

**Adam Alter**  
**Curriculum Vitae**

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**Education**

- 2004      **B.Sc.** in Psychology; Law minor (Honors Class I, University Medal)  
*University of New South Wales*
- 2006      **M.A.** in Social Psychology  
*Princeton University*
- 2009      **Ph.D.** in Social Psychology  
(expected)      *Princeton University*

**Honors, Fellowships, and Awards**

- 2008-2009    Charlotte Elizabeth Procter Honorific Dissertation Fellowship  
Awarded to 25 final-year graduate students at Princeton University across  
all disciplines
- 2007-2009    Woodrow Wilson Scholars Society Fellowship
- 2005-2007    Highest psychology student teaching assistance ratings across 4 semesters
- 2004      Awarded Young Investigator Grant by American Society of Trial Consultants
- 2004      University of New South Wales Medal  
For 1<sup>st</sup> place in undergraduate major and outstanding performance across  
undergraduate career
- 2003      Australian Psychological Society Prize for first place in psychology honors
- 2003      Joseph Forgas Prize for best honors thesis in social psychology
- 2003      University of New South Wales scholarship to complete psychology honors
- 2002      University of New South Wales Prize for first place in third year psychology
- 2002      Joseph Forgas Prize for first place in social psychology

## Publications

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**Alter, A. L., & Oppenheimer, D. M.** (in press). Easy on the mind, easy on the wallet: Effects of fluency on valuation judgments. *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*.

- Subject of a feature article on *Irrational Economics* in *The Economist*, April 3, 2008.

Although people routinely estimate the value of items in the environment, from goods and services to natural resources and lost earnings following an accident, the processes that underlie human valuation estimates are not well understood. We show that people use familiarity and fluency—the ease with which they process information—to determine an item’s value. In three studies, participants believed that familiar forms of currency (e.g., a familiar \$1 bill) had greater purchasing power than their unfamiliar counterparts (e.g., a rare and unfamiliar coin). Mechanistic analyses showed a positive correlation between participants’ familiarity with the unfamiliar currency and their estimates of its value. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our findings for researchers, marketing experts, and policymakers alike.

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**Darley, J. M. & Alter, A. L.** (in press). Behavioral issues of punishment and deterrence. In E. Shafir (Ed.), *Behavioral foundations of policy*.

This chapter examines how the predictable foibles in human judgment and decision making influence how people experience criminal punishment and deterrence. We apply prevailing theories in behavioral science to explain why sentence severity so rarely affects crime rates, why convicted criminals are insensitive to sentence duration, and suggest how the blunt instrument of deterrence might be sharpened.

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**Alter, A. L. & Oppenheimer, D. M.** (2008). Effects of fluency on psychological distance and mental construal (or why New York is a large city, but *New York* is a civilized jungle). *Psychological Science*, *19*, 161-167.

People construe the world along a continuum from concretely (focusing on specific, local details) to abstractly (focusing on global essences). We show that people are more likely to interpret the world abstractly when they experience cognitive disfluency, or difficulty processing stimuli in the environment, than when they experience cognitive fluency. We observed this effect using three instantiations of fluency: visual perceptual fluency (Study 1b), conceptual priming fluency (Study 2b), and linguistic fluency (Study 3). Adopting the framework of construal theory, we suggest that one mechanism for this effect is perceivers’ tendency to interpret disfluently processed stimuli as farther from their current position than fluently processed stimuli (Studies 1a and 2a).

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**Alter, A. L., Oppenheimer, D. M., Epley, N., & Eyre, R. N.** (2007). Overcoming intuition: Metacognitive difficulty activates analytic reasoning. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *136*, 569-576.

Humans appear to reason using two processing styles: System 1 processes that are quick, intuitive, and effortless and System 2 processes that are slow, analytical, and deliberate that occasionally correct the output of System 1. Four experiments suggest that System 2 processes are activated by metacognitive experiences of difficulty or disfluency during the process of reasoning. Incidental experiences of difficulty or disfluency—receiving information in a degraded font (Experiments 1 and 4), in difficult-to-read lettering (Experiment 2), or while furrowing one’s brow (Experiment 3)—reduced the impact of heuristics and defaults in judgment (Experiments 1 and 3), reduced reliance on

peripheral cues in persuasion (Experiment 2), and improved syllogistic reasoning (Experiment 4). Metacognitive experiences of difficulty or disfluency appear to serve as an alarm that activates analytic forms of reasoning that assess and sometimes correct the output of more intuitive forms of reasoning.

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**Alter, A. L.** & Forgas, J. P. (2007). On feeling happy but fearing failure: The effects of mood on self-handicapping strategies. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 43*, 947-954.

