



Psychology

# Newsletter

## Welcome to our February 2013 issue!

Another busy month has passed and we hope that you have been enjoying the spring term so far! This



month, most 3rd year students will have found out how

well they did in their winter exams. But there is no time to rest on achievements just yet: summer exams will be here before we know it and as everyone knows, early preparation is best!

(University) life is all about balance. While studying and working hard is crucial, it is also important to have fun! There are plenty of opportunities to do so on campus and in the Department. For instance, last month, we launched our "Under the spotlight series" which allowed students and staff to interact informally while munching on crisps and drinking a cold drink. We received lots of positive feedback about the event from attendees and we will make sure to offer more of these opportunities in the future. Read about what you've missed in this edition of the newsletter. Also in this issue: How to plan for your summer (work) experiences, what it is like to study abroad, and why psychology is such a popular subject.

Before I let you read on, I'd like to express a special thank you to our design team Stelliphy and Christie! They once more helped to put this newsletter together in time. Happy second-half of term, everyone!

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## A Review of *Zero Degrees of Empathy* by Simon Baron-Cohen



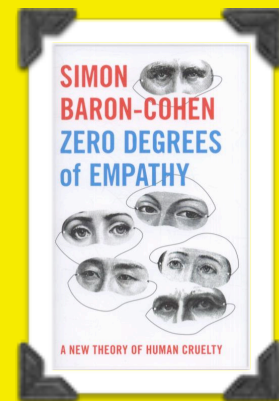
by  
Mathew Hare

With several detailed examples of intense human cruelty, Simon Baron-Cohen's illuminating book does not always make for pleasant reading. He begins by detailing how his father told him that the Nazis turned people into lampshades; it quickly becomes clear that the desire to understand what could motivate someone to enact such horrific behaviour drove Baron-Cohen's early research interests. Fortunately, the examples are never gratuitous and neither are they used for needless effect. Baron-Cohen highlights that the Nazis were not uniquely cruel individuals but instead an instance of humanity's capability for abhorrent acts. This leads to the primary argument of the book, in which Baron-Cohen opts to discard the term "evil" in favour of "empathy erosion". The subsequent chapters discuss examples of individuals with what Baron-Cohen defines as "zero degrees of empathy", and he proposes that this can be both positive and negative. Furthermore, the underlying neural structures behind the "empathy circuit" are examined and the behaviours of individuals with deficits in this system are also discussed. Baron-Cohen concludes by explaining the implications of a deeper understanding of empathy and how this may inform diagnostic manuals such as the DSM.

Baron-Cohen is an excellent author; his writing is concise and offers an appropriate level of detail. He makes use of notes throughout the text to excellent effect; most of the notes offer suggestions for wider reading or develop arguments further than the primary text would allow. Baron-Cohen is also wonderfully reserved when outlining the role of genetics in empathy. He doesn't make the mistake of many authors who tend to imply that a particular gene exists for behaviour "x". It is made quite clear that genes code for the production of proteins and are incapable of creating a high level mental construct, such as empathy. He

stresses the importance of the interplay between genetic and environmental factors in the development of empathy, refusing to take a stance in either the nature or nurture camp. Baron-Cohen also tackles the somewhat contentious subject of mirror neurons with similar excellence. Rather than upholding the mirror neuron system as the holy grail of neuroscience, he explains that mirror neurons are implicitly associated with feelings of empathy but work as part of the aforementioned empathy circuit. He suggests that in isolation, mirror neurons may be involved with automatic mirroring behaviours.

*Zero Degrees of Empathy* is not quite as accessible as many other popular science books. In places it certainly assumes foreknowledge greater than the layman in topics such as autism and neuroanatomy. I want to make clear that this shouldn't deter anyone. The book provides a systematic and well-reasoned account of what factors may cause empathy erosion and how this leads to individuals partaking in cruel behaviour. Similarly, Baron-Cohen also shows how individuals, who lack empathy but display no intention to harm others, such as those with Asperger syndrome and autism, have enhanced systemizing abilities which can benefit society. Baron-Cohen is an optimistic author with a strong moral code that permeates into the book. He argues for how empathy may be used to rehabilitate offenders and even settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This may seem unlikely to some, but after reading the book it is hard to refute Baron-Cohen's compelling evidence and discount his point of view.



