
Opening Extract from...

This is Improbable

Synchronised Cows, Speedy Brain Extractors and More WTF Research

Written by Marc Abrahams

Published by Oneworld

THIS IS IMPROBABLE TOO

Synchronized Cows, Speedy Brain Extractors and More WTF Research

Marc Abrahams

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PROLOGUE

BETWEEN THE SECOND AND FOURTH DIGITS

If you plunge or plod through these pages, expect the unexpected. I went to a lot of trouble to find it for you, and then worked to describe it simply and clearly – more clearly, in many cases, than it may have presented itself.

I collect and write about improbable research. Here's what those words mean to me. Improbable: not what you expect. Research: the attempt, intentional or not, to find or understand something that no one has yet managed to find or understand.

I do improbable research about improbable research.

Some of what I find goes into my 'Improbable Research' column in the *Guardian* newspaper. Some of it goes into the magazine I edit, the *Annals of Improbable Research*.

Some of it ends up earning an Ig Nobel Prize. I founded the Ig Noble Prize ceremony in 1991, and every year we (a shadowy group called the Ig Nobel Board of Governors) award ten new Ig Nobel Prizes for achievements that first make people laugh, then make them think.

That's the quality I always look for: that whatever the story is, it – with no twisting or adornment – first makes people laugh, then makes them think.

This book, *This Is Improbable Too*, is the second book in the series that began with *This Is Improbable*. That 'too' is meant to imply two things.

First, that this book is second.

And second, that the stories I write about do not stand alone – the people who did these things also did other things, some of which are fully as unexpected. It's easy to assume that the good story you know about a person is *the* good story about that person. In my experience, poking through studies and books, and chatting and gossiping with thousands of improbable people, if there's one good story about a person, chances are high that other stories exist too, and that some of those stories are even better than the one you knew about.

The stories in this book are all, one way or another, about people, arrayed somewhat by body part.

You might notice that two of those people keep reappearing.

One of those individuals began, in middle age, to count things that annoyed him. I don't mean by that that he keeps a long list of the many things that annoy him. No. This fellow, when he's bored enough, takes note of some particular thing that has repeatedly annoyed him. He then carefully counts how many times that annoying thing occurs during a particular span of time. Then he publishes a report about it, in some scholarly journal.

The other individual began, also in mid-adulthood, to pointedly find a connection between the relative length of a person's fingers and important aspects of that person's life. He also publishes his reports in scholarly journals.

The first of those individuals leans toward attributing no significance to what he sees. Bean-counting, done his way, is almost a form of poetry. To him, it's a source of grim, soul-satisfying amusement. Tally ho. Here are representative passages from his body of research:

- 'A total of 45 1-hr. citings of convenience were taken, during the Summer of 1983, equally divided among Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 1000 to 1500 hours. Note was made of the north-

south movement, which remained approximately consistent during the period at a rate of about 800 private and 1,850 commercial vehicles per hour. The timing of the traffic signal was constant: 45 sec. "go" (green), 4 sec. "caution" (yellow), and 41 sec. "stop" (red). Notice was taken of the number of vehicles passing the stop light, where passing the stop light was defined as entering into and continuing through the intersection after the signal had turned red.'

- 'The students were asked for a single answer to the following query, in my opinion brussels sprouts are (a) very repulsive, (b) somewhat repulsive, (c) something that I can either take or leave, (d) somewhat delicious, or (e) especially delicious. The findings for the group (collectively) and (stratified) by sex and nationality are shown in Table 1.'