Does temporary mood influence people's tendency to engage in self-handicapping behaviors? Based on past research on self-handicapping and recent work on affect and social behaviors, this experiment predicted and found that positive mood significantly increased the tendency to engage in two kinds of self-handicapping strategies. Participants ( $N=94$ ) first received contingent or non-contingent positive feedback about performance on a task of 'cognitive abilities', and then underwent a positive, neutral, or negative mood induction using video films. Self-handicapping was assessed in terms of their subsequent preference for (a) drinking a performance-enhancing or performance-inhibiting herbal tea, and (b) engaging or not engaging in performance-enhancing cognitive practice. As predicted, happy mood and non-contingent feedback significantly increased self-handicapping on both measures. The implications of these results for everyday performance tasks, and for recent affect-cognition theories, are discussed.

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**Alter, A. L.**, Kernochan, J., & Darley, J. M. (2007). Morality influences how people apply the ignorance of the law defense. *Law and Society Review, 41*, 819-864.

In four empirical studies, we showed that laypeople apply the ignorance of the law defense differently depending on the perceived morality of the defendant's course of conduct at the time of the illegal act. Moral and neutral defendants who pled ignorance of the law were afforded leniency, whereas immoral defendants were sentenced as though they were not ignorant, even when defendants in all three conditions violated identical laws. These findings suggest that laypeople adopt a just deserts approach to criminal law, which influences their responsiveness to a criminal defendant's claim to be ignorant of the law. We discuss the implications of these findings for criminal law and argue that legal doctrine should reflect laypeople's moral intuitions.

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**Alter, A. L.**, Kernochan, J., & Darley, J. M. (2007). Transgression wrongfulness outweighs its harmfulness as a determinant of sentence severity. *Law and Human Behavior, 31*, 319-335.

When students suggest sentences for criminal offenders, do they rely more heavily on the harmfulness or on the wrongfulness of the offender's conduct? In Study 1, 116 Princeton University undergraduates rated the harmfulness and wrongfulness of, and suggested appropriate sentences for, a series of crimes. As expected, participants emphasized wrongfulness when choosing an appropriate criminal punishment. In Study 2, 33 Princeton undergraduates made similar ratings for violations of the University Honor Code, and rated their contempt for fabricated amendments to the Code that required sentencers to focus either only on harmfulness or only on wrongfulness. Again, sentences more closely reflected wrongfulness ratings, and participants were more contemptuous of the harmfulness-based proposal. We also consider the theoretical and practical implications of these findings for sentencing laws and policy.

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**Alter, A. L.** & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2006). From a fixation on sports to an exploration of mechanism: The past, present and future of hot hand research. *Thinking and Reasoning*, 12, 431-444.

We review the literature on the hot hand fallacy by highlighting the positive and negative aspects of hot hand research over the past 20 years, and suggesting new avenues of research. Many researchers have focused on criticising Gilovich et al.'s claim that the hot hand fallacy exists in basketball and other sports, instead of exploring the general implications of the hot hand fallacy for human cognition and probabilistic reasoning. Noting that researchers have shown that people perceive hot streaks in a gambling domain in which systematic streaks cannot possibly exist, we suggest that researchers have paid too much attention to investigating the independence of outcomes in various sporting domains. Instead, we advocate a domain-general mechanistic approach to understanding the hot hand fallacy, and conclude by suggesting approaches that might refocus the literature on the important general implications of the hot hand fallacy for human probabilistic reasoning.

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**Alter, A. L.**, & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2006). Predicting short-term stock fluctuations by using processing fluency. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 103, 9369-9372.

- Selected as a *PNAS: In This Week* feature article.
- Paper featured in *Nature* news, May 30<sup>th</sup> 2006.
- Interviewed on U.S. and Australian television and British radio, and research featured in international newspapers and popular journals, including *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Guardian* (United Kingdom).

Three studies investigated the impact of the psychological principle of fluency (that people tend to prefer easily processed information) on short-term share price movements. In both a laboratory study and two analyses of naturalistic real-world stock market data, fluently named stocks robustly outperformed stocks with disfluent names in the short term. For example, in one study, an initial investment of \$1,000 yielded a profit of \$112 more after 1 day of trading for a basket of fluently named shares than for a basket of disfluently named shares. These results imply that simple, cognitive approaches to modeling human behavior sometimes outperform more typical, complex alternatives.