## 60 seconds with... Dr. Netta Weinstein



When you were growing up what did you want to become in life?

I was indecisive. I went back and forth between wanting to be a teacher, a superhero with the powers of flight and super-strength (I was willing to compromise beyond that), or a shepherd. It took me a while to let go of the superhero plan, and longer to acknowledge I know very little about sheep.

If you could pick a book you've read to make into a movie, which one would you choose?

Is it cheating to say *Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin?

What is your favourite TV show?

This is genre specific. In comedy, *Modern Family* is a hilarious show, from the Sci-fi soap-opera genre: *Battlestar Galactica*, which may be the best show ever, and my current favorite drama is *Newsroom*.

Which is your favourite song that you would sing at a karaoke bar?

It's probably best for everyone that I avoid singing at karaoke bars, but if I did it would have to be "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen.

Describe yourself in one sentence:

I am silly and achievement-oriented; I love travelling and deeply value personal growth. And, apparently, I am not good at picking just one answer.

### News in brief

- Dr. Silke Paulmann, Prof. Riccardo Russo (both Psychology), and Dr. Philip Hofmeister (Language & Linguistics) have been awarded £5084 from the Ageing and Assisted Living Network to explore *Emotional Speech Perception in Healthy Ageing Individuals*.
- The new MSc course *Brain and Language*, a programme taught jointly by members of the Psychology and Linguistics Depts., should start in Oct. 2013. Interested students should apply for the MSc in Cognitive Neuroscience indicating on their application form that they are interested in the Brain and Language MSc.
- The Department's Poster Day will take place on Wednesday 20th March when all current third year students will present their final year projects. Don't miss out on the opportunity to ask them about their experience!

## Why Psychology?



by Lisa Phillips

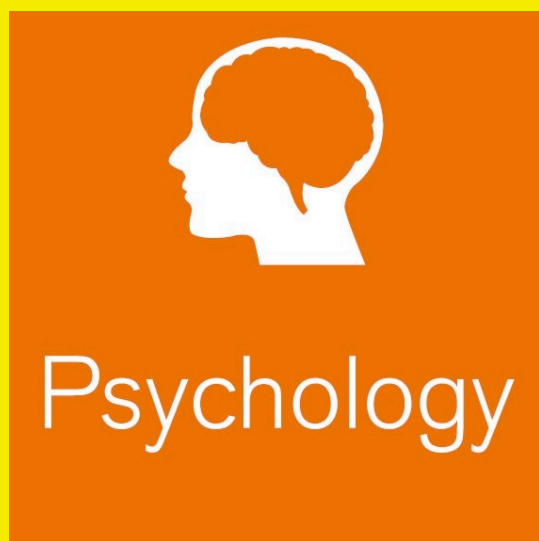
The popularity of psychology makes it a regular feature in Top Ten lists, including lists such as UCAS's most popular degree choice and the Top Five of graduates least likely to be unemployed. The Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) annual survey from 2012 revealed which degree subjects generate the highest and lowest number of unemployed graduates.

From the class of 2011, 8.6% of all graduates were unemployed six months after graduation. The highest unemployment rates are for graduates in computer science (13.9%), media studies (12.3%), electrical engineering (12.1%), art & design (11.6%) and accounting (11.5%). However, the future looks brighter for psychology graduates - along with graduates in geography (6.4%), sports science (6.8%), law (7.5%) and chemistry (8.2%), psychology students are amongst the least likely to be unemployed, even faring better than the national average with 7.8% unemployed six months after graduation. Law graduates have a long-standing employment success; the success of geography and chemistry could well be equated with more recent government initiatives to attract teachers with these backgrounds; and sports science's newly-found employability is likely owed to the London 2012 Olympics; but where do psychology graduates secure employment? The areas that employ the most graduates, regardless of degree subject, are retail and hospitality, both of which are popular industries with existing students and so could suggest that students simply continue with prior employment after graduation. For psychology graduates however, most find employment in the public sector with the majority being employed in hospitals, working in care, in education and within the emergency services.

