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WEEK IN IDEAS | NOVEMBER 20, 2010

Week in Ideas

By CHRISTOPHER SHEA

PSYCHOLOGY

Water-Cooler Power

Casual office chat might not be the time-waster you thought it was: A study has identified a link between brief, friendly social encounters and cognitive performance.



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Co-workers smiling by water cooler.

Researchers split several dozen subjects into groups, telling some to "get to know" a conversational partner for eight minutes with no other goal, while telling a second group the same thing but adding that the subjects would soon be cooperating with their partners in a lab-based game (which never happened). The researchers told a third group that their conversational partners would be their opponents in the game and told a fourth (control) group nothing. The researchers then tested all of the subjects for basic problem-solving abilities, like connecting sequences of numbers and letters scattered across a paper.

The groups asked to "get to know" their partners and to cooperate with them outperformed the control group and the competitive group on the cognitive tests. The friendly conversations improved performance on the tests more than working on crossword puzzles and other mind-teasers, which also had short-term cognitive benefits.

"Friends (and Sometimes Enemies) With Cognitive Benefits: What Types of Social Interactions Boost Executive Functioning?" Oscar Ybarra, Piotr Winkielman, Irene Yeh, Eugene Burnstein and Liam Kavanagh, Social Psychological and Personality Science (forthcoming)



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Manager Clint Hurdle

BASEBALL

Interchangeable Managers?

When a Major League Baseball team starts losing, it often decides to send its manager packing. A new study finds that such changes at the top rarely make a difference for the team or for individual players.

The study looked for a correlation between the arrival of new managers and the performance of players, from 1980 through 2009, correcting for players' ages and the standard of play in

each season. (When switches happened during the middle of the season, the author waited until the following season to evaluate.) Of 134 managers in the sample, only 21 were associated with improved hitter performance (as measured by on-base percentage plus slugging percentage, or OPS), and only 15 were associated with improved pitcher performance (as measured by earned run average).

No manager improved the performance of both hitters and pitchers. If managers make a difference, the study concluded, "the impact is small and difficult to identify."

It's not that baseball managers serve no purpose, according to the researcher. It's just that one appears to be as good as another.

"Hired To Be Fired: The Publicity Value of Managers," John Charles Bradbury (to be delivered Saturday at the annual meeting of the Southern Economic Association)

PSYCHOLOGY

Tetris vs. Trauma

Psychologists have made progress in counseling victims of post-traumatic stress disorder, but the holy grail remains some way of preventing disturbing flashbacks in the first place. A study finds that traumatic memories can be reduced by working on a puzzle exercising the part of the brain that deals with spatial relationships among objects. The treatment works when administered as much as four hours after the initial trauma.

Participants in the study watched a film featuring grisly injuries and deaths and then went home for four hours. When they returned, they either sat quietly for 10 minutes; played a videogame testing "visuospatial" skills (Tetris, in this case); or played a videogame testing general knowledge and memory (Pub Quiz). Over the next week, all of the subjects kept diaries, and the ones who had played Tetris reported fewer nightmares and painful flashbacks than the other two groups.

The researchers said that any exercise testing visuospatial skills might work as a sort of anti-trauma vaccine—for example, in combat areas. But not just any distraction would do, as the Pub Quiz result showed. The researchers said that the finding couldn't be extended to games that generated strong emotions, like first-person adventures.

"Key Steps in Developing a Cognitive Vaccine against Traumatic Flashbacks: Visuospatial Tetris versus Verbal Pub Quiz," Emily A. Holmes, Ella L. James, Emma J. Kilford and Catherine Deepröse, PLoS ONE (Nov. 10)



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An empty prison cell.

LAW

Legalizing Drugs: A Tally

In 2001, Portugal decriminalized the possession of small amounts of virtually every illicit drug. A study looking at the results over the years found one negative: From 2001 to 2007, the proportion of people ages 15 to 64 who had ever tried an illicit substance rose to 12% from 7.6%. But, the study's authors say, Italy and Spain saw larger increases without major changes to their laws.

In Portugal, "problematic" drug use dropped to 6.8 per 1,000 citizens from 7.6 per 1,000, and opiate-related deaths declined significantly. Pressure on courts and prisons also eased: In 2000, 14,000 drug offenders were dealt with as criminals, but by 2008, more than half that year's 12,000 offenders were steered to three-person civilian panels that could insist on treatment or apply mild sanctions. From 2001 to 2005, prison density fell to 102 prisoners per 100 spaces, from 119.

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Water-Cooler Power, Tetris vs. Traum...

"What Can We Learn From the Portuguese Decriminalization of Illicit Drugs?" Caitlin Elizabeth Hughes and Alex Stevens, The British Journal of Criminology (November)

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