

NYT's 'Ideas' Feature Psychology Research

February 01, 2006

What do sexy billboards, cynicism, eating your vegetables, and bad British teeth have in common? According to *The New York Times*, they're the inspiration behind some of 2005's best ideas. In the December 11, 2005 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, "The 5th Annual Year in Ideas" lauded five APS Members for their innovative research last year.

In all, 78 notions made up the list, which ranged from "The Laptop That Will Save the World" to "In Vitro Meat" to "Ergonomic Footwear." The assemblage is a seemingly random review, chosen on the merits of intellectual curiosity and ranked only by their alphabetical order. Yet there is no escaping their relevance.

Among the ideas listed was the work of Marvin Chun and David Zald, along with colleague Steven Most, who coined a new effect, "attentional rubbernecking." They showed students a rapidly moving set of slides and asked them to identify the images that had been turned 90 degrees on their sides. Most had little to no trouble answering correctly. However, when an image of a bare breast or severed limb appeared immediately before the sideways image, 30 percent of students could not remember what the following image had been.

It may be intuitive that nudity and violence are distracting. However, the research indicates that when we see an accident on the side of the road or a sexy billboard looming above, we may focus exclusively on the image and miss the message altogether — a frightful thought for modern marketers. That kind of "attentional blindness may only last for a halfsecond or less," Zald said. "But when you're going 70 miles an hour, that can be plenty dangerous."

Also recognized were the findings of APS Fellow and Charter Member Frank C. Keil and member Candice M. Mills regarding children's perceptions of lying, first seen in the May issue of *Psychological Science*. The Yale-based researchers found that when people distort the truth, children in kindergarten, as well as grades two, four, and six, believe the reason for doing so is more likely dishonesty than bias or unintentional error. The study suggests that children may even be more cynical than adults, who more readily assign the benefit of the doubt when incorrect statements are made in someone else's favor.

In August, APS Past President Elizabeth Loftus brought us a study suggesting that it may be possible to convince people that they do not like certain calorific foods. Known for her work regarding the impressionability of human memory, Loftus's experiments attempted to persuade subjects that they tend to become ill after eating strawberry ice cream. In fact, 40 percent of participants claimed they were less inclined to eat the dessert after the false memory had been implanted.

Loftus's newest, unpublished studies consider whether positive memories of eating healthy food might also be implanted. As she told the *Times*, perhaps "we can convince people they really loved asparagus the first time they tried it as a kid."

Finally, APS Member Dacher Keltner — who specializes in the relationship between culture and emotion — was highlighted for finding much more than bad teeth to distinguish British smiles from those in the United States. During a sabbatical in England, Keltner noticed that the English had a different way of showing their joy — particularly in the way they move their lips.

"I think Tom Cruise has a terrific American smile," he told the *Times*. He observed that photographs of Cruise are typical of American grins, which show only the top row of teeth. Britons, on the other hand, have a tendency to more fully use the risorius muscle, which pulls the lips sideways, *and* the zygomatic major, which lifts up the lips. The result is a large grin in the fashion of Prince Charles or Tony Blair.

His theory was put to the test when a British journalist asked Keltner to identify the nationality of 15 closely cropped photos that showed only smiles. He blundered only once, recalling "I missed Venus Williams like a fool."