Developing good psychologists

Over the years there have been a number of pieces in *The Psychologist* questioning whether A-level and Scottish Higher psychology should be a prerequisite for undergraduate study (Toal, special issue, October 2007; Smith, Forum, November 2009; McCarthy, Forum, December 2009). We would like to prompt discussion on this issue with a focus on what would be of benefit to those who receive the services of psychologists.

There have been many articles that discuss what qualities make a good psychologist (e.g. Bennett-Levy, 2006; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999). Although essential, the required knowledge can be acquired at various stages in a person's career and is not the only quality needed. The declarative, procedural and reflective (DPR) model highlights the importance in practice of 'self-schema' (which includes the therapist's attitudes, interpersonal skills, personal knowledge and

experience). This model emphasises the importance of reflective practice to 'apply existing knowledge and skills from other contexts to the new situation' (Bennett-Levy, 2006, p.60). This element of personal growth is perhaps particularly important in psychology, and it can develop from many different experiences, at different stages for different individuals. We are all too aware that psychology is subscribed to largely by white middle-class females and we would hope that any decisions to enhance the profession would be one that would support the application of those from a more diverse background.

We do appreciate that many of the applicants to psychology degrees are unaware of the true content of this subject and the reality of this career path. We were those naive first-year students. But would A-level psychology have helped us? Given that, as Marc Smith

(November 2009) says, A-level 'content is vast' and there are several different specifications to choose from, perhaps a foundation year to the degree will always be necessary. This would teach individuals transferable skills such as how to use journal articles, how to write references, what constitutes a theory and a model, basic research skills, etc, so that if the student eventually chooses to study a different subject they have been equipped to transfer courses.

We're not denying that A-level psychology may be one of the subjects that develops suitable skills and knowledge. However, we feel that as a profession who welcomes and needs diversity to relate to the population we serve, a skill mix obtained from a broad spectrum of disciplines will surely enhance our profession rather than hinder it. The core competencies required to develop as a psychologist at degree

Inequalities and the perfect system

I read with interest Phil Boyes' letter 'Clinical training selection 'inequalities'' (July 2010), which outlined his difficulties in attaining an interview for clinical training given a non-standard background.

Having recently meandered through the same minefield, I have found myself thinking a lot about the much-maligned process for selecting candidates for clinical training. What I began to wonder was whether we would recognise a perfect system even if we had one. There is a fundamental difficulty that there are far more suitable candidates than there are

places available. Many that apply would make 'good enough' clinical psychologists. Therefore, to make the job of selection at all possible, some screening criteria are necessary. These will often look arbitrary, even more so to those who do not meet them.

Even if the process correctly identified only those candidates that would successfully complete training and be retained within the NHS as productive and competent psychologists, it would still be the case that only a subset of those who could have been selected actually were. Those who were not selected are likely

to feel aggrieved, overlooked, frustrated, disheartened, and disappointed. The fact that people feel that way is not in itself a reason to believe that the system is fundamentally flawed. Also, the fact that different courses respond differently to the same candidate speaks more to the diversity of the profession and the courses than a problem with the recruitment process.

Whilst I am sure that the present system is not perfect, I am not confident that the

perfect system would look as perfect from the outside.

Lucy Robinson
PhD Student
Academic Psychiatry, Newcastle General Hospital

level and beyond should be identified through research; we should then look at all possible routes by which they could be developed. If it was shown through research (including studies of viable alternatives) that A-level psychology is in fact essential to the development of good psychologists we would happily support its implementation as a prerequisite to degree level study.

Sarah Masson
Assistant Psychologist
Nicole Stokoe
Associate Psychologist & Research Officer South Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust

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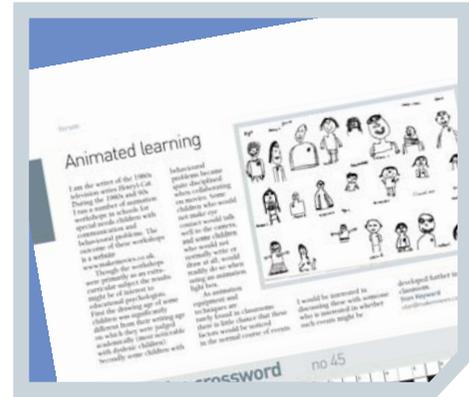
Visual literacy

After seeing a letter from the animator Stan Hayward (May 2009), I became intrigued by his idea that written language is rapidly being replaced by graphic representations. As a philologist, an ex-ITer with an interest in the cognitive foundations and possibilities offered by AI, and a psychologist researcher, I wanted to know more.

