

This is improbable

Marc Abrahams, *Guardian* columnist and founder of the Ig Nobel prizes, on research to make you smile and think

It can be tempting to assume that 'improbable' implies more than that – implies bad or good, worthless or valuable, trivial or important. Something improbable can be any of those, or none of them, or all of them, in different ways. Something can be bad in some respects and good in others.

Improbable is, simply: what you don't expect.

I collect stories about improbable things, things that make people laugh, then think. The research, events and people in this article defy any quick attempt at judgement (bad-or-good? worthless-or-valuable? trivial-or-important?). But don't let that stop you from trying.

Do ethicists steal more books?

'One might suppose that ethicists would behave with particular moral scruple', begins the little monograph published in the journal *Mind*, looking you straight in the eye while grinning and snorting, textily. The two co-authors, philosophy professors who specialise in ethics, thus embark on what they call a 'preliminary investigation' of their fellow ethics experts.

Eric Schwitzgebel, of the University of California, Riverside, and Joshua Rust, of Stetson University in Deland, Florida, surveyed almost 300 attendees of a meeting of the American Philosophical Association. Tell us, they asked in a variety of ways, about the ethical behaviour of ethicists you have known.

Schwitzgebel and Rust offered candy to anyone who agreed to complete the survey form. They report that 'a number of people stole candy without completing a questionnaire or took more than their share without permission'.

The ethics experts in aggregate indicated that in their experience, on the whole, ethicists behave no more ethically than do other persons. The paper pauses for just a moment to suggest a broader context. 'Police officers commit crimes', it says. 'Doctors smoke. Economists invest badly. Clergy flout the rules of their religion.'

Schwitzgebel also wrote a study, on his own, called 'Do ethicists steal more books?', which elbowed its way into the face of readers of the journal *Philosophical Psychology*. He drew up lists of philosophy books – some specifically about ethics, others not. Then, using information available through computer networks, he examined the status of every copy of those books in 19 British and 13 American academic library systems.

Schwitzgebel looked separately at what happened to newish books (Buchanan's *Ethics, Efficiency and the Market*; Hurd's *Moral Combat*; and suchlike bestsellers), and to older ones (Kant's *Critique of Judgment*; Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*; and other beloved masterworks). It was roughly the same story. The ethics books, whether youthful or aged, went missing more often than did the not-quite-so-relentlessly-about-ethics books.

The youthful, 'relatively obscure, contemporary ethics books of the sort likely to be borrowed mainly by professors and advanced students of philosophy were actually about 50 per cent more likely to be missing'. The aged, 'classic (pre-1900) ethics books were about twice as likely to be missing'. (For those older books, Schwitzgebel looked only at the American libraries, muttering that 'the British library catalog system proved impractically unwieldy'.)

More recently, Schwitzgebel has written in his blog about what he calls 'the phenomenology of being a jerk'. He identifies two important components of jerkhood. 'First: an implicit or explicit sense that you are an "important" person.' 'Second: an implicit or explicit sense that you are surrounded by idiots.'

To determine whether you yourself might be a jerk, Schwitzgebel suggests, look at those two simple criteria. He adds the almost mandatory thought: 'I can't say that I myself show up as well by this self-diagnostic as I would have hoped.'

Research proposals: Sex with a stranger

'Gender differences in receptivity to sexual offers' should be a screamingly famous research report. Yet most people don't know about it. Or maybe they can't believe it exists.

It exists.

Published in 1989 in the *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, this 17-page sizzler tells a simple story. Five women and four men were sent, one at a time, on to a university campus. Each approached strangers of the opposite sex, and said: 'I have been noticing you around campus. I find you to be very attractive.' They then invited the strangers to have sex.

This experiment was performed twice, once in 1978, and again in 1982. The results were the same. As the report describes it: 'The great majority of men were willing to have a sexual liaison with the women who approach them. Not one

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woman agreed to a sexual liaison.'

The study was conceived and directed by two psychology professors, Elaine Hatfield of the University of Hawaii at Manoa and Russell D. Clark III of Florida State University. It begins with a declaration: 'According to cultural stereotypes, men are eager for sexual intercourse; it is women who set limits on such activity.' It ends with a declamation: 'Regardless of why we secured these data, however, the existence of these pronounced gender differences is interesting.'

The paper never does exactly explain why they secured the data, but it does supply a list of 59 earlier published studies that they found useful, interesting, or at least worth listing. These include four other sex-related reports by Hatfield and three technical reports from the prestigious US Commission on Obscenity and Pornography.

Fourteen years later, Hatfield and Clark published a study called 'Love in the afternoon', in which they tried to explain why they had done the experiment and what happened as a

Journal after journal refused to publish their paper, giving harsh comments of which this one is typical: 'The study itself is too weird, trivial and frivolous to be interesting. Who cares what the result is to such a silly question.'

