

New Study Describes “Y.M.C.A. Reflex”

BOSTON, MA—It has been observed for decades and is so commonplace as to almost be an afterthought. And yet, after a thorough review of the medical literature, Dr. Dick Clark of Doctors University Hospital realized that something he sees every week has never been the subject of a medical study. He decided to rectify that.

And so, this week, the New England Journal of Medicine published the first-ever study describing the “YMCA reflex.” It is a reflex seen in humans of all ages and all ethnicities, but that multivariate analysis finds is significantly more likely to be seen in middle-aged adults and in Caucasians, with the highest incidence in middle-aged Caucasians.



The reflex is described as a series of upper body movements, primarily involving the arms, in which the subject gyrates—in Dr. Clark’s precise scientific terms, “ridiculously”—to form the letters Y, M, C, and A in order. The study further notes, with $P < 0.00001$, that this reflex is correlated with the playing of the song “Y.M.C.A.” by The Village People, is absent when the song is not played, recurs if the song is turned back on, and is extinguished by turning the song off, even if in the middle.

“Many do it voluntarily,” Dr. Clark said, “But there are certain people in whom this is triggered automatically — again, seen across all ages but disproportionately affecting middle-aged Caucasians. We particularly tended to see this reflex in your Aunt Peggy and Uncle Mike.”

Interestingly, despite the song’s reputation as a gay anthem, Dr. Clark found with an odds ratio of 3.1 (95% confidence interval 2.7 to 3.3) that heterosexuals were more likely to possess the reflex than homosexuals. Again, the voluntary-versus-reflex breakdown was seen here; the voluntary acting out of those gestures was

seen in equal proportions across sexual orientations, but, as noted, heterosexuals were about three times more likely to perform the gestures reflexively.

As a follow-up study, Dr. Clark intends to look at whether handedness, left-brain/right-brain dominance, intelligence, age, or blood alcohol level correlates with whether the subject forms the "C" with the concave portion pointing to his or her own right or to the audience's right.