So why is psychology so frequently a feature of Top Ten lists? Psychology continues to be the fourth most popular A Level subject, and as a popular degree choice there is no shortage of psychology graduate jobseekers, so why are so many successful? Professor Derek Mowbray, vis-

iting professor in psychology at Northumbria University told The Guardian that it's because psychology graduates, to have chosen to study psychology, must already have an interest in people and what makes people 'tick'; they will have been engaged in interacting with people. By studying psychology, they are exploring and satisfying this curiosity. Skills such as inquisitiveness, curiosity, and an interest in people are all attributes that employers seek. Employees who understand why people behave the way they do and how to get the best responses from them are seen as valuable. Also the graduates are interested in how they present themselves to other people: the way they dress, talk, smile and interact. So, it is an interest in themselves and other people which makes psychology graduates attractive.

According to this view then, psychology students are more understanding of people and it is this that is integral to their career success. The PNG asked psychology students if they would agree that they share an interest in people and whether this was in fact the reason they chose to study psychology. Whilst students generally agreed that they do find people's behaviour interesting and are enjoying learning about the motivation behind those behaviours, most students thought this interest was not the sole reason for enrolling in psychology. In fact, those reasons were as vast as the employment opportunities the degree offers: from an interest in mental health stemming from first-hand experience, to a desire to help people through counselling, from wanting a degree that doesn't 'close any doors' to simply fulfilling an urge for an 'ology as it looks good on the CV! Whatever the driving force, choosing a psychology degree is certainly a good choice for the undecided or those who want to keep their future options open; the subject area is not as restrictive as some degrees which may leave graduates looking for work in one specialised field or having to re-train in the future. Student, Emma Nicholls, told the PNG "with my degree in psychology I am considering a career in education or academia but if one day I decided I wanted to work in research, or a specialised area such as Speech and Language Therapy, these are still options for me".



So could psychology graduates' employability be related to their flexibility in the job market? Dee Hardcastle, Careers Adviser in the Employability & Careers Centre at Essex thinks so. "Although psychology is linked to a profession, it's a very flexible qualification, offering a range of choices and directions. With employers recognising this, students can be creative and flexible in their career planning, following many interesting career paths in a broad range of areas".

The latest figures from the HECSU also suggest this. For example, 47.3% of the computer science graduates who were lucky enough to secure employment did so in the IT profession; 36.2% of employed electrical engineers were employed in engineering but many psychology graduates do not find or seek employment as a psychologist. One of the positives of a psychology degree is not limiting oneself to a specific field or even a specific job.

Dr Will Matthews, lecturer in psychology at Essex, agrees that psychology graduates benefit from an all-round education. He told the PNG that these graduates are valued by employers because firstly, they have the analytical thinking and quantitative skills that accompany a scientific training, combined with first-hand experience of collecting, analysing, and interpreting data. Secondly, psychology graduates know how to communicate complex ideas clearly and accurately in speech and writing; extensive essay and lab-report writing mean that psychology equips

graduates for jobs which require good written English. Finally, psychology graduates have a unique insight into human behaviour; their academic knowledge has direct relevance to the overwhelming majority of professional situations, and gives them a fresh perspective on the issues faced by every organisation.

In a highly competitive jobs market, recruiters are more commanding than ever before and demand is obviously higher for those who graduate from a leading university. Psychology graduates from Essex can gain some reassurance from the fact that degrees with higher employment rates, like psychology as well as geography and law, are mostly studied at established universities. It is less common for teaching of these subjects to take place at newer universities such as former polytechnics. Here, graduates in media studies or art & design, who have higher unemployment rates, are more prevalent. Although location alone won't suffice, especially if, in-and-around, that location employed an impressive 33.5% of the class of 2011, as was the case last year with the most graduates being employed in nearby London and the South-East. So what else do psychology graduates do to boost their employment prospects?

