



Psychology

# Newsletter

## Welcome to our March 2013 issue!



March is generally a busy month for students and staff of the Psychology Department: Second-year students are busy collecting data for their final lab (Cognitive Psychology II) while third-year students are finalizing data collection for their PS300 projects. At the same time, final-year students also prepare for the Departmental Poster Day. This year, there were again lots of interesting posters to look at and it is always fascinating to see the diversity of topics addressed. Pictures of the day are featured on the Department's website.

The end of term is also always a good time to reflect on what you have enjoyed while studying with us and what you think could be improved in the future. Why not share your views with the newsletter team? Let us know what you liked and disliked in the past term(s). We are always looking forward to hearing from you.

Let's all enjoy our well-deserved Easter Vacation and let's hope the weather will be brighter soon! Happy Easter, everyone!

**Famous  
Celebrities  
with  
Psychology  
Degrees p. 3**

**Poster Day p. 5**

**Review of  
"incognito"  
pp. 2-3**

**60 Seconds  
With...  
pp. 4-5**

**RES deadline  
approaching p. 5**

**Weekly  
Seminar  
p. 7**

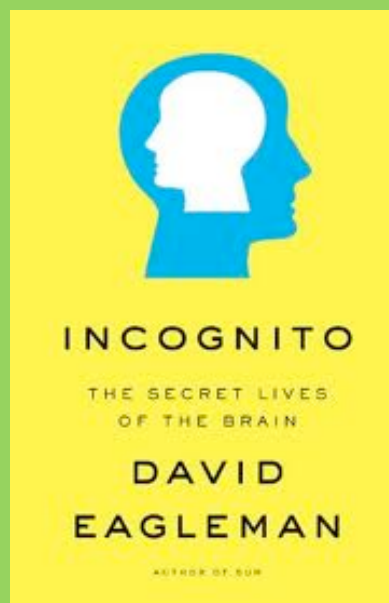
## A Review of David Eagleman's "INCOGNITO"



by  
Mathew Hare

David Eagleman certainly isn't afraid to show off his artistic flare throughout "Incognito". Furthermore, his writing carries a certain magnitude which is undeniably persuasive. The text holds a wonderful speech like quality and sometimes you would be forgiven for forgetting that you are reading a book, and not listening to your favourite lecturer talking about a beloved subject. This is not to say that "Incognito" is always comfortable armchair reading; in the opening pages Eagleman warns readers to cast off previously held assumptions about the fundamental nature of our cognitions and behaviour. After this warning, he proceeds to systematically reconstruct the reader's view of the mind and how it operates.

The opening chapter offers a crash course in the history of how scientists have conceptualised the workings of the mind. Visual attention, the unconscious, and free will are all addressed. Eagleman is careful not to dismiss work that preceded his own; for example, he highlights that Freud was correct in his assumption about an inaccessible part of our mind almost eighty years before modern neuroscience blossomed. In this respect, the book serves to show how advances in technology can enable us to revisit and update older theories.



The second, third, and fourth chapters are concerned with illustrating the importance of perceptual processes in forming and influencing cognitive processes. A variety of visual figures are used to demonstrate and explain concepts, some of these will most likely be familiar to readers such as the two-heads-vase illusion, whilst others will be less known such as those that originate from Eagleman's own research into synaesthesia. This section of the book also tackles wider topics such as neural circuitry and how we can "burn" subroutines into our neural networks.

Chapters five, six, and seven are where Eagleman truly begins to shine. He likens the brain to a parliament, explaining that essentially we are the sum of a vast number of competing influences rather than a singular, coherent individual. This idea is developed and the implications of our brain as a team of rivals discussed. Eagleman opts

to suggest that with this knowledge it would be pertinent to discard a belief in free will. Aside from this suggestion, which would primarily be of academic value, Eagleman also argues for how this shift in our understanding of the mind can inform and change our system of law to improve punishment and rehabilitation for offenders.

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It is important to note that Eagleman is not a reductionist. Whilst the information about neural circuitry and a lack of free will may make it seem as though he is ready to present behaviour as nothing more than the result of genes, inputs, and outputs, this is just not the case. There is wonderful warmth in Eagleman's writing which never denies the complexity of human nature and experience.

If "Incognito" has one central theme, it is one of change. Eagleman's writing is easy to comprehend and undeniably convincing. Readers will inevitably find themselves desperately wanting to agree with the author's ideas and theories. The problem is that Eagleman's

greatest strength as a writer is also his greatest weaknesses. His punchy, rapid words offer so much; blind people will see, neuroscience can restructure society for the better, and artificial intelligence is within our reach. However, Eagleman fails to illustrate how neuroscience can achieve these things; he seems to ask the reader to take his words without question. Eagleman fails to address criticisms; this immediately makes his writing inferior to that of Baron-Cohen, or Bruce Hood for example. This however, is a small criticism, and one that should not deter readers from experiencing a captivating and provocative text.

## 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. American satirist, author, actor and comedian **Jon Stewart** graduated from the College of William & Mary in Virginia with a psychology degree.



2. Chief Executive Officer American Association for the Advancement of Science and Executive Publisher, *Science* **Dr. Alan I. Leshner**. He received an undergraduate degree in psychology from Franklin and Marshall College, and M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in physiological psychology from Rutgers University.



## A long 60 seconds with... PhD student Dean Wybrow



*What was your best subject in school?*

I was always good at science. In fact, on the first day of primary school, I told my teacher I wanted to be a scientist. I changed my mind a few times on the way, but here I am!

