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Psych NUWS

The Newsletter of the Northeastern University Psychology Department

Vol. 14, Number 2 (January 2008)

From the Editor

At this time of year, quite a few seniors are saying “Whew!” after putting the final touches on their applications to graduate or professional school. Congratulations! And we professors are proud to have the opportunity to talk glowingly about our students in letters of recommendation.

Not all of these letters are for current students, however. Rather often, students from the past reappear, writing to tell us that after one, or two, or more years of exploring options, they are now applying for graduate training. This is very exciting to us! Don’t forget that you can always come back to your professors for letters. Of course, you want us to remember you! Whether you are applying in senior year or later, you’ll want to get to know your professors as much as possible while you are here.

Not all careers require a graduate degree, by any means. But in case you are thinking about graduate school, you should be aware that, unlike Master’s programs, PhD programs often pay your way with a living stipend and tuition remission. Yes, it’s true—they pay *you*, rather than you paying them! This is society’s way of investing in the scholars and university teachers of the

future. Programs vary in how well they support their students, however, so check out their policies during the application process. Be sure to see the article later in this issue on applying to graduate school!

Hattie Morris Is Retiring!

It’s hard to believe, but true: Hattie Morris, one of the mainstays of the Psychology Department staff, is leaving after over 25 years. On January 3, her last day at work, we had a wonderful all-day party in 125 NI with visits from many old and current friends, food, gifts, and even poetry. For everyone who knows Hattie—and it’s hard to imagine anyone who doesn’t—this will be a great loss. But she is going to have a fantastic time in the next phase of her life.

Getting to Know Our Adjunct Faculty

Our adjunct faculty members teach both introductory and advanced courses, often drawing on specialized backgrounds and areas of expertise not represented by the regular faculty. Some of our adjunct faculty

tell us about themselves below. Meet the adjunct faculty for Spring 2008! You'll be especially intrigued by their stories about how they chose their career direction:

Christine Williams Will Teach Developmental Psychology and Statistics

I am finishing my PhD in Counseling Psychology at the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio (also got my MA in counseling psych there as well). My areas of specialty are career development, the psychology of working, identity development, and gender. I moved to Boston this summer with my husband (an Industrial/Organizational psychologist) and two cats. I am a skier and psychology nerd – I actually worked in the American Archives of the History of Psychology for a year where I was able to see home movies of Freud and display the uniforms from the Stanford Prison Experiment.

I became interested in psychology in high school and was fascinated by personality development in undergrad. I chose to focus on vocational psychology because we spend so much of our time working and work has the power to fulfill our lives or make us miserable.

Grayson Kimball Will Teach Sport Psychology

I earned my BA in 1994 at the University of Hartford in Mass Communications, an MS in Physical Education (Sport Psychology concentration) at Springfield College in 1998, and a Doctorate of Physical Education (Sport Psychology concentration) from Springfield College in 2001. My special academic interests are Sport Psychology, Sport Sociology, Research Methods, and

Statistics. In addition, I have extensive experience in marathon running (I've completed six marathons) and coaching/consulting in several sports including running and tennis.

One day during my senior year at the University of Hartford, I was hanging out with a few of the basketball players. As the clock approached 5:00, they were getting up to leave and one of them mentioned "coach has us meeting with a sport psychologist today to talk about our 6-game losing streak so we have to go." Prior to that day, I had never heard of the field of sport psychology or the role of a sport psychologist. After that day, I began researching the field and soon began my graduate training (master's and doctorate) at Springfield College. The rest is history...

Melanie Soderstrom Will Teach Cognition, Cognitive Seminar

My BS is from MIT (major: biology, minor: cognitive science), and my MA and PhD are from Johns Hopkins University. I am currently doing postdoctoral work at Brown University. My academic specialties are early grammatical development in infants/toddlers and infant speech perception. I grew up in Ottawa, Canada. I have a 1 year old son. In my "spare" time, I am part of a swing dance troupe.

While an undergrad at MIT studying for a biology degree, I became involved in a research project on child language development. I decided to apply for graduate programs in psychology to pursue this research further, and I haven't looked back since.

Lisa Gurdin Will Teach Learning and Motivation, Seminar in

Behavior Modification, Advanced Clinical Seminar (focus on autism)

My educational background: BA in Dance, University of Maryland; MS in Applied Behavior Analysis, NEU. My special interests are in behavior therapy for families, teachers, and individuals with autism, developmental disabilities, anxiety, etc. I have 2 children – Jacob, age 3 1/2 and Noah, age 2.

