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“Too Much, To Young: Brain Overgrowth Correlates with the Severity of Autism Symptoms” by Erica Westly 27 July 2010

The average age at which children are diagnosed with autism is between three and four, but scientists have long suspected that the disorder starts much earlier. A key piece of evidence is a phenomenon known as brain overgrowth. Autistic toddlers tend to have large brains for their age, and researchers have shown a correlation between the degree of excess growth and the severity of autism symptoms.

Eric Courchesne, director of the Autism Center of Excellence at the University of California at San Diego, helped to pioneer the overgrowth hypothesis. Now he and his colleague Cynthia Schumann have published data that suggest the excess brain growth starts in the first year of life, if not sooner.

The study, published in a recent issue of the Journal of Neuroscience, is the first to evaluate brain growth and autism throughout early development. Using cross-sectional MRI scans, the researchers found overgrowth in autistic subjects as young as one and a half. At two and a half, the autistic subjects’ brains were 7 percent larger on average than the control group’s. Although why, exactly, excessive brain growth is related to autism remains a mystery, the new work helps to confirm that signs of the disorder appear early – knowledge that could lead to detection and treatments, such as behavior therapy, at a younger age. “The earlier the intervention, the better the outcome,” Courchesne says.

Précis summary:

“Abuse and Attachment” by Erica Westly 1 March 2010

The scenario is all too common – children who are abused develop an attachment to their abuser that interferes with their desire to seek help or leave the situation. Experts have struggled to understand this seemingly destructive behavior, but the underlying causes have remained hidden. Now new research from scientists who study attachment in rats offers insight into what may be happening in abused children’s brains.

Rats are especially responsive to smells during infancy, which may help foster the parental bond. Psychologist Sullivan of New York University showed in 2000 that young rats are drawn to almost any odor, even when the odor is associated with a stressful stimulus, such as a mild heat shock. In other words, baby rats are attracted to the very thing that hurts them, rather than being repelled as older rats would be.

What is happening in the young rats’ brains to foster attachment instead of aversion or fear? Researchers found the answer in the rats’ amygdala, a brain region associated with anxiety and fear. In the amygdala of rats attracted to the aversive odors, there were lower than normal levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine. This lack of dopamine activity may have turned off their brain’s fear response, enabling attraction to take place instead. A similar mechanism may occur in abused children although how much the amygdala is involved with early human attachment is unclear. This behavior probably evolved as a survival tactic. “The animal has to be able to survive, which means it has to be attached to its caregiver no matter what the quality of care,” a researcher says.

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“Contagious Yawn ‘Sign of Empathy’” by Liz Seward, BBC, 9 October 2007

A susceptibility to contagious yawning may actually be a sign of a high-level of social empathy. Although many species yawn, only some humans and possibly their close animal relatives find yawning infectious.

The University of Leeds research stated "Contagious yawning...you don't need a visual cue, you don't even need an auditory cue – you can just read about it or think about it and it gets you going."

The same area of the brain is involved when reacting to yawning and when considering others. Researchers carried out an experiment on students studying psychology and engineering to test this concept. Each student was shown to an occupied waiting room where their companion was actually a researcher who yawned 10 times in 10 minutes. The scientists recorded how often the students yawned in response. Each participant was then asked to complete a test of their empathetic skills, in which they analyzed pictures of eyes and recorded the emotions shown. The results showed that those who had succumbed to the most contagious yawning also scored higher on the empathy tests.

There was also a clear difference between the subjects studied. Psychology students were more susceptible to contagious yawning, and scored significantly higher on the empathy test than did the engineering students.

Précis summary:

“Sleep On It” Scientific American Mind, August/September 2007

How does your brain manage to see both the trees and the forest? A team of researchers from Harvard Medical School and McGill University conducted a new study that suggests that getting the big picture requires some downtime and to help the most, a night of restful sleep.

The ability to recognize hidden relations among our memories, a characteristically human feature, is vital for solving problems in creative ways. To understand how this relational memory develops, the team of researchers presented students with pairs of abstract images in which one image was considered greater, and then asked them to determine the hierarchy of the images in new combinations. Subjects tested 20 minutes after the learning period performed no better than chance – their brains had not yet been able to figure out any new connections. However, those who were tested after at least 12 hours were much more successful in detecting the hidden relations. And a third group of participants, who had slept during their 12 hours of time away from testing, outperformed the other groups, in particular, with the most difficult inferences.

The process of binding memories together evolves over time. As people sleep or even when we give our brains an opportunity to focus upon other tasks, it seems our brain forges connections in the background, fitting newly learned information into the bigger picture.

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“Everyone Agrees” Scientific American Mind

With the 2008 presidential election only a year away, the merits of each candidate are becoming a common topic of conversation. But how do our brains, after hearing so many different opinions, gauge the popularity of each one. New research supports that we judge a viewpoint prevalence by how familiar it is – regardless of whether we have heard it five times from one person or once from five different people.

The researcher gave volunteers records of opinions from a fictional focus group that had supposedly met to discuss the preservation of open space in New Jersey. In some cases, multiple people expressed the viewpoints; in others, the same person repeated an opinion many times. Based on these records, they asked the subjects to estimate how the focus group and the population in general, felt about the matter.

The study participants rated an opinion as popular if it had been expressed several times – even if only one person had said it. The researchers’ follow-up experiments suggested that the opinions familiarity was the most important factor in whether subjects considered it to be common.

“People are not always good at inferring what other people think.” The ability to gauge the sentiment of a crowd is vital for good social decision making, and for the most part evolution had honed our skills of perception. But our psychological mechanisms are sometimes subject to constraints – and this phenomenon is a perfect example. These types of miscalculations could sway our own opinions and perceptions of reality, leading us to unintentionally make decisions influenced by a mentally amplified vocal minority.

Précis summary:

“the Bilingual Edge”

Many parents would like their children to master a second language, but few kids in this country do. Only 9 percent of adults in the U.S. are fluent in more than one language. In Europe that figure is closer to 50 percent. “The United States is a long way from being the multilingual society that so many of our economic competitors are,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at a meeting on foreign-language education last December.

Part of the problem is that American students are often not exposed to a second language until high school, and even then foreign-language training is rarely compulsory. Numerous studies have shown that children are more likely to learn a second language if they begin early, but in 2008 only a quarter of elementary schools in the U.S. offered some form of foreign-language instruction, according to the Department of Education.

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“Bullying”

Most people do not genuinely like bullies. They do not like witnessing another person being bullied. It is a very uncomfortable psychological state, a state known as cognitive dissonance, to witness a bullying incident and do nothing about it. Cognitive dissonance occurs when our actions do not match our internal code of ethics and morality; it is triggered when we don't act in accordance with our internal moral code.

Most people want to stop a bully but lack the courage or confidence to get involved for fear of becoming a target, or being associated with that which they defend (gays, Jews, etc). When somebody else makes the first move to stand up to a bully others are very likely to follow to alleviate their dissonance. Bullies nearly always back down when one or more people confronts them.

There are many effective ways to stop a bully. If you stand by and do nothing when you see bullying you are a part of the problem; your silence will be interpreted by the bully as your acceptance of their behavior, and will (in their eyes) encourage them to repeat it.

Fear of retaliation is a legitimate concern but there are ways to stop a bullying incident without jumping in to the fire. Approach a bully with confidence and don't aggressively confront them unless it becomes necessary and you will have your best chance of stopping a bullying incident. Be confidently assertive when confronting a bully, not aggressive, and often the bully will stand down.

Précis summary:

“Self Labeling”

Why is it certain members of groups are quick to claim themselves as victims of racism when certain vocabulary is directed against them, while they themselves chose to utilize these same words or sayings in reference to themselves – blacks calling themselves “*ni**ers*”, Jews calling themselves “*dirty Jews*” or “*ki**s*”, whites calling themselves “*crac**s*”, gays calling themselves “*queer*”, etc?

The reason for individuals assuming these terms is varied. Some chose hurtful words for self-identification so as to remind themselves of their peoples historical oppression, oftentimes in the context of that oppression as being ongoing; some think (wrongly, social psychologists assert) that by embracing the slogan of an oppressor they defeat that intent; others – particularly the youth – just do not have an appreciation for the labeling and stereotypes these words are associated with, and are left flabbergasted when the older generations respond with horrified derision.

These individuals, for whatever their reasons, do not realize that it is the collective history of a group which determines what is racist or not. They, by dishonoring themselves through taking ownership of the derogatory words being ascribed to their heritage, are only perpetuating a continuation of the very stereotypes members of their group have sought to overcome

We internalize subconsciously any embrace of such identifying labels, which in turn is reflected in parts of our sense of identity at a deep level.

