictitious, during two interviews held a week apart. If at first the children were unable to recall any further details, they were asked to concentrate and try again. They were also asked to reflect on the events during the week between interviews, to see if they could flesh out any further details.

Altogether, 74 per cent of the children developed false memories for the fictitious event - that is, they said they remembered the event and added extra details about what happened. Crucially, those asked to recall the time they were accused of copying a classmate were significantly more likely to develop a false memory than were those asked to recall the time they had to switch classrooms.

The researchers speculated that children might be more prone to developing false memories of negative rather than neutral events because the two kinds of information are stored differently in the brain. "Negative information is more interrelated than neutral material," they explained. "As a result, the presentation of negative information - either true or false - might increase the possibility that other negative materials become activated in memory. This, in turn, could affect the development of a false memory for a negative event."

OTGAAR, H., CANDEL, I., MERCKELBACH, H. (2008). Children's false memories: Easier to elicit for a negative than for a neutral event. *Acta Psychologica*, 128(2), 350-354.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2008.03.009>

Author weblink: <http://www.personeel.unimaas.nl/henry.otgaar/>



Free every fortnight

Volunteer staff are surprisingly committed

Despite the obvious value of volunteers, managers often have reservations about hiring unpaid staff because of doubts over their commitment. There's a sense that they can leave at any time and there's no paid contract to keep them in line. But a new study turns these ideas upside down, finding that volunteers are actually more committed than their fully paid up colleagues.

Mark van Vuuren and colleagues surveyed hundreds of paid and volunteer workers at a Dutch charity for the blind and partially sighted. Questionnaire items tapped three aspects of organisational commitment, including the employees' emotional commitment ("I feel a strong sense of belonging to my organisation"); their sense of obligation and loyalty ("Even if it were to my advantage, I do not feel it would be right to leave my organisation now"); and what's known as "continuance commitment" - their sense that leaving isn't an option ("I believe that I have too few options to consider leaving this organisation").

It transpires the volunteers were more emotionally committed (especially if they felt there was a close fit between their values and the values of the charity) and also felt more loyalty and obligation to the organisation than did the paid staff. The researchers were particularly surprised at this latter finding, which they said could have to do with the fact the volunteers tended to be older. "Older people are motivated to volunteer because of their wish to fulfil an obligation or commitment to society," they said.

Van Vuuren's team said these results have several implications for managers. For example, it's important for organisations wishing to attract volunteer staff to "communicate how their goals, values and culture are congruent to the individual's beliefs..."

"This study showed that the absence of the 'stick of paid work' does not lead to the situation that volunteers leave their tasks very easily," the researchers continued. "As indicated by their commitment, there seems to be an interdependence, even though volunteers are not paid for their contribution. They may need the organisation as much as the organisation needs them."

van Vuuren, M., de Jong, M., Seydel, E. (2008). Commitment with or without a stick of paid work: Comparison of paid and unpaid workers in a nonprofit organization. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 17(3), 315-326. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13594320701693175>

Author weblink: <http://www.ibr.utwente.nl/>



Free every fortnight

Dear World: What kind of a person blogs?

Blogging - they call it the democratisation of the media. Any Tom, Dick or Harriet can log-on and broadcast their inner-most thoughts to the world. For many, the high-tech diary has become a harmless hobby, in some cases even leading to fame and lucrative book deals. For others, the irresistible lure of sharing their secrets has proven costly; they've lost their jobs. But who are these bloggers? Are some personality types more likely to blog than others?

Rosanna Guadagno and colleagues asked over three hundred students about their blogging habits and asked them to complete the now industry-standard Big Five Personality Inventory.

Around 20 per cent of the students blogged, mostly about their personal experiences. Among female students only, those who scored highly on neuroticism (i.e. anxious, insecure characters) were more likely to blog. This is consistent with work on internet usage that also found an association with neurotic personality types, but only among women. The researchers surmised that nervous women may blog to "assuage loneliness or in an attempt to reach out and form social connections with others."

