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Letters

Elemental error illuminated

The analytical technique to which Rick Weiss refers in "Elements employed to trace smuggled tusks" (SN: 8/25/90, p.119) is stable isotope ratio analysis. The nuclides of carbon, nitrogen and strontium mentioned in the article are stable, not radioactive as stated. Their relative amounts in a material do not change with time after death, as would the carbon-12:carbon-14 (radioactive) ratio used in radiocarbon dating.

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American antagonism?

At first glance, the study described in "Sweeter slumber for tots who sleep solo" (SN: 8/11/90, p.87) appears to be straightforward science. A closer look reveals cultural preju-

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Cover: A solid-waste landfill nestles in this scenic Mountain View, Calif., vista. Traditionally, communities have entombed their refuse in such waste graves. However, available landfill space is shrinking and few new landfills are opening as public concern grows over their potential health threats. To revive the landfill option, several research teams are exploring safer and more effective ways to manage buried garbage. (Photo: Ronald W. May)

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dice masquerading as science.

"The researchers warn that tots who get in the habit of sleeping with their parents may suffer chronic sleep problems," according to your article. But what are those "problems"? The more often children are allowed to come to their parents' bed during the night, the more they "dislike sleeping alone" and the more they "resist going to bed," you report. Assuming that the parents in this study, like most American parents, make their children begin their night sleep by themselves, these findings can be restated: The more thoroughly parents force their children to sleep alone, the less the children will resist.

Study coauthor Deborah Madansky recommends, therefore, "that parents encourage small children to go to bed alone and to fall back asleep without waking the rest of the household."

American culture is exceptional for the extent to which we push our babies away, forcing them to be "independent." Their resistance to this is called, as in the article, "behavior difficulties." But the real problem is

our antagonism to the natural needs of the growing infant. Do we imagine that during the millennia of primate and human evolution, our babies slept in their own rooms, away from their mothers? Is it healthy for us now to impose such separation on our very young infants?

Earlier in this century, the most prominent pediatric authorities in the United States condemned mothers' holding and rocking their babies. Affection was considered mawkish; a "businesslike" manner with young children was preferred. Cloaked in the mantle of science, these authorities ratified our culture's tendency — remarkable when viewed from a crosscultural perspective — to withhold from infants the warm human contact that they are born needing. This unhappy project evidently continues.

Andrew Bard Schmookler
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Schmookler is the author of *The Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution* (1986, Houghton Mifflin).



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