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“The Hidden Power of Culture”

Culture influences the songs we sing, the steps we dance and the words we write. It also shapes our brains. Scientists have long known that neuroplasticity allows individual events to sculpt the brain’s form and function. Now there is evidence that life experience as intangible as culture can also reorganize our neural pathways. Recent research has found that culture influences the way a person’s brain perceives visual stimuli such as scenes and colors.

In one study, psychologists showed people complex scenes, such as an elephant in a jungle or an airplane flying over a city, while scanning their brains with an MRI. The team studied young and elderly subjects from the U.S. and Singapore. For Westerners of all ages, the images triggered activity in a part of the brain associated with object recognition called the lateral occipital region, whereas the same object-associated areas were not activated in the older Asians’ brains.

“An Asian would see a jungle that happened to have an elephant in it,” Park explains. “Meanwhile a Westerner would see the elephant and might notice the jungle.” Because the Asian subjects’ responses differed between the two generations, while the older Americans matched the youths in their interpretation of the landscapes, the researchers concluded that the culture people grow up in plays a role in how they interpret scenes.

Language helps to convey and maintain a culture’s conventions, and similarly affects perception. An unrelated study found that Russian speakers, whose language includes two words that make a mandatory distinction between light blue and dark blue, could more quickly distinguish between shades of the color than English speakers could. In this case, language meddled in the simple task of differentiating among hues. With an infinite number of ways to perceive the world, every culture’s guidebook helps to focus our brain’s attention on the characteristics most important to our life.

Précis summary:

“Do Gay Animals Change Evolution?”

Homosexual behavior seems pointedly un-Darwinian. An animal that doesn't pass along genes by mating with the opposite sex at every, well, conceivable opportunity, seems to be at an evolutionary disadvantage. So what's in it for the 450-plus species that have evidenced tendencies of same-gender sex?

Two evolutionary biologists from University of California, Riverside, set out to answer that question in a paper published today in Trends in Ecology and Evolution. "It's been observed a lot," says researcher Nathan Bailey, of same-sex sexual behavior in animals. "But it took people a long time to put it in an evolutionary context." It can be seen as an adaptational strategy, "these behaviors can be a force," Bailey said. "They create a context in which selection can occur [differently] within a population." In the Laysan albatross, for example, previous research has shown that a third of all bonded pairs in a Hawaii colony are two females. This behavior helps the birds, whose colony has far more females than males, by allowing them to share parenting responsibilities. It also gives more stability to the offspring of males, already bonded to a female, who mate opportunistically with females in a same-sex couple. Such a dynamic, then may force gradual changes in behavior and even physical appearance of the birds, the authors note.

Other researchers, however, aren't convinced that everything must fit into the evolutionary, adaptive rubric. "You have to think outside of that," says professor Paul Vasey. His work has shown that in female macaque monkeys at least, same-sex sexual behavior doesn't seem to have any adaptational advantage, which "doesn't jibe with how people want to think about it," he says. But, he concludes, "You can't impose your perspective on the species you're studying. Attempt to understand the world on its own terms."

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“Whistles Spoken Here”

Shepherds on La Gomera in the Canary Islands (Spain) communicate across long distances and over rough terrain with shrill whistles that represent Spanish word symbols. For example, those who know this “Silbo” language and are separated by a ravine can transmit a message like, “Meet you at the hilltop at 3:00p”. A team of Spanish and American psychologists studying Silbo found that the whistlers brain’s treat the sounds as language, whereas the brains of Spaniards who do not know Silbo do not. This is clear evidence, says the study leader, that “the language processing regions of the human brain can adapt to a surprisingly wide array of signaling forms.”

The researchers used functional neuroimaging to watch the subjects brains while they listening to recorded Silbo, spoken Spanish and nonsense whistling. The temporal regions of the brain’s left hemisphere associated with spoken-language function became active when whistlers heard Silbo sentences, which did not happen for Spanish speakers who do not understand Silbo.

Unfortunately, few shepherds live in La Gomera today, and most have cell phones. Silbo is dying out.

Précis summary:

“Can They Hear Us?”

Some patients with severe brain damage may be more aware that we think, according to new neurological studies. Minds of minimally conscious patients appear to retain the ability to process language.

A minimally conscious patient will occasionally respond to commands, reach for objects of make other purposeful gestures. In contrast, patients in a vegetative state show no such behavior; this was the plight of Terri Schivo, the Florida woman who’s plight gained national attention in 2005. The researchers compared MRI’s of two minimally conscious patients to those of seven healthy subjects, taken as the individuals listened to recordings by loved ones about past experiences they had shared. The injured brains showed activity in the language centers of the temporal lobes that was strikingly similar to that in the healthy brains. But when the researchers played the narrative backward, the injured brains response was far inferior, perhaps indicating an inability to fully tap into their neural circuitry.

The possibility that minimally conscious patients could be tuned in to activity around them – such as bedside conversations among doctors and family members – without being able to respond underscores the limitations of current tests used to estimate consciousness. Additionally, having the “infrastructure for cognition in place suggests that it is at least theoretically possible” for these patients to regain some function and perhaps return to a preinjured status.

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“Personality At Hand”

If divining personality from finger length sounds like nonsense, Professor Hurd understands. An assistant professor of psychology at the University of Alberta, Hurd thought that such efforts “seemed like palmistry.” But now he is a believer.

Research had shown that the short a male’s index finger is relative to his ring finger, the more testosterone he was exposed to as a fetus. Hurd has since found that men with a greater disparity are more prone to be physically aggressive throughout life. (There is no correlation for females.)

Although the association isn’t strong enough to predict the trait, it is stronger than the relation between adult testosterone levels and aggression, a sign that “the causal effect of testosterone begins in the womb,” says Hurd. “the take home message” from this study of over 300 individuals, he adds, “is that hormone during development explain far more variation in human behavior than hormones during adulthood.”

Précis summary:

“New View on Autism”

“Look me straight in the eye” is not something autistic children find easy to do. Avoiding eye contact is a hallmark of this developmental disorder, and researchers have looked for the cause in the brain’s fusiform gyrus region, active in facial recognition. But instead of an underactive fusiform, an overactive amygdale may be at fault.

Autism greatly weakens an individuals capacity to socialize and communicate. Avoiding eye contact is a problem because it is a crucial source of subtle cues that are critical for normal and social development. The researchers compared autistic teenagers with average teens. They observed their brains with MRIs as they looked at pictures of familiar faces and other faces that showed various emotions. The autistic teens took longer to recognize family faces and made more mistakes in identifying the emotions of others.

By tracking the subjects eye movements and brains, the researchers learned that the autistic children spent less time fixing their gaze on the eyes in the photographs. Yet the autistic group “showed greater activation of the amygdale and frontal gyrus” – areas associated with emotional response. These results suggest that in autistics, viewing faces causes overarousal of emotional centers, resulting in avoidance. The quieter fusiform response is a result, not a cause. Understanding this link may help scientists devise ways of training autistic children to look at faces, helping them form stronger social bonds.

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“Delaying Dementia”

For a decade, neurologists have produced studies that suggest that adults who regularly challenge their brains in later life succumb to dementia less often, less severely and at older ages than seniors who are intellectually lazy. The mature brain can grow new neural connections and strengthen weak ones, if exercised. As with muscles, "use it or lose it" applies. A new study, however, suggests that mental activity in young adulthood also helps keep dementia at bay later.

A team of psychologists scanned the brains of 14 adults ages 18 to 30 and 19 seniors beyond age 65 as they performed various memory tests. Among the older subjects, those who had had the most education during their youth did the best and used their frontal lobes for recall. The top young participants primarily used their medial temporal lobes, which are employed to encode and think about new information. The team concluded that seniors may have trouble recruiting the temporal lobes and therefore rely on the frontal lobes--responsible for general cognition--to help out. But apparently, having pushed the brain further during their college days made that substitution more effective.

So if you want to be a clear thinker, or at least try to forestall dementia in your golden years, get as much formal education as you can when you are young. If you're already past that stage, then the experts say you should start challenging yourself now. Read, write, take classes, play cards, start a new hobby. Keep learning. Stay connected with friends and family, too; the interactions stimulate memory, concentration and mental processing. Also, control high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol and obesity; increasing evidence shows that these threats also predispose people to dementia.

Précis summary:

“Alzheimer’s Jam”

The earliest trigger of Alzheimer's disease may be traffic jams occurring on the brain's cellular highways. Researchers at the University of California at San Diego who led a multi-institutional study have found that prior to the formation of the destructive plaques that cause Alzheimer's, cellular debris accumulates along axons, whose long, thin fibers shuttle chemicals from neuron to neuron and from one brain neighborhood to the next. Clogging these transportation routes promotes the generation of plaque.

