

UNCOMMON KNOWLEDGE

## How to get Johnny to study

### Surprising insights from the social sciences

By Kevin Lewis | June 27, 2010

How do we motivate kids — especially kids in rough situations — to want education? Researchers at the University of Michigan studied middle school students in Detroit and found that, while almost 90 percent expected to go to college, only half wanted a career that actually required education. And this difference was critical. Students whose career goals did not require education (e.g., sports star, movie star) spent less time on homework and got lower grades. The good news is that the researchers found it was easy to make education more salient, and thereby motivate kids. When students were shown a graph depicting the link between education and earnings, they were much more likely to hand in an extra-credit homework assignment the next day than if they were shown a graph depicting the earnings of superstars.

*Destin, M. & Oyserman, D., "Incentivizing Education: Seeing Schoolwork as an Investment, Not a Chore," Journal of Experimental Social Psychology (forthcoming)*

#### The spirit of capitalism

One of the classic works of sociology is "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" by Max Weber, who argues that the former facilitates the latter. Scholars have been trying to test this theory ever since, typically by analyzing economic patterns at the international level. An ideal scientific test of the theory, however, would require randomly indoctrinating one group of people with one religion and another group of people with another religion. This is obviously easier said than done, but economists at Cornell and Yale universities have figured out a very rough approximation. They recruited over 800 students — including Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and atheists — and asked them to take a sentence-unscrambling test. Half of the students were given some sentences that contained religious references, as a way to subconsciously activate each student's religious values. The students were then asked to make various economically relevant decisions. A few of the findings: Protestants became more willing, but Catholics less willing, to contribute to the public good. Catholics also expected others to contribute less and were more willing to take risks. Jews were willing to work more for a given wage.

*Benjamin, D. et al., "Religious Identity and Economic Behavior," National Bureau of Economic Research (April 2010).*

#### The adult effects of teen consent laws

Although the rate of abortion climbed in the decade after the US Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision, it has since fallen off, and there's no consensus on why. A new analysis gives

some credit to parental notice and consent laws, which require minors to involve at least one parent in the abortion decision. But the surprise is that the laws appear to affect the abortion rates among adults as well. The first states to pass parental involvement laws have the lowest abortion rates for adult women and experienced the earliest declines, even among conservative states. The authors suggest that parental involvement laws have a long-term effect on behavior, changing the choices people make even after they become adults. Enacting a parental involvement law in 1994, for example, reduced abortion rates among adult women in 2000 by an estimated 9.6 percent.

*Medoff, M., "State Abortion Policy and the Long-Term Impact of Parental Involvement Laws," Politics & Policy (April 2010).*

#### Increasing consumption by mistake

In a recent book, titled "Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness," Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein — both esteemed professors and friends of President Obama — advocate for subtly manipulating the way choices are framed so as to nudge people towards the socially preferred outcome. Yet it seems that not everyone is on board. Economists at UCLA analyzed the energy consumption of customers in California who were issued special utility bills comparing their own usage to that of their neighbors, with the goal of nudging people to conserve more.

Liberals, and those surrounded by liberals, cut back their consumption. Conservatives tended to increase their consumption.

*Costa, D. & Kahn, M., "Energy Conservation 'Nudges' and Environmentalist Ideology: Evidence from a Randomized Residential Electricity Field Experiment," National Bureau of Economic Research (April 2010).*

### **Productivity through hanging out**

The ideal employee is supposed to be singularly focused on his or her job. Taking breaks or socializing at work is generally considered a sign of inefficiency. Nevertheless, researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are finding evidence that, to some extent, the opposite may be true. Workers in a large call center at a major bank were asked to wear special badges designed by the researchers to track social interaction. Two teams of workers were allowed to take breaks together as a group, while two other teams had to take staggered breaks (the status quo for workers in the call center). Teams with a simultaneous break developed a stronger social bond, and this social bond was associated with higher productivity.

*Waber, B. et al., "Productivity through Coffee Breaks: Changing Social Networks by Changing Break Structure," Massachusetts Institute of Technology (January 2010).*

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