

On Research...

Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University



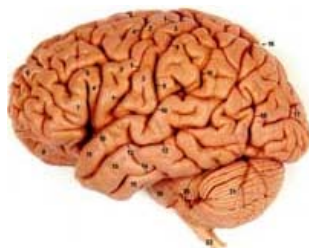
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Of mice and men . . .

Posted on March 23rd, 2009 by earle holland

The research in question was fairly straightforward.

Take two sets of mice – those that were housed singularly and those that lived with companions — induce a stroke in their brains and compare their survival rates.



At question was whether the identical mice lived longer in isolation or with comrades. The experiment was testing the impacts of immunological changes brought on by social interaction. And it possibly might one day suggest new ways to limit, if not thwart, stroke damage.

Results of the experiments were first reported last November at the annual meeting of the [Society for Neuroscience](#). Our story reporting that presentation began with . . .

“STUDY SHOWS HOW SOCIAL SUPPORT MAY PROTECT BRAIN DURING STROKE

“New research in mice suggests that high levels of social support may provide some protection against strokes by reducing the amount of damaging inflammation in the brain.

“Researchers at Ohio State University found that male mice that lived with a female partner before and after a stroke had a much higher survival rate compared to those mice that lived alone.” [[read more](#)]

That story garnered a few news stories but, given that it was but one paper delivered among hundreds at one of the year’s largest science meetings, the news was barely a flash in the pan.

So when a more recent report on the same research was accepted for publication in the respected *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, we figured it deserved a second chance. But this time, we traded the earlier hopeful prospects from the study to something more dismal. It read . . .

“SOCIAL ISOLATION MAKES STROKES MORE DEADLY, STUDY FINDS

“New research in mice suggests that social isolation may promote

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- * [June 2010](#)
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- * [March 2010](#)
- * [February 2010](#)
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- * [October 2009](#)
- * [September 2009](#)
- * [August 2009](#)
- * [July 2009](#)
- * [June 2009](#)
- * [May 2009](#)

more damaging inflammation in the brain during a stroke.

“Researchers at Ohio State University found that all the male mice that lived with a female partner survived seven days after a stroke, but only 40 percent of socially isolated animals lived that long.” [read more]

The data was the same for both stories – only the suggested implications changed. In effect, did the study show a glass half-full or one half-empty?

For scientists — and for the journalists who follow their work — those two interpretations encapsulate an ongoing challenge – the data derived from most research is usually unequivocal.

The implications, however, usually aren't.

The public usually wants a simpler answer than just the data – they want to know what it means, and usually, they want to know specifically what the research means to them!



Science seldom can provide that answer, so interpretations tend to reveal the hidden biases of researchers and reporters alike.

For the latter group, it's understood that most news is bad. But researchers tend to see the promise in their discoveries. So there's always a delicate dance between the two in their collective effort to be both accurate and interesting.

And the public can be left confused.

The solution may be quite simple, once you think about it. Can a statement be “read” two seemingly opposite ways?

If we hear that 5 percent of the public is susceptible to a virus, doesn't that mean that 95 percent are not?

Such questions don't negate the findings, but they do help keep them in perspective. And it's that perspective that lends value to the research findings we hear.

For us older, more morose husbands, though, the mouse study might suggest a different slant:

“LIVING ALONE MAY INSURE STROKE VICTIMS A QUICKER, MORE MERCIFUL DEATH

“Married stroke victims may suffer slower, more-lingering deaths than would similar patients who have no spouse, if the findings of a recent study in mice would apply to humans.”

That's not a story I plan on sharing at home. __Earle Holland

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- * [March 2009](#)
- * [February 2009](#)
- * [January 2009](#)
- * [December 2008](#)
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3 Responses to “Of mice and men . . .”

[Fabio Turone](#) // Mar 24, 2009 at 1:25 pm

I have been reflecting very often on the differences in perception when you turn a 99% into a 1% and viceversa, and I was wondering: did the second release obtain more coverage, less coverage, the same?

Was the content of the news pieces similar or different when starting from the reversed perspective?

Did anyone report the story twice without realising it was the same research?

[Pam Frost Gorder](#) // Mar 24, 2009 at 1:33 pm

So which version of the news release got more hits?!? Don't leave me hanging!

I know, I know, the new one has only been out for one day...

[Amy Waterman](#) // Oct 30, 2009 at 7:29 am

Near the end of your post you concluded that perhaps “LIVING ALONE MAY INSURE STROKE VICTIMS A QUICKER, MORE MERCIFUL DEATH”

I couldn't disagree more. I do agree with what you said in the rest of your story about how the results can be interpreted in different ways and that the public aren't really so interested in the results if the interpretation is left up to them.

However being someone who works with helping people save their marriages, I know how depressed people can get from being in isolation and while they might be more likely to die after suffering from a stroke, they possibly are more likely to suffer from a stroke to begin with due to the isolation and brain damaging depression.

Also, I wouldn't wish anyone the sadness of dying alone with no spouse or family for support, even if it does mean more physical pain to live longer.

Anyway, good article, I just disagreed with your last point.

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« What we don't see . . . Some weeks, better than others . . . »

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