

Odd Science

A Sampling
of Scientific
Studies from
the Odd to the
Ridiculous

- Shimon Rosenberg



Every once in a while we hear of a scientific study so outlandish that we wonder what the researchers were thinking. Who cares whether rats can tell the difference between Japanese and Dutch? What difference does it make whether people learn to laugh when they are tickled or if it is just a reflex? Every year the research world conducts experiments ranging from the odd to the ridiculous to the outright outlandish. Here is a small sampling of particularly odd studies reflecting the stranger side of science.

Did you ever wander into the prestigious Zicklin School of Business in the pre-dawn hours? If so, while strolling through the wide corridors you may have bumped into a heavysset figure with large glasses and thin, black whiskers looking like a lost child. Don't interrupt him! He is in the midst of conducting a very important study.

Professor John Trinkaus has graced the halls of this institution for the past 25 years, completely dedicated to the dozens of studies he has led. He has plowed through many topics and overturned many previously accepted theories.

For example, after spending countless hours and sleepless nights, Trinkaus discovered that 79% of men prefer white sports shoes while only 34% of women choose the same. But that's not all. Another study of his—this one took 10 years to complete!—involved lost gloves. Professor Trinkaus proved conclusively that left gloves are lost far more often than right gloves. In fact (wait till you hear this...) left gloves are lost *three times* as often as their right counterparts!

After years of speculation, in the course of which Professor Trinkaus considered blaming the left-handed among us, he decided that the explanation was that most people remove their right glove first. The right glove is stuffed into the pocket first, followed shortly thereafter by the left glove. That leaves the left glove closer to the pocket's entrance and more prone to falling out and being lost. Brilliant!

11 Items? Not in this Lane!

Did you ever choose the express lane in the supermarket? A large sign is usually strategically positioned nearby clarifying "10 Items or Less." How many times have you stood in the longer "express" lane while the customer ahead of you pulls out the 11th item from his shopping cart—and it isn't even half empty yet? The cashier complains at this obvious trespass. So while you



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are waiting impatiently you swallow your anger... because you have around 21 items to unload!

If you have been wondering what percentage of shoppers will knowingly ignore the written admonition and take advantage of the express lane, you can relax. It's to answer the great weighty questions of the day like this that Professor Trinkaus was created.

Trinkaus is a somewhat curious yet respected professor at the Zicklin School of Business, a division of Baruch College in Manhattan and the largest business college in the United States. He is especially famous



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for his research into everyday events. He has spent years carrying out dozens of studies on all sorts of trivialities that people do all the time. He seeks to glean information on how people think and how society is improving, or otherwise.

Take, for example, the above episode of standing in the express lane and seeing someone with more than the permitted sum of items. We may harumpf, snicker and even sneer at the violator but rarely do we do anything more. Trinkaus, who is older than many of us, has been standing in express lanes since they were still a new concept. One time the number of rule-breakers caught his attention and he decided to channel his frustration into a study to benefit civilization.

For the next few years Trinkaus spent untold hours standing at the express lanes of large supermarkets. He marked down exactly how many people had fewer than the maximum number of items, how many had the exact number and how many went over. He also categorized the offenders by how far above the limit they went and noted at what point other customers became annoyed.

The results were published in a scientific journal in 1993. Trinkaus determined that no more than 15% of shoppers have the correct number of items and generally people have between one to three items more than are permitted. Interestingly, he noted that the people who go above the limit will usually have mostly smaller items so that the cashier will not notice immediately that they are past the allowance.

Even more interesting is the fact that when he returned to the same supermarket just 10 years later, in 2002, to repeat the study it turned out that now only 7% of customers stuck to the rules. The remaining 93% went above the limit. Trinkaus ascribed this to the fact that today's internet-educated youths are less careful, less patient and less inclined to respect authority.

Other strange studies by Professor Trinkaus dealt with the question of how many people like Brussels sprouts. In case you were wondering, the answer is that

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46% do like them while 54% do not. How many people carry attaché cases? Around one in five. Of them, 71% are men. Trinkaus speculates that most of these cases are empty; they are carried purely to present a sophisticated image.

He found that the number of children who go around in baseball caps with the visor turned to the back is falling at a rate of 10% annually. Trinkaus has also dedicated many hours to finding out such matters as: how long do patients wait at a doctor's office, how many swimmers prefer the shallow section of the pool, how many people will sooner go through an open door than a closed one, etc.

One of his lengthiest and most thorough studies was to find out how many people come to a full stop at a stop sign. What makes this particular study especially fascinating is that he conducted it many times over a period of years. He conducted five studies on this topic between 1982 and 1999, and each