

# FORCES TO RECKON WITH



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

by Jennifer Bleyer

Photograph by Peter Gregoire

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.

Why the difference? As Adam Alter explains in his *New York Times* best-seller, *Drunk Tank Pink: And Other Unexpected Forces That Shape How We Think, Feel, and Behave* (Penguin Press), people perceive the world differently based on subconscious exposure to various cultural values, or primes. Alter helped devise this study as part of a broad research project to examine the influence of these primes on perception, while controlling for extraneous factors like race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. His conclusion: Simply being in a Chinese neighborhood, surrounded by its iconography and symbols, the control group adopted a more Chinese outlook. In other words, whereas Americans are typically surprised by change, most Chinese believe that it's inevitable, as expressed in the philosophies of Taoism and Buddhism.

"The study was designed to show that we're all multicultural," Alter says. "We've been exposed to so many different cultures across time that we can be primed to adopt those foreign worldviews, even if we haven't lived within those cultures."

It's not just a neighborhood that can have such a profound effect. In *Drunk Tank Pink*, Alter, an assistant professor of marketing at the Leonard N. Stern School of Business with an affiliated appointment in NYU's psychology department, explains how 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" operating underneath all the input and stimulus the mind absorbs.

A lively compendium of Alter's own work as well as psychological studies that date back to the turn of the 20th century, the book has often surprising revelations of the many forces that buffet our behavior. One study, for instance, suggests that the ease of pronouncing a person's name impacts his or her success in the real world: In an examination of mid-career lawyers, 12 percent of those with easy-to-pronounce names made partner, compared to only 4 percent of those with harder-to-pronounce names at a similar point in their careers.

But the book is not just a collection of gee-whiz head-scratchers. Many of its anecdotes point to deeply disturbing patterns that burble below conscious awareness. Consider a study of murder trials in which the defendant was black and the victim white: Black defendants were found to be more likely to receive the death penalty the more "stereotypically black" they looked. Besides simply revealing the troubling depth of racism, Alter says, research like this is critical because it suggests how we might tweak our institutions to be more just and fair. "By exposing how pervasive biases are and how they shape institutional outcomes, you give people tools for dealing with them," Alter says. "The material can be negative, but by showing the effects, you're giving people the information they need to bring about change."

A broad-grinning Australian with a knack for explaining behav-

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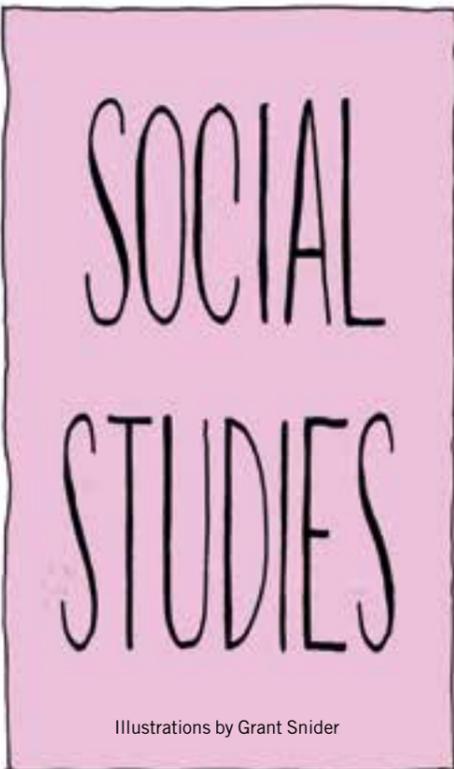
ioral science in simple, entertaining terms, Alter says that his interest in the hidden forces was sparked during his undergraduate years at the University of New South Wales. A few influential professors there inspired him to pursue social psychology, and he was particularly intrigued by the classic studies that followed World War II, such as Stanley Milgram's work on conformity and obedience. "Those experiments suggested that we certainly are prone to obeying authority," Alter says. "But culture plays a big role, which suggests that the effects are not biological or ingrained. The silver lining there is that if culture has the ability to shape how likely it is you are to conform, then there's room for movement."

Alter came to the United States in 2004 to pursue graduate studies at Princeton University, after which he was hired by NYU

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 tether 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 very 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." ■

in 2009. In addition to teaching at Stern and toying with the idea of a possible follow-up to *Drunk Tank Pink*, he's now active in a broad slate of interdisciplinary research that extends far beyond traditional marketing to everything from education policy to medical decision-making, with a constant eye on how to harness the lessons of social psychology so that people can improve themselves and the world.



Illustrations by Grant Snider