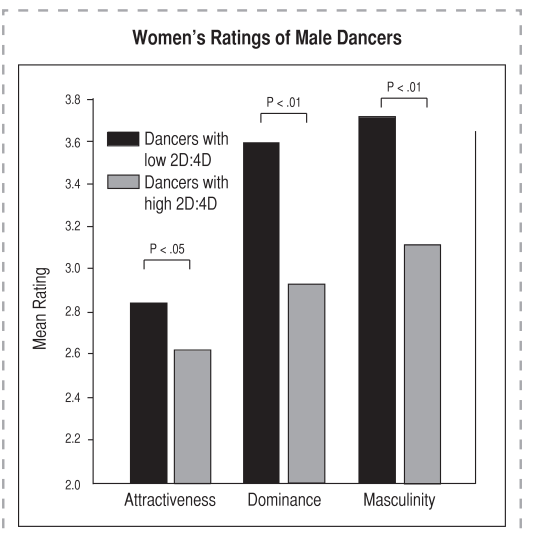
Table 1:
Number of Responses and Percent for Totality, by Sex, and by Citizenship

Response	Total group (*n*=442)		Women (*n*=266)		Men (*n*=176)		US national (*n* =217)		Foreign (*n*=225)	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Very repulsive	31	137	30	80	34	60	40	87	22	50
Somewhat repulsive	20	88	20	53	19	33	19	41	20	45
Indifferent	41	181	43	114	38	67	36	78	46	104
Somewhat delicious	6	27	6	16	8	14	4	9	10	23
Especially delicious	2	9	1	3	1	2	1	2	2	3

The other individual leans towards attributing significance where someone else might see only fingers. This is a form of leadership, done so that others might perceive his insights. His

jargon phrase '2D:4D' means 'the relative lengths of the second finger and the fourth finger':

- 'We recruited 300 subjects (117 men and 183 women) with a minimum age of 30 years from the Merseyside area. Participants were from social groups of elderly retired people and mature university students. We measured the 2nd and 4th digit length twice… The English sample… showed that married women had higher 2D:4D ratios than unmarried women.'
- 'We measured the lengths of the 2nd (index) and 4th (ring) finger in a sample of young men and recorded short digital video clips of their dance movements. A panel of 104 female judges rated 12 clips of men with the lowest and highest finger-length ratios (2D:4D) for attractiveness, dominance, and masculinity.'



A classic in the body of 2D:4D work

I hope those quotes appeal to you enough, or perplex you enough, that you will track down the journals in which they appear, and find the bigger stories there. And I hope other parts in the body of this book have a similar effect. I've told you only a short version of each story. Still more juicy improbable details, unmentioned by me, await you. The references noted at the end of each story point you to treasures. (For the examples in this introduction, though, I leave you the pleasure of googling them to find the citations.)

Chunks of what's here appeared in the newspaper column. Chunks were in the magazine. Much of it came into existence with and for this book, updating or augmenting the newspaper or magazine chunks, or becoming wholly new bits of the universe.

The seven billion or so humans of planet Earth have been relentlessly kind in doing improbable things that deserve to be written up. I am way behind in that writing, and am relentlessly scrambling to try to catch up.

But if ever you find an especially good improbable thing that you wish someone would write about, I wish you would write to me about it. You may find me, amidst steepening heaps of improbable research, at www.improbable.com.

Sincerely and improbably,

Editor and Co-founder,
Annals of Improbable Research

PS. What is the best way to read this book? I suggest that each night you choose a different story, and read it aloud to loved ones, at bedtime.

THIS IS IMPROBABLE TOO

ONE

THE BRAIN'S BEHIND

IN BRIEF

'WOULD BOHR BE BORN IF BOHM WERE BORN BEFORE BORN?'
by Hrvoje Nikolić (published in the *American Journal of Physics*, 2008)

Some of what's in this chapter: Dr Bean, man of international body parts • Einstein, Einstein, Einstein and other Einsteins • Improved scarecrow • The man who has Gorbachev's number • His basic laws of stupidity, and theirs of incompetence • Speaking of hooked tongue • Criminal mentors • When Washington really counted • The man who really counts: Trinkaus • Strange seats for prominent minds • Kakutani's bottled-up thoughts • Portfolio of a genius • One theory of everything • A number of genius numbering schemes

BEAN: COUNTER OF BODY PARTS

Dr Robert Bennett Bean took the measure of his fellow men almost fanatically. Women, too. He measured the parts, then published the copious details, and sometimes pictures, for all to see.

