



Associate Editor: Nicola Hills

Short articles (around 600 words), news, tips, quotes, cartoons and other contributions of particular relevance to students are most welcome. Send to: Nicola Hills, c/o the Society's Leicester office. E-mail: Nicola\_Hills@hotmail.com

# Getting a foot on the ladder

BY SOPHIE MONAGHAN

**B**EFORE I even started my degree, I knew that a future in clinical psychology was for me. But I also realised that there is huge competition for training places and the odds were stacked against me. Armed with this daunting information, I was conscious that I had to prepare myself with 'something to sell' on leaving university.

My final-year project provided an opportunity to produce an exciting piece of research that I was interested in and that had real-world applications. I also liked the possibility of involving participants outside the university population. However, in order to have a supervisor who was as enthusiastic about my work as I was, I soon realised I would require a clinically active NHS psychologist. Someone who had an interest in producing research, and who would be willing to undertake the supervision of a final-year undergraduate research project on top of an already busy schedule.

Although my university department provided internal supervision, an option for final-year projects was to obtain additional assistance from suitable sources outside the university. The first challenge was to find the right clinician who would bring me first contact with the profession I wanted to become part of. So the initial step was to find a British Psychological Society list of local clinical psychologists working in

relevant fields. Costs directly related to my study, including travelling expenses, would be covered by the university, so I felt comfortable looking across the region for help. Then the letter writing began, and the hope that somebody would remember their days as an undergraduate and look favourably upon me. I got lucky.



That first meeting with my external supervisor was probably the most important turning point in my career so far, as both my project and I were welcomed with eagerness and warmth. The collaboration moulded my original ideas into an exciting project that held my interest throughout the long nights at the computer, while the pressure of working to the schedule of a busy professional encouraged me to complete work as agreed.

My idea was for an investigation of the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among survivors of childhood sexual abuse who were clients of clinical psychologists in the North East of England. My supervisor's connection with a local support group allowed the original concept to evolve into a comparison between the client groups of clinical psychologists and support groups in the region.

The response I received, from clinicians and support groups alike, was fantastic. People shared my excitement for this investigation, the project went well and my results were significant. I was able to feed

back my results to a professional development conference on PTSD, present my findings to groups involved in the project, and gain a citation in a research report.

It was important to me that I was creating an undergraduate version of the type of research I would like to engage in later in my career. The 'scientist-practitioner' role of a clinical psychologist (see Shapiro, 2002) meant that the research skills acquired here would continue to be relevant throughout my professional life. At interview stage for psychology assistant positions, my project and the motivation behind choosing the topic was the focus of a number of questions. I was able to remain excited about the results, and provide evidence that I could confidently tackle clinical research questions independently.

The opportunity for socialisation into a new profession, and the culture of information-sharing I have experienced, provided a wealth of knowledge about applying for jobs and the clinical psychology doctorate course. I have been fortunate enough to get my first and now second position as an assistant psychologist, and get a foot on the ladder. Producing a clinically relevant project may not be the 'golden ticket', but it certainly provides evidence of your interest, enthusiasm and ability in this area.

■ *Sophie Monaghan is in the Department of Forensic Psychology, St Nicholas' Hospital, Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne. E-mail: sophie.monaghan@nmht.nhs.uk.*

#### Reference

Shapiro, D. (2002). Renewing the scientist-practitioner model. *The Psychologist*, 15, 232-234.

#### TOP TIP

What makes a project distinctive is a certain sense of involvement and excitement; this comes across when the writer is addressing the reader and 'telling a good story'. If there is a general sense of the writer being in charge of the material and of everything hanging together and being driven by the research problem, that may not be the recipe for first class degree but it's well on the way to being a very successful one!

*Brian Young, University of Exeter*

## SGM OF THE SMG

The outcomes of the committee elections and the ballot on the adoption of new terms of reference will be announced at a special general meeting of the Student Members Group to be held on 21 June 2004, at 10.45am at the Society's office at 48 Princess Road East, Leicester. Please note that this is a change of venue to that published on the ballot and election forms.

□ *If you have any queries in relation to this matter, please contact Lisa Morrison Coulthard (Scientific Officer) on e-mail: lismor@bps.org.uk or telephone: 0116 252 9510.*