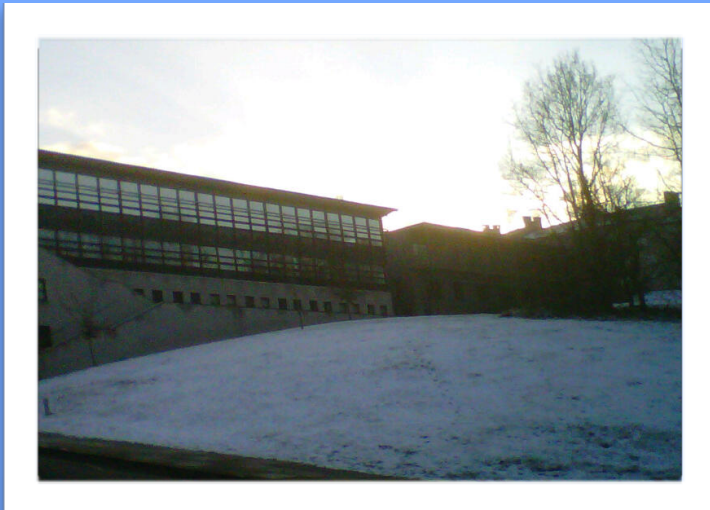




Psychology

Newsletter

Happy New Year!



A warm welcome back and happy new year to all our readers! We hope that you had an enjoyable break and we look forward to another exciting and fun term!

The Newsletter Team's goals are unchanged: we aim to provide you with a regular update on everything that happens in and around the department. We've said it many times before, but we are going to say it again: Please get in touch with us as we would love to hear from you! Share any news that you have, send us pictures of campus, the department, student-life, or let us know about ideas that you would like to get included in the newsletter.

Once again, the current edition is full of interesting information. For instance, read about our new event series (Under the Spotlight), how the Sixth-Form Visit day went, or get to know new lecturer Dr. Jemma Harris Bawden in her 60 seconds interview.

Have a fantastic, healthy, and prosperous 2013!

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Sixth-form Visit day

by
Dr. Steffan
Kennet

In the gap between the end of term and Christmas, the department is usually eerily quiet. Most undergraduates have left, and, behind closed doors, staff take time to finish off tasks put on hold during term time. Not so on 18th December, when we opened our doors to 80 sixth-form students from three local schools. We aimed to give them a taste of Psychology lectures and research here at Essex. Over the course of four hours, a dedicated group of six staff, four postgrads and two undergraduates, ably assisted by our technicians, performed for our visitors across nine different sessions covering the full breadth of the work we do here. It was a bit of squeeze at times, and we spread out across five rooms to fit everything in.

Mitch Callan kicked things off by confronting the visitors with their attitudes to young and old people, hopefully opening their eyes to how powerful simple behavioural studies can be. This was followed by a series of equipment demonstrations: Gethin Hughes and Rachel Cooper showed off the EEG set-up by recording the brainwaves of three of our visitors in less than an hour (surely some kind of record); Lydia Whitaker single-handedly tracked the eyes of a few sixth-formers, though at times they seemed reluctant to have this done in public (maybe something to do with the eyes being the window on the soul); and Nick Cooper did his best to make Dave Atkins' guitar playing hit the wrong note, by subjecting his motor cortex to transcranial magnetic stimulation. After a lunch break, Chris Barry showed-off the breadth of research on conscious and unconscious language processing. This was followed by two mini-experiments on cognitive psychology: Mark Atkinson investigated the limits to taking someone else's physical perspective; while Geoff Cole tested how our attention is guided by someone else's gaze. Honourable mentions go to Roger Deeble, Tom Foulsham and Rick O'Gorman for a variety of facilitating roles.

Feedback from the staff and students of the visiting schools is positive. The hope is that this good feeling will translate into undergraduate applications in the coming two years. This should justify the efforts put in by everyone at this event and several similar ones in the future.

60 seconds with...