"It's choking up supply lines," says Lawrence S. B. Goldstein, professor of cellular and molecular medicine at the university. "It's like a rock in a garden hose. The chemicals can't get through to do their job." By studying mice with the condition and the brains of people who died during early stages of Alzheimer's, the scientists found that the more debris that exists on an axon highway, the harder that region is eventually hit with plaque.

In Alzheimer's, brain proteins called amyloid and tau are present in abnormal amounts, but researchers have long debated why. The new study indicates that congestion in axons is the likely culprit behind amyloid-filled plaques and tau-rich tangles. What's more, Goldstein says, the jams may explain tau's role in the disease process. Tau is key to regulating traffic on the axon highways, and even a slight blockage can lead to serious neuron damage.

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“Soldiers Who Have Taken A Life More Likely To Defend Iraq War”

How do soldiers come to terms with having taken a life in combat? Research has suggested that when people consider themselves to be “good” but are forced to do something “bad” to others, they adopt negative opinions about their victims to rationalize their actions. But according to a new study, this tendency may not apply to soldiers or at least not to those who have served in the Iraq War. American soldiers who have killed in Iraq do not think more poorly of Iraqis than Iraq War soldiers who have not killed—they do, however, think worse of Americans who speak out against the war.

68 Iraq War veterans were asked about their experiences, their thoughts on the war and their opinions about Iraqis and Americans. Compared with soldiers who never saw combat and those who witnessed a death but were not involved, veterans who “were directly involved in an Iraqi fatality” were much more likely to consider the war to be beneficial to both countries. The finding is consistent with prior evidence that people tend to value outcomes that require great effort or distress. But although previous research predicts that these soldiers might disparage their victims, investigators were surprised to find that these veterans instead resented Americans whose opinions about the war suggest that their killings may have been unjustified.

This change could be a result of the unique circumstances surrounding the Iraq War. “A clue lies in the political and public nature of a controversial war fought by a volunteer army,” says Klug, who presented his findings in August at the annual conference of the American Psychological Association in Boston. For example, in the Vietnam War soldiers were drafted, and people who avoided serving were viewed with suspicion, he explains. But today the situation is reversed.

“The veterans are aware of their status as the ‘stepchildren’ of polite American society, a sense that’s enhanced by their abysmal treatment upon returning,” he posits. Because America’s decision to go to war was the sole reason these soldiers killed, they “now depend on that policy to justify their actions,” Klug believes. Those who disagree with the policy, then, become automatic enemies.

“The Joys of Parenthood?”

Sure, the soccer uniforms, piano lessons and college tuition add up—but there is nothing like being a parent. Or so we tell ourselves, according to a study in the February issue of Psychological Science. When parents are faced with the financial costs of a child, they justify their investment by playing up parenthood’s emotional payoffs.

Psychologists at the University of Waterloo in Ontario gave parents in the study a government report estimating that bringing up a child to age 18 costs more than \$190,000. Then half the parents read an additional report about the financial help grown children provide their parents. Those who read only about the high price tag were more likely to agree with statements idealizing the emotional benefits of parenthood, such as “There is nothing more rewarding in this life than raising a child.”

Such rationalization is a common response to cognitive dissonance, the state of having two conflicting ideas in mind, according to psychological theory. In this scenario, the choice the parents made to have children conflicts with the fact that kids are such a financial burden, so the parents conclude that the emotional benefits must be so great they outweigh the material cost.

The authors of the study point out that this mind-set makes sense in light of history. Until recently, children were not so expensive—and often they were of great economic value, helping out on the farm or bringing home a paycheck. In those eras, childhood was less sentimentalized and the emotional bond between kids and parents was not as strong. As raising kids became more costly, we began to idealize parenting.

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“The Power of Negative Thinking”

Can our expectations for the future change how we remember the past? According to a new study published in the Journal of Experimental Psychology, they can—we remember unpleasant experiences more negatively if we expect to endure them again.

Researchers at New York University and Carnegie Mellon University conducted seven experiments to determine how people’s expectations shape their memories. In one test, they exposed 30 students to the noise of a vacuum cleaner for 40 seconds. Afterward, half were told they would have to hear the noise again, whereas the rest were told the study was over. Everyone was then asked to rate how irritated they were by the noise. Students who expected to hear it again consistently found it more irritating. Other tests involving stimuli that bored and annoyed subjects all yielded the same results. Jeff Galak, a Carnegie Mellon behavioral scientist who worked on the study, suggests that we remember hardships as worse than they actually were so that when we face those experiences again, they will be less painful than we expect. Galak thinks that by understanding this “bracing” strategy individuals can learn to overcome it and stop fearing exaggerated pain. He acknowledges that doing so may backfire, however—it is possible that by bracing for the worst, we actually suffer less.

Précis summary:

“The Persistent Influence of MisInformation”

After people realize the facts have been fudged, they do their best to set the record straight: judges tell juries to forget misleading testimony; newspapers publish errata. But even explicit warnings to ignore misinformation cannot erase the damage done, according to a new study from the University of Western Australia.

Psychologists asked college students to read an account of an accident involving a busload of elderly passengers. The students were then told that, actually, those on the bus were not elderly. For some students, the information ended there. Others were told the bus had in fact been transporting a college hockey team. And still others were warned about what psychologists call the continued influence of misinformation—that people tend to have a hard time ignoring what they first heard, even if they know it is wrong—and that they should be extra vigilant about getting the story straight. Students who had been warned about misinformation or given the alternative story were less likely than control subjects to make inferences using the old information later—but they still erred sometimes, agreeing with statements such as “the passengers found it difficult to exit the bus because they were frail.”

This result shows that “even if you understand, remember and believe the retractions, this misinformation will still affect your inferences,” says Western Australia psychologist Ullrich Ecker, an author of the study. Our memory is constantly connecting new facts to old and tying different aspects of a situation together, so that we may still unconsciously draw on facts we know to be wrong to make decisions later. “Memory has evolved to be both stable and flexible,” Ecker says, “but that also has a downside.”

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“Could You Use An Extra Hand?”

The brain usually has a pretty good idea of what is part of the body and what is not—although the classic rubber hand illusion can convince people to adopt a fake hand as their own when one of their real hands is hidden from view. Researchers at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm have added a strange new twist to this experiment, persuading volunteers to believe that they have three hands rather than two.

The psychologists accomplished this sensory legerdemain by placing a false rubber right hand next to the subject’s real right hand and covering both with a cloth from the wrist up (to obscure which one was connected to the body). With the left hand also in view, an experimenter stroked each right hand in parallel with a small brush—a technique that tricks the brain into “feeling” the touch on the fake hand. The experimenter then swiftly picked up a kitchen knife and swiped it toward one of the right hands.

Participants reacted with a flash of fear regardless of whether the knife was plunging toward the real or rubber right hand, indicating that the brain had started to think of the false hand as part of the body, too. The findings suggest that the nervous system—and a lifetime of experience—may not in fact hardwire our somatosensory cortex to expect and accommodate just two arms. The brain might be far more flexible in what it can perceive as part of the body. This discovery could one day help create operational prosthetics for paralyzed stroke patients or people who could just use an extra hand on the job.

The mind is not entirely dupable, though. Exchange the false right hand for a left hand—or a prosthetic foot—and the brain does not buy it. No amount of brushstroking or knife waving could trick subjects into sweating that a chest-level foot was about to lose a toe.

Précis summary:

“Why The Ball Looks Bigger When You’re On Your Game”

Successful batters often report that the baseball looked “huge” just before they hit a home run. This effect, dubbed action-specific perception, has been noted for years in all kinds of physical activities. Yet questions remain about why the illusion happens. Some experts say it is a consequence of imagining the action before you make a move. Others suspect that knowing you nailed it might conjure a larger target in your memory. But a new study suggests neither process alone is enough. Something else is needed: visual attention.

Researchers from Amsterdam and Hong Kong asked three groups of students to putt golf balls at a target about five feet away. After first checking out the target, one group had to putt the ball under a curtain obscuring the view. Another group putted between two corks en route to the target. The third group simply putted at the target without distraction. In all three cases, individuals got feedback about where their balls ended up. They then estimated the target’s size by drawing it on a computer screen.

As expected, successful individuals in the straightforward putting experiment described a bigger target. Not so for the putters who could not see the target or give it their full attention.