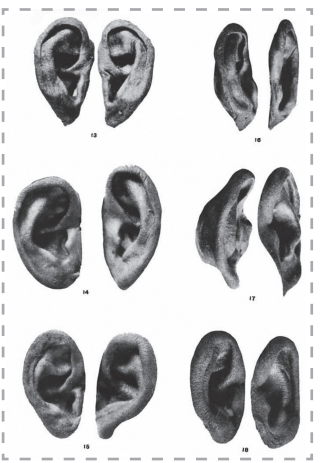
Bean worked at the University of Michigan, then at the Philippine Medical School, then at Tulane University, and finally at the University of Virginia. One of his first published papers, in 1907, was 'A Preliminary Report on the Measurements of about 1,000 Students at Ann Arbor, Michigan'. After that, he turned more specific, looking at this or that particular organ, limb or bodily region.

Bean measured lots of innards. In 'Some Racial Characteristics of the Spleen Weight in Man', he wrote: 'The white male spleen weighs about 140 grams, the negro male 115 grams, the white female 130 grams and the negro female 80 grams.' Numbers abound also in his 'Some Racial Characteristics of the Liver Weight in Man', and 'Some Racial Characteristics of the Weight of the Heart and Kidneys'.

He occasionally looked at the entire person, as in 'Notes on the Hairy Men of the Philippine Islands and Elsewhere'.

Most often, though, he did piece work. In 'Sitting Height and Leg Length in Old Virginians', he instructed: 'The sitting height, leg length, and sitting height index of several groups of Old Virginians is of some interest.'

Bean's treatise on ears is divided into two parts: 'Ears of the morgue subjects' and 'Ears of the living subjects'.



'Characteristics of the External Ear' collected by Robert Bennett Bean, including ears of a Filipino woman, a Filipino man and a Russian (gender unspecified)

He published 'Note on the Head Form of 435 American Soldiers with Special Reference to Flattening in the Occipital Region', and also 'Three Forms of the Human Nose'. Sometimes he was very specific: 'The Nose of the Jew and the Quadratus Labii Superioris' (facial muscle).

In 'Some Useful Morphologic Factors in Racial Anatomy', Bean introduced the omphalic index, a new metric about the belly button. One obtains it by making two measurements and a calculation: 'The distance of the umbilicus from the symphysis pubis is divided by the distance of the umbilicus from the suprasternal notch.'

By the time Bean died in 1944, he had recorded measurements of more partial people than almost anyone else ever had.

This was, obviously, not the same Dr Bennett Bean who, in 1980, published the study (described previously in *This Is Improbable*) entitled 'Nail Growth: Thirty-Five Years of Observation'. That was Robert Bennett Bean's son, William Bennett Bean, whose measurements were circumscribed, focusing exclusively on what he found at the ends of his own fingers.

Bean, Robert Bennett (1907). 'A Preliminary Report on the Measurements of About 1,000 Students at Ann Arbor, Michigan'. *Anatomical Record* 1: 67–8.

—, and Wilmer Baker (1919). 'Some Racial Characteristics of the Spleen Weight in Man'. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 2 (1): 1–9.

— (1919). 'Some Racial Characteristics of the Weight of the Heart and Kidneys'. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 2 (3): 265–74.

Bean, Robert Bennett (1913). 'Notes on the Hairy Men of the Philippine Islands and Elsewhere'. *American Anthropologist* 15 (3): 415–24.

— (1933). 'Sitting Height and Leg Length in Old Virginians'. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 17 (4): 445–79.

— (1915). 'Some Characteristics of the External Ear of American Whites, American Indians, American Negroes, Alaskan Esquimos, and Filipinos'. *American Journal of Anatomy* 18 (2): 201–25.

—, and Carl C. Speidel (1923). 'Note on the Head Form of 435 American Soldiers with Special Reference to Flattening in the Occipital Region'. *Anatomical Record* 25 (6): 301–11.

