

Obvious conclusions from obvious studies

February 2 2010, By Sam McManis

Months of planning and hypothesizing presumably took place. Weeks of research compiled, numbers crunched, data analyzed. Days of rigorous revision to prepare for publication.

Finally, in this month's [Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology](#), a University of Rochester study revealed that ...

People are happier on weekends.

The study got gussied up and slapped with a fancy, syndrome-like sobriquet, "The Weekend Effect." But essentially, it's telling us that we feel better and enjoy the freedom of weekends as opposed to the soul-crushing, punch-the-clock workweek.

To which many might say, "Well, duh!"

It's no revelation to followers of 1980s "big hair" bands who headbanged to Loverboy's "Working for the Weekend." But then, lead singer Mike Reno never had hard data to back up his claim. Richard Ryan, a professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, does.

As Ryan explained in a news release, "Our findings highlight just how important free time is to an individual's well-being."

To which many might ask, "They get paid for studying that?"

Giving Ryan the benefit of the doubt, The Sacramento Bee contacted

him and tactfully asked, "Well, isn't this a tad obvious?" He replied via e-mail that "we were even more interested in why" people are happier on weekends.

Short answer: They don't have to work.

Oh, and this: "We were also identifying the time course of the WEE (weekend effect), showing that it begins Friday afternoon but sadly ends Sunday afternoon. As people anticipate the next day, mood goes down."

Really?

So maybe we're being a little harsh on this one study. It's not as if it stands alone in the annals of "Duh!" research. It's simply the latest example of academic and scientific exploration that confirms what sensible people already know.

To wit:

- "People's Clothing Behavior According to External Weather and Indoor Environment," in the journal *Building and Environment*, 2007. Major finding: When it's cold, people wear more clothes.
- "Integrating Cues of Social Interest and Voice Pitch in Men's Preferences for Women's Voices," in *Biology Letters*, 2008. Major finding: Men are attracted to women who like them.
- "Characteristics Associated With Older Adolescents Who Have a Television in Their Bedrooms," in *Pediatrics*, 2008. Major finding: Teenagers with TVs in their room watch more TV.
- "Effects of Acute Alcohol Consumption on Ratings of Attractiveness of Facial Stimuli," in *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, 2008. Major finding:

"Alcohol consumption increases ratings of attractiveness. ... (It) can persist up to 24 hours after consumption, but only in male participants when rating female faces."

That last one is the "beer goggles" study that garnered chuckles from scores of media outlets when it was released.

But whether studies are meant to be serious ("Eighty-five percent of headache sufferers would be happier without headaches," National Headache Foundation) or frivolous ("Smoking pot gives us the munchies," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*), somebody apparently must tackle the job of quantifying the obvious.

At least, that's one of the theories offered by Marc Abrahams, a Harvard scientist and co-founder of the magazine *Annals of Improbable Research*. (He's the guy who, every October, awards the Ig Nobel Prize for wacky research.)

Abrahams doesn't have any hard data, but anecdotally, he breaks down the people who do "obvious" studies thus:

- Researchers who are oblivious to the obvious.
- Researchers who seek to prove the obvious wrong.
- Researchers who need data to confirm a belief so that programs can be funded.

"The first type is the most fun for everybody else," Abrahams says from his office in Cambridge, Mass. "By everybody, I mean even the individuals who work with them. They usually find that an amusing thing."

The last type, he says, is the most politicized.

"It is usually some political fight," Abrahams says, "and nobody will do a thing about (an issue) until somebody comes up and says, 'OK, I've got numbers. It was foolish that somebody had to go to all the time and trouble to do this, but now that somebody has, we can all agree it's time to do something.' "

Abrahams' online magazine (you can read it at improbable.com) devotes a section, called "Soft Is Hard," to obvious studies. It suggests that "soft science" (sociology, psychology) lends itself to such research.

"If you're really trying to find out the way people behave or think, how do you even start?" Abrahams says. "If you're figuring out how two different kinds of rock behave, there are all kinds of things to measure and test. But if you're looking at why somebody falls in love, what on earth do you measure?"

So Abrahams is not completely scornful of the obvious.

"I'm not saying they deserve mockery," he says. "But if you're at all awake, you should already know this stuff."

Where is the research to back up that claim?

Well, there's a 2001 study by Texas Christian University researchers, published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. It is titled: "That's Completely Obvious ... and Important: Lay Judgments of Social Psychological Findings."

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