Stan believes that drawing should be taught equally with literacy and numeracy as an enabling skill. 'Visual literacy' could become a common educational goal. The insight Stan offers should make psychologists (especially educational psychologists) take a different stance. We need a clear view on the value, strengths and limits of visual thinking and how this relates to the overall cognitive functioning. There is a lot of research to be done, like exploring the dynamics between the visual and the verbal systems, or how drawings may be used to assess the intelligence of future generations.

I have interviewed Stan, and this is available via http://bit.ly/9cRbKR. I would be very interested to hear the views of the psychological community on this issue.

Cristina Vellinga
Birkbeck, University of London

TIM SANDERS

As a physically disabled Oxford undergraduate who has a youthful aspiration to change the world, I've been reading the letters in *The Psychologist* on diversity in relation to clinical psychology training with great interest. With a little bit of mathematics the 2009 equal opportunities numbers on the clearinghouse application website at http://tinyurl.com/29qmt4u revealed the following:

I 28.1 per cent of applicants from the 'white group' were accepted, compared to 12.2 per cent of applicants from the 'other' group

I 27.6 per cent of applicants who did not declare a disability a disability were accepted, compared to 21.9 per cent of applicants who did declare a disability

I 27.4 per cent of female applicants were accepted, compared to 25.6 per cent of male applicants

I 22.4 per cent of applicants aged 20 to 24 were accepted, 34.2 per cent of applicants aged 25 to 29 were accepted, 23.8 per cent of applicants aged 30 to 34 were accepted, 23.8 per cent of applicants aged 35 to 39 were accepted, 9.62 per cent of applicants aged above 40 years were accepted.

Last year there were only 10 applicants out of 2269 who declared a disability due to mental health problems. It is impossible to know how many of them were accepted due to the way the statistics presented on the website.

Naturally there are many interpretations of this data, and without more information about the applicants or comparable information relating to other professions it is very hard to differentiate between them. Unfortunately neither seemed easy to find. Nevertheless, I think they demonstrate the continued existence of a problem, both for the individuals concerned and in terms of effective service provision. It is clearly important that services meet the differing needs of different individuals, and without suitably diverse experiences within the profession how will that be possible?

I also feel my personal experience helps to demonstrate the dangers of structural discrimination. Due to disability I cannot use a standard computer interface without expensive adjustments. It also means that I cannot straightforwardly perform many tasks that might typically be considered 'low-level' and typical of work experience or unskilled care jobs. In essence I imagine the adjustments required for me to work as a clinical psychologist would be perfectly reasonable, but that the adjustments required for me to work in the standard experience-giving roles would be significantly more difficult, both in terms of ease and cost.

Tris Smith
Woking
Surrey

Limitations of computer simulation

Padraic Monaghan and his colleagues have shown us how computational methods can be used to simulate certain aspects of human behaviour (August 2010), but I am less sure that they have shown us that such methods tell us anything about how human minds and brains work.

Let us consider the process of reading, not by analysing how computers might simulate it, but by analysing how humans actually do it. And, as an example, let us consider the following passage and the four different ways it might develop in the process of reading it:

The man raised his arm above his head and brought the cat down with a loud crack...

Then (a) *...upon the table.*
then (i) *The hubbub abruptly subsided and men looked up from their beer, startled by this unwelcome interruption in their conversation.*
or (ii) *The animal lay still with its tongue lolling and blood starting to seep from its mouth. The others looked on horrified at this gratuitous cruelty.*

Or (b) *...upon the sailor's back.*
then (i) *The man arched his back and screamed with pain. The onlookers looked away with a mixture of fear, and distaste at the poor man's humiliation.*
or (ii) *The man grunted but made no other sound. His face became set in an expression of gritty determination and defiance. The others looked on with a sense of hatred – yes – but also of reluctant admiration.*

Now – pause at each choice point and reflect on what is in your mind at that time. I suggest that it is far more than the pure literal meaning of the passage; it is a quasi-pictorial image together with other associated knowledge of the likely scene that would support the words. It consists of ideas about what has happened before and what is likely to happen in the future. It is part of a story – a framework.

