

Research offers little to human wisdom

Garth George asks who comes up with the funding for all this probing into human behaviour, which is mainly common sense?

Day after day in this newspaper and others we are presented with stories in which the first sentence ends with the words “a new survey shows” or “new research reveals” or “scientists have discovered”.

These items seem to have an irresistible appeal to news editors seeking urgently to fill inconvenient holes in news pages. Few of these “research” results add anything to the sum of human knowledge for often all they do is confirm “scientifically” what we sentient humans have known either intuitively or by experience ever since we put childhood behind us.

Seldom, if ever, are we told who sponsored the “research”, or how much it cost. There is so much of it about these days that the cost must be staggering and I suspect that business, industry and lobby groups such as the environmental movement stump up for much of it.

One of the latest to appear in these pages told us that “when it comes to crossing the road, humans act more like lemmings than rational people when they blindly follow other pedestrians”. The “research”, by biologists at Leeds University using computer projections (of course), concluded that at a busy city intersection pedestrians were 1.5 to 2.5 times more likely to cross a busy road if someone stepped out in front of the traffic first and that men were more likely to do so than women.

So what? How many of us, cocooned in our own little mental world at the lights, have taken a step thinking the lights have changed when someone in front does, only to stop dead a split second later when we realise that the silly bugger has decided to jaywalk? If this “research” proves anything, it is that university scientists have too little to do with their time and their funding.

Then there was the “study” by researchers at a medical school in Ohio which concluded that “feverish texting by teenagers could be a dangerous sign because they are more likely to have sex and binge drink”.

Such texters - one in five teenagers, many female, according to the study - were, among other things, 43 per cent more likely to be binge drinkers and 90 per cent more likely to have had four or more sexual partners.

It doesn't seem to have occurred to the researchers that they have the whole thing back to front - that if a teen is bonking, or being bonked by, four or more partners then he or she is sure to be texting madly to set up assignations. Or if the teen is a drinker to line up a new source of booze and somewhere to drink it.

Good news for men came from an Italian series of studies of 4000 men that show that a healthy sex life makes

men live longer. The bad news, for some, was that that happens only if the bloke is faithful to his partner and doesn't screw around. That only goes to show that the Bible has it right - one man for one woman for life, and “you shall not commit adultery” - and that God didn't proclaim such principles to spoil our fun but rather to enhance it.

The gem of them all was contained in a brief item on one of the world pages on Tuesday: The British Government will introduce a “happiness index” to gauge the population's psychological and environmental wellbeing. This index, Prime Minister David Cameron says, will be at the heart of future policymaking.

According to the Guardian, the Government will ask its independent national statistician to devise questions to add to the existing household survey by as early as next northern spring.

Now that will be a task and a half, for if you call up any one of the internet's quotations websites you will be confronted with hundreds of definitions of happiness. They vary from Ingrid Bergman's “Happiness is good health and a bad memory” to American journalist John Gunther's “All happiness depends on a leisurely breakfast” to Canadian poet Henry Drummond's “Happiness ... consists in giving, and in serving others” to American writer Ambrose Bierce's “Happiness [is] an agreeable sensation arising from contemplating the misery of another”.

But when it comes to a futility of a national happiness index, you can't go past the great truth uttered by Martha Washington, wife of first US President George: “I've learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions and not on our circumstances.”

But I suppose that doesn't really matter because Mr Cameron's Government doesn't really want to know how happy people are; what it wants to know is what to do to keep them thinking they're happy and voting Conservative.

Let the last word go to Wayne Atwell, senior brand strategist for marketing firm Bold Horizon, quoted in this newspaper this week: “I'm always a bit cautious about research ... As with all research and focus groups, what you find out doesn't necessarily translate into fact.”

Wise man, that.

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