They’ve done studies, you know. 60% of the time, the PLB is on schedule every time.

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Florencia Reali, Monday 2/5

The Role of Statistical Regularities in the Acquisition and Processing of Linguistic Structure

Natural languages have a complex syntactic structure that results from combining linguistic elements according to certain principles. Even with minimal explicit instruction, humans are very good at learning and processing linguistic structure. However, the question of how the human brain succeeds at this remarkable task comprises one of the most interesting puzzles in all of cognition.

Can children learn structure from experience? What is the role of statistical regularities in the acquisition and processing of complex structure? The studies presented here explore these questions.

Giant Eagle, 4:30 PM

David Creswell, Thursday 2/8

Self-Resources in Stress and Disease: Self-Affirmation and Mindfulness

In this talk I will describe a program of research which examines the stress and health protective effects of self-affirmation and mindfulness. Self-affirmation theory proposes that people can buffer threats to self-worth by drawing on positive self-resources. In examining the effects of self-affirmation in the health domain, I will present two studies showing that self-affirmation buffers stress and improves health outcomes among individuals coping with both acute laboratory stressors and chronic health stressors. Mindfulness is the process of being aware and receptive to present moment experiences. Previous studies have demonstrated that mindfulness and mindfulness meditation interventions buffer stress and improve health outcomes in a variety of populations. In considering the underlying neural and behavioral mechanisms for these effects, I will present a third study showing that dispositional mindfulness is associated with reduced distress and enhanced emotion regulation, as measured by behavioral and fMRI methods.

Room 342D, 11 AM

Laura Stroud, Monday 2/12

Dr. Stroud is an assistant professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown Medical School. Her research interests include physiological responses to stress, biobehavioral mechanisms in nicotine dependence, and sex differences in depression. She has done research on the effects of maternal smoking during pregnancy on infants’ stress responses, and currently explores sex differences in physiological responses to stress and depression during the transition to puberty.

Time and location TBA
Sheldon Cohen:
King of all Media?

Sheldon has gotten a lot of attention in the press recently for his research. Here are some of the highlights:

In Old Media:
Sheldon is scheduled to appear on NBC’s national news next Tuesday (2/5/07), and was mentioned in the Orange County Register, as seen below...

On the Web:
Sheldon graced the front page of CMU’s website, and was also covered on Slashdot (link1).

Slashdot users had many comments on Sheldon’s work. One user in particular may have found a fatal flaw in his theory. The user, ‘sorak’ posts: If happiness prevents illness, then why are so many diseases sexually transmitted? Sheldon has not, as of press time, provided any response to this devastating critique.

Seriously, though, the comments on Sheldon’s story (follow the link above) are a comedy goldmine. Check them out!

Office of the Executive Director
Church of Scientology Orange County

Dear Dr. Cohen;

I have taken the liberty to write to you concerning an article that was featured in the Orange County Register, picked up from Reuters. It was titled, “Happy people may catch fewer colds.”

I have included a book, as a gift to you, by author L. Ron Hubbard, Self Analysis, which was written in 1951. What you have found in the relationship to one’s level of happiness and one’s health is amply covered in not only this title, but much of his work in the 50’s, 60’s and even into the 70’s.

Hubbard documented, in numerous of his writings and lectures, on the relationship between one’s state of mind, or “tone level” as he referred to it, and one’s physical condition.

Now that contemporary science has substantiated his findings, some half a century later, I think it is time now to put the use of Self Analysis to a scientific test. And that is this: Can we causatively raise the tone level of an individual, and from that, monitor and document general improvement in their health as a result of such therapy?

Hubbard’s works were never intended to cure the ill or to be for used medicinal purposes. The objective of his therapy was always the rehabilitation of the Human Spirit. But as you have found, happy people emanate a health from “within” that some transcends traditional wisdom on physical healing.
Pittsburgh Barbies
submitted by former department undergrad Nicole McNeil

Fox Chapel Barbie: This yuppie Barbie comes with your choice of BMW convertible or Hummer H2.