So it is clear that we possess 'story frames' just as we possess frames about eating in restaurants, etc., as per Schank and Abelson (1977). Such frames are knowledge structures. As you read a story the frame gets fleshed out or, in Schank and Abelson terms, the slots get filled in with values. In my terms the frame gets 'instantiated' (Campion, 2009). This is not a linear process, nor is it one that occurs at a single level. It might include word-level processes if, for example, one is interested in the author's writing style, or it might just include story-level processes if one is speed reading to get the gist of a passage. Normally, in reading for pleasure, many different levels would be involved.

Understanding how knowledge is acquired, stored, structured and used in any particular task is fundamental to understanding human cognition. We are all skilled perceivers, readers and thinkers and, as Gary Klein (Klein, 1993) has pointed out in relation to decision making, skill entails possessing sophisticated suites of different types of knowledge structure.

Such processes are not mentioned by Padraic Monaghan and his colleagues and, indeed, it is difficult to see how they could be simulated by computational methods, and even more difficult to see how studying such methods could help us understand them.

John Campion
Liphook, Hants

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FORUM BEYOND BOUNDARIES

Murder is not antisocial. If you want a demonstration that we are governed by society even when breaking its rules, homicide is one of the best and grimmest examples. Studies show that victim and offender tend to resemble each other to a striking degree – the young murder the young and the old murder the old, rich and poor rarely kill each other, gang bangers prey on other gang members, and you are likely to be personally acquainted with the person who later ends your life. Socially conservative it may be, but homicide remains a deeply social act.

In a remarkable 2010 study published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, academic Andrew Papachristos took these findings to their logical conclusion and conceptualised each murder over a three-year period in Chicago as a social interaction between groups. Surprisingly, the pattern of homicides resembled an exchange of gifts. One gang 'presents' a murder to another, and that group must reciprocate the 'gift' or risk losing their social status in the criminal underworld. From this perspective, murder is perhaps the purest of social exchanges as the individual is left in no position to reciprocate on his own.

Murder, is not, however, an equal opportunities reaper and you are considerably more likely to be dispatched if you are poor and marginalised. It was not always the case though. Historical records show that homicide was used equally by all levels of society but has become increasingly less democratic over time as access to formalised systems of dispute resolution have become more widely available. The fact that the legal system is preferentially used by those with money is perhaps not surprising, although the fact the distribution of justice is unjust should give us pause for thought.

Nowhere is this contrast more striking than in Latin America. Although the region has the highest murder rates in the world the generalisation tell us little – the devil is really in the detail. A 2008 study led by the Venezuelan sociologist Roberto Briceño-León found that poverty in the region predicted little of the homicide rate on its own. It was inequality that explained the trend: in areas where wealth and extreme poverty coexist, violence occurs more frequently. Despite the horror, society adapts and nations with higher levels of slayings have been found to have higher acceptance of murder. If we want to prevent violence we need to understand that murder is not a stain on the fabric of society, it is one of its threads.

Vaughan Bell is a clinical psychologist and academic working in Medellín, Colombia. Share your views on this and similar cross-cultural, interdisciplinary or otherwise 'boundary related' issues – e-mail psychologist@bps.org.uk.

obituary

John Newson (1925–2010)

In early July over 70 people gathered at Nottingham University to celebrate the life and work of John Newson, who died in May aged 84. The many tributes testified to the seminal role that he played in the growth of developmental psychology in the second half of the 20th century.

John studied psychology at University College London, following service in the army. A fellow undergraduate was Elizabeth Palmer and 50 years later they recalled that era in a chapter in *Psychology in Britain* (2001). John and Elizabeth were married on the day that their degree results were announced in June 1951 and their professional lives were to be inextricably intertwined thereafter. John had been appointed to an assistant lectureship in psychology at Nottingham University before he had been awarded his BSc; the whole of their careers were spent there.

Experience with their first child made John and Elizabeth question the basis of our understanding of childhood and family life. He was a 'difficult' baby and they turned to child rearing manuals and then to research for guidance. British child psychology at that time focused on older children and education, with the study of infancy largely the preserve of psychoanalysis. As John wrote recently: '...it took us some time to realise that whereas different people hold strong, but often contradictory, opinions about the best way to raise a baby there was hardly any knowledge about what most ordinary parents actually do believe.' He and Elizabeth set out to provide what they called a 'listening ear', allowing parents' beliefs and practices over a wide range of topics to be heard, without judgement from an 'expert interviewer'.

