

## How much would you pay for an hour of love?

Would you pay more cash to experience intense happiness or to avoid intense embarrassment? Your answer may depend on the culture you live in.

A team led by Hi Lau at the University of Hong Kong used this 'willingness to pay' approach to find out how students in Britain and Hong Kong value different emotions. For the first study, 97 British students chose how much they would be willing to spend (from £10 to £150, in £10 increments) to enjoy various positive emotions intensely for an hour, or to avoid various negative emotions for an hour.

Overall, the students were willing to pay more to experience positive emotions than to avoid negative ones. An hour's worth of love was the most valued, followed by an hour's worth of happiness and then an hour without sadness. Bottom

of the list was disgust – the students were only prepared to pay an average of £43 to avoid an hour of disgust (compared with £95 to have an hour of love).

Next, the research took in the choices of 46 students in Hong Kong as well as 41 Brits, and the range of emotions was expanded. The findings for the British students was largely a replication of the first study, with a greater willingness to pay for positive emotions than to avoid negative ones. The Hong Kong students showed a more balanced set of responses, being just as willing to pay to avoid negative emotions as to

experience positive ones. Focusing on specific emotions, the Brits said they'd pay more than the Hong Kong students for happiness, delight and calm; the Hong Kong students meanwhile said they'd pay more than the Brits to avoid regret, embarrassment and frustration.

Lau's team, including University of Cambridge researcher Simone Schnall, said their approach offers a new, advantageous way to gauge people's attitudes towards emotions. The findings complement questionnaire-based research on people's beliefs about which emotions matter most to them, and their beliefs about which emotions will have more of an impact on their long-term wellbeing. There's some evidence that an absence of negative emotion is more important for well-being than positive emotion, in which case the British participants in the current study may have been unwise in their choices. 'By putting price-tags on emotions we might come closer to understanding the value of human experience in order to aid policies at enhancing well-being,' the researchers said.



In the October issue of the *Journal of Happiness Studies*



### What people really think of their personality

In the *European Journal of Personality*

A problem with your standard personality questionnaire is that most people like to make a good impression. This is especially the case when questionnaires are used for job candidates. One way around this is to use so-called implicit measures of personality, designed to probe subconscious beliefs. The famous Rorschach inkblot test is one example, but many psychologists criticise it for its unreliability. A more modern example is a version of the implicit association test, in which people are timed using the same response key for self-referential words and various personality traits. If they associate the trait with themselves, they should be quicker to answer. Now a team led by Florin Sava have proposed a new test based on what's called the 'semantic misattribution procedure'.

Nearly a hundred participants watched as personality traits were flashed one at a time for a fifth of a second on a computer screen. After each trait (e.g. 'anxious'), a neutral-looking Chinese pictograph was flashed on-screen. The participants didn't know what these Chinese symbols meant. Their task was to ignore the flashed personality traits and to say whether they'd like each Chinese symbol to be printed on a personalised t-shirt for them or not, to reflect their personality.

This method is based on past research showing that we tend to automatically attribute the meaning of briefly presented words to subsequent neutral stimuli. So, in the example

above, participants would be expected to attribute, at a subconscious level, the meaning of 'anxious' to the Chinese symbol. When assessing the suitability of the symbol for their t-shirt, it feels subjectively as if they are merely guessing, or making their judgement based on its visual properties. But in fact their choice of whether the symbol is suitable will be influenced by the anxious meaning they've attributed to it, and, crucially, whether or not they have an implicit belief that they are anxious.

In this initial study, and two more involving nearly 300 participants, Sava and her colleagues showed that participants' scores on this test for conscientiousness, neuroticism and extraversion correlated with explicit measures of the same traits. The new implicit test also did a better job than explicit measures alone of predicting relevant behaviours, such as church attendance, perseverance on a lab task, and punctuality. The implicit scores for extraversion showed good consistency over six months. Finally, the new implicit test showed fewer signs of being influenced by social desirability concerns, as compared with traditional explicit measures. Next, the researchers plan to test whether their new implicit measure is immune to attempts at deliberate fakery.

'The present study suggests that the Semantic Misattribution Procedure is an effective alternative for measuring implicit personality self-concept,' the researchers said.