What kind of things really make you laugh?

I like to think that I am part of a rather happy and giggly household. We tend to laugh quite a lot on most days- at quite a few different things. I really like stand-up comedy and have been to quite a few local and West End gigs. People I have really enjoyed seeing live include Lee Evans, Andrew Lawrence, Mickey Flanagan, Mike Gunn, Russell Kane, and Stephen K Amos.

Favourite movie of all time? Why?

I don't really have a favourite movie of all time. I'm indecisive and tend to chop and change rather a lot! Movies that I have really enjoyed and have watched multiple times include... The Shawshank Redemption, The Lord of the Rings trilogy, Up, The Hunger Games, A Beautiful Mind, and Rain Man. I have also really liked TV series such as 24 and A Game of Thrones. Why all these?... Hhhmmm... I guess the common threads there must be struggle, tenacity, and (for most) a relatively happy ending.

What's your biggest goal in life right now?

Again, I don't think I have a single biggest goal right now. Life can be very unpredictable and so I tend to make lots (and lots) of smaller goals. Every year my husband and I make a list of goals for the New Year and most of the time

Dr. Jemma Harris Bawden



we fulfill all of them. One of my favourites from 2013's list... to swim with a whale-shark! I can't wait!

What is your favorite way to spend a Saturday?

It would probably involve something quite homely and family oriented. Perhaps having breakfast in bed with a newspaper or a good book. Then a long walk or bike ride with my husband and son. Followed by a big roast (or BBQ if it's summer) with all the family.

Do you have any pet peeves?

I am consciously trying to reduce these after finding myself getting annoyed when people placed bottles back on the bathroom shelf with their labels not facing the front!

What should we know about you that we'd never think to ask?

As of this autumn, I am now a PADI Open Water qualified diver!

News in Brief

- Welcome to Dr. Jemma Harris Bawden who joined the Department on 3rd January 2013 as a lecturer and Year 2 Tutor.
- We also welcome Dr. Vincenzo Romei who joined the Department as a Senior Lecturer this January.
- The “University of Essex Doctoral Scholarships” call is now out. The scholarship will cover tuition fees for three years, plus a maintenance stipend and a budget for conducting research. There is also the opportunity to work as a Graduate Teaching Assistant within the Department of Psychology. Deadline for submission is 1st March 2013. To find out more go to:
<http://www.essex.ac.uk/psychology/department/PhD/funding.html>
- Dr. Max Roberts has published his new book “Underground Maps Unravelling, Explorations in Information Design”. For more information go to:
<http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~mjr/underground/umuinfo.html>
- Prof. Elaine Fox has been shortlisted for Salon London’s inaugural Transmission Prize for her book “Rainy Brain Sunny Brain”. Find out more here:
<http://www.rainybrainsunnybrain.com/public-speaking/elaine-fox-nominated-for-transmission-prize/>
- Mark your diaries: Dr. Peter Lovatt will come and visit the Department on March 5th to give a talk on “Dance and Parkinson's”. Read more about him here:
<http://www.peterlovatt.com/>
- Applications for the Research Experience Scheme running this spring term will have to be received by 20th January 2013.

Under the Spotlight: Final Destination Psychology?!



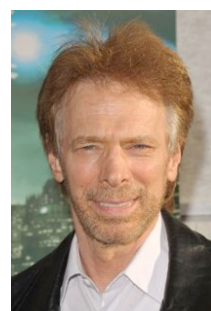
The Department is proud to announce that we are launching the “Under the Spotlight” Series! In this series, you will have the chance to pick the brains of academics in Psychology in a relaxed, fun setting. The first event will be moderated by Dr. Silke Paulmann (lecturer) and Karen Gooch (Faculty Employability Co-ordinator) who will grill several members of staff on how they got to where they are today!