The study of 700 families began in 1958 and involved interviews with mothers about their one-year-olds. *Infant Care in an Urban Community* (1963) helped secure funds to continue the study when the children were 4 and there were subsequent rounds of interviews at 7, 11, 16 and 26. The published findings – four books in all – were jointly constructed and written. John's role was the statistical analysis around which Elizabeth crafted a narrative richly informed by a selection of verbatim accounts from the transcribed tapes.

John concentrated his energies on these publications, reasoning that they would reach a larger and more diverse audience than articles in academic journals would. The books' approach and accessibility appealed to parents as well as to those with professional concerns for children's well-being, yet the message that underlay the analysis of the data was not universally welcome. The identification of social class as a major determinant of parenting styles led the Newsons to be labelled as sociologists by some in the psychological community, but many sociologists saw their work as too psychological and data-focused.

1967 saw the birth of the Child Development Research Unit, with John and Elizabeth as co-directors, and also the first intake of students onto an innovative master's course, which provided training for clinical and educational psychologists. At the same time the Psychology Department moved to new premises, which included a state-of-the-art playroom. The CDRU quickly established a reputation for innovative thinking and research.

Several master's students progressed to doctoral research, and the growing availability of video recording technology encouraged some like Susan Gregory and Susan Pawlby to undertake detailed analyses of mother–infant interaction. John became increasingly intellectually gripped by the origins of social understanding, an extension of the reflections on parental roles prompted by the longitudinal study. His commitment to understanding how infant and adult guide each other as the infant develops and the adult adjusts to this contributed to an explosion of theory in the early 1970s. His much cited 1974 paper 'Towards a theory of infant understanding' demonstrated John's ability to draw great insight from careful observation of seemingly mundane events.

John was not a man for committees and contrived to avoid much BPS bureaucracy. However, in 1974 he became the first chair of the Developmental Psychology Section, a fitting recognition of his standing and influence.

John was also a practical man, a skilled carpenter who applied his craft to his wider interests, designing and making toys for assessing and remediating developmental delays. In the 1970s he and Elizabeth established one of the first toy libraries at Nottingham, and published *Toys and Playthings*.

A generation of students was profoundly influenced by John Newson's dedication and insights, carrying these principles forward into their own careers. The wide respect that he commanded in the field of developmental psychology in the UK and beyond is further testimony to his intellect and his humanity.

Peter Barnes
formerly of The Open University
Charlie Lewis
University of Lancaster

NOTICEBOARD

I Are there any **clinical psychologists (working or retired) with a special interest in neuropsychology** who could become involved in Headway North West London on an occasional or regular basis? This long-established group of brain injury survivors and their families meets in Harrow Weald on the first Thursday of every month in the evening. There are many types of support which this group and the weekly survivors group could benefit from, besides contact with a professional who has a good knowledge of brain injury and its impact.
Frances Clegg
020 8422 8694
frances.clegg@dsl.pipex.com

I Is there a graduate psychologist who would be interested in gaining some **voluntary assistant forensic/ clinical psychologist experience within a mental health setting**? This would involve being part of a therapy team that offers CBT, EMDR, schema-focused therapy, DBT and art therapy to detained female patients primarily with a diagnosis of personality disorder. We can offer experience of multidisciplinary working, varying assessments and both individual and group treatment. Opportunities to be involved in research may also be available. We are flexible on time and based in Newark, Nottinghamshire.
Claire Thompson
Claire.Thompson@raphaelhealthcare .org.uk

I Are you a chartered psychologist or a psychologist registered with the HPC? I'm an occupational psychologist **researching whether the recent changes in the regulation of psychology could affect how you practise as a psychologist** and whether this change might have an impact on how you view yourself and your profession (as part of a professional doctorate). If you would like to take part, I will be running focus groups and interviews in Scotland and via teleconference. For more information please contact me.
Bridget Hanna
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0141 331 8613

The depth perspective

This is why we need psychologists and other social scientists. We are equipped with skills in based objectivity and observed subjectivity, to lend distance and measure to the debate. We get it wrong when we claim to be the only experts in human experiencing (the same error that termed theology the 'queen of the sciences' for centuries). But our stance as scientists, as reflective practitioners, as rigorous thinkers is needed to make a case for the long view, the anti-intuitive, the considered path that takes more into account than reflex action.

