

The New York Times

December 10, 2012

Social Science Palooza III

By **DAVID BROOKS**

Elections come and go, but social science marches on. Here are some recent research findings that struck my fancy.

Organic foods may make you less generous. In a study published in *Social Psychology and Personality Science*, Kendall J. Eskine had people look at organic foods, comfort foods or a group of control foods. Those who viewed organic foods subsequently volunteered less time to help a needy stranger and they judged moral transgressions more harshly.

Men are dumber around women. Thijs Verwijmeren, Vera Rommeswinkel and Johan C. Karremans gave men cognitive tests after they had interacted with a woman via computer. In the study, published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, the male cognitive performance declined after the interaction, or even after the men merely anticipated an interaction with a woman.

Women inhibit their own performance. In a study published in *Self and Identity*, Shen Zhang, Toni Schmader and William M. Hall gave women a series of math tests. On some tests they signed their real name, on others they signed a fictitious name. The women scored better on the fictitious name tests, when their own reputation was not at risk.

High unemployment rates may not hurt Democratic incumbents as much. In the *American Political Science Review*, John R. Wright looked at 175 midterm gubernatorial elections and four presidential elections between 1994 and 2010. Other things being equal, high unemployment rates benefit the Democratic Party. The effect is highest when Republicans are the incumbents, but even when the incumbent is a Democrat, high unemployment rates still benefit Democratic candidates.

People filter language through their fingers. In a study published in the *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, Kyle Jasmin and Daniel Casasanto asked people to rate real words, fictitious words and neologisms. Words composed of letters on the right side of the QWERTY keyboard were viewed more positively than words composed of letters from the left side.

We communicate, process and feel emotions by mimicking the facial expressions of the people around us. For a study in Basic and Applied Social Psychology, Paula M. Niedenthal, Maria Augustinova and others studied young adults who had used pacifiers as babies, and who thus could not mimic as easily. They found that pacifier use correlated with less emotional intelligence in males, though it did not predict emotional processing skills in girls.

Judges are toughest around election time. Judges in Washington State are elected and re-elected into office. In a study for The Review of Economic Statistics, Carlos Berdejó and Noam Yuchtman found that these judges issue sentences that are 10 percent longer at their end of the political cycle than at the beginning.

New fathers pay less. In a study for the Administrative Science Quarterly, Michael Dahl, Cristian Dezso and David Gaddis Ross studied male Danish C.E.O.'s before and after their wives gave birth to children. They found that male C.E.O.'s generally pay their employees less generously after fathering a child. The effect is stronger after a son is born. Female employees are less affected than male employees. C.E.O.'s also tend to pay themselves more after the birth of a child.

Affluent neighborhoods challenge mental equilibrium. In a study for the Journal of Research on Adolescence, Terese J. Lund and Eric Dearing found that boys reported higher levels of delinquency and girls reported higher levels of anxiety and depression when they lived in affluent neighborhoods compared with middle-class neighborhoods. Boys' delinquency and girls' anxiety-depression levels were lowest when they were from affluent families living in middle-class neighborhoods.

Premarital doubts are significant. In a study in the Journal of Family Psychology, Justin Lavner, Benjamin Karney and Thomas Bradbury found that women who had cold feet before marriage had significantly higher divorce rates four years later. Male premarital doubts did not correlate with more divorce.

Women use red to impress men. In a study for the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, Andrew Elliot, Tobias Greitemeyer and Adam Pazda found that women expecting to converse with an attractive man were more likely to select a red versus green shirt than women expecting to converse with an unattractive man or another woman.

Birth date affects corporate success. In a study for Economics Letters, Qianqian Du, **Huasheng Gao** and Maurice Levi found that C.E.O.'s are disproportionately less likely to be born in June and July.

It's always worth emphasizing that no one study is dispositive. Many, many studies do not replicate. Still, these sorts of studies do remind us that we are influenced by a thousand breezes permeating the unconscious layers of our minds. They remind us of the power of social context. They're also nice conversation starters. If you find this sort of thing interesting, [you really should check out Kevin Lewis's blog](#) at National Affairs. He provides links to hundreds of academic studies a year, from which these selections have been drawn.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: December 11, 2012

An earlier version of this column misstated the findings of a study in the journal Economics Letters about corporate success. The authors found that C.E.O.'s were disproportionately less likely — not disproportionately likely — to have been born in June and July.