When I was in college, I did behavior therapy with a child with autism. I absolutely loved it. Although it was challenging work, I was impressed by the power of Applied Behavior Analysis to teach this child everything from communication to play to self-help skills. I wanted to do more work with children with autism through behavior analysis. My clinical work has evolved over time. My background includes doing professional development, teaching, and consultation in the areas of autism and brain injury rehabilitation. Currently, I do workshops and individual therapy with children, parents and teachers. I work mostly with families (and teachers) who have children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, developmental disabilities, and anxiety. I also provide parenting workshops to area preschools and individual families.

What Do Psychologists Do? Some Study Juries

In this issue of *Psych NUws*, we start a new feature highlighting some of the interesting things that psychologists do in their careers.

Back in 1994, former athlete and actor O.J. Simpson was tried for the grisly knife

murders of his ex-wife and her friend. His trial was shown on live TV to a captivated national audience. There was a huge amount of evidence that he was guilty. Yet, he was acquitted by the jury. What happened?

Psychologists have long been involved in research on jury selection and jury behavior. Often, issues of racial attitudes and stereotypes are important in this kind of analysis. In the Simpson case, O.J.'s lawyers used peremptory challenges, whereby they can reject a potential juror without having to state a defensible reason, to constitute a jury that had nine blacks, one Hispanic, and two whites. Sometimes defendants appeal to higher courts, arguing that discriminatory intent went into the lawyers' choice of jurors.

Psychologists who study the process and consequences of jury composition note that, consciously or not, decision makers manifest various biases. For example, prosecutors tend to exclude black jurors, while defense attorneys strike white jurors. As the proportion of white jurors increases, juries become more punitive toward minority defendants. Homogeneous white juries use less deliberation time, discuss fewer case facts, make more uncorrected inaccurate statements, evade the topic of racism, and are more likely to believe that a black defendant is guilty than more diverse juries.

--APA *Monitor on Psychology*,
December 2007 (adapted)

What Do Psychologists Do? Some Study the Movies

The psychological study of film was considered lightweight for much of the 20th

century. But this has changed. Two important developments are the introduction of neuroscience as a tool for studying viewers' responses to film experiences, and the growth of interdisciplinary approaches whereby psychologists team up with scholars from other disciplines. Some current topics of research include the effectiveness of product placement in movies and the therapeutic role of movies.

One of the best-studied topics is the effect of violent movies (and other media) on people's behavior. There is now a huge amount of evidence that violent movies produce violent behavior. However, not all people react the same. Hostile or physically aggressive men react the most violently, while women and more "sensitive" men react much less so. Further, films with realistic violence have the biggest impact. If people are able to think "this isn't real," their aggressive impulses can be short-circuited.

And, yes, viewers can be prompted to buy products after seeing subliminal ads for them in a movie. But, fortunately, the effects are weak and show up mainly in interaction with certain states the viewers are in. For example, thirsty viewers bought more "Lipton Ice" beverage after seeing a subliminal ad, but not-thirsty viewers didn't.

--APS *Observer*, March 2007 (adapted)

What Do Psychologists Do? Some Make a Career in the News

I often talk with students about academic and clinical careers in psychology, but for a change, I thought it would be fun to profile a friend of mine from graduate school, who is

using her psychology background in a fascinating alternate career track. Joanna Schaffhausen is Associate Producer, ABC News Medical Unit.

Joanna has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a Ph.D. in behavioral neuroscience. She always enjoyed writing, so she applied for a job opening at ABC News Medical Unit as she was finishing up her dissertation. Part of her job interview involved reading a pile of original research articles and compiling them all into a brief, balanced, and well-articulated news article – all within a one-hour time limit. The unit had originally intended to hire an M.D., but quickly learned that this psychology Ph.D. could efficiently and accurately read, evaluate, and critique research articles, all while putting them in the larger context of current research in the relevant field. Joanna was immediately offered the job, and has now been working at ABC for several years.