We are sometimes mocked for the depth perspective. Popular press characterises psychological research expensively re-telling 'common sense'. For instance I found on a web search for 'silly psychology' research by Johnston et al. (2010). It investigates 'Why are you smiling at me? Social functions of enjoyment and non-enjoyment smiles'. The findings seemingly state the obvious: we naturally discriminate the meaning of the smiles of others. But this research is not silly. It deepens a field of assumed knowledge with precision and with rigour. We now know more. We are aware of the 'how' and 'where' as well as 'what'. All such disciplined research can free us from stereotypes of knowledge and release subtlety, context and creativity. The function of psychology is to give this depth and perspective and to introduce caveats.

Common sense must not be allowed to become a tyrant or a kind of social see-saw, that would never allow consistent and wise action. Psychology is about questioning the obvious. It is about putting common sense to the test and then locating limits and contexts. Perhaps, we can borrow (and decontextualise) Barack Obama's refusal 'to settle for the paltry limits of conventional wisdom' (Oval Office speech on the oil spill, 16 June 2010) in the debate about the safety of vulnerable children and adults. The skill of the psychologist is essential in the debate lest 'common sense' becomes a synonym for truth and we all become paralysed by alternating stereotypes.

Peter Martin
*Division of Counselling Psychology
Communications Lead*

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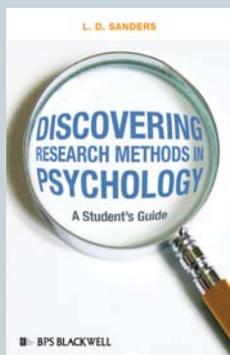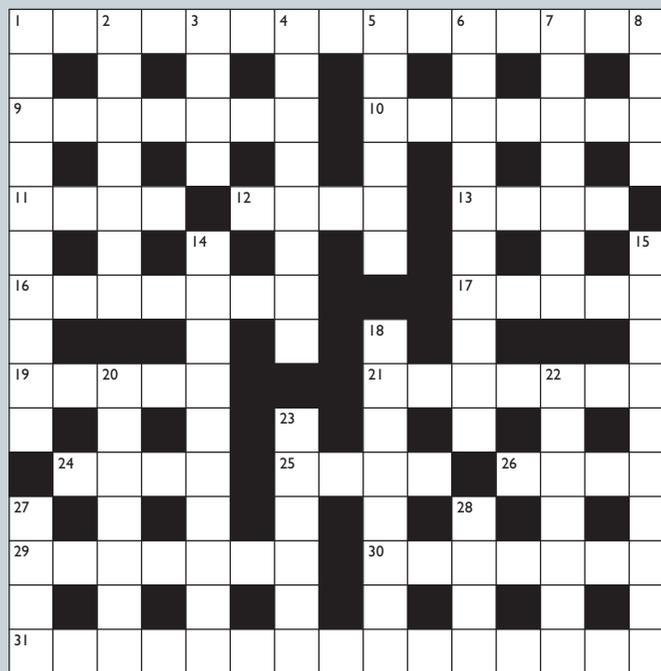
prize crossword no 53

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Send your entry (photocopies accepted) marked 'prize crossword', to the Leicester office (see inside front cover)
deadline 11 october 2010. Winner of prize crossword no 52 B.V. Allan, Hythe, Kent

no 52 solution **Across** 1 Occupational, 9 Education, 10 Press, 11 Inbred, 12 Impostor, 13 Neuron, 15 Anteroom, 18 Examiner, 20 Awaken, 22 Equality, 23 Loggia, 26 Irene, 27 Four-walls, 28 Psychologist. **Down** 1 Obedience, 2 Crumb, 3 Placebo, 4 Trip, 5 Ointment, 6 Approve, 7 Textbook, 8 User, 14 Unamused, 16 Mental set, 17 Beatific, 19 Illness, 21 Who's who, 22 Epic, 24 Golgi, 25 Auto.

Competition vs. cooperation

Research cited on the Society's www.researchdigest.org.uk/ blog asks 'Does greater competition improve performance or increase cheating?' In view of our modern emphasis on competition as the driver of economic and social progress, psychologists could well publish the research on cooperation.

In history mankind has always got further through cooperation than competition. Competition as wars and as occasional rivalry has achieved a certain amount, often of dubious value, but cooperation has been the means by which we have really achieved – hunting in bands, dividing tasks in agriculture, commerce and industrial production, and in the family itself. We really suffer today by all the means whereby firms keep their competitive edge.