*What was the last book that you read?*

I am currently reading 2312 by Kim Stanley Robinson. It's an interesting take on the future of humanity, with most of the solar system colonised.

*Where was your best ever holiday?*

That has to be Lanzarote. I've been there twice now, because the volcanic National Park is astonishing. It's been perfectly preserved since the last eruption and the scenery is beautiful. It's also eerily quiet.

*How long could you go without talking?*

Not very long! I think sleep was invented to stop me talking for a bit.

*If you were a super hero what powers would you have?*

I'd quite like to move objects with my mind, like a Jedi. It would save getting up to get a biscuit.

*What was the last thing you recorded off TV?*

Ricky Gervais's Derek. It's another great piece of British comedy. It's very moving.

*If you could learn any language fluently which would it be?*

I'm currently trying to learn Swedish, but I'd like to speak Mandarin fluently. There are over a billion people out there I could speak it with!

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Which historical figure would you love to see in 21st century

Can I say there are no people I'd like to bring back? However, I would like to go back 66 million years and grab myself a couple of Brontosauruses. They'd look fabulous roaming around the Serengeti!



What would you best sums you

song say up?

Well, I write music myself, so probably one of my own songs, but as for existing songs... God, this is hard... probably Ulvaskall (roughly translates as wolf's call) by swedish metal band Grand Magus

What do you think the greatest invention has been?

Recorded music. I don't know what I'd do without my record collection!

What's your favourite movie quote?

As anyone who has seen my email signature would know, it's going to be from Red Dwarf:

Holly: "Well, the thing about a black hole - its main distinguishing feature - is it's black. And the thing about space, the colour of space, your basic space colour, is black. So how are you supposed to see them?"

If you could ask your future-self one question what would it be?

Have humans learned their lessons from the 20th century?

Have you ever walked out of a cinema before the film was done?

I'm not paying nearly ten pounds and then not seeing the end of the film!

## Research Experience Scheme

Are you interested in gaining first-hand research experience and an insight into state-of-the-art psychology research? Do you want to develop enhanced research skills, boost your transferable soft-skills, and learn more about psychology? If so, why not apply to the RES for the Summer Term? Deadline for applications is the end of the first week after the start of term (28/04/2013). For more information visit our website: <http://www.essex.ac.uk/psychology/department/RES/home.html>



# Poster Day

by Natalie Kwok

To finish of the term, last Wednesday, year three students had to present their year-long project to the masses. There were a wide range of studies spanning from motivation and dreams to statistical reviews; all contributing to the specific area of research.



During the last session, I interviewed Valerija, who was presenting her project on "Sex differences in recognition of male and female faces under low memory condition".

Previous studies on this research topic have shown that gender has a significant impact on recall accuracy of faces. Most studies featured a simple design: presentation of a target face, a retention interval, then choose from an array of faces. These studies showed females were better at recalling faces than males. However, the studies have focused on recall tasks and not on perceiving the faces differently.

In Valerija's study, she used her own stimuli design showing only internal features of faces which minimize gender cues. Participants were



shown the target face and underneath the target face were the array faces participants could choose from. This minimizes memory demands for the participants. Her results show that females and males recognize faces of both genders equally. Specifically, both genders recognize male faces better than female.

So, what are the implications? Valerija explained that perceiving faces is different to recalling them. Both genders can recognize faces with the same accuracy but females (as the literature suggested) can recall the faces

better than males. It is intriguing that male faces seemed to be best recognized by participants. She said this might be an influence from the stimuli or maybe other factors. She is planning a follow up study to understand this phenomenon.



# Weekly Seminar

by Rick O'Gorman

On March 5th, the Department of Psychology, in association with the Psychology Society, welcomed Dr. Peter Lovatt to Essex to present on 'Dance for Parkinson's: Investigations into two forms of dance on problem solving and wellbeing'. Dr. Lovatt is a Principal Lecturer and Reader at the University of Hertfordshire, and is an alumnus of Psychology at Essex, having completed his PhD here with Dr. Steve Avons (now retired). Together with his PhD student, Amelia Hall, Dr. Lovatt is researching whether dance can be used as a therapeutic technique to improve the welfare of people suffering from Parkinson's Disease. Dr. Lovatt presented results from a number of studies that suggest that dance may indeed be beneficial, while engaging those present in an impromptu dance workout for ourselves! Examining the potential benefits on quality of life, mood and problem solving, Dr. Lovatt reported that in one study, which used 'contact improvisation' dance, improvements on two cognitive dimensions on the Parkinson's Disease Quality of Life instrument were observed. In a second study, both Parkinson's Disease and Non Parkinson's Disease participants took part in a series of social dances, all of which featured strong beat and regular steps. There was a

significant improvement across groups in one dimension within Quality of Life and a number of mood scores improved over long and short term, though no changes in problem



solving were observed. As interesting and tantalising as these results are for benefits to those with PD, the demonstrations of the dance techniques used in the research also rocked da house, bringing a groove to the seminar series that is not typical. Attendance was probably worth it just to see some of the psychology staff do their best to replicate John Travolta's moves from Saturday Night Fever, or poor me engage in some contact improvisation live on stage with Dr. Lovatt! All told, it was a riveting example of how psychology can bring novel ideas to the health business, and may offer possible routes to better quality of life for those with Parkinson's.