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Tim Plocinski
College of DuPage

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Watching NASCAR Makes You Smarter

Tim Plocinski

I get to work on Tuesday – new assignment – I’ve been chosen to head up a research project, sponsored by NBC, to determine the effect of television on the cognitive abilities 18 to 25 year old males. As a control group, we have to round up these 18 to 25 year old Amish males from a little communality just outside of Pittsburgh.

I hate my job. I got involved in research psychology simply because I wanted to understand my own neurotic behavior. Private things. Things you can’t tell your shrink or your girlfriend: things about feet, things about inadequacy, anxiety, various obsessions and creative compulsions. I studied the DSM-IV constantly, realizing it’s like a mail-order catalogue for interesting malfunctions of the mind. I managed to identify at least six symptoms on most of the disorders, and the ones I only had two or three, I chalked up to denial.

I did say I was *research* psychologist, and you are probably curious, given my initial motivation and mastery of the DSM-IV, why I am not a *clinical* psychologist. The answer is really simple, early in graduate school I took an internship with a psychologist, Dr. Peters. It was nice to get out from under the books and lectures – and I went into the world alarmed and determined. After a few weeks of making coffee and answering phones, Dr. Peters allowed me to sit in on a few sessions.

Sitting behind the see thru pane of a two-way mirror, I identified a new neurotic tendency I hadn’t know I had: Voyeurism. I thoroughly enjoyed watching these people pouring their heads out on to the floor while the doctor poked around and examined it. I added Voyeurism to the list and tried to take notes on the session, looking forward to my first try at counseling a client with a mix of anticipation and anxiousness that made my toes curl and my eyes dart.

Dr. Peters had a discount program for the legion of uninsured depressives. The program essentially consisted of a few sessions with an intern, with an understanding that they were not seeing a professional – only offering up their minds for some practice by a future star of the psychology field.

Personally I didn’t like the thought of someone practicing with my psyche, but the middle aged housewives that signed up for the program in droves didn’t seem to mind. Doctors get cadavers, we get middle aged housewives. After six months of sitting behind my trick mirror, Dr. Peters assigned me my first case. Her name was Sally Struthers.

Not the Sally Struthers of *All in the Family* fame, but a different, fatter, poorer Sally Struthers. I wanted to laugh and then worried about laughing. I needed a distraction and then worried about my focus on the client. I handed her a form and then studied her, thinking of what I would say.

She was between thirty-five and fifty, with the sort of bags under her eyes that met her in the morning mirror and mocked her as she brushed her teeth before bed. While I waited for her to fill out her form, I placed personal wagers on her age. I bought a ticket for forty-two and set the stake at asking her about her sex life. A winner would grant me permission to delve into her libido, a loser, and I would be stuck with mundane questions about her thoroughly boring life.

Normally when a new client comes to the practice the secretary passes out and collects the forms bringing them to the doctor in his office. Then he studies the responses and prepares some notes on what he thinks the patient is suffering from. The interns did not get such treatment. That was the problem with the free service, Dr. Peters did not want his

salaries employees doing any work on the charity cases. It fell to the intern to pass out the form and collect it in the same meeting. From there I imagined I would ask her to tell me about herself while I frantically read her responses.

When she handed back the form, I decided I was only interested in her age and the rest of the responses were trivial. I had a bet to win. My eyes were drawn to the name field, Sally Struthers. *Don't laugh*. Scanning over I saw the age, forty-two. *Don't Celebrate*. I skipped the rest of the form and decided to speak.

"Welcome Mrs. Struthers, mind if I call you Sally?" That almost put me over the edge. *Welcome Mrs. Struthers, mind if I call you Sally... Struthers for my personal amusement?* I wanted my compulsions to be solely motivated by nerves. After all, it was my first session with a crazy person and I was about to get a taste of my chosen career path. I knew it was something else: I knew that Dr. Peters had left, he wasn't sitting in my hidden room taking notes, instead I saw his Beamer pull out of the lot as Sally Struthers' pulled in; I knew her name was Sally Struthers, yet she wasn't the real Sally Struthers – she was an imposter; I knew I had won the bet on her age. I felt good about that victory and I couldn't wait to collect my earnings.

"Why no Doctor, all my friends call me Sally."

I debated whether or not to remind her I wasn't actually a Doctor, just an intern who had no idea what I was doing and that I hadn't even read her form. Maybe I should tell her that Dr. Peters had left and wasn't sitting behind the mirror she kept glancing at.

I flipped a page on my legal pad and wrote in a very serious way: "All her friends call her Sally." Now that that was out of the way, I was ready to get to the heart of the issue.

"What seems to be the problem, Sally?"

"I'm depressed"

"What is your relationship status?"

"Didn't you read my form?"