Bean, Robert Bennett (1913). 'Three Forms of the Human Nose'. *Anatomical Record* 7 (2): 43–6.

— (1913). 'The Nose of the Jew and the Quadratus Labii Superioris Muscle'. *Anatomical Record* 7 (2): 47–9.

— (1912). 'Some Useful Morphologic Factors in Racial Anatomy'. *Anatomical Record* 6 (4): 173–9.

Bean, William B. (1974). 'Nail Growth: Thirty-Five Years of Observation'. *Archives of Internal Medicine* 134 (3): 497–502.

Terry, R.J. (1946). 'Robert Bennett Bean, 1874–1944'. *American Anthropologist* 48 (1): 70–4.

IN BRIEF

'THE SPLENIC SNOOD: AN IMPROVED APPROACH FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF THE WANDERING SPLEEN'
by Steven P. Schmidt, H. Gibbs Andrews and John J. White
(published in *Journal of Pediatric Surgery*, 1992)

OTHER EINSTEINS

People say 'There is only one Einstein', but of course that is not so. Albert stands celebrated, but not alone.

Albert Einstein has a signature equation, $e=mc^2$, which predicts how energy relates to mass. M.E. Einstein of Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, has a whole set of equations that predict the composition of a pork carcass.

M.E. Einstein and several collaborators published a series of studies – seven of them so far – in the *Journal of Animal Science*. Their 'Evaluation of Alternative Measures of Pork Carcass Composition' appeared in 2001. It is a minor classic in the history of pork-production prediction literature. This passage lists several of the parameters that Professor Einstein found ways to manipulate: 'FFLM is fat-free lean mass (kg), TOFAT is total carcass fat mass (kg), LFSTIS is lipid-free soft-tissue mass (kg), STLIP is soft-tissue lipid mass (kg), DL is dissected lean in the four lean cuts (kg), and NLFAT is the non-lipid components of the fat tissue.'

Evaluation of alternative measures of pork carcass composition[1,2]

A. P. Schinckel[3], J. R. Wagner[4], J. C. Forrest, and M. E. Einstein

M.E. Einstein also co-authored the doubly seminal 'Utilisation of a Sperm Quality Analyser to Evaluate Sperm Quantity and Quality of Turkey Breeders'. It was published in 2002 in the journal *British Poultry Science*.

Outside a small circle of specialists, Einstein's pork carcass composition equations and Einstein's turkey sperm quality analyser analysis are not so well known as they perhaps deserve to be.

Anyone with access to certain libraries can also check out Einstein on cannabis. Albert Einstein never published any research papers about cannabis, at least not formally, but Rosemarie Einstein did. In 1975, she and two colleagues at the University of Leeds investigated the use of cannabis – and alcohol and tobacco, too – by three hundred young persons at a university.

Einstein and her team carefully protected the students' confidentiality. In their study, which appeared in the *British Journal of Addiction*, no student is named. Even the university is not identified. The report speaks of it only as 'a provincial university', leaving readers to speculate, perhaps feverishly.

The scientists discovered exactly how many of those students used pot, alcohol, tobacco or any combination of the three. Or, to be more specific, they discovered what the students said they used. And how. According to the survey results, some students smoked their cannabis, others ate it, still others drank it. Some said they avoided cannabis altogether. Only a minority claimed to smoke tobacco, but none reported eating or drinking it. Almost everyone claimed to drink alcohol.

The scientists also discovered something they had expected: that students cannot be relied upon to answer surveys. The team says it sent questionnaires to exactly one thousand students, and that exactly three hundred of those questionnaires were returned. This 300/1,000 is a return rate of 33 percent, Einstein and her colleagues explain, using a brand of mathematics peculiarly their own.

There are many other Einsteins besides Albert, M.E. and Rosemarie. One analysed magical thinking in obsessive-compulsive persons. One did a comparison study of different kinds of barium enemas. One was a specialist in the history of television programmes. And so on. There is, I expect, an Einstein for everyone.

