

When was the most important public event of your lifetime?

The idea that young people might find the world a stranger, more exciting place than older people makes intuitive sense. They've had less time to grow familiar with life. What's irrational is to believe that more significant public events happen when people are young. Of course they're just as likely to happen at any time of life. Nonetheless, a new study suggests that thanks to a phenomenon known as the 'youth bias' many of us do believe that more major public events happen during a person's youth, than at any other time.

Jonathan Koppel and Dorthe Bernsten began by asking 200 US participants recruited online to imagine a typical infant of their own culture and gender. The participants then read the following text: '...throughout this person's life, many important public events will take place, both nationally and internationally, such as wars, the deaths of public figures, and sporting events. How old do you think this person is likely to be when the event that they consider to be the most important public event of their lifetime takes place?'

The question was phrased deliberately to tap people's beliefs about the subjective sense of when the most important public event is likely to occur in a lifetime. There was an overwhelming bias for the participants to mention ages in the second and third decades of life (from 11 to 30 years). Splitting the participants into an older (aged 33 to 81) and younger group (aged 18 to 31), both groups showed this bias, although the younger group specifically mentioned an age in the range 16 to 20 more often, while the older group more often mentioned an age in the range 6 to 10.

Next, the researchers recruited 198 more participants online and this time they tweaked the wording of their question. The participants were again asked to imagine an infant of their own gender and culture. Then they read this text: '... how old do you think this person is likely to be when the most important public event of their lifetime takes place?'

This time the question was phrased deliberately to tap participants' beliefs about the objective distribution of major public events across a lifetime, regardless of the subjective impact of events on a person. Again there was evidence of a youth bias. The participants far more often mentioned ages within the range 11 to 30. This was true for the whole sample, and when the sample was split into younger and older groups.

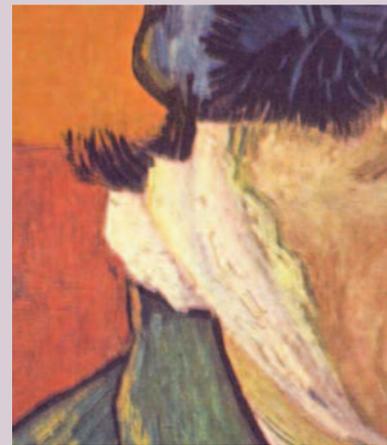
The researchers explained there is no rational reason to suppose that major public events will more often occur in a person's youth. 'These findings represent the discovery of a heretofore unnoted cognitive bias, the youth bias,' they said. 'The youth bias holds that the most notable experiences of one's life, whether private or public, occur in young adulthood.'

The researchers mentioned people's perceptions about the timing of private and public events because prior studies by them and others have shown that people's narratives about their personal lives also show a bias towards perceiving more important personal events – such as marriages – as occurring more often earlier in life.

The notion of a youth bias in people's perceptions about the timing of major public and private events also chimes with research on a memory phenomenon known as 'the reminiscence bump'. This is our tendency to recall more events from our teens and twenties than any other stage of our lives. In fact, Koppel and Bernsten speculated that perhaps the youth bias 'structures recall,' heightening access to our memories from our youth. They added that their discovery of a youth bias 'opens up new vistas' for research, including studies to find out whether the bias exists in other cultures outside of the USA, and whether it applies to other domains, such as people's beliefs about when in a lifetime a person is most likely to meet the best friend they'll ever have.



In the *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*



Eccentricity and appreciation of art

In the *European Journal of Social Psychology*

Van Gogh sliced off his own ear. Truman Capote insisted he could only think in a supine position while sipping coffee and puffing on a cigarette. Michael Jackson hung out with a chimp, and posed for photographers while sleeping in a hyperbaric chamber. Lady Gaga attended an awards ceremony wearing a dress made from meat. There's a stereotype that creative people are eccentric and it's easy to find examples like these to support the point.

A new study shows that because of this widely held stereotype, people infer that work produced by an eccentric person is better and more valuable than that produced by a conventional character. Eccentricity is taken as a sign of artistic skill, except when the work in question is conventional and/or the display of eccentricity is judged to be fake.