The results challenge the theory that action-specific perception arises from imagining your motions before performing them, explains co-author John van der Kamp of the Free University Amsterdam, because such visualization was possible for all the participants. Similarly, simply knowing the putt hit the pin was not enough. Visual attention to the target, therefore, is key. But scientists still do not know whether seeing a bigger target contributes to—or results from—success. One thing is clear: what we see is often not an accurate reflection of the world around us. Our senses are influenced by our attention and experiences.

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“Tips for Speed Learning”

Need to learn a lot of material fast and perform well when it counts? Two new studies suggest easy ways to speed up learning and ease anxiety before a test.

A simple recall drill may be the best way to solidify new information in your memory, according to a study published online January 20 in Science. Many teachers encourage students to use elaborate conceptual methods to learn complicated material, but psychologists at Purdue University found that practice at retrieving facts works better. College students who read short science texts and then spent 20 minutes recalling as much as possible by writing down what they had read performed about 50 percent better on tests the next week than did students who drew complex maps depicting relations between concepts. The authors say that the act of reconstructing knowledge enhances learning and strengthens memories. Put simply, practice makes perfect.

But sometimes all that studying is for naught when a test or a big performance rolls around and you choke. It turns out that focusing on your worries by writing about them before a test can boost your scores, according to a different paper published in January in Science. Psychologists at the University of Chicago found that college students who first wrote about their thoughts and feelings about an upcoming math exam for 10 minutes solved more arithmetic problems than did students who sat quietly. And the writing task improved the scores of highly anxious ninth graders so much that they performed as well as students with low anxiety on a biology final exam. The authors say that the technique may be most useful for habitual worriers in high-pressure situations.

Précis summary:

“Physical Distance May Improve Negotiating Climate”

Buying a house or car? Perhaps you should try making the deal via e-mail. A January study in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology suggests negotiations are smoother when the parties are separated by distance. When undergraduates who negotiated the purchase of a motorcycle over Instant Messenger believed they were physically far apart (more than 15 miles), negotiations were easier and showed more compromise than when participants believed they were closer (a few feet). The experimenters explain that when people are farther apart, they consider the factors in a more abstract way, focusing on the main issues rather than getting hung up on less important points. So next time you have to work out a complex deal, the researchers say, it may be worthwhile to begin from a distance, such as when you are traveling.

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“Pain Lessens Remorse”

We tend to regard pain as an unfortunate by-product of physical harm. Sensations of crushing, burning and piercing are the language of alert, used by our bodies to communicate tissue damage, whether imminent or real. But what about the pain we inflict on ourselves? What about the moment of anguish when we tear at our hair or thrust our fists into the wall? New research suggests that we seek out physical pain to provide an emotional catharsis for feelings of guilt or shame. More important, it suggests that such actions may work.

“Pain may actually be functional in many ways,” explains Brock Bastian, a psychologist at the University of Queensland in Australia. Psychologists working with self-mutilating patients have long suspected this to be true, and leaders in the field describe an intense overlap between emotional and physical pain. But Bastian has demonstrated the first results in a nonpatient population. He asked participants to focus on an episode in their past that made them feel guilty while submerging one hand in a bucket of either freezing or tepid water. Those who had their hands in icy water kept them there for longer and felt less guilt over time. In Bastian’s opinion, guilt motivated them to prolong their exposure to physical pain as a prescription for the psychological pain.

Consider our rituals of apology and religious atonement, and his theory begins to make sense. If you’re looking for a way to wash away your own sins, it may help to turn your shower knob as far as it can go to the right or left. Yes, it will hurt, but that’s the point

Précis summary:

“The Prejudice Hormone”

Oxytocin is known as the “love hormone” because it encourages trust, cooperation and social bonding. But these effects may exist only for members of your own clan, according to a study published in January in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA. Psychologists at the University of Amsterdam found that Dutch men who inhaled oxytocin were more likely to associate positive words, such as joy and laughter, and complex positive emotions, such as hope and admiration, with Dutch people than with Germans or Arabs.

Next, subjects had to choose whether to stop a trolley from running into five people by hitting a switch that would divert it to another track, where it would kill only one person—a commonly studied moral dilemma. Under the influence of oxytocin, Dutch men were less likely to sacrifice a Dutch male than a German or Arab. Because the drug enhances bias against people belonging to other groups, it may contribute to bigotry just as much as harmony.

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“With The Changing Of The Seasons...”

Winter blues, spring fever—most of us take seasonal changes in mood for granted. According to a new study, the cause might be the seasons tinkering with the chemicals in our brain. As reported in the November 3 Journal of Neuroscience, researchers at the National Institute of Mental Health found evidence of seasonal differences in dopamine—a chemical messenger involved in motivation, pleasure, movement and learning.

Using brain scans, psychiatrist Daniel Eisenberg and his colleagues measured dopamine levels in the brains of 86 healthy people at different times of the year. People scanned in the fall and winter had an average dopamine signal 4.3 percent greater than those scanned in the spring and summer in an area that receives messages from dopamine-carrying neurons. Eisenberg says future work will have to test whether dopamine levels in individuals fluctuate with the seasons the same way or if this result reflects some other difference unrelated to season between the groups, which were similar in age, sex and ethnicity. If the pattern holds, it means environmental cues that change seasonally, such as the amount of sunlight we see, may actually mold our brain state.

Eisenberg says this type of dopamine fluctuation could contribute to the winter sluggishness and summertime pep experienced by many healthy people. It may also provide clues to the winter onset of seasonal affective disorder, as well as seasonal symptom changes noted in psychiatric illnesses such as schizophrenia.

Précis summary:

“What Are You Looking At?”

Liberals might be more likely than conservatives to check out what you are looking at, according to a study published online November 4 in Attention, Perception, and Psychophysics. Experiments show that people take longer to notice when an object appears if they have first seen a face looking in the other direction. Now a team of psychologists and political scientists at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln report that whereas liberals do just that, conservatives do not. The researchers asked 72 undergraduates to look at a drawing of a face that looked to the left or right of a computer screen and then press a key when a black dot appeared. Despite being told the face would not predict the dot’s location, liberals took 10 to 20 milliseconds longer—about 5 percent—to notice the dot when the face looked away from it instead of toward it, indicating that they had followed the face’s gaze. Conservatives did not—they took the same amount of time regardless of where the face looked.

Study co-author Kevin Smith says one possible explanation is that “liberals are more sensitive to social cues,” such as where someone looks, whereas conservatives value individual independence. Whatever the explanation, the results bolster the idea that political dispositions depend in part on differences in how people use social information.

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“Two Narcissists Are better Than One”

For many years psychologists have explored whether narcissism and creativity are linked, and some studies have suggested that the self-obsessed may, in fact, be more creative than the rest of us. But new research from Cornell University argues otherwise.

Two hundred and forty-four undergraduates completed a test that measures narcissism (with questions such as, “I enjoy being the center of attention”). Participants then paired up and “pitched” movie ideas to one another, with one playing the role of pitcher and the other evaluator. Narcissistic participants’ pitches were consistently rated as especially creative by evaluators, but when independent evaluators—unaware of which participants were self-obsessed—reviewed transcripts of the pitches, the narcissists’ pitches were not rated as more creative. This result suggests that charisma influences how egotists’ ideas are received, but the ideas themselves are no more creative than average.

Researchers then paired 292 undergrads (all of whom completed the narcissism test) into 73 four-person groups. The groups were given the task of proposing creative ways for a company to improve its performance. The experimenters found that having two narcissists in a group produced more creative results than a group with none, because their competitiveness sparked more brainstorming. But when more than two narcissists were in a group, the opposite happened—hyper-competitiveness scuttled the group’s productivity

Précis summary:

“How Uncertainty breeds Extremism”

Feeling uncertain about who you are and what you want to do with your life? Such doubt may lead you to sympathize with a radical or extremist group, according to a new study in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. Groups that rally around radical beliefs may provide a searching person with the sense of self and social identity they are lacking.

Michael Hogg, a psychologist at Claremont Graduate University, and his colleagues increased feelings of doubt in a group of college students by asking them to write down several things about which they felt uncertain. The researchers then asked them whether they supported some very strong (some might say radical) responses to tuition increases, such as blockading the campus, rallies and vigorous protests. The experimenters found that these uncertain students stopped preferring the usual moderate courses, such as holding meetings, printing leaflets and sending letters to newspapers, and they shifted toward favoring the more radical actions.