Find out how native Canadian Dr. Mitch Callan ended up in Colchester, or how Prof. Debi Roberson went from being one of the first UG Psychology Graduates at Essex to becoming a Professor in the very same department. Intrigued? We promise to also unlock the secret of which member of staff used to work as a clown in his (her?!) previous career! Moreover, you will have the chance to ask your lecturers anything that interests you about their (career) path. So, come along and join us on 28th January 2013 between 6-8pm at Zest (on campus). The first 30 students there will receive a refreshment voucher!

Just for fun...

Did you know that these famous (or infamous) people also have psychology degrees???

Jerry Bruckheimer, television and movie producer earned his BA in psychology from the University of Arizona.



1970s’ serial killer Ted Bundy graduated with a degree in psychology from Seattle’s University of Washington.



Free Will

by Matthew Hare

Recently, 2nd year students Mathew Hare joined the newsletter team. Mathew's role will be to contribute opinion pieces about topics in psychology that particularly interest him. We've asked him about his role and what he looks forward to the most: "My primary interests are the study of free will and the self, autism, and the rehabilitation of patients with neurological damage. I hope to contribute pieces to the newsletter that deconstruct preconceptions which may exist about certain psychological theories, research, and methods of treatment. I believe that psychology is currently going through an exciting transitional period and hope that through the newsletter I can offer my opinions on developments and recent research."

If an animal harms a human being, generally the animal will be destroyed without question. Society does not ascribe blame to the animal; essentially we consider animals to be a collection of neurocircuitry without the capacity for free will. However, this causes considerable problems for some neuroscientists. How can we consider humans to have free will, given that our brains run fundamentally the same algorithms to that of an animal's brain? As we do not accept that animals have freedom of thought, how can we assume this capacity for ourselves with the knowledge that our brain anatomy is essentially the same?

Evidence from neuropsychology provides researchers with reasons with which to refute our ability to make free decisions. Spilt-brain patients will often develop alien hand syndrome, a condition where one hand will often act seemingly of its own volition without regard for the concerns of the individual. Patients with this condition report that however hard they try, it is impossible for them to stop their alien hand from moving or influence its actions. In what way can we describe these patients as having freedom in their choices? Critics argue that their inability to control and influence their motor actions in a particular limb arises from a neurological impediment and that "neurotypicals" (an individual without any evident neurological

damage or impairments) do not display any deficit in freedom of choosing when to move a limb. However, Benjamin Libet conducted research with a neurotypical population in an effort to directly test the free will of human beings. He used EEG to record the brain activity of participants during a very simple task which involved watching a timer and noting the exact moment when they had the urge to lift their finger. The first finding was that on average participants felt the urge to move their finger about a quarter of a second before they made their move; this is of course hardly a remarkable finding. Rather more exciting was that brain activity began to rise in participants before they reported the urge to move. Furthermore, this activity began to rise a whole second before participants moved. From this are we not surely to conclude that our brain works behind the scenes planning actions long before we are made privy to the news that we've had an idea? Some neuroscientists now argue that consciousness is more like the CEO of a large, exciting, and impossibly complicated company. Essentially, consciousness only becomes involved with decisions at the final stage and is able to apply a veto if necessary. It is only fair to point out, that some such as philosopher Alfred Mele, have turned this argument in on itself. He argues that the very fact that consciousness retains the ability to modify or cancel an action surely suggests that we do in fact have free will. Equally, some researchers have expressed concerns about applying Libet's findings to cognitive processes such as thinking and planning due to the nature of the original research which focused on a, relatively speaking, simple motor action.

For many the notion that we may not have free will is quite unsettling. Does evidence from neuroscience not just relegate us to mindless robots at the mercy of our biology? I think not. David Eagleman illustrates the ramifications of neuroscientific findings quite beautifully when he says "Just as Galileo dethroned Earth from its position at the centre of the universe, neuroscience has dethroned man's position from the centre of themselves". We are now free from previous assumptions about the fundamental nature of the way in which we make decisions; consequently we can begin to address the difficult and exciting task of understanding how our neural systems determine our behaviour.