### Manuscripts Under Review

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**Alter, A. L.**, & Kwan, V. S. Y. (under review). Cultural sharing in a global village: Extracultural cognition in White Americans. Revising for resubmission to *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

In eight studies we examined the effects of exposure to foreign cultural environments and symbols on decision making among White Americans. Although White Americans predicted change less frequently than East Asians did (Study 1), White Americans anticipated greater change when primed with East Asian culturally-laden locations (Studies 2 and 3) and the East Asian Yin-Yang symbol (Studies 4-8). These effects held in the domains of stock prediction and weather forecasting, and were stronger the more familiar White Americans were with the cultural primes, and the longer they had spent overseas. Together, these findings suggest that familiar culturally-laden cues sometimes prime people within one cultural milieu to make so-called *extracultural* judgments.

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**Alter, A. L., & Oppenheimer, D. M.** (under review). Uniting the tribes of fluency to form a metacognitive nation. Revising for resubmission to *Personality and Social Psychology Review*.

Processing fluency, or the subjective experience of ease with which people process information, reliably influences people's judgments across a broad range of social dimensions. Experimenters have manipulated processing fluency using a vast array of techniques, which, despite their diversity, produce remarkably similar judgmental consequences. For example, people similarly judge stimuli that are semantically primed (conceptual fluency), visually clear (perceptual fluency), and phonologically simple (linguistic fluency) as more true than their less fluent counterparts. Although other reviews have considered a subset of mechanisms that generate fluency, we offer the first comprehensive review of such mechanisms and their implications for judgment and decision making. Since every cognition falls along a continuum from effortless to demanding, and generates a corresponding fluency experience, we argue that fluency is a ubiquitous metacognitive cue in reasoning and social judgment.

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**Alter, A. L., Oppenheimer, D. M., & Zemla, J. C.** (under review). Voters exhibit an illusion of explanatory depth. Submitted to *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

An *illusion of explanatory depth* (IOED) occurs when people believe they understand a concept more deeply than they actually do. To date, IOEDs have been identified in mechanical and natural domains, constraining our understanding of why they occur and suggesting that their implications are quite limited. In attempt to address both issues, we identified an IOED amongst voters in the week following New Jersey's presidential primary elections. Voters believed they deeply understood their favored candidates' policies, but exhibited only shallow knowledge when pressed to elucidate those policies. Consistent with earlier research, this IOED was most pronounced amongst people who reported being generally politically uninformed. Apart from their obvious implications for theories of voting, these findings suggest a novel factor that might contribute to such diverse social psychological phenomena as stereotyping and persuasion, in which people often settle on intuitive positions rather than pursuing more informative but effortful processing styles.

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**Alter, A. L., & Darley, J. M.** (under review). Affirmative action's Achilles heel? A cognitive-behavioral model of stereotype perpetuation. Submitted to *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Group stereotypes are persistent even in the face of disconfirming evidence. We propose a model to suggest that stereotypes may endure in part because attempts to redress group-based historical imbalances using collective treatment (e.g., affirmative action) imply that the target group is homogeneous, which ironically reifies the group further. In support of an iterative model of stereotype maintenance, we show that group homogeneity and collective treatment are correlated and, more specifically, that each enhances the other. We examine these effects using laboratory studies (Studies 2-5) and archival U.S. foreign aid data (Studies 1a and 1b), and show that the effects hold for positive (Studies 1a, 1b, 4, and 5) and negative (Studies 3 and 5) collective treatment.

## Manuscripts in Preparation and Current Research

Simmons, J. P., & **Alter, A. L.**, (in preparation). How to decide when more information is too much: Predicting the performance of Jeopardy! contestants from minimal information

**Alter, A. L.**, & Kwan, V. S. Y. (in preparation). Pictures versus words: Symbols selectively prime behavior more strongly than words.

**Alter, A. L.**, Aronson, J., & Darley, J. M. (in preparation). Ameliorating stereotype threat by presenting the threat as a challenge.

**Alter, A. L.**, & Oppenheimer, D. M. (in preparation). Determinants of the illusion of explanatory depth.

**Alter, A. L.**, & Oppenheimer, D. M. (in preparation). Disclosure in the dark: Disfluency licenses interpersonal disclosure.

Laham, S., & **Alter, A. L.** (in preparation). Fluency-induced construal mediates action identification processes.

Aronson, J., Darley, J. M., & **Alter, A. L.** (in preparation). Race and expectancy confirmation.

## Selected Conference Papers, Chaired Symposia, and Invited Talks

**Alter, A. L.**, & Oppenheimer, D. M. (under review). Easy on the mind, easy on the wallet: Fluency predicts stock and currency valuation. Submitted within a symposium entitled: *What makes ideas stick? How characteristics and contexts of messages influence their success* to the Association of Consumer Research annual conference, San Francisco.