Wijnand van Tilberg and Eric Igou tested these ideas across five studies. In the first, 38 students rated a painting by Van Gogh more positively if they were first told about the ear-cutting incident. In two other studies, dozens more students rated paintings by a fictional Icelandic artist more positively and estimated it to be more valuable if they were told he had an eccentric personality, or if they saw a photograph showing him looking eccentric, unshaven with half-long hair (as opposed to seeing a photo showing him



looking conventional, with short hair and neat clothing).

The fourth and fifth studies highlighted some caveats. Students rated the unconventional art of Joseph Beuys ('The Pack') more positively if they were told that Beuys was eccentric in that he had a habit of carrying roadside stones on his head. However, the same yarn about Andrea del Verrocchio did not lead to higher ratings for his conventional art ('Lady of Flowers'). Similarly, seeing a photo of Lady Gaga crouching in an usual outfit (tight, all black, with shiny mask) led student participants to rate her as more highly skilled compared to seeing her seated in a conventional black dress; unless, that is, the students were told that Gaga's eccentricity is fake and no more than a marketing ploy. In other words, eccentricity of the artist

leads to more positive ratings of their work, unless that work is conventional, and/or the artist's unusual behaviour is seen as contrived.

'To the best of our knowledge,' the researchers said, 'this is the first detailed empirical research that establishes a link from creator eccentricity to appreciation of creative works.' Their results build on prior research that's shown thinking about unusual people boosts a person's creative output. The findings also fit with a prior study of 'stereotype confirmation', in which listeners rated a rap more positively if they were told it was by a black artist. 'The perception of creative endeavours, typically considered as (usefully) original, deviant, and novel, is deeply embedded in conformist processes,' van Tilberg and Igou said.

Farewell, Christian

Dr Christian Jarrett, our Research Digest editor and journalist on *The Psychologist*, left the Society on 19 March. You can read his goodbye, and the comments of appreciative readers, on the Digest blog at tinyurl.com/cjleaves.

We asked Professor Catriona Morrison, Chair of the Society's Psychology Education Board, for her views on Christian's legacy. She said: 'The Research Digest came along at just the right time.

Back in September 2003, the means of

disseminating knowledge were changing rapidly. Science blogging was beginning to get a foothold, and social media such as Facebook was just around the corner. Twitter was still nearly three years off! Christian was adept at surfing

this digital wave, and the resultant influence of the Digest is evidenced by the impressive levels of engagement by a very wide range of professional psychologists and non-psychologists. It has opened the Society up to a much broader readership, consequently raising the profile of the Society not just in the UK but worldwide.'

Professor Graham Powell was Chair of the then Psychologist Policy Committee when the Digest was proposed. He told us: 'Committees rarely get excited, but when feedback on the new venture started to come through, I nearly fell off my seat and most committee members woke up. The original aim was in part to feed the rising appetite for psychology to be found in schools, the A-level students cramming into our public

lecture events. The reality was that it was not just the youngsters who were hooked, but a large percentage of our expert membership! We had completely underestimated the power of good science writing to engage everyone. It was a pleasure for our hard-pressed members to have someone source, discuss, present a diverse range of evidence-based studies; it broadened our horizons, showed us what to be proud of in our science.

Christian does not just

summarise, he critiques, separates the sense from nonsense, building on his own background of PhD in psychology and postdoctoral work in Manchester.

In checking out his website recently

I was yet again bowled over by the sheer breadth of his writing and sourcing. I would therefore like to thank Christian for educating us and entertaining us for all these years, but above all for fulfilling so uniquely well the Society's mission of diffusing a knowledge of psychology pure and applied, to all.'

Christian leaves the Digest in fine fettle: 32,000 subscribers to the free, fortnightly e-mail; 37,000 followers on Twitter @researchdigest; and an average of around 280,000 page views per month at www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog. He will be a tough act to follow, but we are excited to push on into a new era for both the Research Digest and *The Psychologist* via the appointment of two full-time replacements: see ad on p.283. And Christian: thank you.



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