The results hint that organizations espousing extreme views may be especially attractive to people with questions about their purpose. “Some groups provide a more clearly defined sense of self,” Hogg explains. “These are the groups that seem from the outside to be a bit cliquish, a bit closed. At the extreme, you get groups that look like religious terrorist groups.” Helping people navigate through times of social change, therefore, by providing them with a strong sense of self and belonging, may help lower the risk that they will end up in extremist organizations

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“Marijuana and Maleness”

The sex hormones that bathe a fetus in the womb are some of the earliest and most potent determinates of gender differences in brain structure and social behavior. But other chemicals produced by the human body more subtly tweak the neural pathways underlying these distinctions. Endocannabinoids, natural compounds in the brain that excite the same receptors as marijuana, influence gender-specific behaviors, according to a study published in November in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA.

Desiree Krebs-Kraft of the University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore, counted the number of actively dividing glia (nonneuron brain cells) in the medial amygdala (MeA) of four-day-old rats. The MeA controls gender-specific differences in youthful play and regulates mating, parenting, aggression and territoriality in adults.

Krebs-Kraft found that females had more dividing MeA glia than males did. But when the researchers gave newborn rats a drug that mimics the effect of endocannabinoids on brain cells, the rate of cell division in females slowed to the same pace observed in male brains. The drug also changed behavior. Juvenile male rats usually engage in more social play than females, but female rats that received the drug frolicked just as much as the males.

Marijuana affects the mind because substances in the plant called cannabinoids imitate the naturally occurring endocannabinoids found in the brain. “Our results show that endocannabinoids are part of a natural signaling system that underlies the establishment of sex differences in the brain that are an important part of social behavior,” explains Margaret McCarthy, one of the study’s co-authors. “This would suggest that the use of cannabis during pregnancy could alter those systems and have unintended consequences,” she says, though cautioning that much more research is needed to say for sure. Studies have shown that the cannabinoids in marijuana can in fact breach the placenta, so an indulgent mother is smoking for two.

Curiously, the cannabinoid treatment had no effect on cell division or play behavior in males. The researchers found that male rats have inherently higher levels of endocannabinoids in their brains than females, so trying to give the males a little boost did not cause any measurable changes.

Précis summary:

“Accent Trumps Appearance”

Accent matters more than looks when it comes to identifying a person’s ethnicity, according to a study published in the November Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. Researchers at Friedrich Schiller University of Jena in Germany asked students to identify Italian- and German-looking men who spoke German with or without an Italian accent. The students were more likely to confuse two people who spoke with the same accent than two who looked liked they belonged to the same ethnic group, meaning accent was more of a distinguishing feature than appearance. The authors say their results emphasize the importance of language in how we judge those whom we meet.

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“A New Mom’s Changing Brain”

A new mother’s body goes through many changes—among them, key parts of her brain get bigger, according to research reported in October’s Behavioral Neuroscience. And the more these areas grow, the greater the mother-infant bond seems to be.

Structural changes in animal brains, says National Institutes of Health neuroscientist Pilyoung Kim, are critical to getting mothers to take care of their offspring. Similar changes in human mothers, she observes, might be necessary for attentive parenting and ultimately forming long-term emotional bonds, and now there is evidence suggesting that possibility. Using MRI, Kim and her colleagues at Yale University and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor produced detailed maps of the brains of 19 new mothers a few weeks after they gave birth. At around the same time, the researchers asked mothers to select words from a list of positive descriptors such as “beautiful,” “perfect” and “special” to describe how they felt about their babies and about their experience of parenting.

When the scientists mapped the mothers’ brains again about three months later, some areas had grown, including the hypothalamus, amygdala and substantia nigra—regions that animal studies suggest are involved with caring for, learning about and forming positive feelings toward newborns. The planning and decision-making part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, also grew. In addition, mothers who initially chose more of the positive words to describe their feelings about their babies showed more brain growth. The investigators do not yet know what causes what—if brain growth leads to more positive feelings, or vice versa—but the results indicate for the first time a connection between mothers’ subjective feelings and physical changes in the brain. Kim says they are planning more studies to investigate the phenomenon, including one that will look for similar changes in fathers.

Précis summary:

“Social Anxiety More Likely Than Depression To Keep People Unemployed”

Job interviews are stressful for most, but the process can be unbearable for people with social anxiety. As a result, social anxiety sufferers often wind up unemployed or in jobs below their training level. Ethan Moitra, a clinical psychologist at Brown University, decided to quantify this problem by comparing unemployment rates across similar disorders. His results were surprising: individuals with social anxiety were more than twice as likely to be unemployed as those with depression and generalized anxiety, which had minimal effects on employment. Psychotherapy can help reduce social anxiety, Moitra says, but early detection is key.

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“Different Forms Of Disgust Create Different Physiological Signatures”

Where do our emotions come from? Scientists addressing this long-standing philosophical question recently got some answers by using—bear with us—videos of people licking vomit off their fingers and other revolting scenarios.

Human emotions are associated with measurable changes in heart rate, gut motility and sweat gland secretions, but some experts have argued that these bodily responses are simply a general stress reaction and therefore cannot account for different types of emotions. A Journal of Neuroscience study from September 22 suggests otherwise, presenting evidence of distinct physiological signatures of two forms of disgust.

Neuroscientist Neil Harrison and his colleagues at the University of Sussex in England monitored heart rate, stomach contractions and brain activity as study participants viewed videos designed to elicit two kinds of disgust. The vomit video and other gross-out films elicited what is known as core disgust; videos of surgical operations—such as an above-knee amputation—induced body-boundary violation (BBV) disgust. Although both types of videos were judged as equally revolting, core disgust evoked strong increases in stomach contraction, whereas BBV elicited increases in heart rate. If these bodily changes form the basis of our emotional experiences, the researchers predicted that disgust-specific brain activity should reflect similar patterns. They found this very type of activity in the insula, an area deep in the brain where information about the body intersects with that about emotions.

The findings support the idea that these bodily responses are more than generalized arousal: they can form the outlines of specific emotions. Our own cognitive interpretations of the scene may then add to these physical responses to create a full-fledged emotion. “These bodily responses are not going to be the whole story of where our emotions come from, but they provide a kind of skeleton,” Harrison says

Précis summary:

“Preteens and the Glowing Screen”

Kids who spend their time glued to a glowing screen may be faring poorly psychologically, suggests new research from the University of Bristol in England. Psychologists tracked the amount of free time children aged 10 and 11 spent in front of the computer or television, their psychological states and their physical activity. The more screen time kids had, the more likely they were to report feelings of loneliness, sadness or negativity, regardless of their level of physical activity. The researchers cannot say whether computer or TV time contributes to the kids’ distress or whether children with preexisting mental health problems are drawn to video games and sitcoms. But either way, excessive use may be a warning sign of deeper psychological issues.

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“The Contagious Yawn”

There’s nothing worse, when you’re trying to stay awake at work during the postlunch lull, than looking over and seeing a colleague yawn. To most of us, yawning seems all too contagious, but a new study in the journal *Child Development* suggests that the ability to “catch” a yawn actually requires some sophisticated social skills.

Psychologists at the University of Connecticut studied more than 120 children, who ranged in age from one to six. While reading each child a story, a researcher would stop several times to yawn conspicuously. Fewer than 10 percent of the children younger than four yawned in response. Among the older kids, that percentage jumped significantly, with 35 to 40 percent of kids displaying contagious yawning.

“We know that the social brain develops over the first few years of life,” says Molly Helt, the study’s lead author and a doctoral student in psychology. Although youngsters are certainly sensitive to others’ expressions, she says, their brains may not yet be capable of unconsciously mirroring those emotions. “At some point we sort of start to take on the emotions of other people without even thinking about it,” Helt says.

In the second part of the study the researchers put kids with autism through the same scenario. They discovered that children with disorders on the autism spectrum were significantly less likely to catch yawns—among five- to 12-year-olds, 11 percent yawned, compared with 43 percent of typically developing children.

Although kids with autism may have no problem identifying that someone else is yawning, Helt says, their brains seem less likely to respond by unconsciously mimicking the expression back. “They’re not developing that automatic emotional linkage with those around them,” Helt says. “If we learn more about how the social brain wires up in the early years, maybe we can take that and apply it to kids with autism as an early intervention.”

Précis summary:

“Beware ‘Imbibing Idiot Bias’”

We all know alcohol impairs a person’s reasoning abilities. But in a study presented at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management in August, researchers reported that booze also diminishes how smart others perceive us to be. In a series of six experiments, the investigators consistently found that participants rated people in pictures, videos and face-to-face encounters as less intelligent when they held or drank alcoholic beverages than when they drank nonalcoholic beverages or nothing at all. The “imbibing idiot bias,” as the researchers call it, persisted even when participants drank fake alcoholic beverages that did not interfere with their cognitive functioning. Most strikingly, in mock interviews volunteers judged job candidates as less intelligent when they ordered an alcoholic drink—even when the person interviewing them had done so first.