Those students who are considering applying their psychology theory in the workplace understand that to do so they will have to gain relevant work experience and post-graduate study. Many will have proactively gained work experience during their course and continue to expand on this. These experiences increase their future employability. And for those psychology students who do wish to continue with their education, their future also looks bright. From the class of 2011, 10.4% of psychology graduates are studying in the UK for a higher degree – an impressive statistic compared to the national average of 7.4%. Those psychology students chose to progress their education by studying PhD psychology or education, MSc Speech and Language Therapy or DNA Profiling, MA Clinical Counselling, Brain Imaging, Organisational Psychology, Publishing or Chinese Language and Culture

# SUMMER WORK EXPERIENCE

by Chelsea Harmsworth

So some of you may be wondering how you can go about getting good experience for your CV especially in those long summer months we have off. There are many opportunities out there so I thought it would be a great idea to let you know a few to prepare you well in advance:

## Undergraduate Research Assistant Scheme

This exciting scheme is run by the British Psychological Society (BPS). How the programme works is as follows: a researcher along with a student apply for a grant from the BPS to work on a project over the summer months. The awarded grant provides a student stipend of £200 a week for a 6-8 week project. Researchers applying for the grant have to be members of the BPS and they can only work together with second year students who will be starting their third year after the summer vacation. This is an invaluable opportunity especially for students who are considering a career in research as it provides you with hands on experience in research. It would also look great on your CV!

For more information follow the link below or alternatively search the research assistant scheme the BPS website:

<http://www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/awards-grants/undergraduate-research-assistantship-scheme/undergraduate-research-assistant>

## The Experimental Psychology Society Scheme

The Experimental Psychology Society (EPS) offers two types of grants: small grants and the so-called undergraduate research bursary scheme. The

small grant is an award of £2500 which is honoured to members of the society to fund a research assistant position, to help work on a project. This scheme has 4 submission deadlines per year: 1 March, 1 June, 1 September and 1 December. The other grant the society offers is available for students who have just finished their second year and wish to gain more knowledge in research. The grant is £200 per week for 10 weeks therefore a total grant of £2000 will be awarded to a society member to pay to an undergraduate. The deadline for this grant is the 1<sup>st</sup> of March. If you are interested in either of these grants you could approach staff who are members of the EPS and ask whether they would be happy to apply for such a grant. Both these grants allow students to learn at first hand about experimental procedures and analyses. For more information please look on the EPS website:

<http://www.eps.ac.uk/index.php/grants-and-awards>

## Volunteer with lecturers over the summer period

There also could be chances to volunteer with lecturers over the summer break. Some of them have on-going projects and would be happy for you to help out. Find a lecturer that carries out research in the discipline you have interest in, then approach them and ask if there is anything you could do to help out with. You could gain valuable experience in data collection, data analysis and more knowledge in an area you enjoy.

**Other opportunities:****The Haven project**

The Haven project is an organisation that is dedicated to supporting people suffering from personality disorders in Colchester and tendering.

There are a number of areas where you can get involved. The Haven Project runs Day Services, offering a wide range of practical and emotional support in groups and individually. Crisis Services are also available to registered Haven clients, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Safe Centre at the Haven is a sanctuary which can be used for several hours, day or night, and the Crisis House has five beds for short stays. There is also a Social Inclusion Unit, helping clients look outwards to life and their aspirations.

If you are interested in Summer Volunteering Placements or volunteering from October to May, then please send your CV and a covering letter to [kgooch@essex.ac.uk](mailto:kgooch@essex.ac.uk). For more information about this project visit their website: [www.thehavenproject.org.uk](http://www.thehavenproject.org.uk)

**Frontrunners**

Essex university offers a campus-based placement scheme called Frontrunners. All placements are on campus, based within departments, sections and administrative areas of the University. Placements vary from administration-based roles to project work. Frontrunners work 15 hours per week in the summer vacation and get paid for their placements. Frontrunners have three intakes October, January and July. For more information visit <https://www.essex.ac.uk/frontrunners/students/>

In addition, you can approach local charities or organisations to gain relevant voluntary experience, or you can apply for paid summer positions with businesses, charities, or other organisations. Examples of organisations that people have worked with in the past include: Head Start, Mind, Autism Anglia, Colchester General Hospital, Relate, and Headway.