Included are her own Starbucks cup, credit card and country club membership. Also available for this set are Shallow Ken and Private School Skipper. You won’t be able to afford any of them.

Mt. Lebanon Barbie:
The modern day homemaker Barbie is available with Ford Wind star Minivan and matching gym outfit. She gets lost easily and has no full-time occupation.

Traffic jamming cell phone sold separately.

Liberty Ave Barbie/Ken: This versatile doll can be easily converted from Barbie to Ken by simply adding or subtracting the multiple snap-on parts.

Blood Drive

The University is having a blood drive. If you can donate, people would appreciate it. Especially people who need blood.

The Blood Drive is from 8 AM to 2:45 PM, on Tuesday, February 6th, in the Connan Room of the University Center.

Thanks to Ellen and Emilie for notifying the PLB.
February’s Graduate Student of the Month is Nora Presson. She and the PLB talked at length about plasticity, entrenchment, Arizona State, and the perils of smoking. To find out more about Nora, read the highlights of our discussion below:

PLB: Tell us a little about yourself. Where are you from? Where did you go to college?
NP: I was born in Tempe, Arizona, which is where Arizona State is located. I went to undergrad at Northfield, Minnesota, at Carleton College. Making me, therefore, adapted to every condition on the weather spectrum. I also spent a lot of summers in Bloomington, Indiana, because my parents—who are both psychologists—have a project they do every summer, on smoking.

PLB: What is Carleton like?
NP: Well, they call it the Harvard of the Midwest. Narrowly beat out Macalaster for that title! It’s a small liberal arts college about an hour south of the Twin Cities. The Northfield’s slogan is “Cows, colleges, and contentment,” which I think is sort of charming. It’s the town where Jesse James robbed his last bank, because he was caught by the Northfield townsfolk. They do a reenactment every year, with full costume and horses.

PLB: What was your major in college?
NP: I was a psychology major and a Spanish major. When I got to college, I said I wanted to major in anything BUT psychology, because I didn’t want to do the same thing that my parents do. But then I took Intro Psych because it fulfilled a requirement, and (sigh) I really enjoyed it. And then I took Psychology of Language, and I was like, “Oh, damn, this is fun.” So then I was a psychology major, and I had been taking Spanish Lit classes, and my adviser convinced me to take on a second major, which was worth it in the end. That’s one of the great things about growing up in the Southwest. It gives you a reason to learn Spanish, and an opportunity to speak it outside of class, and I wanted to keep speaking Spanish.

PLB: What brought you to CMU?
NP: It’s sort of funny that I ended up here, because of all the places I visited, this was the one where I spent the least time on campus. I was visiting both CMU and Pitt—those were my final two choices—and I spent so much time going back and forth between them that I hardly saw either one! But Carnegie Mellon was definitely an excellent choice.

PLB: What kinds of research questions are you interested in?
NP: In three sentences or less, what I’m interested in is what happens when people have more than one language they have to deal with. Right now, the way I’m looking at it is looking at how people are able to learn a new language. How they handle learning another language after they’ve gotten to the point that they’ve learned their first one well enough that it gets difficult to learn any more.
PLB: So what kind of research project are you working on right now?
NP: I’m trying to see if we can teach people, undergrads here and at Pitt, to learn grammatical gender. But not just to learn it kind of well, but really to master it, and reach a level of performance that some people might think impossible. People who think about critical periods as an explanation for why babies learn languages better than adults expect that adults don’t have the ability to learn language any more. So I want to see just how well adults can do, if we can give them the right kind of training.

PLB: So this last semester, you’ve gotten a research project up and running, and you’ve gotten a taste of graduate student life. What did you learn last semester that’s going to help you be a better graduate student for the rest of your time here?
NP: I’ve learned a lot. Can I just say a lot? No? I would say that I’ve gotten much better at making where I’m coming from clear when I’m talking to people, like my theoretical assumptions. I’ve got a better sense of how to lay everything out and know what’s important to discuss.

PLB: What do you do with your spare time?
NP: Well, I don’t know, it seems dumb to say I like to read and listen to music, since everyone says that, but I do like that! And I really enjoy watching sports. Also, I like to play tennis. Since it’s really cold outside, I’ve recently become a pro at Wii tennis.