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“Why Smear Campaigns Work”

We are often surrounded by bogus claims about other people—especially in the context of political elections. But why do we sometimes believe blatant misinformation? A new study from the University of Arizona suggests that our gullibility can be triggered by subtle reminders of how we are different from the person in question.

During the months before and after the 2008 presidential election, psychologists asked predominantly white, non-Muslim students to evaluate smears about both candidates. They found that cues about social differences, such as age or race, were enough to get many participants to buy into false allegations against a candidate. Students who were undecided about which candidate to support, for example, when asked to report their own race on a questionnaire, increased their belief that Obama was Muslim from 38 to 58 percent. Similarly, reminding students about their own age helped to make them believe that McCain was senile. Overall, thinking about differences in social categories increased students’ acceptance of smear-campaign misinformation by 24 percent.

Scientists have long known that we tend to have a preference for people of our own social category, “an us-versus-them sort of mentality.” But he adds that he was surprised by the magnitude of this effect in his experiments. He plans to use upcoming elections to look at ways to counter the effect, for example, by reminding people of similarities they have with a candidate. To wit, “I am an American; he is an American. Would that reminder attenuate people’s willingness to believe that [Obama] is Muslim?”

Précis summary:

“Split Motivation: Half Your Brain Can Be Subliminally Motivated”

Ever find yourself doing something without knowing exactly why? You might swat at a fly before you consciously realize it is there, or you might catch yourself scratching a bug bite you were trying to forget about. A new study published in *Psychological Science* could help explain why: half of the brain can be subliminally motivated while the other half is left in the dark.

Researchers first measured how hard 33 subjects could squeeze a grip with each hand. Then they presented the subjects with images on a computer screen of either a one-euro coin or a one-cent coin. The coins were visible to only one eye at a time, and they appeared for only 17 milliseconds—long enough for subliminal, but not conscious, processing. After each coin image flashed, the subjects squeezed the grip with whatever hand they were holding it in—they were told they would win a fraction of the coin’s value depending on the amount of effort they exerted. Each subject got to try all four possible combinations of eyes and hands: right eye with right or left hand and left eye with right or left hand.

Although the subjects could not correctly guess which coin they had seen—confirming that they were not conscious of what they saw—they squeezed harder when presented with the larger coin if the hand grip was on the same side of the body as the eye that had seen it. Their squeezes did not change depending on what the opposite eye saw, indicating that only half the brain was being motivated at a time. Motivation, therefore, is sometimes not only subconscious, but it can also be “subpersonal,” in that “one part of a person can be motivated while the other is not.” So next time you are surprised to find yourself midaction, consider blaming it on the independent halves of your brain.

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“The Mad Artists Brain: The Connection Between Creativity and Mental Illness”

The popular perception of creative thinkers and artists is that they often also have mental disorders—the likes of Vincent van Gogh or Sylvia Plath suggest that creativity and madness go hand in hand. Past research has tentatively confirmed a correlation; scientific surveys have found that highly creative people are more likely to have mental illness in their family, indicating a genetic link. Now a study from Sweden is the first to suggest a biological mechanism: highly creative healthy people and people with schizophrenia have certain brain chemistry features in common.

A research team at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm studied 13 mentally healthy, highly creative men and women. As noted in the paper published in May in PLoS ONE, other scientists had previously found that divergent thinking, or the ability to “think outside the box,” involves the brain’s dopamine communication system. The Swedish research team used PET scanning to determine the abundance of a particular dopamine receptor, or sensor, in the creative individuals’ thalamus and striatum, areas that process and sort information before it reaches conscious thought—and that are known to be involved in schizophrenia. The team found that people who had lower levels of dopamine receptor activity in the thalamus also had higher scores on tests of divergent thinking—for instance, finding many solutions to a problem.

Previous work has shown that people with schizophrenia also have lower dopamine receptor activity in the thalamus—and the scientists suggest in their paper that this striking similarity demonstrates a “crucial” link between creativity and psychopathology. “Thinking outside the box might be facilitated by having a somewhat less intact box,” writes lead author Fredrik Ullén, a cognitive scientist at Karolinska.

Précis summary:

“Babies On The Edge”

Mountain goats are born understanding where they should and shouldn’t climb, but baby humans need practice pattering around before they can make sound judgments. Now New York University developmental psychologist Karen Adolph has found that for each new phase of motor development, infants have to relearn how to keep themselves safe.

Adolph tested how infants judge risk by setting 12- and 18-month-old infants at the top of an adjustable wooden “cliff” and having their mothers beckon them over the edge. (Lab staff guarded the babies closely and caught any who actually tumbled off.) Babies who had been crawling for months generally did not go over drop-offs that were too big for them, nor did babies who had been walking for a while. But many babies who had just started walking marched straight over drop-offs beyond their capabilities—even the highest, most obvious three-foot plunge.

What that means, Adolph explains, is that crawling infants do not learn to be afraid of heights. Instead they learn what their crawling bodies can do, and when their style of locomotion changes, they need practice to recalibrate how they perceive their abilities. Adults adjust to changing motor limitations every day: they may shift their body weight to ease up on a sore leg or take smaller, more deliberate steps when there is ice on the ground. Adolph says we learn that adaptability as infants by experimenting with physical limits and making mistakes.

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“Brain Overgrowth Correlates With Severity of Autism Symptoms”

The average age at which children are diagnosed with autism is between three and four, but scientists have long suspected that the disorder starts much earlier. A key piece of evidence is a phenomenon known as brain overgrowth. Autistic toddlers tend to have large brains for their age, and researchers have shown a correlation between the degree of excess growth and the severity of autism symptoms. Eric Courchesne, director of the Autism Center of Excellence at the University of California, San Diego, helped to pioneer the overgrowth hypothesis. Now he and his colleague Cynthia Schumann have published data that suggest the excess brain growth starts in the first year of life, if not sooner.

The study, published in a recent issue of the Journal of Neuroscience, is the first to evaluate brain growth and autism throughout early development. Using cross-sectional MRI scans, the U.C.S.D. researchers found overgrowth in autistic subjects as young as one and a half. At two and a half, the autistic subjects’ brains were 7 percent larger on average than the control group’s. Although why, exactly, excessive brain growth is related to autism remains a mystery, the new work helps to confirm that signs of the disorder appear early—knowledge that could lead to detection and treatments, such as behavior therapy, at a younger age. “The earlier the intervention, the better the outcome,” Courchesne says.

Précis summary:

“Color TV: Nonverbal Behavior toward Characters of Different Races Affect Viewers’ Prejudices”

Watching how black characters are treated on television can affect attitudes about race both consciously and unconsciously, new findings suggest. In a two-part study, researchers at Tufts University examined nonverbal behavior toward characters of different races on television shows, then tested how clips from these shows affected viewers’ prejudices.

First, the team found clips of mixed-race scenes from 11 popular TV shows with prominent black and white characters. In each clip, they blocked out one character to hide his or her race, turned off the sound, then asked volunteers whether the blocked-out character was seen by the other characters in a positive or negative light. The researchers found that in nine of the 11 shows—Friday Night Lights, CSI, House, CSI: Miami, Scrubs, Greek, Heroes, Reno 911! and Grey’s Anatomy—viewers thought the actors’ body language and facial expressions were less favorable when they were responding to someone who was black. The only two shows without this bias were Bones and Rob and Big.

Then the researchers showed clips from all the shows, with the images restored to normal, to a new group of viewers who had no idea the study was about race. After watching clips in which black characters were treated less favorably than whites, the viewers’ conscious attitudes about race did not change. But they were faster to associate white people with positive words such as “laughter” and black people with negative words such as “failure”—a sign that this implicit bias had found its way from the TV screen into people’s behavior, the researchers say. After watching clips in which black characters were treated better than whites, however, viewers not only displayed less implicit bias toward blacks, they also showed improved conscious attitudes toward blacks as measured by a questionnaire.

Because these TV shows’ bias in either direction is unintentional, suggests Tufts psychologist Nalini Ambady, one of the researchers working on the study, simply being aware of it might help actors and directors to counteract it or use it to a positive end.

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“the Clock Is Off – Bipolar Disorder and Circadian Rhythm”

An off-kilter body clock can throw off our sleep-wake cycle, eating habits, body temperature and hormones—and mounting evidence suggests a malfunctioning clock may also underlie the mood cycles in bipolar disorder.