## When parents lie to their children

In the *International Journal of Psychology*

We teach our kids that it is wrong to lie, even though most of us do it every day. In fact, it is often our children who we are lying to. A new study, involving participants in the USA and China, is one of the first to investigate parental lies, finding that the majority of parents tell their children lies as a way to control their behaviour.

Gail Heyman and colleagues presented 114 parents in the USA and 85 in China with 16 so-called 'instrumental lies' in four categories – lies intended to influence the kids' eating habits (e.g. 'You need to finish all your food or you will get pimples all over your face'); lies to get the children to leave or stay put (e.g. 'If you don't come with me now, I will leave you here by yourself'); lies to control misbehaviour (e.g. 'If you don't behave, I will call the police'); and finally, lies to do with shopping and money (e.g. 'I did not bring any money with me today. We can come back another day.').

Eighty-four per cent of US parents and 98 per cent of Chinese parents admitted telling at least one of the 16 lies to their children, and a majority of parents in both countries admitted to telling lies from three of the four categories. The exception was the misbehaviour category – just under half the US parents said they told lies to make their children behave better, compared with 80 per cent of Chinese parents.

The lie that the greatest proportion of parents said they told was threatening to leave a child behind if he/she refused to follow the parent. Rates of lying

by parents were higher in China than in the US, especially in relation to misbehaviour and eating. The Chinese parents also were more approving of instrumental lying by parents than the US parents were; at the same time, they (the Chinese) viewed lying by children with more disapproval.

Asked why they told instrumental lies to their children, parents across both countries talked in terms of a cost-benefit trade-off and the stress of getting children to comply. Other times it was felt children would struggle to understand the truth, such as the complexities of the family budget.

As well as looking at instrumental lies, the study also asked parents about untruths they told their children regarding fantasy characters like the tooth fairy, or to make their children feel better, for example praising a poor piano performance. Here there were no cultural differences in rates of lie-telling, although the Chinese parents showed less approval toward lying about the existence of fictional characters.

The two samples differed in other ways besides their culture – the US parents being more highly educated, for example. And of course there was a reliance on self-report rather than an observation or record of actual lies told. Despite these issues, acknowledged by the researchers, Heyman said their study 'helps fill a void in an understudied area that may have strong implications for children's social and moral development'.



## The psychology of online reviews

In the December issue of the *Journal of Economic Psychology*

We remain impressed after reading early positive reviews online, even if negative reviews come later. That's according to a pair of studies by Brent Coker.

Seventy-six undergrads were told all positive facts about one fictional coffee brand and all negative facts about another, along the lines of: 'The company has put green policies in place' and 'The company has tried to cover up exploitation of its workers'. Then a research assistant told the participants that a mistake had been made – the sheets had been wrongly labelled, so that the positive statements actually applied to the other coffee brand and vice versa.

The key finding here was that the impact of the early positive facts lingered, leading to enhanced ratings for the brand that was originally misdescribed in glowing terms. In contrast, the stain of negative facts wore off. The brand originally misdescribed in

negative terms was given fair ratings by the participants, as if they were able to forget the mistaken negative associations.

A second study tested this principle with online reviews for an LA hotel. Undergrads read five Trip Advisor reviews for the hotel, ordered so that they went either from positive to negative, or from negative to positive. The participants showed more favour for the hotel when they read the more positive reviews first, again showing how the impact of early positive reviews appears to linger. This remained the case even when the reviews were labelled such that they appeared to have been written over the course of a year (so giving the impression that the hotel had deteriorated during that time).

Coker concluded that '...Consumers may overshoot their judgments towards brands when positive information is replaced with negative information.'



The material in this section is taken from the Society's **Research Digest** blog at [www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog](http://www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog), and is written by its editor **Dr Christian Jarrett**. Visit the blog for full coverage including references and links, additional current reports, an archive, comment and more.

 Subscribe by RSS or e-mail at [www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog](http://www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog)

 Become a fan at [www.facebook.com/researchdigest](http://www.facebook.com/researchdigest)

 Follow the Digest editor at [www.twitter.com/researchdigest](http://www.twitter.com/researchdigest)