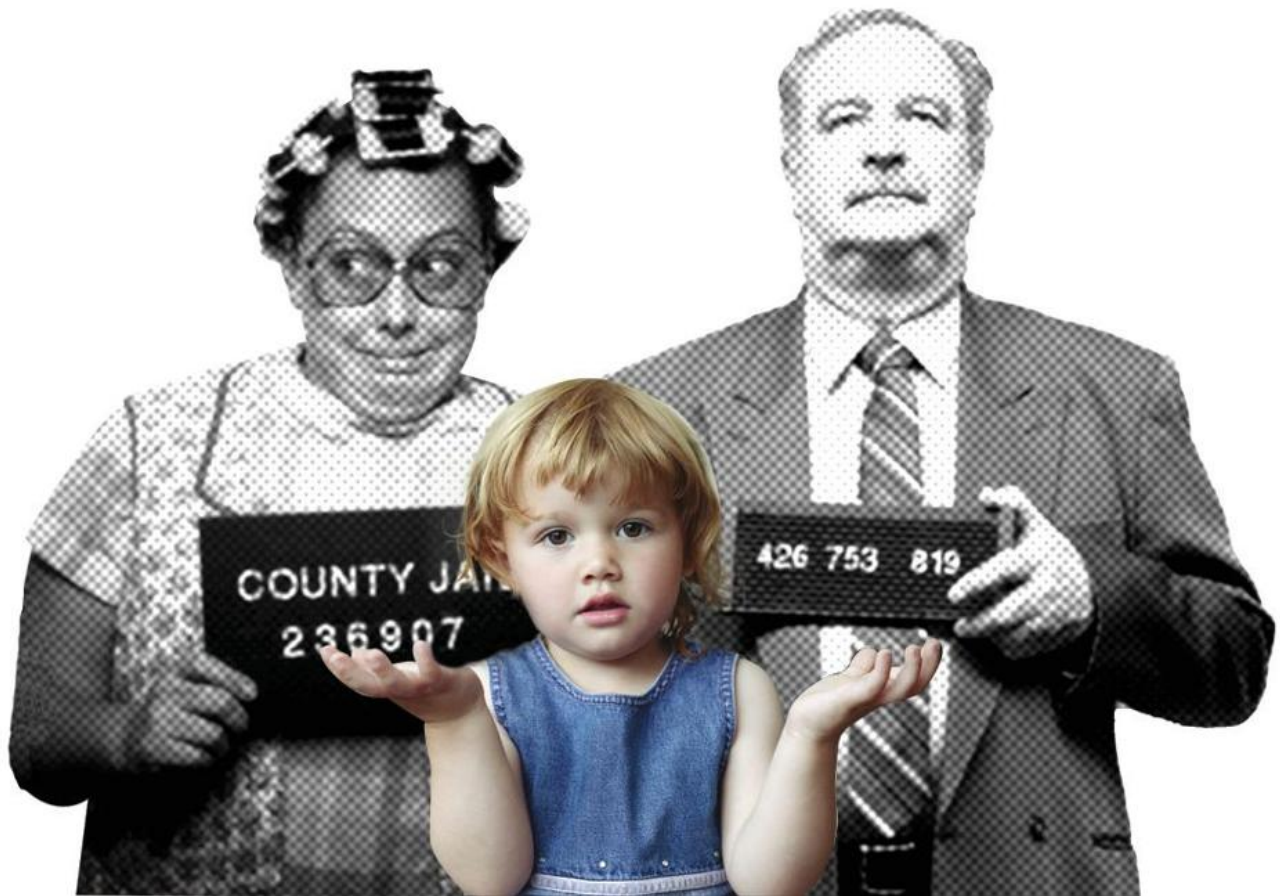


UNCOMMON KNOWLEDGE

The secret to a better alibi

And other surprising insights from the social sciences

By Kevin Lewis | JUNE 17, 2012



MATTHEW CALLAHAN/GLOBE STAFF

Born guilty

IF SOMEONE in your family has done something wrong, is that your problem? It is, according to a new study, if they're a blood relative. Someone whose biological father or grandfather committed bad acts was judged to be more tainted—and therefore more responsible for restitution—than someone with the same father or grandfather related by marriage. Likewise, “long-lost identical twins separated at birth” were both judged

dividuals

Uhlmann, E. et al., "Blood Is Thicker: Moral Spillover Effects Based on Kinship," Cognition (forthcoming).

The X-rated alibi

IF YOU FIND yourself accused of a crime, your best defense might just be to say you were busy watching porn on your computer. In a recent study, people judged a suspect whose alibi was watching an X-rated movie as more believable and less likely to be guilty than a suspect whose alibi was watching a regular movie. An X-rated alibi also made corroborators—like a brother or neighbor—more believable, too.

Allison, M. et al., "Alibi Believability: The Impact of Salacious Alibi Activities," Social Behavior and Personality (May 2012).

Shopping vs. church

RESIDENTS IN STATES like Massachusetts long chafed under "blue laws" restricting business hours on Sundays—after all, who's to say the government knows what's best for you? Well, the government might have been on to something. A recent analysis by two economists finds that the repeal of blue laws led to lower church attendance, as shopping on Sundays was now an option. But rather than the choice making people happier, it led to lower overall happiness among women (though not men). The influence of repealed blue laws, they claim, explains "at least part of the decline in female happiness over the last three decades."

Cohen-Zada, D. & Sander, W., "Religious Participation versus Shopping: What Makes People Happier?" Journal of Law and Economics (November 2011).

The social hormone

SOCIAL BEHAVIOR IS, of course, dependent on brain function, so social science is now busy exploring this connection, and one key ingredient seems to be the hormone oxytocin. Researchers in Scandinavia administered either an oxytocin or placebo nasal spray to people and then asked them to rate the emotional content of faces. The researchers also tracked subjects' pupil diameter. Oxytocin improved the ability to differentiate emotional expressions, but only for people who weren't good at this in the first place. Oxytocin also increased pupil dilation, which has been associated with

“increased attractiveness and approach behavior.”

Leknes, S. et al., “Oxytocin Enhances Pupil Dilation and Sensitivity to ‘Hidden’ Emotional Expressions,” Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience (forthcoming).

Why they hate America

WHAT DRIVES ANTI-AMERICAN feeling in the Muslim world? It’s easy to conflate it with religious belief, but a recent study finds that anti-American sentiment in Muslim countries is less a product of religious fervor than domestic politics—specifically, “the intensity of domestic political competition between a country’s Islamist and secular-national factions.” As an example, Turkey has a much higher level of anti-American sentiment than Senegal, despite Senegal’s higher percentage of highly religious Muslims. In fact, among Muslim countries, the proportion of highly religious Muslims is associated with less anti-American sentiment. (The authors also found that a country’s distance to Jerusalem—the epicenter of Middle East controversy—was not significantly associated with anti-American sentiment.)

Blaydes, L. & Linzer, D., “Elite Competition, Religiosity, and Anti-Americanism in the Islamic World,” American Political Science Review (May 2012).

Get two weeks of FREE unlimited access to BostonGlobe.com. No credit card required.

Kevin Lewis is an Ideas columnist. He can be reached at kevin.lewis.ideas@gmail.com.