In a new study led by psychiatrist Alexander Niculescu of Indiana University, researchers found that children with bipolar disorder were likely to have a mutated RORB gene, which codes for a protein crucial to circadian clock function. The team’s previous work identified alterations to this gene and other clock genes in animal models of the disorder. In the new study, the scientists compared the genomes of 152 bipolar kids with those of 140 typical kids. (Children were studied because their moods cycle more rapidly than the moods of bipolar adults, and a quicker cycle suggests a stronger connection to the circadian clock.) The team found that the bipolar children were more likely to have one of four alterations to RORB, and the investigators suspect the mutations prevent the body from producing the correct amount of the protein to support normal clock function.

Previous studies had shown that strictly regulating a bipolar patient’s sleep schedule could improve extreme mood cycles, but experts weren’t sure why—until animal studies started showing a connection to circadian clock genes.

“Every time we investigate some [abnormality] of molecular machinery linked to the clock genes, we find an association with bipolar disorder,” says Francesco Benedetti, a neuroscientist at the San Raffaele Scientific Institute in Milan, Italy, who was not involved in the Indiana research. The ultimate goal, he adds, is to pinpoint the precise mechanism that links clock function with mood swings, in the hope of designing new drugs and treatments that will restore the clock to working order.

Précis summary:

“Men Value Sex, Women Value Love?”

Jealousy can be devastating to a relationship—and it is well known that the genders experience the green-eyed monster in different ways. Men are more likely to be jealous of sexual peccadilloes and women of emotional infidelity, according to past research. The oft-quoted evolutionary explanation is that men care more about sex because an unfaithful partner could mean raising someone else’s kids, whereas women are protective of emotional attachments because the biggest danger for them is being left alone with the burden of single parenthood. But a new study from Pennsylvania State University suggests it may be time to rethink why the genders respond differently to each indiscretion.

In a study of more than 400 people, clinical psychologists Kenneth Levy and Kristen Kelly found that individual personality differences—which stem from a person’s childhood experiences—explain the genders’ jealousy patterns. The pair asked subjects what would be more upsetting: their partner having sex with someone else or forming a strong emotional bond with another person. Both men and women with a kind of insecure attachment called dismissing—typical of people who had inconsistent or insensitive parents and learned to shun intimacy and become “hyperindependent”—were the most likely to report being jealous of sexual infidelity. More men than women have a dismissing attachment style. The reason for this gender difference is unclear but may relate, in part, to cultural notions of what constitutes “manly” behavior. Levy says this understanding of personality formation, known as the attachment model, seems to explain both the average differences between men and women in what makes them most jealous, as well as the previously unexplained fact that a subset of individuals better fits the jealousy profile of the opposite sex.

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“Accents Trump Skin Color”

Children, like adults, use three visible cues—race, gender and age—to arrange their social world. They prefer to make friends with kids similar to them on these traits. New research shows that verbal accents may be equally important in guiding youngsters’ social decisions—in fact, accents may be even more important than race.

Working at Harvard University, developmental psychologist Katherine D. Kinzler and her colleagues first showed American five-year-olds photographs of different children paired with audio clips of voices and asked which ones they preferred as a friend: a child who spoke English, one who spoke French, or one who spoke English with a French accent. Even though the subjects understood the French-accented English, they were almost four times more likely to choose the native English speaker as a friend.

Going one step further, Kinzler and her team showed that an accent is more meaningful than race in signifying whether someone belongs in your social group. Replicating previous research, they found that under silent conditions children chose as potential friends children of the same race. Yet when the potential friends spoke, white children preferred a black child speaking with a native accent over a white child who spoke English with a foreign accent.

Why was accent more important than race? “Race, as a psychological category, may be relatively modern in terms of human evolution,” explains Kinzler, now at the University of Chicago. In prehistoric times, “a neighboring group might have sounded different even if they did not look different,” she says. Preference for our own race might have developed later, after the more ancient preference for our own accent. The next step is to see whether living in bilingual or multilingual countries might change this early inclination.

Précis summary:

“Jump Neural DNA Key to Brain Plasticity”

In high school biology you probably learned that every one of our body’s cells contains the same genome, or pattern of DNA—but it turns out that this is not true of the brain. Researchers at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies recently found that the DNA sequence in human neurons can vary not only from that of the rest of the body but even from one brain cell to the next.

The reason is “jumping genes,” DNA elements that can copy and reinsert themselves in different places within the genome. These mutations increase the total amount of DNA in each neuron. Geneticist Fred H. Gage and his team at Salk looked at a type of mobile element called LINE-1. Although LINE-1s are present in all cells of the body, they appeared to be active only in developing brain cells, the researchers found.

The jumping genes generate neuronal diversity, which might help the brain adapt, Gage speculates. “Many of the things that we are going to be presented with throughout our lives are unanticipated,” he says. The higher the neuronal variety in the brain, the higher the chances that it contains some cells that are capable of rising to these cognitive challenges.

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“The Neural Advantage of Speaking Two Languages”

The ability to speak a second language isn't the only thing that distinguishes bilingual people from their monolingual counterparts—their brains work differently, too. Research has shown, for instance, that children who know two languages more easily solve problems that involve misleading cues. A new study published in Psychological Science reveals that knowledge of a second language—even one learned in adolescence—affects how people read in their native tongue. The findings suggest that after learning a second language, people never look at words the same way again.

Researchers recruited 45 native Dutch-speaking students from their university who had learned English at age 14 or 15. The researchers asked the participants to read a collection of Dutch sentences, some of which included cognates—words that look similar and have equivalent meanings in both languages (such as “sport,” which means the same thing in both Dutch and English). They also read other sentences containing only noncognate words in Dutch. They recorded the participants' eye movements as they read. They found that the subjects spent, on average, eight fewer milliseconds gazing at cognate words than control words, which suggests that their brains processed the dual-language words more quickly than words found only in their native language.

“The most important implication of the study is that even when a person is reading in his or her native language, there is an influence of knowledge of the nondominant second language.” “Becoming a bilingual changes one of people's most automatic skills.” She plans to investigate next whether people who are bilingual also process auditory language information differently. “Many questions remain,” she says.

Précis summary:

“More Than just A Bad Dream”

You awake with a pounding heart and clammy hands. Relax, you think to yourself—it was just a bad dream. But are nightmares truly benign? Psychologists aren't so sure. Although some continue to believe nightmares reduce psychological tensions by letting the brain act out its fears, recent research suggests that nocturnal torments are more likely to increase anxiety in waking life.

Researchers asked 624 high school students about their lives and nightmares during the past year and assessed their stress levels. It is well known that stressful experiences cause nightmares, but if nightmares serve to diffuse that tension, troubled sleepers should have an easier time coping with emotional ordeals. The study did not bear out that hypothesis: not only did nightmares not stave off anxiety, but people who reported being distressed about their dreams were even more likely to suffer from general anxiety than those who experienced an upsetting event such as the divorce of their parents. It is possible, however, that some-thing is going wrong in the brains of individuals who experience a lot of anxiety, so that normal emotional processing during dreaming fails.

Another study actually bolsters the Australian findings. To tease out how REM sleep—during which most dreaming takes place—affects our emotions, researchers showed disturbing images (such as gory scenes or a woman being forced into a van at knifepoint) to a group of healthy volunteers just before they went to bed. When the subjects viewed the same pictures in the morning, those who had been deprived of dream-filled REM sleep were less emotionally affected than those deprived of other sleep phases. The same was true for those who experienced fewer negative emotions in their dreams. In other words, having nightmares did not make dreamers more resilient in waking life—just the opposite.

What is not clear from these studies is whether nightmares play a causal role in anxiety or are merely an expression of an underlying problem. Most researchers agree that having an occasional nightmare is normal and not problematic. But if the dreams give rise to persistent anxiety and concern, something more serious could be going on.

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“Gambling”

Close but no cigar, the saying goes. But new research shows that when it comes to gambling, the human brain seems to take a very different approach. In our head, near misses, such as a lottery ticket just one number away from the jackpot, are interpreted as wins.

Using functional MRI, Luke Clark of the University of Cambridge and his colleagues looked at the brains of 15 volunteers who were playing a computerized slot machine. Unsurprisingly, wins activated the players’ reward system, whereas complete misses did not. When the wheel stopped just one position from the pay line, however, the reward system of volunteers’ brains got excited the same way it did after a win—there was much activity in the striatum and the insula, areas involved in reinforcing behavior with positive feedback.

This type of reinforcement makes sense in behaviors that involve actual skill, such as target shooting, because a sense of reward provides encouragement to keep practicing, Clark says. “A near miss in a game of chance doesn’t mean that you are getting better,” he notes, yet it seems that the brain mistakenly activates the same type of reinforcement learning system in these situations.

