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Surprising insights from the social sciences

The Red Baron was lucky, unsportsmanlike conduct, and how hormones affect a woman's choice of clothes

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By Kevin Lewis
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THROUGHOUT HUMAN HISTORY, people have debated whether success is determined by luck or talent. A new analysis of the performance of the Red Baron in World War I offers an interesting addendum to this debate. The researchers began with a list of the wins and losses of all German fighter pilots, including that of the most successful pilot, Manfred von Richthofen (a.k.a. the Red Baron), who is credited with 80 victories. Using a sophisticated statistical analysis, they found that pure luck played a large role in air combat, and that perhaps a quarter of the pilots were more skilled than the Red Baron. When the war ended, there were many pilots with perfect records in the sky. If the war had continued, the study suggests, others would have likely beaten the Baron's record. Then they would have been famous - and lucky.

Simkin, M. and Roychowdhury, V., "Theory of Aces: High Score by Skill or Luck?" Journal of Mathematical Sociology (April 2008).

IF YOU'VE EVER paid a fortune-teller, a consultant, or a therapist, perhaps you can relate to some new research on the psychology of advice. In several experiments, university students were asked to date various events in American history. They were then asked to answer the same set of questions but could now receive advice in the form of a fellow student's answer to the same question. The students were either charged nothing for the advice or were charged a fee that would be deducted from the final payout based on the number of correct answers. Those who had to pay - whether they chose to or not - gave more weight to the advice, even if they were as confident in their initial answers as others who had not paid. The effect appears to be explained by the sunk-cost fallacy - letting nonrefundable costs influence future decisions.

Gino, F., "Do We Listen to Advice Just Because We Paid for It? The Impact of Advice Cost on Its Use," Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes (forthcoming).

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DO HORMONES AFFECT how a woman dresses? Two psychologists studied a group of women for a month to see if they dressed differently at various points in their menstrual cycle. The women had to fill out a three-page questionnaire and take a picture of themselves every day. The study found that the women felt they were dressing more provocatively during the fertile days of their cycle, and men who rated the photos perceived the same pattern. The pattern was not present in women using oral contraceptives and was not related to changes in mood. There was some evidence that the women were also more sociable in the fertile days of their cycle. The researchers found no difference between women who were in a relationship and those who were not.

Schwarz, S. and Hassebrauck, M., "Self-Perceived and Observed Variations in Women's Attractiveness Throughout the Menstrual Cycle - A Diary Study," Evolution and Human Behavior (forthcoming).

PEOPLE WITH DARKER skin suffer setbacks from the moment they arrive on

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American shores, new research suggests. An economist examined data from a large survey of immigrants who had just received their green cards. The data included information such as skin color, height, English proficiency, education, pre-immigration occupation, family background, ethnicity, and country of origin. For two immigrants who otherwise have the same background, those with the lightest skin color earned 17 percent more than those with the darkest skin color. This disparity is about the same as the black vs. white or Hispanic vs. non-Hispanic disparity among citizens. The study also noted that, for each inch that an immigrant is taller than the average US height, they earned 2 percent more.

Hersch, J., "Profiling the New Immigrant Worker: The Effects of Skin Color and Height," *Journal of Labor Economics* (April 2008).






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PROFESSIONAL BASKETBALL, AMONG other sports, has been criticized for offering bad role models. One economist may have an explanation. He analyzed data on players in the NBA during the 1996-2003 seasons to see what made some players more prone to unsportsmanlike conduct, as measured by technical fouls or ejections. The author found that having a high salary compared with other players on the team, or in the league generally, was associated with unsportsmanlike conduct. Strikingly, the highest-paid players on a team engage in 7 percent more unsportsmanlike conduct than the second-highest-paid players. Although there are many possible explanations for this pattern, the author concludes that the evidence is consistent with top-paid players having their team and fans over a barrel. A top-paid player is supposedly more exceptional and therefore cannot be replaced easily, so the team and fans give the player more latitude.

Kendall, T., "Celebrity Misbehavior in the NBA," *Journal of Sports Economics* (June 2008).

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