**Just for fun...**

**The PNG team wondered which celebrities were also psychology graduates, and found some surprising!**

**Do you know of a famous psychology graduate? Please let us know!**

1. Katherine Hepburn (actress) has a B.S. in psychology from Bryn Mawr College.



2. Jessica Ennis (athlete) is a psychology graduate from Sheffield University.



# Study Abroad

by Lisa Phillips

Did you know, as a student at Essex, it may be possible for you to enjoy a period of your study abroad? Essex students can include a term or even a year of their course at another university abroad and students from abroad can spend a term or year here at Essex. The exchange programmes and relationships that Essex has with other universities make it possible to study in many countries across the world. The PNG spoke to Grace Story, a third year Essex psychology student, who is currently studying abroad...

## Where are you at the moment?

I'm studying at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

## Why did you decide the Essex Abroad scheme is for you?

I really wanted to go to Australia and to experience another culture. I was also keen to meet new people and experience a different education system to the one that I had grown accustomed to in England.



## Why did you Macquarie University, in particular?

Macquarie offered some interesting courses such as the philosophy of psychoanalysis and the psychology of human relationships which

## How is Macquarie different to Essex?

At Macquarie more independent work is expected from you. Also classes run later than those at Essex; I have classes from 6-8pm.

## How is it similar to Essex?

The main similarity is the helpfulness of the lecturers. The lecturers clearly have a passion and wish to help you understand.

## What do you enjoy the most?

The people; everyone that I've met has been really friendly. I've really enjoyed the social life here. I've had some really fun experiences travelling around Australia with others. The weather's also been great too!

## What do you enjoy the least?

The late classes.

## What do you miss?

I miss my family and friends immensely.

## How do you think this experience will benefit you in future?

I feel that the confidence and independence that I have gained here will be invaluable in helping me deal with challenges that I may encounter in the future.

## Lastly, is there anything you would change?

I'd like to be allowed to stay longer!

If you are interested in finding out more about studying abroad, more details and the application can be found online: [www.essex.ac.uk/studyabroad/](http://www.essex.ac.uk/studyabroad/)



# Under the Spotlight

Last month, the Department launched its new series *Under the Spotlight*. The talk-show like event aims to foster communication between students and staff in an informal setting. The first session was titled "Final Destination Psychology?!" and explored how staff members got to where they are today.

The evening was moderated by Faculty's Career and Employability Co-ordinator Karen Gooch and Psychology lecturer Silke Paulmann, but plenty of questions were coming directly from the audience. Several well kept secrets were unlocked that night (though not all of them will be shared here).

For instance, attendees found out that one of the first research experiences of Dr. Rick O'Gorman included recording the roosting behaviour of hens in a semi-feral state in Gambia. While in West Africa, Rick recorded

hens with young chicks at intervals during the day and particularly close to roosting time to help our understanding about which cues birds use to decide when to roost. Similarly exciting, it was unveiled that Prof. Debi Roberson used to write radio scripts for Radio Television Hong Kong. She also wrote and presented a children's TV programme called *Swizzle Street* when she lived in Hong Kong. However, if there was an award for the most varied CV, it should probably go to Dr. Roger Grace, currently Computer Officer in the Department: Roger spent 10 years touring with Rock&Roll bands as a roadie, took on different theatre jobs in London, includ-



ing working as a professional clown, before going back to University and studying Archaeology. Who else can say that they used to work as a clown before they got a PhD?

Attendees were also fascinated by the pathways of other staff members who shared that they spent some time in different parts of

the world, including South East Asia, America, and Europe before they started working in Colchester. It also quickly became clear that all staff had gained work or research experience throughout their degree. Next to getting practical knowledge about a specific field, everyone agreed that volunteer work and internships also created networking opportu-



nities. That is, these experiences helped staff decide whether a field was right for them, but they also got them connected with professionals who served as referees or mentors for many years afterwards. Being open-minded, flexible, and adventurous (e.g. spending time abroad) was also a common denominator for the (career) success of panel members. At the end of the night, all attendees agreed that the event was a huge success and the Department looks forward to hosting more of these events in the future. If there is a specific topic that you would like to get covered, please get in touch with Marketing Director Silke Paulmann.