The findings expose the underpinnings of gambling addiction, according to Clark. Even though all volunteers were nongamblers, those whose brain showed a greater response in the scanner also reported feeling more desire to continue trying after near misses. Excessive recruitment of these reward areas, therefore, may be a risk factor for compulsive gambling, Clark says.

Précis summary:

“Helping Stroke Victims By Harnessing Signals From Half The Brain”

One of the first things neuroscience students learn is that the brain’s right hemisphere controls the left side of the body, and vice versa. Brain-computer interfaces, which employ brain signals to control an external device such as a robotic arm or a wheelchair, also utilize these opposing-side signals. Such technology is therefore unable to help victims of stroke and brain trauma, who often have one seriously damaged hemisphere that cannot be enlisted for motor commands.

But scientists now think they may be able to work around that limitation. Emerging research suggests that in addition to controlling the opposite side of the body, a given hemisphere allocates about 10 to 15 percent of its neurons to controlling the same side. A team led by neurosurgeon Eric Leuthardt of the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis has shown for the first time that these same-side signals can be picked up by a brain-computer interface and used to control an external device.

Leuthardt’s group worked with several epileptic patients who had neural sensor grids implanted for the purpose of localizing their seizures, providing a unique opportunity for the researchers to monitor cerebral activity. Three patients learned to use neuronal signals associated with same-side movements to control a cursor on a screen and play a video game. Leuthardt hopes to one day develop a prosthetic that uses these signals to improve motor control of a dysfunctional limb—effectively allowing a stroke patient’s one healthy hemisphere to control both sides of his or her body

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“How Does the Brain Form Sentences?”

Forming a grammatically correct sentence may seem to require advanced cognitive skills, but it turns out that our creative language capacity might rely on a less sophisticated system than is commonly thought. A recent study suggests that our ability to construct sentences may arise from procedural memory—the same simple memory system that lets our dogs learn to sit on command.

Scientists distinguish between procedural memory, which is relevant for learning skills such as how to swim, and declarative memory, which stores knowledge, including facts and memories of events, such as one’s birthday, says Victor S. Ferreira of the University of California, San Diego. To find out which system is at work when we form sentences, Ferreira and his team exploited a phenomenon called syntactic persistence—speakers tend to use the same grammatical pattern they have used or heard in previous sentences.

The researchers tested four healthy individuals and four amnesic patients. The amnesiacs’ procedural memory was intact, meaning that they could learn skills with repetitive practice, but their declarative memory abilities were damaged, leaving them unable to memorize new facts. First, all participants heard and repeated a sentence. Then they saw an unrelated picture and had to describe it. Finally, participants heard another sentence that was either identical to the original sentence or subtly changed in its meaning or grammatical structure, or both.

Both groups tended to use the grammatical rules of the prime sentence when describing the picture; amnesic patients, however, did not remember that they had seen the sentence before. The fact that they still used its syntactic structure is surprising because it suggests that the procedural memory system is responsible for putting grammatical sentences together, Ferreira says. He adds that the findings also shed light on our understanding of procedural memory itself, which was thought to be restricted to specific experiences and motor skills. This study shows it is also able to support abstract knowledge, making it “more powerful than previously thought,” he explains.

Précis summary:

“How Conflicts Escalate”

“You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours,” we say, and “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Conventional wisdom and decades of research point to the universal human tendency to reciprocate, responding to good or bad acts in kind. But if people only give as good as they get, how do conflicts escalate? The answer, according to recent University of Chicago research, is that positive and negative reciprocity are not symmetrical: we retaliate against selfishness more than we reward generosity—even when the slights are only illusory.

Researchers led by psychologist Boaz Keysar asked participants to play a “dictator game,” in which one player acts as a dictator and decides how to split a sum of money with a second player. One group of dictators started with \$100 and gave a portion to the second player; the other group of dictators started with no money but took part of \$100 from their partner. Later, when participants rated the dictators’ generosity, they judged the taking group inordinately more harshly than the giving group. “We found if I give you \$50, you think I’m more generous than if I take just \$30 from you, which is mind-boggling,” Keysar says. Furthermore, takers do not realize how greedy they appear to those on the receiving end.

These skewed judgments led to increasing selfishness with each interaction: when participants switched roles, the new dictators responded to seemingly greedy splits with less generosity themselves, the pattern continuing with each subsequent role reversal.

To stop such downward spirals, the research suggests, it is not enough to give back what you took. “To undo a negative action,” Keysar observes, “you have to go beyond reciprocating in kind.”

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“Autism”

Children with dyslexia have trouble reading and writing, but the root of the problem may actually be in their brain’s sound-processing regions. A new study found that targeting these areas with a workout disguised as a video game improved dyslexic children’s literary skills.

Researchers at Children’s Hospital Boston examined 23 typical 10-year-old readers with fMRI as they listened to rapid sound shifts common in spoken language, which elicited activity from 11 distinct areas in the children’s brains. When 22 dyslexic readers of the same age took the challenge, none of these areas showed any activity at all. “This was a surprise,” says lead researcher Nadine Gaab.

To activate the dysfunctional circuitry, the team had the dyslexic children play video games designed to exercise brain centers associated with rapid sound recognition. The results were dramatic: tests two months later showed that all the dyslexic children reached parity with normal readers in the critical areas of listening comprehension and word recognition. Scores in other areas such as reading comprehension fell short of those of normal readers but still represented a vast improvement.

The improvement was also reflected in brain activity. Follow-up scans showed increasing activity in the 11 areas associated with processing sound. But will the fix stick? “That’s a study that still needs to be done,” Gaab says.

Précis summary:

“Alzheimers”

Research has found that the onset of dementia is delayed in people who have more years of formal education. But a new study shows that this protection may come at a price: once dementia does hit, the well-educated lose their memory faster.

Researchers from Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University studied people with three years to more than 16 years of formal education and found that for every additional year of schooling people had, their memory declined 4 percent more quickly after the onset of dementia. The researchers speculate that individuals with more education can unconsciously compensate as their brain changes with age, preventing the early symptoms of dementia from showing. Consequently, when disease eventually overwhelms the brain and symptoms become severe enough to warrant a diagnosis of dementia, the memory decline that follows is more rapid because the degeneration is at a later stage

Past studies have shown that challenging the brain with activities, such as solving puzzles or reading books, may also delay dementia. But researchers do not yet know if these mental challenges truly protect the brain or if the people who engage in these activities are simply better educated.

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“Discrimination”

Experiencing rejection not only affects how we think and feel — over the long-term it can also influence our physical and mental health. New research suggests that when rejection comes in the form of discrimination, people respond with a pattern of thoughts, behaviors, and physiological responses that may contribute to overall health disparities.

Researchers hypothesized that people would react differently depending on whether they were rejected by members of their in-group or by members of an out-group. Specifically, they predicted that people who experienced perceived discrimination — rejection from someone of another race — would show responses characteristic of approach-orientation, including anger, increased blood flow, greater vigilance, and more risk-taking behavior.

The participants who were rejected by partners of a different race (i.e., White participants rejected by Black partners, Black participants rejected by White partners) showed increased cardiac output, lower vascular resistance, and lower cortisol reactivity than participants rejected by same-race partners. They also showed more anger. The researchers note that these findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that anger, not shame, is the dominant emotional response following experiences of racial bias.

Participants rejected by cross-race partners also showed greater sensitivity to rewards, leading them to engage in riskier behavior on a gambling task when the potential gain was greater. Finally, participants who experienced cross-race rejection also showed increased vigilance for emotionally negative information. While vigilance can help individuals to detect danger and respond to stressors, it can also lead to “false alarms” in which individuals detect bias in ambiguous situations. Mendes and colleagues observe that this kind of bias for emotionally negative information has been linked to anxiety and a host of clinical conditions.

“Together, these findings suggest that while social rejection creates strong negative emotions that are manifested in changes in the brain and body, the race of the person who rejects you alters the responses to social rejection.” Notably, White and Black participants responded similarly when they were rejected by cross-race partners, indicating that being on the receiving end of discrimination is painful regardless of your racial identity.

Précis summary:

“Language”

Humans are unique in their ability to acquire language. But how? A new study published in the *Proceeding of the National Academy of Sciences* shows that we are in fact born with the basic fundamental knowledge of language, thus shedding light on the age-old linguistic "nature vs. nurture" debate.

While languages differ from each other in many ways, certain aspects appear to be shared across languages. These aspects might stem from linguistic principles that are active in all human brains. A natural question then arises: are infants born with knowledge of how the human words might sound like? Are infants biased to consider certain sound sequences as more word-like than others? "The results of this new study suggest that, the sound patterns of human languages are the product of an inborn biological instinct, very much like birdsong," said Prof. Iris Berent of Northeastern University in Boston

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