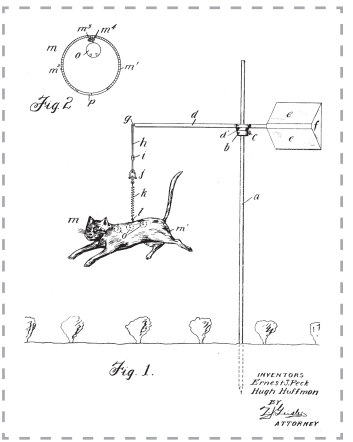
Schinckel, A.P., J.R. Wagner, J.C. Forrest and M.E. Einstein (2001). 'Evaluation of Alternative Measures of Pork Carcass Composition'. *Journal of Animal Science* 79 (5): 1093–119.
Schinckel, A.P., C.T. Herr, B.T. Richert, J.C. Forrest and M.E. Einstein (2003). 'Ractopamine Treatment Biases in the Prediction of Pork Carcass Composition'. *Journal of Animal Science* 81 (1): 16 Schinckel, A.P., 28.
Neuman, S.L., C.D. McDaniel, L. Frank, J. Radu, M.E. Einstein and P.Y. Hester (2002). 'Utilisation of a Sperm Quality Analyser to Evaluate Sperm Quantity and Quality of Turkey Breeders'. *British Poultry Science* 43 (3): 457–64.
Einstein, Rosemarie, Ian E. Hughes and Ian Hindmarch (1975). 'Patterns of Use of Alcohol, Cannabis and Tobacco in a Student Population'. *British Journal of Addiction to Alcohol & Other Drugs* 70 (2): 145–50.
Einstein, Danielle A., and Ross G. Menzies (2004). 'Role of Magical Thinking in Obsessive-Compulsive Symptoms in an Undergraduate Sample'. *Depression and Anxiety* 19 (30): 174–9.
Davidson, Jon C., David M. Einstein, Brian R. Herts, D.M. Balfe, Robert E. Koehler, Desiree E. Morgan, M. Lieber and Mark E. Baker (1999). 'Comparison of Two Barium Suspensions for Dedicated Small-Bowel Series'. *American Journal of Roentgenology* 172 (2): 379–82.
Einstein, Daniel (1997). *Special Edition: A Guide to Network Television Documentary Series and Special News Reports, 1980-1989.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

AN IMPROBABLE INNOVATION

'A NEW AND USEFUL IMPROVEMENT IN SCARECROWS'

by Hugh Huffman and Ernest J. Peck (US patent no. 1,167,502, granted 1916)

The patent holders claimed that 'Prior to our invention, the scare crows ordinarily used were crude affairs… One of the main objects of our invention is to provide a more efficient form of scare crow'.



Illustrative diagram from 'A New and Useful Improvement in Scarecrows' from US Patent no. 1,167,502

PROBABILITY, BY GOD

In 1988, Robert W. Faid of Greenville, South Carolina, solved one of the oldest and most famous problems in mathematics. Yet almost no one noticed. Cracking the nut that was nearly two millennia old, Faid calculated the identity of the Antichrist.

In the rarified world of mathematicians, certain problems become the focus of intense pursuit. The Four-Colour Map Problem was finally solved, by Wolfgang Haken and Kenneth Appel, in 1976. Fermat's Last Theorem tantalized mathematicians until Andrew Wiles solved it in 1993.

Haken and Appel became instantly famous among mathematicians. Wiles became a worldwide celebrity.

But little academic or public acclaim came to Robert W. Faid, perhaps because no one had previously realized that the identity of the Antichrist *was* a mathematical problem.

The Antichrist problem has been on the books since about the year 90, when 'The Revelation of St John' brought it to public notice. Over the years, many amateur mathematicians joined the professionals in trying their hand at this delightful, yet maddening puzzle. Eventually it became a favourite old chestnut, something to be wondered at, but perhaps too difficult ever to yield a solution.

