

BEHAVIOR

The untouchables

The impersonality of modern life in the United States has created a caste of untouchables. Strangers not only tend to avoid eye contact, they jealously guard their personal space and usually attempt to ward off any unnecessary form of physical contact. But human touch is a potent form of communication, say researchers at Purdue University. In an experiment, they showed that even a light touch on the hand from a stranger can make people feel better about themselves and their environment.

The experiment was set up in the Purdue library. During alternate half hours, clerks returning library cards either touched or did not touch hands of people with whom they were dealing. The experimenters (Richard Heslin, Jeffrey D. Fisher and Marvin Rytting) then interviewed students who had cards returned. Those who were touched were more likely than the others to report positive feelings about themselves, the clerk and the library—even though the touch lasted only about a half second, and half of the students did not even recall being touched. The effect of this fleeting touch was especially potent, Heslin suggests, because such contact (which usually conveys a message of tenderness) is rare. Even so, he says, the results of the experiment should probably not be applied on a wholesale basis. As pleasant as human contact is, many people find it threatening. People are touchy about being touched.

Teenage drinking

Almost one-fourth of the junior and senior high school students in the United States, 13 to 18 years of age, are heavy or moderately heavy drinkers, according to the results of a recent national survey conducted by the Research Triangle Institute in Research Triangle Park, N.C. About 18 percent of the girls and more than 30 percent of the boys surveyed across the country fell into the serious drinking categories. The survey defined heavy drinking as having five to twelve alcoholic drinks on at least one occasion per week. Moderate drinking is the same amount three to four times a month or two to four drinks at least once a week. Parental and peer drinking were closely associated with teenage drinking. Blacks, young people in the South and those with strong religious values were most likely to be among the abstainers. Among the frequent drinkers, beer is the preferred beverage. Of the 55 percent who drink at least once a month, 42 percent drink beer, 33 percent drink wine and 32 percent drink hard liquor.

Writing like you speak

"Increases in awkwardness, run-on sentences and incoherent paragraphs," are becoming more and more evident in the writing of students. This is the latest finding of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The 13- and 17-year-old students surveyed were found to be writing with less coherence and more awkwardness than the same age group four years ago. Not all age groups, however, showed this decline. Nine-year-olds did slightly better than in previous surveys.

The loss of the ability to compose a classically coherent and well organized paragraph does not appear to, as many parents complain, go hand in hand with a decline in the teaching of basic writing skills. Grammar, spelling and punctuation were all at least as well developed as in previous years. The data suggest that cultural changes rather than teaching ability may be responsible for the prevalence of short, clipped sentences. Business and personal communication, for instance, depends more and more on verbal expression (telephone), and perhaps students are beginning to write like they speak.

BIOMEDICINE

Power lines and health hazards

There is increasing concern over the health hazards of electronic equipment—radar, microwave ovens, transistor radios, electric blankets, power lines—especially since companies want to bestow increasingly potent voltage on this equipment (SN: 6/29/74, p. 418). Now the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has opened an investigation to determine whether ultra-high-voltage power lines should be limited because of such hazards.

Such lines, introduced in the United States in 1969 and now operating in six states, carry 765,000 volts. Scientific studies, although limited, suggest that such power may be dangerous to health. For instance, a study was conducted in the Soviet Union on 45 persons working in 400,000-volt and 500,000-volt switch yards two to five hours daily. The workers were found to experience, right after high-voltage electrical exposure, instability of pulse and blood pressure, tremors of arms and legs, slowed heart beat and anemia. Electrical fields below a line carrying 765,000 volts can reach a level described as 92 bolts per centimeter. When Robert Becker, an orthopedic surgeon at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Syracuse, N.Y., exposed rats to electrical fields of 70 volts per centimeter, he noted changes in the levels of chemicals in their blood.

Sexual activity and vision

Venereal diseases and other genital infections have been found to be transmitted to the mouth. Now a team of ophthalmologists at the University of California at San Francisco reports in the November ARCHIVES OF OPHTHALMOLOGY that such infections can also end up in the eyes.

As sexual promiscuity has increased in recent years, eye infections of venereal origin have also increased, according to Jang O. Oh and his team. Now Oh and his colleagues have found that herpes simplex virus type 2 infections from the genital area can also infect the eyes.

Herpes type 2 genital infections have been implicated in cervical cancer, neurological disorders and fetal and neonatal diseases. The virus can inflict pain, redness and discharge on the eyes and even reduce vision.

New malaria drug

As malarial parasites have become resistant to chloroquine, the drug that was once effective against them, pharmacologists have feverishly sought a new, effective drug. Such a drug may now have been found, by Gordon M. Trenholme and colleagues at Rush University in Chicago.

The drug, they report in the Nov. 21 SCIENCE, is a 4-quinolinemethanol known as mefloquine hydrochloride. Given orally to 47 volunteers infected with malaria, it resulted in rapid clearance of fever and malarial parasites in the blood. What's more, the drug cured 20 patients with chloroquine-resistant malarial infections.

Lead in baby food

On the basis of a canned foods survey conducted in 1973, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has announced that children who eat canned baby foods are being exposed to hazardous levels of lead. Some adult canned foods also contain high levels of lead, the FDA reports.

Since the lead in these foods undoubtedly comes from the cans they're packed in, the canning industry has informed the FDA that it is reducing the lead content of cans. It claims that the content is now about half of what it was during 1973.