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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

At the SMG conference

THE annual BPS Student Members Group conference was fantastic this year. There was a huge turnout, a buzzing atmosphere, and an incredible mixture of presentations.

The first speaker was Louis Monaco, all the way from the California School of Professional Psychology to talk to us about understanding the criminal mind. Louis spoke very entertainingly about the construct of psychopathy and the problems encountered when trying to understand and treat it. Louis argued that his research indicates that using a psychoanalytic approach, such as insight-orientated psychotherapy, could actually decrease psychopathic traits. He concluded that further research in this area will be difficult and expensive, but ultimately beneficial. Children and 'successful' psychopaths in the community could be the key to understanding the disorder.

Louise Glover was the next speaker, presenting her research with supervisor Julia Simner on synaesthesia – a condition where sensory stimuli are experienced in different modalities, for example on hearing a word they might see a colour (see tinyurl.com/2dfqb). The first vowel in a word can have an effect on the colour experienced by the synaesthete, so Louise investigated the effect of the second vowel using target words with either the same or different vowels. A word-colour synaesthete was asked to listen to a word, then describe the colour experienced. The results supported the idea that the second vowel has some influence – responses were significantly faster when the vowels were the same than when they differed.

Next was a brilliant effort from Laura Baxter (University of Leicester), a third-year undergraduate presenting her final-year dissertation – an inspiration to all undergraduates thinking of presenting their work. Laura discussed CCTV, pointing out that it is only a useful method of identification when the people are familiar to the viewer. Introducing colour was the next step in trying to improve this method, although using black and white is cheaper and better in poor light. Laura concluded that there is no beneficial effect – it does

BY NICOLA HILLS

not aid identification, is more costly, and actually produces more false-positive identification.

Everyone was very excited about the fourth presentation – invited speaker Simon Baron-Cohen (University of Cambridge; see tinyurl.com/3ggbl), asking 'Is autism an extreme of the male brain?' Apparently this



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theory has been around since the 1940s (Hans Asperger) but is still controversial. Simon discussed key sex differences in play and occupations. He concentrated on the two main traits that are perceived as typically male ('Systematising') and female ('Empathising'), and described experiments to measure the empathy quotient and systematising quotient of individuals with autism and males and females without autism. This talk was absolutely packed, and many students had questions to ask, which Baron-Cohen was happy to answer.

The afternoon talks were much quieter, with only three speakers. Rebecca Pearson from Cardiff University went first, presenting her final-year project on fear recognition across the menstrual cycle. Pearson found that fear recognition actually improves in the high oestrogen condition (provoking quite a few questions on using oral contraception).

Next Anna Campbell (City University) presented her work on empathy in the workplace with primary and secondary

emotional workers (the former were counsellors and counselling psychologist trainees, the latter were GPs and psychiatric nurses, where work on emotions is secondary to the medical model). Anna concluded that empathy is not effortless, causing different strains in different groups (primary emotional workers tended to be more stressed) and actually decreasing with age. However, as empathy is not automatic, it can be learned and developed.

The final presentation, and one of most exciting, was by Keith Chrystie (SMG International Officer) on psychology societies. Keith described a new move to set up a network of psychology societies across the country – such as already exists in America – to provide a student forum for discussion, sharing information, out-of-university activities, and so on, and to generate a sense of community. Apparently the BPS have recently offered to provide a support pack to all students thinking of setting up their own Psysoc at their university. It was a fantastic, student-focused talk to end the SMG conference with.

The SMG Conference was a really great event this year, even better than last year. It's wonderful to see so many students making the effort to present their work and to turn up and show their support, and I hope you'll do the same in 2005.

BEHIND THE NAME

by Noel Sheehy

ALFRED BINET (1857–1911) invented the intelligence test. The son of a doctor, his dad considered him a wimp, and to toughen him up forced Alfred to view and touch corpses. It didn't work and Alfred developed a lifelong fear of his father. Binet produced four plays co-authored with the director and actor André de Lorde. These explore morose themes in which psychological problems are considered in plots based on horror and suspense. De Lorde and Binet had similar childhoods: de Lorde's father was a doctor and as a toddler he regularly accompanied his father to patients' deathbeds.

Further reading: Fancher, R.E. (1985). *The intelligence men: Makers of the IQ controversy*. New York: Norton.