Then, after most had given up hope, Robert Faid solved it. In retrospect, his accomplishment seems almost absurdly simple: The Antichrist is Mikhail Gorbachev, with odds of 710,609,175,188,282,000 to 1.

There is no mystery to this. Faid is a trained engineer. He is methodical and rigorous. He wrote a book explaining every first and last tittle and jot: *Gorbachev! Has the Real Antichrist Come?*, published by Victory House. It tells where each number comes from and how it enters into the calculation. Professional mathematicians find it difficult to argue with the logic.

Outside the maths community, the book received little

attention, but Robert. W. Faid was nonetheless awarded with the Ig Nobel Prize in mathematics in 1993 for his achievement.

More recently, another good and great mathematical problem was knocked off. Stephen D. Unwin wrote a book called *The Probability of God*. It is much celebrated.

Stephen D. Unwin has a PhD in theoretical physics. Like Robert Faid, he has methodically, rigorously and with faithful certainty chosen some numbers, then performed addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. The calculated result: that there is almost exactly a 67-percent probability that God exists. The book reveals all the technicalities and includes a handy spreadsheet for those anxious to try the calculations for themselves. After following his detailed instructions for using Microsoft Excel to replicate the maths, he notes: 'You are now a mathematical theologist and can do things of which Aristotle, St. Thomas, and Kant only dreamed. Please proceed responsibly.' Like all good statistical reports, he does point out the possibility that something is off. There is, Stephen D. Unwin carefully warns us, a 5-percent chance that his calculation is wrong.

Faid, Unwin and God knows how many others give mathematicians faith that every problem, no matter how hard, can have some kind of devilishly simple solution.

Faid, Robert W. (1988). *Gorbachev! Has the Real Antichrist Come?* Tulsa, OK: Victory House.
Unwin, Stephen D. (2003). *The Probability of God: A Simple Calculation That Proves the Ultimate Truth*. New York: Crown Forum.

MAY WE RECOMMEND

'THE DESK OR THE BED?'

by Robert Gifford and Robert Sommer (published in *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 1968)

The authors, at the University of California at Davis and supported in part by a grant from the US Office of Education, concluded: 'There is nothing in these data to support the recommendations for studying in a straight-backed chair at a desk.'

THE BASIC LAWS OF HUMAN STUPIDITY, OR: THE GIFT OF INCOMPETENCE

The basic laws of human stupidity are ancient. The definitive essay on the subject is younger. Called *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*, it was published in 1976 by an Italian economist.

Professor Carlo M. Cipolla taught at several universities in Italy and for many years at the University of California, Berkeley. He also wrote books and studies about clocks, guns, monetary policy, depressions, faith, reason and of course – he being an economist – money. His essay about stupidity encompasses all those other topics, and perhaps all of human experience.

Cipolla wrote out the laws in plain language. They are akin to laws of nature – a seemingly basic characteristic of the universe. Here they are:

1) Always and inevitably, everyone underestimates the number of stupid individuals in circulation.
2) The probability that a certain person be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person.
3) A stupid person is a person who causes losses to another person or to a group of persons, while himself deriving no gain and even possibly incurring losses.
4) Non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid individuals. In particular, non-stupid people constantly forget that at all times and places and under any circumstances to deal and/or associate with stupid people always turns out to be a costly mistake.

Cipolla's essay gives an X-ray view of what distinguishes countries on the rise from those that are falling.

Countries moving uphill have an inevitable percentage of

stupid people, yes. But they enjoy 'an unusually high fraction of intelligent people' who collectively overcompensate for the dumbos.

Declining nations have, instead, an 'alarming proliferation' of non-stupid people whose behaviour 'inevitably strengthens the destructive power' of their persistently stupid fellow citizens. There are two distinct, unhelpful groups: 'bandits' who take positions of power that they use for their own gain; and people out of power who sigh through life as if they are helpless.