PLB: Wee tennis? Is that playing tennis with midgets?
NP: No no no! Wii, Double-U, I, I, as in Nintendo Wii. Because it’s all cold, and I can’t play tennis outside, so we have to play virtual tennis.

PLB: Ah, I see. I was confused there for a bit. OK, you’ve almost made it. But you need to answer the PLB’s famous* three tough questions. Number 1: what, for you, is the big question you’re trying to answer?
NP: What is the mechanism for learning language, and where does it go in adulthood? Does it go anywhere at all?

PLB: Number 2: If you weren’t a graduate student, what would you be doing right now?
NP: I would probably be working as a literary translator. That was what I did my Spanish thesis on, translation theory. It’s like what would have happened if I had given up the idea of testing ideas about language, and gone to the artistic side of it.

PLB: Interesting. Finally, number 3: what, for you, is the perfect vacation?
NP: My perfect vacation would be something where I had to bring no work along with me. I’ll tell you what my present to myself will be when I get my Ph.D. and am officially done with graduate school. I’m going to take no work with me, I’m going to go to South America, and I’m going to climb Macchu Pichu. That’s my goal.

*may not actually be famous in some states
According to the January 12th issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, our department is ranked #3 in the nation, behind only Harvard and Yale.

That news sparked a flurry of activity...

**Miami Dolphins Ask permission to speak to Mike Scheier**

The Miami Dolphins have asked CMU permission to speak to Psychology Department Head Michael Scheier in regard to their opening for a head coach. On reading that Scheier’s current team came in third in a recent rating of psychology departments, the Dophins were anxious to get a coach who could get a sluggish team like CMU Psychology to perform so well. Although his salary has not been made public, Scheier is thought to make nearly $8 million a year. This does not include television appearances and racket ball winnings. CMU officials are not concerned. An unidentified source in the administration was quoted as saying “we are tired of being 3rd, 4th, 5th and would be glad to find a really winning coach.”

-Sheeldon Cohen, sports reporter

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**Brooke Feeney wins Department Fantasy Football Title!**

Brooke’s domination of everybody foolish enough to play fantasy football against her came to the expected conclusion over the holidays, as her team, the Cavaliers, took home the league championship. Brooke led the league from start to finish, and demoralized foes, not only with her team’s high scoring, but with her brutal message-board taunting skills.

Miriam Rosenberg-Lee finished second, and Jason Ralph finished third. Several other players of note did, ah, less well, and there’s really no need to dwell on it here. Just wait ’til next year, Brooke Feeney. Next year!

There’s not a league champion trophy, per se, but the winner did get plenty of chocolate. Which she could melt down and sculpt into a trophy, if she wanted to.
At the end of last semester, the research methods classes got together for a great poster session.

**PLB Shout-Out!**

This month’s shout-out comes from Anna Fisher, and goes out to Jim Hawthorne and Theresa Kurutz, for their help in organizing the poster session, in particular finding the poster stands, getting them set up and put away, and -- not least importantly -- procuring food so that people could have snacks while they perused (or presented) the fantastic posters!
Smoking/Healthy Campus Eventually Task Force:
Staff Council leadership recently sat down with CMU leadership about the Healthy Campus 2010 initiatives, including the smoking proposals. In an intriguing bit of news, we were told a primary reason for delaying making CMU a smoke-free campus for another 3 years is CMU leadership’s concerns about attracting and retaining international students and faculty. International students comprise roughly a quarter of CMU students; citizens originating from many non-US cultures are more likely to smoke (per capita) than Americans. With these points in mind, however:

A) The Healthy Campus 2010 Task Force’s own report (link2) states “There is no risk-free level of secondhand smoke exposure; even brief exposure can adversely affect the cardiovascular and respiratory system.” (emphasis added)
B) As of Oct. 2006, over 30 colleges & universities in 18 states (link3) have enacted smokefree policies for their entire campuses.
C) Included in a basket of healthcare policy changes proposed by Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell to kick off his next term in office is smoke-free workplace legislation.

