

POSTED ON 30/06/06

Small Doses

Flower power didn't cut it



PAUL TAYLOR

Watchful eyes can keep people honest -- even when the eyes aren't real. Researchers at Newcastle University in Britain found that people behave differently when they subconsciously feel they are being watched.

They set up their experiment in a common area of the university's psychology department and used 48 staff members as the unwitting subjects of the study. The staff could buy coffee, tea and milk in the common room. A sign listed the prices of drinks and staff were supposed to deposit money for purchases in an "honesty" box.

As part of the experiment, researchers also put up an alternating series of images above the money box. For one week, the poster would be of a pair of eyes. The following week, the image would be replaced with a picture of flowers. Then, it was switched to an image of another pair of eyes. (The close-up images included the eyes of males and females.)

After 10 weeks, researchers found the staff put nearly three times as much money into the honesty box when they were being "watched" by poster eyes, compared with images of flowers. (Male eyes seemed to bring in the most cash.)

So, how could just a picture have this much influence on behaviour? "We think the effect was subconscious -- many people admitted not having noticed the images after the study was over," said Melissa Bateson, lead researcher of the study published in the journal *Biology Letters*. "We know our brains are tuned specifically to process faces and eyes, probably because knowing whether someone is watching you is so important."

The researchers think their findings could be used to help control "antisocial" behaviour. Some day, the eyes of "Big Brother" might stare down at you from road signs and other public places to encourage compliance with the law.

The safest seat in a car

When a car is full, someone gets stuck sitting in the middle back seat. Although it tends to be the most uncomfortable (and least desirable) spot in the car, a new study suggests it may also be the safest.

Researchers at the University of Buffalo reviewed records from U.S. crashes involving fatalities. The findings revealed that "occupants of the back seat are 59 per cent to 86 per cent safer than passengers in the front seat and that, in the back seat, the person in the middle is 25 per cent safer than other back-seat passengers."

After taking into account other factors, such as seat belt use, age of the occupants and type of vehicle, "the rear middle seat was still 16 per cent safer than any other seat in the car," said lead researcher Dietrich Jehle, who presented the study to the Society for Academic Emergency Medicine. The middle seat is safest because it has a much larger "crush zone." Simply put, "there is more space between yourself and where the car hits," especially in side collisions.

The study also found a lot fatalities can be directly linked to the fact that many people don't buckle up. "The most important over all message is to wear your seatbelt."

Cells as bad as booze

Talking on a cellphone while driving can be just as dangerous as getting behind the wheel drunk, a U.S. study suggests.

Researchers at the University of Utah tested a group of volunteers -- 25 men and 15 women -- in driving simulators to compare their reactions to the two different conditions. The study found that using a cell phone delayed reaction time. When the same volunteers consumed above the legal limit of alcohol, their driving became more aggressive. Although cells phones and alcohol produced different responses in the tests, "the level of impairment is very similar," according to the study published in the journal Human Factors.

"Just like you put yourself and other people at risk when you drive drunk, you put yourself and other people at risk when you use a cell phone and drive," lead researcher David Strayer said in a statement released with the study.

Using a hands-free or a hand-held phone didn't change the results. Both are equally hazardous because the conversation itself seems to distract drivers from what's happening on the road.

Heart ills in fast motion

Doctors have long known that people with diabetes are at increased risk of heart disease and strokes. But a new Canadian study suggests diabetes is like having your biological clock put in fast forward.

Diabetics fell into the "high risk" category for cardiovascular disease

an average 15 years earlier than those without the disease, according to the study in *The Lancet*.

As a result, diabetics may need to embrace "aggressive risk reduction" measures at a much earlier age than the general population, said lead researcher Gillian Booth at the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences in Toronto. For instance, that might include taking cholesterol-lowering drugs or low-dose Aspirin as early as age 40. Some diabetics under 40 might also need early help, depending on individual risk factors.

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