Oppenheimer, D. M., Shah, A. K., & **Alter, A. L.** (2008). Fluency and psychological distance. Paper to be presented at annual meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, Washington, D. C.

**Alter, A. L.** (2008). Fluency and metacognition. Invited talk at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, May 2008.

**Alter, A. L.**, Oppenheimer, D. M., Epley, N., & Eyre, R. N (2008). Chaired symposium on *Metacognition and Judgment*, and paper presented on Overcoming intuition: Metacognitive difficulty activates analytical reasoning, at Society of Personality and Social Psychology annual conference, Albuquerque, NM.

**Alter, A. L.** & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2007). New York  $\neq$  nEW yORK (or the effects of fluency on perceptions of distance and psychological construal). Paper to be presented at Society for Judgment and Decision Making annual conference, Long Beach, CA.

Darley, J. M., & **Alter, A. L.** (2007). Behavioral issues of punishment and deterrence. Paper presented at Behavioral Foundations of Policy Conference.

Kwan, V. S. Y., & **Alter, A. L.** (2007). Imported cultural symbols affect everyday decisions. Paper presented at Society of Experimental Social Psychology annual conference, Chicago, IL.

Kwan, V. S. Y., & **Alter, A. L.** (2007). Imported cultural symbols affect everyday decisions. Invited paper presented at Culture preconference, Society of Personality and Social Psychology annual conference, Memphis, Tennessee.

**Alter, A. L.**, Oppenheimer, D. M., Epley, N., & Eyre, R. N. (2006). Overcoming intuition: Metacognitive difficulty activates analytic reasoning. Poster presented at Society of Judgment and Decision Making annual conference, Houston, Texas.

**Alter, A. L.**, Kernochan, J., & Darley, J. M. (2006). Wrongfulness and harmfulness as determinants of sentencing. Paper presented at International Social Justice Conference, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany.

**Alter, A. L.**, & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2006). Predicting short-term stock fluctuations by using stock fluency. Paper presented at Behavioral Decision Research and Management Conference, Santa Monica, California.

**Alter, A. L.**, & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2006). Predicting short-term stock fluctuations by using stock fluency. Paper presented at Yale Whitebox Conference, Yale, University.

Oppenheimer, D. M., & **Alter, A. L.** (2005). Malleability of fluency-based judgments. Poster presented at Society of Judgment and Decision Making Conference, Toronto, Canada.

### **Selected Employment & Experience**

Ad hoc reviews for *Law and Human Behavior*; *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*; *Psychology, Public Policy and the Law*; *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*; *Psychological Science*; *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*.

Senior thesis advisor to clinical and social psychology students, Spring 2007.

Princeton Writing Center Junior, Senior, and Graduate Thesis Writing Tutor, 2006-present.

Princeton University Psychology Department preceptor:

- Introduction to Social Psychology, Fall 2005 and Fall 2006 (mean student ratings both 4.6/5.0).
- Quantitative Methods for Psychology, Spring 2006 (mean student rating 4.7/5.0).
- Psychology of Morality and Politics, Spring 2007 (mean student rating 4.5/5.0).

Princeton University Psychology Department graduate student statistics tutor, 2004-2006, and head tutor, 2006-present.

## Memberships & Committees

Member, Association for Consumer Research  
Member, Society for Consumer Psychology  
Member, American Psychological Association  
Member, Association for Psychological Science  
Member, Society of Personality and Social Psychology  
Member, American Society of Trial Consultants  
Member, New York Academy of Sciences  
Member, Society of Judgment and Decision Making  
Member, American Association for the Advancement of Science  
Graduate Associate, Princeton Program in Law and Public Affairs  
Graduate Fellow, Mathey College  
Graduate Social Psychology Departmental Representative, Princeton University Psychology Department, 2005-2006.

## Selected Media Attention

**Television:** Live interview on Kudlow and Company, CNBC, June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006; Interview on Nightly Business Report, PBS, July 12<sup>th</sup>. (Both with Danny Oppenheimer.)

**Radio:** Live interview on Drivetime Money segment, BBC Radio, UK, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2006.

**Print:** New York Times; Wall Street Journal, The Economist; The Guardian, UK; Los Angeles Times; Spero News, Spain; Innovations Report, Germany; LiveScience.com; Discovery Reports, Canada; CBC Toronto, Canada; Fox News; China Post, Taiwan; Sunday Business Post, Ireland; New Kerala, India; Gulf News, United Arab Emirates; Sydney Morning Herald, Australia; Smart Money, Russia.