Cipolla died in 2000, just a year after two psychologists at Cornell University in New York State wrote a study entitled 'Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments'. Without mentioning any form of the word 'stupidity', it serves as an enlightening and dismaying supplement to Cipolla's basic laws.

In the Cornell study, David Dunning and Justin Kruger supplied scientific evidence that incompetence is bliss, for the incompetent person. They staged a series of experiments, involving several groups of people. Beforehand, they made some predictions, most notably that:

1) Incompetent people dramatically overestimate their ability; and
2) Incompetent people are not good at recognizing incompetence – their own or anyone else's.

In one experiment, Dunning and Kruger asked sixty-five test subjects to rate the funniness of certain jokes. They then compared each test subject's ratings of the jokes with ratings done by eight professional comedians. Some people had a very poor sense of what others find funny – but most of those same individuals believed themselves to be very good at it, rather like David Brent of the television comedy *The Office*.

Another experiment involved logic questions from law

school entrance exams. The logic questions produced much the same results as the jokes. Those with poor reasoning skills tended to believe they were as good as Sherlock Holmes.

Overall, the results showed that incompetence is even worse than it appears to be, and forms a sort of unholy trinity of cluelessness. The incompetent don't perform up to speed; don't recognize their lack of competence; and don't even recognize the competence of other people.

Dunning explained why he took up this kind of research: 'I am interested in why people tend to have overly favorable and objectively indefensible views of their own abilities, talents, and moral character. For example, a full 94% of college professors state that they do "above average" work, although it is statistically impossible for virtually everybody to be above average.' In 2008, he and his colleagues revisited their findings with 'Why the Unskilled Are Unaware: Further Explorations of (Absent) Self-insight among the Incompetent', in order to show that their assessment was not a statistical artifact.

Participants—A total of 46 participants were recruited at a Trap and Skeet competition in exchange for a payment of $5. Most participants reported owning at least one firearm (96%) and having taken a course in firearm safety (89%). They possessed between 6 and 65 years experience with firearms (mean = 34.5 years).

—

Participants—Participants were 42 undergraduates who participated in exchange for extra credit in undergraduate psychology courses.

Participants in Study 3 (top) and Study 5 (bottom) to understand 'Why the Unskilled Are Unaware'

If you have colleagues who are incompetent and unaware of it, Dunning and Kruger's research is a useful and convenient tool. I recommend that you make copies of their reports, and send them – anonymously, if need be – to each of those individuals. (Professor Cipolla used that same method, minus the anonymity, to distribute his essay *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* among his closest friends.)

A copy might, too, be a helpful gift for any national or other leader to whom it may pertain.

For celebrating incompetence and unawareness, Dunning and Kruger won the 2000 Ig Nobel Prize in the field of psychology.

Cipolla, Carlo M. (1976). *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*. Bologna: The Mad Millers/Il Mulino.
Dunning, David, and Justin Kruger (1999). 'Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77 (6): 1121–34.
Ehrlinger, Joyce, Kerri Johnson, Matthew Banner, David Dunning and Justin Kruger (2008). 'Why the Unskilled Are Unaware: Further Explorations of (Absent) Self-insight among the Incompetent'. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Process* 105 (1): 98–121.

IN BRIEF

A Story About a Stupid Person Can Make You Act Stupid (or Smart): Behavioral Assimilation (and Contrast) as Narrative Impact

MARKUS APPEL
Department of Education and Psychology, Johannes Kepler University of Linz, Linz, Austria

'A STORY ABOUT A STUPID PERSON CAN MAKE YOU ACT STUPID (OR SMART): BEHAVIORAL ASSIMILATION (AND CONTRAST) AS NARRATIVE IMPACT'
by Markus Appel (published in *Media Psychology*, 2011)

MAY WE RECOMMEND

'A LUCKY CATCH: FISHHOOK INJURY OF THE TONGUE'
by Karen A. Eley and Daljit K. Dhariwal (published in *Journal of Emergencies, Trauma, and Shock*, 2010)

DASTARDLY DEVELOPMENT

Is our criminals learning?