But Hatfield and Clark were undaunted. As they explain at the end of 'Love in the afternoon': 'The trivial, uninteresting, and morally suspect research of today often turns out to be the "classic study" of tomorrow.'

Ministry of Clowns

Angelika Richter and Lori Zonner have a funny way of captivating readers. In a study called 'Clowning: An opportunity for ministry' they write: 'Experiences over five years interacting with patients as the clown jingles and the experiment and experience of one afternoon as the clown Hairie in a hospital led the authors to reflect on the deeper meaning of clowns... Before sharing further experiences with clowning in ministry, and telling about one afternoon when jingles and Hairie were on their way through the hospital, let us first

describe a common meaning of clowning.'

Richter, a chaplain and minister at Philipps University in Marburg, Germany, and her colleague Zonner published their monograph in 1996 in the *Journal of Religion and Health*.

Clowning, as commonly recognised, is for them just a beginning. Richter and Zonner explain that 'the clown is recognised universally as a symbol of happiness and creates smiles and laughter. The clown ministry, however, is not just entertainment, nor is it preaching in a costume.'

Looking beyond that research, one sees that clowning ministry is often confined to hospitals, but not to any one country. In Scotland, Olive Fleming

Some Ig Nobel winners

Anita Eerland, Rolf Zwaan and Tulio Guadalupe for their study 'Leaning to the left makes the Eiffel Tower seem smaller'.

Karl Halvor Teigen of the University of Oslo, Norway, for trying to understand why, in everyday life, people sigh.

Richard Stephens and colleagues at Keele University for confirming the widely held belief that swearing relieves pain.

Daniel Simons of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Christopher Chabris of Harvard University, for demonstrating that when people pay close attention to something, it's all too easy to overlook anything else – even a woman in a gorilla suit.

Gian Vittorio Caprara and Claudio Barbaranelli of the University of Rome La Sapienza, and Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University, for their report 'Politicians' uniquely simple personalities'.

Drane of Aberdeenshire proudly administers the yuks. In England, Roly Bain of Bristol is the most prominent of this variety of spiritual clown. The US is bursting with clowns of a ministerial turn.

For anyone wishing to be initiated, resources abound.

Janet Litherland's book *The Clown Ministry Handbook*, published in 1982, offers something of a one-stop education. The table of contents lays out the basics: 'An overview of the activities of clowns throughout history'; 'The "where" and "how" of clown ministry'; 'How to entertain an audience by making a wide variety of objects from balloons'; and more. The final chapter crowns it: 'Eleven clown ministers tell how they came to be clowns for Christ'.

However, not everyone loves a clown, even a worshipful clown. And sometimes, clownish optimism meets donnish discouragement.

Linda Miller Van Blerkom, of Drew University in New Jersey, published a study in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, where she cautioned that 'small children are frequently afraid of clowns, whose bizarre appearance suggests the dangers of the unknown and uncanny, and whose performances dramatise common childhood fears'.

To clown-lovers, Miller Van Blerkom's work may sound flat, lifeless, sterile. But the Economic and Social Research Council warned in 2007 that even two-dimensional artwork of clowns, affixed to a wall of a hospital, can be problematic. Citing research performed by Penny Curtis of the University of Sheffield (and which it sponsored), the Council issued



result. Here is a nutshell version of their explanation:

In the spring of 1978, Russ Clark was teaching a small class in experimental social psychology... Russ dropped a bomb. 'Most women', he said, 'can get any man to do anything they want. Men have it harder. They have to worry about strategy, timing, and "tricks".' Not surprisingly, the women in the class were incensed. One woman sent a pencil flying in Russ's direction. In one of Russ's finer moments, he observed: 'We don't have to fight. We don't have to upset one another. It's an empirical question. Let's design a field experiment to see who's right!'

improbable research

an alert to hospitals, in 2007, with the headline 'Children's Wards – Don't Send in the Clowns'. The most chilling detail: 'All children disliked the use of clowns in the décor, with even the oldest children seeing them as scary.'

Take a seat in Bulgaria

When people walk into a cinema, where do they choose to sit? The question has vexed several brain researchers.

The topic arose in Bulgaria. Bulgarian cinema receives less global attention than its counterparts in other developed countries. Bulgarian cinema audiences receive correspondingly little scrutiny. This attention deficit was addressed, slightly, in the year 2000, when George B. Karev of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences conducted his study 'Cinema seating in right, mixed and left handers'.

At the time, Karev was best known for his 1993 report 'Arm folding, hand clasping and dermatoglyphic asymmetry in Bulgarians'. The cinema seating study, dealing as it does in questions of left versus right, in some respects builds on the earlier work.