"I did, but I find when a patient tells me about herself, it helps her to work through her problems on her own."

"I don't understand how telling you that I am married would help anything, it's just a statement of fact, my problem is not with my husband."

"I wanted to see the way you said 'I'm married'."

"You didn't read my form, did you?"

While taking notes in my hidden room, I realized that when a person is asked a question by a professional, they tend not to put it into context. They simply obey, because all these people really want is to hear themselves speak. Counseling is not about answers, it's about the sound of the patient's voice bouncing off the counselor and reflecting back to the lonely counseled. This drone is broken occasionally by prompting questions that signal to the patient that it is time to change key for a while, move from whining to self-analyzing. But this Sally Struthers lady was different, she was combative. I wasn't really sure how to continue, so I just jumped right back in.

"Your problem is with your sex life." I said as seriously as I could. Sally looked shocked and fired back, "You're a pervert. Free or not, I'm not going to take this from you."

Sally got up, collected her coat and left. I sat there partially wishing I had guessed 43 and contemplating my future. I quickly found out that my time with Dr. Peters was over, as he dismissed me after lunch. Being released didn't really upset me much, except for the lost credits I stood to gain. I would miss the little observational room, but perhaps after Dr. Peters cooled off, he'd let me hang out in there.

So Sally Struthers started my career as a research psychologist. My chosen profession didn't choose me, so I took her awkward step-sister out. After school I ended up working for Trans-Media-Systems, a media research company, and that is where I remain. Except for the

fact that I dread coming to work and hate my assignments, the place isn't all that bad. Since we do exclusively commercial media research, and our studies are rarely, if ever corroborated. We don't even have a proper peer review system. The company does not require peer reviews, but the by-laws clearly state that the lead researchers count as peers for their own projects. Perhaps it's the whole self-analysis principle.

Either way, I get to reach conclusions without much consequence. Because we sold to the networks, all information was proprietary, and, for the most part, went unchecked outside of the companies peer review system. When I applied for the job, I neglected to mention that I had founded the fledgling "Citizen(s) for Imperfect Science (C4IS)" association. The group had a long history (dating back to when I first got my driver's license) but was historically low on members (it had always only been me). Initially the C4IS concentrated on giving misleading information to phone surveys, and later moved on to skewing traffic data.

While lying on the phone and circling parking lots to jack up the patron count were minor activities in the grand scheme of statistics – the real change came when I got the job at TMS. As I rose through the ranks, my ability to skew data grew exponentially. Early on as a lowly fact checker, I would sign off on all sorts of false assumptions and statements. The self-absorbed researchers were above reproach anyways, so I let their faulty data stand. This earned me an elevated status amongst the higher-ups, eventually leading to a promotion as a research assistant.

I went from assistant, to my own office in a matter of six months. Once I gained control of my own projects, the true fun began. I don't feel any guilt about it, you should see the studies the networks want us to work on. Today's assignment is a perfect example, as I told you earlier, we are looking at the effect of television on the cognitive abilities 18 to 25 year old males. I am to be looking at various types of programming, and the effect it has on the intelligence of young men. They don't have to say it in the design document (and they don't) but they are keying on the ones that decrease intelligence. It's not my paranoid delusions say that, it's the truth: beat them down and rope them in, a motto anyone could live by.

What the design document did say is that we were to administer various aptitude tests and have a same size no smaller than 100 men in the 18-25 year old category. They are to take the tests one hour before watching four hours of "The Golden Girls" (or something similar) and take the tests again one hour after. All this data is then compiled into a database, and conclusions are drawn, scheduling is affected, and new pilots are signed or dropped.

No matter what type of programming (including "educational") the scores consistently decreased by 10-15%. Our Amish friends retained the same scores after 6 hours of doing nothing. My, C4IS comrades were calling (well they would be if I had any) something had to be done. The research was designed such that there were 5 general categories: Sports, Drama, Comedy, Educational and Action. Under each there were sub-categories that were really nothing more than specific shows.

Going through the data, I noticed that NASCAR had the greatest decline of any of the other specific shows, a gaudy 22% decline.

Had I known the outcome, I still probably would've done the same thing over again, I mean after all, today's TV guide is screaming the false news all from grocery check out lanes across the country: "New Study Proves... Watching NASCAR Makes You Smarter." This of course, has lead to a plethora of firms looking to corroborate our data. The lie is still safe, because studies like these take a long time (when done properly). Lack of any additional evidence has not stopped the tabloids from running headlines like: "Nature, Nurture or NASCAR?"

It's all very empowering actually. Right before I inverted the results to read as a 22% increase and while I was falsifying the documents to such a claim, I imagined this outcome. The C4IS has come a long way since its early years, and if it had any members, I knew they would be proud.