Cognitive psychology in the real world

Infant hyperthermia
(Weingarten, 2009, Washington Post)

- Parents leave their kids in the car
  - Lethal, in the summer
- Happens 15-25 times/year in the US
  - More so in recent years
- Some are prosecuted, some not
  - Facts are often identical
- One prosecutor who did prosecute:
  - Q: Could you imagine this happening to you?
  - A: I have to say no… I’m a watchful father.

A prospective memory task

- Prospective memory: Remembering to do something in the future
  - Here, remembering to drop the kid at daycare
  - Or at least remove the kid from the car
  - Also: remembering to stop for milk, etc.
- Different memory strategies:
  - Keep the goal active (rehearsal)
  - Rely on cues to trigger it at the right time
  - Have to attend to a cue for it to work

Child safety laws

- Kids used to ride in front
  - But airbags could kill them
  - So laws required them to ride in back
- Young kids used to ride facing forward
  - A problem in crashes
  - So laws required that they face backward
- Cognitive implication:
  - Fewer, less obvious cues that your kid is in the car

The case of Lyn Balfour

- Car seat was behind the driver seat
  - Usually behind the passenger seat
  - Out of view of the rear-view mirror
- Balfour had driven her husband to work
  - Usually he drives himself
  - Usually the diaper bag is in the passenger seat
  - Usually she makes only one delivery

The case of Lyn Balfour

- Baby was sick, and had fallen asleep
  - Usually didn’t sleep in the car
- Balfour was multi-tasking
  - On the phone fighting various fires
  - Had also been up most of the night
- Babysitter had a new phone
  - Hadn’t entered Balfour’s office number yet
  - Balfour left her cell in her purse
Other cases

• Miles Harrison
  – On the cell, dealing with work-related issues
  – Devoted parent
    • Had travelled to Russian hinterland 3 times to adopt
    • All evidence was that he doted on the kid
• An unnamed business executive
  – Motion detector went off 3 times during the day
  – Couldn’t see anyone tampering, so disarmed it remotely each time

Can’t happen to me!

• Comment on Balfour acquittal story:
  – If she had too many things on her mind she should have kept her legs closed and not had any kids.
• Comments on Harrison acquittal story:
  – This is a case of pure evil negligence of the worse kind… He deserves the death sentence.
  – I wonder if this was his way of telling his wife that he didn’t really want a kid.

Can’t happen to me!

• These are conscious theories of the event
  – One unconscious input might be fear of a world where catastrophic accidents happen to anyone
  – Discount the role of other unconscious processes

Solutions are easy

• A simple after-market device exists
  – Market research suggests it wouldn’t sell
  – Because people think it couldn’t happen to them
• Built-in sensors killed by automotive lobby
  – Possibly for the same reason

Cognitive analysis

• Automatized routines and skills are involved
  – Reduce need for attention to the current task environment
    • The car and what’s in it
  – Driving to work may be more automatized than dropping the kid off
    • Harrison was 49, kid was a toddler

Cognitive analysis

• There may be a change in routine
  – There were many in the Balfour case
  – The goal is an exception to the routine
    • Balfour: Checking the rear-view wouldn’t have been enough
• Stress, emotion, fatigue
  – Cede more control to automatized routines
  • If you’re capable of forgetting to get milk, you’re capable of forgetting your child