Karev made some diagrams showing the seat locations in five different cinemas. He blocked off the seats in the middle, and asked people to tell him which of the open seats they would select. Most chose seats on the right side. This was especially true among people who, in answer to another question, said they were right-handed.

Why this general preference for the right side? Most probably, Karev says, it's because: (a) films pack an emotional wallop; (b) one side of the brain is better at handling emotions; and (c) experienced film-goers learn to sit where that side of their brain will have the best vantage point.

The response of the scientific community was immediate, if minuscule. Professor Sergio Della Sala of the University of Aberdeen suggested that 'one possible way to find out if Karev is correct would be to ask people to sit in a room exempt from any emotional content – example a large waiting room, a lecture theatre, even possibly the House of Lords?' Della Sala made this comment in the form of a press release. The press release announced two things: that Karev's study had just been published; and that Della Sala was the new editor of the journal that published it. The journal is called *Cortex*.

That was about the extent of the scientific community's reaction to the

Karev experiment, at least publicly, until 2006. In that year, a German research quartet took the stage.

Peter Weyers and colleagues at Bavarian Julius-Maximilians University repeated Karev's experiment, but with some twists. The original cinema diagrams showed the film screen at the top of the page. But here, some diagrams showed the screen at the bottom of the page, or on one side. Looking at these diagrams, people had no real preference for sitting with the screen to their left or to their right.

The Germans published a report in the journal *Laterality*. There could be many reasons, they said, why the Bulgarians opted for the right. Top of the list: the odd fact that most people



Cinema – which side are you on?

habitually turn to the right when entering a room.

That's how things stand, for now, on the mental and cinematic significance of choosing sides in Bulgaria or elsewhere.

The journal *Laterality*, by the way, is edited by Chris McManus, Professor of Psychology and Medical Education at University College London. McManus was awarded the 2002 Ig Nobel Prize in biology for the short treatise 'Scrotal asymmetry in man and in ancient sculpture', which he wrote soon after graduating from medical school. The journal *Nature* published the article in 1976, and featured it on their front cover.

Crosswords and lineups

Crossword puzzles are a threat to the criminal justice system. Indeed, they may have been doing damage for decades, causing guilty persons to be set free and innocent ones to become enmeshed in

hellish entanglements with the courts and jails. A 2006 study by Michael B. Lewis, a senior lecturer at Cardiff University, published in the journal *Perception*, reveals that the danger comes mostly from one variety of crossword puzzle.

Lewis has no qualms identifying the culprit. Beware, he warns, of the so-called cryptic crossword puzzle. Accordingly, the study is called 'Eye-witnesses should not do cryptic crosswords prior to identity parades'.

Once you know what to look for, cryptic crosswords are easy to recognise. The regular, or 'literal', crossword, Lewis writes, 'is a task where words must be filled within a grid where the clues to these words are literal definitions'.

Cryptic crosswords 'use a similar grid but the clues involve double meanings and sometimes involve anagrams or uncommon ways of thinking about words'.

Cryptic crosswords enter the picture in seemingly innocuous ways. Police or court officials may – through a toxic mix of good intentions and ignorance – be tempted to introduce them exactly where they can do harm. Lewis explains: 'The identification of an offender by a witness to a crime often forms an important element of a prosecution's case. While considerable importance is placed by jurors on the identification of the offender by a witness (such as a suspect being picked out from an identity parade), research tells us that these identifications can often be wrong and sometimes lead to wrongful convictions.'

'It would be undesirable', he writes, 'to have witnesses doing something before an identity parade that would make them worse at picking out the offender... Consider what witnesses may do before an identity parade. It is possible that they might be doing something to pass the time (eg read or do a puzzle). It is possible that some of these potential activities may lead to a detriment in face processing.'

Determined to determine whether reading or doing a puzzle can lead to a detriment in face processing, Lewis did an experiment. In his words: 'The tasks tested within the experiment presented here were: reading a passage from Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*; solving a sudoku puzzle; solving a literal crossword; solving a cryptic crossword'.

Sixty volunteers took part. They looked at some faces, 'then engaged in their puzzle or read the passage for 5 minutes'. Lewis then began to test their

memory of the faces. 'Between each test item, however, participants continued with their puzzle or read the text for 30 seconds.'

Sudoku and literal crosswords seemed not to affect how well the volunteers identified the faces. But, according to Lewis, when the volunteers did cryptic crossword puzzles, they became less reliable at recognising faces: 'In doing a cryptic crossword, one typically has to suppress the immediately obvious meaning of a word within the clue in favour of less obvious and more cryptic meanings. The suppression of the obvious features of the face, the obvious global letter, or the obvious literal meaning of a word may provide the device by which face-recognition performance is affected. This observation, however, does not explain how such suppression has such a detrimental effect on face recognition. That is, the question of what the mechanism is by which any of these tasks influences the supposedly modular face-recognition system is not addressed here.'

