PTN invited Hope College professor David Myers to share—from his recent presentation at the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology—some exciting and teachable new findings from the world of social psychology.

“So much new research and so little time to teach it!”—that is the shared experience of those who teach (and also those who write about) psychology. As I screen new content for students of psychology, I find it helpful to ask myself three questions:

1. **Importance**: Is this finding significant for psychology—and also for human understanding? Do educated people need to know this?

2. **Accessibility**: Are students likely to understand and remember this?

3. **A place**: Does our course structure offer a branch on which to hang this? If not, is it important enough to merit a new branch?

With these criteria in mind, here are some of my favorite social psychological studies from the last 2 years—findings that illustrate important ideas, are simple to explain and remember, and that could find a home in most instructors’ teaching of social psychology’s big ideas.

continued on page 3
NFL FANS’ ILLUSORY OPTIMISM

The unrealistic optimism that biases people’s perceptions of their future health, relationships, and time needed to complete tasks extends to their perceptions of their groups. Throughout a National Football League season, reported Cade Massey and colleagues (2011), fans of all teams correctly guessed that other teams would win about 50% of the time. But they incorrectly guessed, on average (across teams and weeks), that their own team stood about a 2 in 3 chance of winning. This optimistic and illogical bias persisted despite monetary incentives for accuracy and despite their team’s experience.

ISRAELI JUDGES’ COGNITIVE DEPLETION

Like a muscle, self-control (willpower) temporarily weakens after exertion, but replenishes with rest and nourishment (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011). Self-control requires energy. This was dramatically apparent in the discovery by Shai Danziger and colleagues (2011) that Israeli judges were much more likely to grant parole requests at the beginning of the day and after the day’s two food breaks. Hungry equaled harsh. See figure 1.

INCREASING INDIVIDUALISM IN BABY NAMES

A dramatic demonstration of increasing American individualism appears in the 325 million baby names that Jean Twenge and her coworkers (2010) mined from Social Security archives. In recent years, the percentage of American babies receiving one of that year’s 10 most common names has plunged. See figure 2.

SOCIAL INFLUENCE ON REFEREES

Several recent studies have revealed striking social influences on people’s willingness to floss (Schmiege et al., 2010), undergo cancer screening (Sieverding et al., 2010), or even give yellow cards for soccer football infractions (Unkelbach & Memmert, 2010). In the latter case, the referees in 1,530 German soccer matches gave an average of 2.35 yellow cards to away teams, but only 1.89 to home teams. Moreover, the difference was greatest in the noisiest stadiums and was replicated in the lab (where fan noise again influenced the decisions of referees).

GROUP POLARIZATION IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

The Internet facilitates group polarization, as like minds network. Blue liberal blogs link mostly to one another, as do red conservative blogs (Lazer et al., 2009). The size of each blog reflects the number of other blogs linked to it.

GAY PREJUDICE LIVES

Three independent experiments submitted fictitious pairs of resumes, one gay-identified (for example, of someone who had volunteered in an LGBT organization), and one not. These were submitted to 613 Austrian job openings, 1,713 Greek openings, and 1,789 American openings (Drydakis, 2009; Tilcsik, 2011; Weichselbaumer, 2003). In response, callbacks were much less likely to the gay-involved applicants. In the American experiment, for example, 7.2% of applicants whose activities included being “Treasurer, Gay and Lesbian Alliance,” received replies, as did 11.5% of those associated with a different left-seeming group (“Treasurer, Progressive and Socialist Alliance”).

HEAT AMPLIFIES AGGRESSION—ON THE BASEBALL FIELD

In the laboratory, and also in the real world, uncomfortable heat increases aggressive behavior. Richard Larrick and his colleagues (2011) offer a hot example: In their analysis of 57,293 Major League
Baseball games since 1952, batters were more likely to be hit by a pitch during hot weather—nearly 50% more likely when the temperature was 90 degrees or above (versus 59 degrees or below) and when three of the pitcher’s teammates had previously been hit. Pitchers weren’t wilder on hot days—they had no more walks or wild pitches. They just clobbered more batters.

USA WEALTH POSSESSED BY TOP 20%

![Graph showing wealth distribution by top 20%](image)

**FIGURE 3**

**INCOME INEQUALITY—NOT GOOD**

Inequality predicts lower happiness in societies and also increased health problems (Messias et al., 2011; Oishi et al., 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Curiously, report Michael Norton and Dan Ariely (2011), Americans greatly underestimate the amount of wealth possessed by the top 20%. And when shown two unidentified wealth distributions, one of which happens to be Sweden’s and one the USA’s, they prefer Sweden’s by an 11 to 1 ratio. Moreover, Republicans and Democrats and those earning less than $50,000 and those earning more than $100,000, are more alike than different in their underestimating American income inequality and preferring a much more equal distribution. See figure 3.

**PERSUASION RESEARCH NEEDED!**

Human-caused climate change is occurring, say 97% of published climate scientists (Anderegg, Prall, Harold, & Schneider, 2010) and 38% of the American public (Pew, 2011). Meanwhile, carbon dioxide is accumulating in the atmosphere, the predicted planetary warming is occurring, the ice caps are melting, species are migrating northward, spring is coming earlier, and extreme weather is increasing. Surely, tomorrow’s social psychology will be contributing to education and opinion change that supports a sustainable future.

There is more good news, including wonderful new data archives for students and teachers to explore, such as the massive Gallup World Poll and daily Gallup-Healthways USA survey, Google’s ngrams.googlelabs.com, and the easy-to-access General Social Survey archives. But those stories are for another bedtime.

**REFERENCES**