Among both men and women, those who were more open to experience were also more likely to blog - perhaps unsurprisingly given that blogging is a relatively new phenomenon and given that this personality dimension is associated with creativity.

The researchers cautioned their findings may only be applicable to college students in America and called on future research to look at why people blog. "It is important for social scientists to continue to examine this phenomenon to fully understand its affects on psychological processes that differentiate it from other similar forms of self-expression," they said.

GUADAGNO, R., OKDIE, B., ENO, C. (2008). Who blogs? Personality predictors of blogging. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(5), 1993-2004. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2007.09.001>

Author weblink: <http://psychology.ua.edu/people/faculty/rguadag/fac.html>

Research Digest



The
British
Psychological
Society

Free every fortnight

Worldwide, pride and shame are expressed in the same way

Athletes stood tall, arms raised, chests puffed out has been a common sight during the Beijing Olympics. We've also see the less successful with their heads slumped. According to a new study, these emotional displays of pride and shame are not learned, culturally defined habits. Rather, just like the core emotions of happiness, sadness, fear and disgust, the ways we display pride and shame are innate and have probably evolved to either shore up our status or convey our acceptance of another's dominance.

Jessica Tracy and David Matsumoto analysed photographs of 140 judo competitors from 36 nations taken at the 2004 Olympic and Paralympic games, after either a loss or victory. Crucially, 53 of these competitors were blind, 12 of them from birth. The way these congenitally blind competitors responded to a loss or victory was of particular interest to the researchers because they will never have seen how other people display their pride or shame.

All the competitors, regardless of their country of origin or whether they were sighted or blind, tended to demonstrate their pride (head tilted back, chest expanded, arms raised) and shame (slumped shoulders, narrowed chest) in the same fashion. There was just one exception: sighted competitors from North America and Western Europe tended to conceal their shame, presumably because of cultural-specific pressures to maintain an air of self-confidence whatever the circumstances.

"...[T]he emotions of pride and shame may have evolved innate nonverbal expressions, challenging the long standing assumption in the emotion literature that only a small set of emotions fit within the Darwinian framework," the researchers said.

Tracy, J.L. & Matsumoto, D. (2008). The spontaneous expression of pride and shame: Evidence for biologically innate nonverbal displays. PNAS, In press. <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2008/08/08/0802686105>

Author weblink: <http://www.ubc-emotionlab.ca/jltracy/>

Subscribe free at www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog



Free every fortnight

Why so many people perish needlessly in emergencies

The stress caused by an emergency situation impairs people's attentional control, leaving them unable to pursue the actions necessary for their survival. That's according to John Leach and Louise Ansell who said their research helps explain "at least one anomaly that exists in survivorship: why so many people perish when there is no need". The pair cite the example of air crash passengers who fail to withhold inflating their life-jackets until the appropriate time, thus imperilling their lives.

Leach and Ansell tested the cognitive abilities of 14 RAF crew while they were out on a two-week survival exercise in Northern England. The exercise simulated an "aircraft down incident" and took place during the Winter with conditions of hail and snow.

A task that required the crew to identify locations on a map was used as a measure of selective attention. This showed that, once deployed in the field, the crew were impaired when compared against a control group of colleagues back at base, and also against their own classroom-based performance prior to the survival exercise. Their ability recovered after about three days in the field.

Once deployed, the crew also showed impaired sustained attention. This was measured by their ability to spot lottery numbers appearing in a boring ten-minute read-out of numbers.

"This form of cognitive impairment makes flexible interaction with the survival environment difficult and the victim's behaviour becomes dominated by environmental cues at the expense of wilful, goal-directed survival behaviour," the researchers concluded. "The often witnessed result is of a victim who is cognitively unable to aid his own survival."

Leach, J., Ansell, L. (2008). Impairment in attentional processing in a field survival environment. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 22(5), 643-652. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/acp.1385>

Author weblink: <http://www.psych.lancs.ac.uk/people/JohnLeach.html>