The study hammers home its message: 'The practical implication of this research is, as the title suggests, that eye-witnesses should not do cryptic crosswords before an identity parade.'

The Nudist Research Library

The American Nudist Research Library has a fairly simple motto: 'Dedicated to preserving nudist history with a comprehensive archive of nudist material'. Like all specialist libraries, it operates with a limited budget. Thus, the library covers only what it needs to.

The institution marked its 25th anniversary in 2004. The celebratory material explained that 'the Library was established in 1979 to preserve the history of the social nudist movement in North America and throughout the world. It is a repository of material rather than a circulating library. Visitors may read or view most of the collection as long as they are in the Library.'

The facility is in Kissimmee, Florida, on the grounds of Cypress Cove Nudist Resort, just a few miles from Disney World. Visitors are welcomed, whether or not they come equipped with clothing.

A library is a good place to conduct research. This particular library may be a good place to settle an ever-so-slight controversy in the field of cognitive science. Cognitive scientists, some of them, want to know how looking at nude bodies can affect a person's memory.

Dr Stephen R. Schmidt, a professor of psychology at Middle Tennessee State University, tried to settle the question by

showing nude photographs to a group of volunteers. He conducted a series of experiments, which he subsequently described in a report called 'Outstanding memories: The positive and negative effects of nudes on memory'.

Schmidt exposed his volunteers to carefully selected photographs, which he presented in various orders and paced at different time intervals. Here is a partial list of the photos: woman pumping gas; man climbing a mountain; woman sitting at a window reading a newspaper; man stacking wood; woman playing a cello. Some – but not all – of the men were nude. Ditto for the women.

This was a sophisticated follow-up to much earlier experiments that were done by psychologists Douglas Detterman and Norman Ellis. Detterman and Ellis embedded a photo of male and female nudes, which they obtained from an issue of *Sunbathing* magazine, into a series of black-and-white line drawings of common objects, and then showed the lot of them to volunteers. The result: 'Not surprisingly, memory for the nudes was much better than memory for [other items] – approaching 100% correct. However, the presence of the nudes caused amnesia, in that memory for items immediately preceding and following the nudes was poor.'

The point of this research? To tease out the subtle nature of why some memories are retained and others forgotten. Why nudes? Because, says Schmidt, 'nudes (rather than other emotional stimuli) seem to provide reliably strong effects'.

Live nudes would seem to provide more reliably strong effects than one would get from photographs of nudes. The American Nudist Research Library has nudes of both varieties, a bounty that should be of interest to scientists.

And it may be instructive to librarians elsewhere who lament that people don't visit libraries the way they used to.

The psychology of repetitive reading

A typical adult knows almost nothing about the psychology of repetitive reading. This is not surprising. Research psychologists, as a group, know little about the subject, though some have attempted to close the gap.

Human beings can be induced to read repetitively. In one experiment, a scientist named Paolo L. Fir* asked 200 subjects to read a repetitive essay. The essay consisted of a single paragraph repeated several times. Each subject was told beforehand that the essay was highly

repetitive. The result was surprising. Ninety-two percent of the subjects read the essay completely from beginning to end.

Fir began his experiment by recruiting several dozen people, whom he asked to be his research subjects. A typical adult knows almost nothing about the psychology of repetitive reading. (This is not surprising. Research psychologists, as a group, know little about the subject, though some have attempted to close the gap.) So Fir sat his subjects down in a room, and explained that human beings can be induced to read repetitively. In one experiment, he told them, a scientist asked 200 subjects to read a repetitive essay. The essay consisted of a single paragraph repeated several times. Each subject was told beforehand that the essay was highly repetitive. The result was surprising. Ninety-two percent of the subjects read the essay completely from beginning to end.

After giving his subjects that background information, Fir described his own experiment in great detail. The experiment was based on a book he had read. The book was based on the idea that human beings can be induced to read repetitively. In one experiment, a scientist asked 200 subjects to read a repetitive essay. The essay consisted of a single paragraph repeated several times. Each subject was told beforehand that the essay was highly repetitive. The result was surprising. Ninety-two percent of the subjects read the essay completely from beginning to end.

After Fir carried out his experiment, he published a report. Called 'The psychology of repetitive reading', it explains that human beings can be induced to read repetitively. In one experiment, a scientist – Fir, in fact – asked 200 subjects to read a repetitive essay. The essay consisted of a single paragraph repeated several times. Each subject was told beforehand that the essay was highly repetitive. The result was surprising. Ninety-two percent of the subjects read the essay completely from beginning to end.

*OK, this one is just too improbable.

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