Imagine walking through the neat grid of apartment buildings and national retail chains on Manhattan’s Upper East Side when a researcher approaches to ask if you’ll complete a short questionnaire. You’re asked to predict how the stock market will perform in the next six months, as well as what you think the weather will be like after a string of sunny or rainy days. Your answers reveal that you expect stocks that have performed well in the past to continue blazing upward, and that the weather will hold steady.

Now imagine walking through the warren of winding streets in Chinatown, lined with dim sum shops where Buddha statues sit by the entrances and stores peddle souvenirs emblazoned with yin-yang, the Taoist symbol of perfect balance. You’re asked the same set of questions about the stock market and the weather, but your answers show that you expect appreciating stocks to take a dive, and consistently sunny or rainy weather to pivot to their opposites.

Our surroundings shape the way we behave— for better or worse
by Jennifer Bleyer

Photograph by Peter Gregoire
Colors, symbols, sounds, weather, environment, and the perceived presence of other people all influence us—challenging the very notion that there’s really a freethinking “you.”

In one of his current areas of research, on charitable giving, Alter has compiled evidence that people donate more money for hurricane relief if the hurricane shares their name’s first initial. Seeking some real-world impact with that information, he’s had conversations with the National Weather Service about naming hurricanes to further more often with the most popular American first initials, like J and M.

With such practical intents, Alter demands that his work hew to the highest standard of proof and rigorous scientific method precisely because the notions can be so hard to believe. “We have to be really careful that results are real,” he says. “The public is right to be skeptical because a lot of this stuff isn’t consistent with our intuitions about how the world works. It’s interesting for that reason.”

Drunk Tank Pink

The title of Adam Alter’s book, Drunk Tank Pink, refers to a study in the late 1970s that proved exposure to bright pink decreased male aggression and physical strength. Soon, all kinds of places were painted pink, from visiting team’s locker rooms at football stadiums to single-lane intersec- tion in Phoenix on a series of Saturday afternoons, timing how long it took the drivers piling up behind her to honk their horns. The temperatures on those days ranged from 84 to 108 degrees; the researchers found that after the day, the more urgent, frequent, and persistent the honks grew.

Researchers paid an assistant to sit in her car in a single-lane intersection in Phoenix on a series of Saturday afternoons, timing how long it took the drivers piling up behind her to honk their horns. It was not until the day was over that the assistant noticed their honking was more frequent and persistent. The research suggested that exposure to pink decreased male aggression and physical strength, leading to less frequent and persistent honking.

Students who were identified early on as “academic bloomers” outscored their peers by at least 10 IQ points after one year, despite having no actual IQ advant- age at the beginning of the experiment. The outcome suggests that teachers devoted extra time and effort to those students, subconsciously seeking to justify their labels.

When Opower, the Virginia-based energy information company, started sending a report to customers that rated their relative conservation of energy to their neighbors’ with smiling faces, consumption fell an average of 2.5 percent per customer. This saved nearly a billion kilowatt-hours across 22 states. It also showed that seemingly inconsequential symbols (smiley faces) and our aware- ness of others both shape how we act.

Researchers asked American and Japanese students to gauge the emotions of a cartoon figure standing in front of four other figures. Seventy-two percent of Japanese students devoted extra time and effort to those students, subconsciously seeking to justify their labels. Students who were identified early on as “academic bloomers” outscored their peers by at least 10 IQ points after one year.

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In his book, Drunk Tank Pink, Alter explores how we become influenced by the world around us, challenging the idea that we’re truly freethinking beings. He examines how colors, symbols, sounds, weather, environment, and the perceived presence of other people all influence us, using colorful and surprising research studies to illustrate his points. The book includes anecdotes and experiments that show how easily we can be primed to adopt foreign worldviews, even if we haven’t lived within those cultures.

For example, the researchers found that the hotter the day, the more urgent, frequent, and persistent the honks grew. In one of his current areas of research, on charitable giving, Alter has compiled evidence that people donate more money for hurricane relief if the hurricane shares their name’s first initial. Seeking some real-world impact with that information, he’s had conversations with the National Weather Service about naming hurricanes to further more often with the most popular American first initials, like J and M.

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