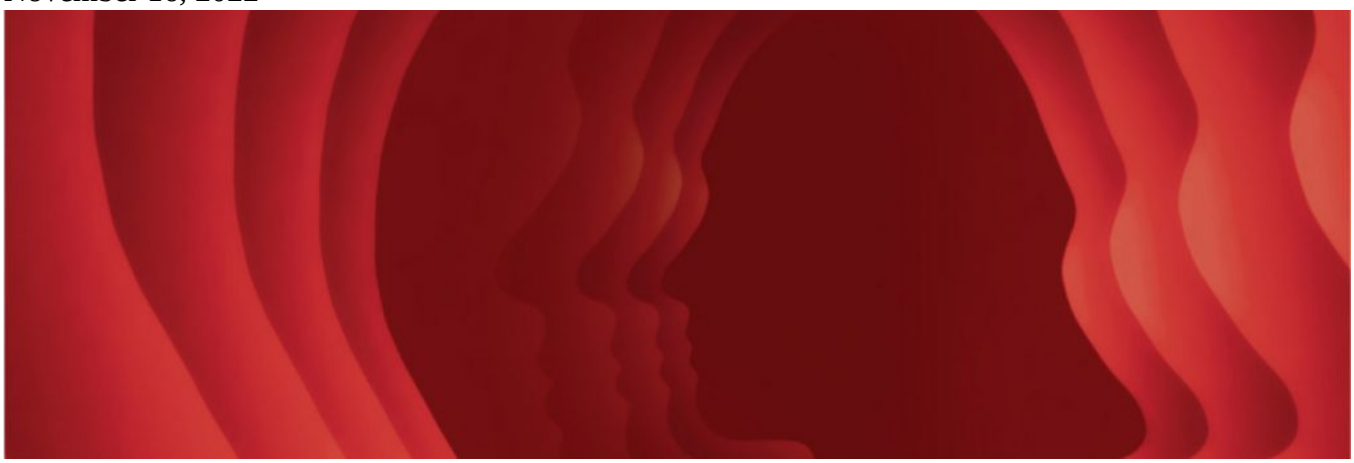
New Research in *Psychological Science*

November 16, 2022



The Relative Importance of Joke and Audience Characteristics in Eliciting Amusement
Hannes Rosenbusch, Anthony M. Evans, and Marcel Zeelenberg

Why are some jokes funnier than others? It might depend on the audience, this research suggests. Across five studies with varied stimuli and types of audiences (website visitors, students, Mechanical Turk and Prolific users), Rosenbusch and colleagues found that perceivers' characteristics account for more variance in funniness ratings than stimulus characteristics. Thus, psychological theories focusing on between-persons differences have a relatively high likelihood of explaining and predicting humor appreciation (in this case, funniness ratings). Crucially, perceiver-by-stimulus interactions explained the largest amount of variance, highlighting the importance of fit between joke and audience characteristics when predicting level of amusement.

Storage in Visual Working Memory Recruits a Content-Independent Pointer System
William Thyer et al.

Thyer and colleagues recorded electroencephalogram (EEG) activity while participants maintained varying numbers of items (geometric shapes varying in color and/or orientation) in their visual working memory (WM). The EEG results enabled precise tracking of the number of individuated items each participant held and predicted individual differences in their WM capacity. This neural "load signal" was unaffected by variations in the type and number of visual features held about each item, suggesting that it tracked the number of item representations and not their content. Thyer and colleagues hypothesize that the number of items matters because of a WM limit in the number of distinct entities that a person can simultaneously track through time and space.

Experience of Playing a Musical Instrument and Lifetime Change in General Cognitive Ability: Evidence From the Lothian Birth Cohort 1936
Judith A. Okely, Katie Overy, and Ian J. Deary

Okely and colleagues analyzed data from older adults who completed general cognitive-ability assessments (e.g., intelligence tests) at ages 11 and 70 and reported their experience playing a musical instrument. The researchers found a small, statistically significant positive association between this experience and change in general cognitive ability between ages 11 and 70. Specifically, individuals with more musical-instrument experience were likely to show greater gains in general cognitive ability. This association was reduced but remained statistically significant following adjustment for covariates such as childhood and adulthood socioeconomic status, years of education, and disease history.

Underestimating Counterparts' Learning Goals Impairs Conflictual Conversations
Hanne K. Collins, Charles A. Dorison, Francesca Gino, and Julia A. Minson

Expressing willingness to learn about each other might improve communication between people holding opposing views. Across seven studies, participants consistently underestimated how willing their disagreeing counterparts were to learn about opposing views. However, participants did not underestimate their own willingness to learn or how willing others who share the same views would be. This belief predicted greater derogation of attitude opponents and more negative expectations for conflictual conversations. In both American partisan politics and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a short informational intervention increased beliefs that disagreeing counterparts were willing to learn about the others' views. This decreased derogation and increased willingness to engage in the future.