If these claims rouse controversy, that would be good for making everyone think about this.
Valerie Yule
Mount Waverley
Victoria, Australia

Editor's note: Matt Ridley's recent TED talk has some fascinating ideas on cooperation: see tinyurl.com/mattridley

❙ across

1   A variation whereby they accept blame for treatment type (8,7)
9   Psychologist's first to connect with cleric (7)
10   Artery supplying the brain represented as rib, alas (7)
11   Lightly cooked and unusual (4)
12   What may be keen on rim (4)
13   Group accepting first of treatment let it stand (4)
16   In the direction of closed hospital rooms (7)
17   Assessed delusion's beginning to be associated with speed (5)
19   Sanctuary's operating system seen as one is admitted (5)
21   Retired professors note excellence exhibited by one (7)
24   Girl found hideout in church (4)
25   Brood about poem (4)
26   Heard connection to national (4)
29   Computer options, backed up in pub? (4,3)
30   Who's to blame for rip-off covered up by sect? (7)
31   Somehow steers on her land for air-raid protection (8,7)

❙ down

1   Desire expressed in sound of consonant (10)
2   Feature might be raised with some surprise (7)
3   Damage produced by short panic attack (4)
4   Exaggerate points relating to excessive intake of 5? (8)
5   Plate for pill (6)
6   Comfortable address (4,6)
7   Affliction of one with mental disorder (7)
8   You old soldiers accepted in former times (4)
14   Doctor's one to shortly push bed to emergency room? (10)
15   These days, religious leader to do the paper work (10)
18   What may be paid to press, etc? Unlikely (8)
20   Examined, cursorily? (7)
22   Come into home with their doctor (7)
23   One at rudimentary stage beset by more complications (6)
27   Girl identified initially by Eysenck, Maslow (twice) and Adler (4)
28   Off colour? (4)

FORUM LIGHTER SIDE

The late, great, Richard Gregory, who died in May, wrote *Eye and Brain*, a perception text enjoyed by almost every student mainly because it has no formulas or graphs, just visual illusions galore. On Richard's website (www.richardgregory.org) is a paper, somewhat improbably written for the Vatican, which says, 'it is hard to believe that learning can't be fun'. Richard was a fun teacher, and he was fun because he was funny, finding 'funny ha-ha' and 'funny peculiar' in the most mundane phenomena. The ever-punning Richard would have enjoyed his own commemoration, called a *fun*eral.

Psychologists ought to know about fun, because everyone else does. On 'fun', Google has 531,000,000 pages of images (and turning off Safe Search illustrates Freud's description of people as 'polymorphously perverse'). There is 'Nuns having fun', 'Fun with Braille', 'Making geometry fun', 'Put the fun between your legs' (a bike advert), and a contrived eight-line mathematical proof on what constitutes fun.

What though of the psychology of fun? All that PsycINFO has is such heartsinks as, 'Sexual behavior at work: Fun or folly?', 'Exploring the role of positive and negative consequences in understanding perceptions and evaluations of individual drinking events', and 'Pottermania: Good, clean fun or cultural hegemony?'. Neither fun nor informative. An exception may be, 'Is sex just fun? How sexual activity improves health', but I won't provide a plot spoiler.

Few psychologists have asked how people have fun. Fortunately University College London undergrads are made of sterner stuff. In our three-week, second-year attitudes lab, a hundred students use focus groups, structured interviews, grounded theory, and attitude questionnaires to explore a single-word topic, such as 'Fashion', 'Art', 'Science', 'Europe' or 'Careers'. Two years ago we knew we'd enjoy the class, because everyone laughed and clapped when we announced the topic: 'Fun'.

Chris McManus studied scrotal asymmetry in Greek sculpture: see http://tinyurl.com/greekballs

Loads of ideas and data were generated, and we found five different types of fun: sociability (laughing with friends), contentment (relaxing with family), achievement (doing things well), ecstatic (that's a small 'e', and means crazy and excited), and sensual (do I have to explain everything?). Not everyone liked all of them (and certainly not at the same time).

The un-fun thing was when Adrian Furnham and I wrote a research paper, full of correlations and factor analyses. Perhaps we shouldn't have called it, 'Fun, fun, fun', but good, indifferent and bad journals all rejected it. For some sad, po-faced, reviewers, fun meant dumping from a great height on those doing fun research. Eventually a new journal understood us: 'It is fun to read this study about fun.' Find out more at *Psychology* (had no-one thought of that title before?), via www.scirp.org/journal/psych. Have fun!

Chris McManus is at University College London. This column aims to prompt discussion and debate, and the odd wry smile.