The question is a natural follow-on to one raised by George W. Bush during his first campaign to become president of the

United States. On 11 January 2000, looking down at a select audience in the city of Florence, South Carolina, where the crime rate was 3.4 times the national average, Bush asked: 'Is our children learning?'

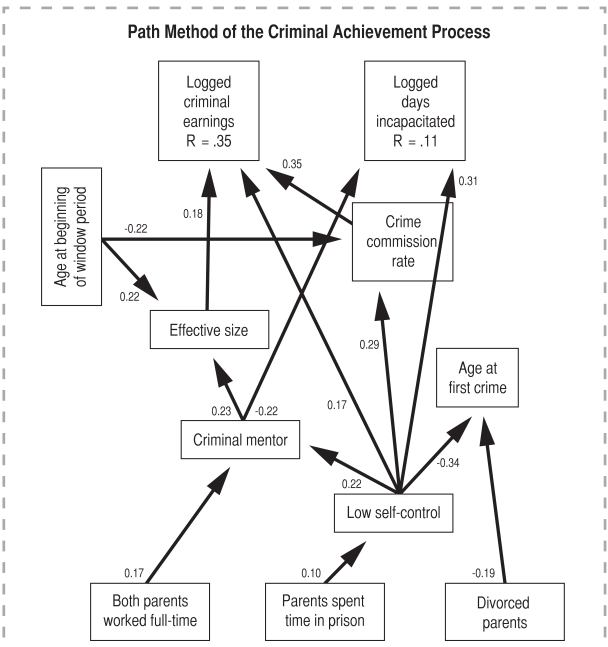
For Bush, it seemed, learning was a lifelong challenge. In the journal *Criminology,* Carlo Morselli and Pierre Tremblay, of the Université de Montréal, and Bill McCarthy, of the University of California at Davis, explore how that challenge applies to 268 prison inmates in the Canadian province of Quebec. Their report, called 'Mentors and Criminal Achievement', echoes the thoughts and findings not only of George W. Bush, but also of earlier researchers and criminals.

They offer up a nugget from Indiana University criminologist Edwin H. Sutherland's 1937 book *The Professional Thief, By a Professional Thief.* 'Any man who hits the big-time in crime, somewhere or other along the road, became associated with a big-timer who picked him up and educated him', the thief told Sutherland, adding: 'No one ever crashed the big rackets without education in this line.'

Mentors, say those who study the development of great executives, inventors, artists, sports figures and entrepreneurs, are crucial if one is to have a successful career. But aside from those highly celebrated professions, and from some obvious high-skill specialties, do people really need mentors or can they generally find success on their own? Do mentors make a measurable difference?

'Our analysis', write Morselli et al., 'focuses on the effects of mentors on two aspects of criminal achievement: illegal earnings and incarceration experiences … Protégés with lower self-control attract the attention of some criminal mentors who provide the structure and restraint that lead to a more prudent approach to crime. This approach involves fewer and more profitable offenses that lower the risks of apprehension and, perhaps, promote long-term horizons in crime.'

The researchers used a painstaking protocol: 'We collected information on monthly illegal earnings and on the number of days that respondents were incarcerated. After calculating the total for criminal earnings and incapacitation experiences for the period, we applied logarithmic transformations to create our dependant variables.'



The authors note that 'For clarity… age at first crime on criminal earnings… and parents' full-time employment… were removed from the model.'

Their calculation resulted in a big payoff. As they put it: 'Our findings suggest that strong foundations in crime offer an advantageous position for continuous achievement and the presence of a criminal mentor is pivotal for achievement over one's criminal career.'

Morselli, Carlo, Pierre Tremblay, and Bill McCarthy (2006). 'Mentors and Criminal Achievement'. *Criminology* 44 (1): 17–43.
Sutherland, Edwin H. (1937). *The Professional Thief, By a Professional Thief*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.