

Counting the cost of Christmas

A round-up of seasonal psychological research. **NEIL MARTIN and FIONA LYDDY**

If you remember trembling with excitement when Mattel, Fisher-Price or even the mysterious Ronco began splashing their wares on television in those early childhood winter months, you know the exciting lure of advertising at Christmas-time. But does exposure to all this advertising actually influence children's pleas for the latest toy treat?

A study of Dutch children published last

SANTA'S LITTLE HELPERS

ONE way of making children aware that gifts have a price and that the things they want have to be worked and paid for is to pay them for doing household chores. Usually, the control in such a context is exerted by the parent or guardian; the child is often not asked whether he or she thinks such remuneration is fair. In a curious study Jennifer Bowes and her colleagues from Macquarie University, Australia, and Pennsylvania State University studied just this.

They asked over 4500 adolescents at what age they should be expected to be paid for domestic chores and what payment was most appropriate for which task. Children were from a range of nationalities – American, Australian, Swedish, Bulgarian, Czech and Hungarian.

Although not supporting payment for every household job, the Americans, Australians and Swedes were significantly more likely to support payment for chores undertaken than were the Czechs, Bulgarians and Hungarians.

'These differences', the authors suggest, 'appear to reflect a general difference in values between countries with an individualist ethic that emphasises monetary reward for individual effort, and countries that place more emphasis on the social group.' When the group's contribution is valued more than the individual's, the authors conclude, introducing money into the equation threatens social responsibility in those cultures valuing the group's contribution more.

year by Moniek Buijzen and Patti Valkenburg from the University of Amsterdam, found that between 40 and 67 per cent of children interviewed requested an item that was advertised during the Saturday morning programmes that they watched most in the run-up to Christmas. The older children seemed to be more immune from the advertising: 67 per cent of 7- to 8-year-olds requested advertised items whereas only 40 per cent of the 11- to 12-year-olds did. Thirty-six per cent of 7- to 8-year-old boys requested Nintendo, whereas 17 per cent of the girls requested a 'nameless stuffed animal'. The children – regardless of age – who watched the TV network carrying the most advertisements, reported wanting more advertised items than did those who watched the less advert-intensive network.

The results of this study stand in contrast to a new study from the University of Hertfordshire. Karen Pine and Avril Nash studied the gift requests made by children from a different age group (4- to 6-year-old British children) in their letters to Santa and interviewed them about their television viewing habits. The researchers also asked parents of a group of nursery

school children to complete a questionnaire about their children's viewing and to describe their children's Christmas wishes (as expressed in letters to Santa).

Children who watched the greatest amount of television requested a greater number of gifts from Santa than did those who watched a moderate or little amount. These children also requested more branded items (e.g. 'Barbie' instead of 'a doll').

The proportion of branded items requested, however, did not correlate with the amount of advertising viewed. In their survey of those adverts broadcast on Saturday mornings in December, the researchers found that 90 per cent of the toys advertised did not feature in the children's request lists. Children who watched television alone, however, were more likely to request the advertised items. A comparison group of Swedish children – advertising to children is not allowed in Sweden – requested fewer Christmas gifts overall than did their British counterparts.

The lack of a 'relationship between the branded products requested and the frequency of televised advertisements,' the authors argue, 'suggests that advertisements may not have an individual impact on the under-sevens but may simply contribute to a general increase in desire.'

Christmas stuffing

If being stuffed with seasonal fare leaves you feeling the size of an elephant with manoeuvrability to match, your thoughts

CHRISTMAS IN THE RED

With the Christmas season comes gifts, with gifts comes spending, with spending – often – comes debt. Some people, however, are quite adept at avoiding it whereas others aren't. There is also a peculiar asymmetry in the relation between debt and solvency: some people in dire financial situations avoid debt while others in adequate financial positions get into difficulty. Why?

Paul Webley and Ellen Nyhus from Exeter University and Tilburg & Agder University College took a longitudinal, questionnaire-based approach to understanding the psychology of debt and debtors by asking over 3000 Dutch adults to monitor their debt, their attitudes towards it, their view of their time orientation (are they present-people or planning-ahead people) and their self-control (among other factors) over three years.

Debtors were found to be younger, to have lower incomes and fewer economic resources, to be less likely to own their own house or to have a partner, and to have greater economic needs (e.g. rearing children). Chronic debtors tended to be more present-orientated and lacked self-control, preferring to spend immediately. These people had higher expectations of future income than did those less in debt.

will probably lead to exercise and a well-intentioned, activity-based new year resolution.

There is some debate in sport and exercise psychology over how much exercise a person needs before he or she derives positive psychological benefit from it – how much is needed to generate a good mood and whether exercising beyond this amount improves mood still further or depresses it.

Cheryl Hansen and researchers at Northern Arizona University investigated how much exercise 14 women undergraduates needed to report an increase in positive mood. Testing took place at the same time of day over four weeks in four conditions. In the first condition, participants sat quietly for 30 minutes; in the second condition, participants warmed up to a 60 per cent aerobic level then maintained that level for 10 minutes while pedalling a bicycle; in the third condition, exercise duration was extended to 20 minutes; and in the fourth condition, exercise was extended to 30 minutes. Mood was measured before and after each condition.

Exercise, in general, increased vigour and decreased overall negative mood. However, there was no further improvement in mood after the first 10 minutes of exercise: this variable remained fairly stable. The message seems to be that 10 minutes of moderate exercise may be enough to decrease negative mood. Which is reassuring when you're thinking bad thoughts about that pudding.

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Faith conquers all?

People have ambivalent views on whether religion is associated with improved mental health. ANTHONY C. EDWARDS

WHETHER religious commitment is associated with improved or reduced mental health has been a widely researched question in academic psychology. By contrast, a somewhat less widely researched question has been what the public *believe* about the relationship between religion and mental health.

Christopher Lewis (University of Ulster at Magee College) administered three scales – the Francis Scale of Attitudes to Christianity, the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised and the Sandler–Hazari Obsessionality Inventory – to 48 undergraduates. Participants were asked to complete these scales as they believed (a) a religious person would; (b) a non-religious person would; (c) a mental patient would; and according to (d) their own personal responses to these scales. Scores on the psychoticism subscale of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire were lowest when participants put themselves in the shoes of a religious person. However, scores on the scale assessing obsessionality were higher if participants were asked to complete the scales as a religious person would than if they were asked to complete the according to the other two conditions. Thus it would appear that among students, religion may be perceived as a double-edged sword – associated with lower psychoticism, but higher obsessiveness.

Kate Loewenthal and colleagues from Royal Holloway University of London asked people to rank six means of religious coping with depression – faith in God, praying for yourself, having others pray for you, maintaining religious practices, going to see a religious leader and attending a place of worship regularly – as well as various secular means (e.g. approaching a social worker, medication, receiving support from family or friends).

Both religious and non-religious

respondents ranked social means of coping (e.g. having good friends) more highly than either religious or medical means.

Intriguingly, the six religious coping strategies were ranked more highly by men than women. This finding may seem to challenge the belief that women tend to be more religious than men; but, as the authors note, it could relate to men being less willing to seek out aid for depression from professional medical or psychological consultants than women.

The study also found that those who had had a history of depression ranked the religious coping strategies lower than did those without such a history. Former depressives may have had past personal experience of finding religious coping strategies ineffective in helping their depression. However, as Loewenthal and her colleagues note, their study did not actually ask participants whether they had ever tried religious means of coping and, if so, with what effects – so future data are needed to evaluate this interpretation.

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