Surprisingly Happy to Have Helped: Underestimating Prosociality Creates a Misplaced Barrier to Asking for Help
Xuan Zhao and Nicholas Epley

People may be overly reluctant to ask for help. The reason? Miscalibrated expectations about others' prosocial motivation can make them underestimate how positively others will feel when asked to help, according to Zhao and Epley. In a series of scenarios, recalled experiences, and live interactions among participants in the United States, those needing help consistently underestimated others' willingness to help and their positivity in doing so, and overestimated their sense of inconvenience. These miscalibrated expectations stemmed from underestimating helpers' prosocial motivation while overestimating compliance motivation.

Face-Information Sampling in Super-Recognizers
James D. Dunn et al.

Super-recognizers have exceptional face-recognition abilities. Dunn and colleagues compared visual sampling of super-recognizers with that of typical viewers by measuring participants' gaze position as they learned and recognized unfamiliar faces. Using eye-tracking, the researchers created "spotlight" apertures that revealed only part of the unfamiliar faces. Super-recognizers performed better than average people at all aperture sizes. They also made more fixations (i.e., stopped scanning and held their central vision to take in detailed information more often), focused less on the eye region, and distributed their gaze more than typical viewers. This indicates that face-recognition ability cannot be explained by holistic information (i.e., whole-face) sampling. Moreover, differences were most apparent when participants were learning faces, which suggests that super-recognizers might better be thought of as "super-learners."

Mugs and Plants: Object Semantic Knowledge Alters Perceptual Processing With Behavioral Ramifications

Dick Dubbelde and Sarah Shomstein

What people know about an object can change what they see and how they see it. Dubbelde and Shomstein hypothesized that people process objects with and without action associations (i.e., tools and nontools, respectively) differently because the objects recruit different brain areas. Results indicated that when participants saw a tool, such as a mug, the parietal cortex was recruited, leading them to perceive this object with higher temporal resolution (i.e., faster) than when they saw a nontool, such as a potted plant. However, participants saw details better (i.e., better spatial resolution) when they saw a nontool.

Real-World Exploration Increases Across Adolescence and Relates to Affect, Risk Taking, and Social Connectivity

Natalie M. Saragosa-Harris et al.

Exploration and risk taking may play an important role in sustaining adolescent well-being and establishing social connectivity, this research suggests. Saragosa-Harris and colleagues used geolocation tracking to quantify exploration—variability in daily movement patterns—over a 3-month period in 58 adolescents and adults (ages 13–27) in New York City. They found that individuals near legal adulthood exhibited the highest exploration levels. Days of higher exploration were associated with greater positive affect irrespective of age. Higher exploration was associated with greater social connectivity in all participants and also with higher risk taking selectively among adolescents.

Stress and Stress-Induced Glucocorticoids Facilitate Empathic Accuracy in Men but Have No Effects for Women

Jonas P. Nitschke, Jens C. Pruessner, and Jennifer A. Bartz

Acute stress can undermine cognitive abilities such as decision making. But in men, paradoxically, it might improve the ability to understand others' feelings (i.e., empathy), this research suggests. Nitschke and colleagues found that acute stress increased cortisol response, resulting in a higher presence of glucocorticoids in saliva, which in turn facilitated empathic accuracy (i.e., the ability to rate how people depicted in short videos were feeling). Notably, this effect occurred only in men—women showed a smaller cortisol response to stress, and acute psychosocial stress did not improve their empathy. Moreover, women taking oral contraceptives showed worse empathic accuracy than regularly cycling women.

Personalized Prediction of Behaviors and Experiences: An Idiographic Person–Situation Test
Emorie D. Beck and Joshua J. Jackson

How can psychological science accurately predict future behaviors and experiences? Beck and Jackson used data collected in several assessments of college students and built personalized prediction models to predict future occurrences of procrastination, loneliness, and studying. Rather than pitting persons against situations, they used an idiographic, person-specific perspective that leverages psychological phenomena, situations, and time to jointly predict future behaviors and experiences. The researchers were able to accurately predict students' behaviors, but some students' behaviors were more predictable than others. Moreover, the features of each person and situation that best predicted each future behavior and experience varied widely across students.

Recognition of Masked Faces in the Era of the Pandemic: No Improvement Despite Extensive Natural Exposure
Erez Freud et al.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, masks frequently occluded faces, which may have led to deficits in people's ability to recognize others. As real-life exposure to masked faces increased, did the recognition of masked faces improve? This research suggests that it did not. Freud and colleagues tested masked-face recognition at six different time points over 20 months, alongside a 12-month longitudinal study. Results indicated persistently poor recognition of masked faces and little improvement across time points. Additional experiments indicated that the amount of individual exposure to masked faces did not improve recognition.

Feedback on this article? Email apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org or login to comment.
Interested in writing for us? Read our contributor guidelines.