Joanna's job encompasses an incredibly diverse range of tasks. The medical unit evaluates all the research that ABC is considering putting on the air (including *Good Morning America* and *ABC World News*) or online. They explain to the producers of those shows what the study under consideration really says – that is, not just what it claims to demonstrate (e.g., that vitamin E helps women's heart health), but also the quality of the study (e.g., whether it was controlled, randomized, double-blind, etc.). Joanna explained to me that in the news world, people are always trying to find the sensationalism in a story, and it is her job, and the job of the other scientists on staff, to rein them back in. (Read more about this in Joanna's blog at <http://blogs.abcnews.com/theworldnewser/2007/02/index.html>). She also writes scripts for on-air personalities, writes articles for ABCnews.com, preps scientists who are

about to go on-air, and has been on air herself. Everything has to be done very quickly, which requires her to be highly knowledgeable about the current state of many different areas of medical and behavioral research.

--Prof. Kim

Some Guidance on Applying to Graduate School

You might think it's too soon to be thinking about the next cycle for graduate school applications—after all, 2008 is just beginning—but actually it's not too soon. Applying to grad school requires lots of advance planning. The latest issue of *GradPSYCH* (a publication of the APA) offers tips for planning the steps in applying to grad school, which we adapt for you below:

Spring and Summer—start investigating possible programs to apply to. Your research should include online resources (secondary sources or departments' own websites) as well as talking to as many people as possible, starting with our faculty and branching out to faculty or students (recent and current) in programs. And start studying for the GRE. This test is very important!

September—apply to take the GRE in October, and start studying! Take practice exams and focus on areas where you need the most improvement.

October—list the programs you want to apply to and schedule campus visits if you can. Call the department to see if any faculty can meet with you while you are there. Feel free to make contact with potential advisors at those schools via email to get a dialogue

going. This can really help when they are confronted with a big pile of applications!

November—request that your undergrad transcripts be mailed to the schools you are applying to. Request letters of recommendation. Send an information packet to the people who write your letters, including your resume, undergraduate transcript, and a list of accomplishments and anything special you would like to remind them of about yourself. Provide them with stamped envelopes, deadlines, and guidance on whether the letter is mailed back to you or directly to the school.

December—write your essays. Ask an experienced person (for example, one of your letter writers) to give you feedback on your essay before you make it final. Mail applications and financial aid forms. Make a backup copy of your application packet. More and more schools want electronic applications so be prepared for that.

January—file your free application for federal student aid. Confirm that your professors sent their letters. Sometimes they forget!!

March—accept and decline offers. As soon as you are sure you want to decline an offer, let the school know. This is extremely considerate for their applicants who are waiting to hear and who are just as nervous and impatient as you were/are!

Does Happiness Change After Major Life Events?

People's greatest hopes and fears often center on the possible occurrence of rare but important life events. Richard E. Lucas of Michigan State University recently summarized the topic of how life events—good or bad—influence our experience of

subjective well-being or, more simply, our happiness, in an article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (April 2007).

People may dread the possibility of losing a loved one or of failing to achieve a big life goal, and they may go to great lengths to find true love or to increase their chances of winning the lottery. Generally, people assume such events will have lasting effects on their happiness. But do they?

Surprisingly, the answer is not necessarily yes.

The prevailing theory among psychologists is that after a major life event, people inevitably adapt. This is called the “set-point” theory—which posits that after a good or bad event, people will return to their genetically determined personal set-point for happiness. So, if you “naturally” tend to be happy, you’ll end up back at that point (or back at your typical unhappy level).

One piece of evidence favoring this theory is the finding that factors such as income, age, health, marital status, and number of friends can’t account very well for how happy people are. Further support comes from the fact that people’s happiness stays quite stable over periods as long as 20 years, even when big ups and downs have occurred within their lives. There is other evidence too. For example, people who won a big lottery were soon not any happier than was a control group. Long-term research also shows that at marriage there is an upward spike in happiness, but it reverts to the pre-marriage level within a few years. After widowhood and divorce, happiness understandably goes down, but it rebounds within a couple of years to pre-event levels.

But research also indicates that the set-point theory needs qualification. Some groups who experience negative life events do not return

to their pre-event levels of happiness. One such group is people with spinal cord injuries, who consistently rate themselves as less happy than control participants do.

People experiencing unemployment rebound in their happiness, but not to their pre-event levels. Also, there are very large individual differences among people in whether they return to their earlier levels of happiness or not.

Though there is much research to be done, one conclusion of this line of research is that bad life events don’t have to ruin our happiness forever.

--summarized by Dr. Hall

Psych NUws is a joint effort of the faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and staff of the Northeastern University Psychology Department. Direct all inquiries and contributions to the Editor, Prof. Judith Hall. We especially welcome contributions from undergraduates!