

**SOCIAL STUDIES**

Peer pressure makes people more likely to pay their taxes

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Taxes and peer pressure

"Can peer pressure make delinquent taxpayers pony up what they owe the government?" asks Reuters. "Behavioural economists say it can, and some tax agencies in both the United States and Britain are taking their advice to heart – and finding that they are reaping rewards. ... Psychologist Robert Cialdini, a professor at Arizona State University and an expert in persuasion, pioneered the social insight that if people know what their peers are doing, they are more likely to do the same. Applying that insight, the British tax agency, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, has tested different form letters on delinquent taxpayers. In one letter, this sentence – 'Nine out of 10 people in the U.K. pay their tax on time' – increased positive response by 1.5 per cent. Adding another sentence – 'You are one of the few who have not paid us yet' – raised the success rate 3.9 per cent. HMRC also found compliance rose 6.8 per cent when taxpayers were told they were one of the few delinquents in their hometowns."

Perils of quick thinking

"When people make hasty decisions, they tend to make more mistakes," says NBCNews.com. "Now, a new study on monkeys explains why: Brain cells become hypersensitive to new information, even bad information, making us likelier to draw faulty conclusions. 'When we try to do things too quickly, we tend to make more errors and then when we slow down we tend to be more accurate,' said study co-author Richard Heitz, a neuroscientist at Vanderbilt University. 'Your brain sees things differently when you're placed into a situation where you have to make snap decisions.'" The findings are detailed in Wednesday's issue of the journal Neuron.

Cure for colourblindness?

A cure for colourblindness might be in the offing, writes Melinda Beck of The Wall Street Journal. "Vision scientist Jay Neitz and his colleagues at the University of Washington are building on their 2009 breakthrough in which they restored red-green vision in two colourblind squirrel monkeys by inserting the missing gene into a virus and injecting it into their retinas. Four years later, the monkeys, Sam and Dalton, still pass daily vision tests, identifying colours on a computer screen correctly. They also have a newfound liking for green M&M's, Neitz says."

Fewer stars nowadays

"While parts of the world experience economic hardship, a team of Portuguese, British, Japanese, Italian and Dutch astronomers has found an even bigger slump happening on a cosmic scale," says SciTechDaily.com. "In the largest ever study of its kind, the international team of astronomers has established that the rate of formation of new stars in the universe is now only 1/30th of its peak and that this decline is only set to continue." The new results also predict that "no more than a further 5 per cent of stars will come into existence, even if we wait forever."

Sentenced to cook

"A U.S. judge has ordered a woman who knocked over a police officer to make a Thanksgiving dinner as part of her punishment," says Orange Co. UK. "Valerie Rodgers, 46, of Canton, Ohio, will have to make a roast turkey dinner and all the trimmings for three police officers who are unable to work. Judge Frank Forchione also placed her on probation for a year and said she would be jailed if she did

not comply, reports CantonRep.com. The court heard that police officer Eric Martzoff was directing traffic during a marathon when he ordered Rodgers to stop and not make a left turn. She ignored the order and Martzoff was thrown on his back as she drove past."

Thought du jour

"As long as a scoundrel is illustrious he can count on the support of most men."

Frederick II, King of Prussia (1712-86)