We voted not on a particular proposal, but rather on the general concept of “moving toward a smoke-free campus in 2010”. It passed, 24-14 (I voted “aye”). During commentary and Q&A prior to the vote, some opponents of the concept expressed concerns about Big Government not stopping at smoking, in terms of behaviors to regulate; and worried that staff members would lose jobs and/or parking places (???) if we move to a smoke-free campus. Other Council members expressed concerns that since the current (very liberal) restrictions aren’t enforced anyway, who exactly will be held responsible for enforcing new regulations that actually have any teeth? The 2010 initiative may include non-Oakland properties such as Penn Ave., Pgh. Technology Center, etc. The issue of jurisdiction over nearby city sidewalks & streets is still unresolved. We heard some fraternities wanted to join the Healthy Campus 2010 committee merely because they oppose smoking bans, and not to help out with the other, wide-ranging health-related proposals being worked on by the committee. Last I heard, they were rebuffed.

Food Drive
The campuswide Food Drive, organized by Staff Council and three times larger than the Steelers Food Drive (wow!) was hugely successful this year compared to prior years, collecting about 3 _ tons (7,000+ lbs.) of food, and over $600 cash. For those caring enough to contribute food, cash or time, the Staff Council thanks you!

Staff Council Representation Proposal
A long-term goal of Staff Council is to reduce its size. With that in mind, we voted on a proposal to, in future elections, elect only 2 members per administrative unit (H&SS, SEI, CFA etc.), plus a small number of at-large slots. Despite concerns about fairness (e.g., SEI has 500+ staff, while CFA has about 60), and despite proposals for a per-capita alternative (modeled by the U.S. House of Representatives), the measure passed overwhelmingly. (I voted “nay” because I felt the concerns expressed were sufficiently compelling to warrant more consideration of alternatives. And while this is my first term, and the long-term roadmap for Staff Council reform was on the table before I got here, I’m concerned that a smaller Staff Council will lead to underpopulated committees and committee meetings [e.g., Benefits, Communications, Food Drive], faster burnout and higher turnover, and less manpower to promote another of Staff Council’s long-term goals: increasing its visibility among, communications with, and importance to staff).
**Staff Council Report, Pt 2**

**Whistleblower Hotline**
It was supposed to go live in December, but was delayed until January due to kinks that needed to be worked out in the telephone/computer system regarding privacy concerns.

**Port Authority**
We really couldn’t devote sufficient time to this very important threat, once we tackled all the above issues. Staff Council members were encouraged to attend the public hearings if possible, and a campuswide forum was suggested for the near future. Also, a member I spoke with after the meeting reported that Access fees for the elderly and those with disabilities are slated to rise soon, by up to 30%.

**Faculty Senate Report**

The Faculty Senate also talked about the proposed campus-wide smoking ban. Since Ellen’s discussion is pretty comprehensive, just a few brief notes. Entropy currently sells cigarettes, and will stop doing so in August, if all goes according to plan. Also, I was wondering: if we outlaw tobacco, does that mean only outlaws will have tobacco? Anyhow, the only other thing of interest at the meeting was that Vivian Loftness (Senate vice-chair) wanted volunteers to form a committee. The committee’s purpose would be to assess how a second committee was composed, and if it needed different membership. You can’t get that kind of meta-committee action just anywhere!

**A Modest Suggestion from the PLB**

Like all of us, the PLB is very happy to have David and Marlene back. But it does lead to some confusion: we now once again have 3 Davids in the department (Klahr, Plaut, Rakison). Thus, whenever someone refers to “David,” the PLB is hopelessly confused.

So the PLB suggests we differentiate among our Davids. For example, we could refer to David Klahr as “David” (he’s been here the longest, so he gets the full moniker). David Plaut could be “Dave.” And David Rakison? Well, I was thinking, he’s British, and has been compared to a rock star, so it seems appropriate that he be “Davey,” not unlike the sole British member of the Monkees, Davey Jones. I haven’t run this proposal by Davey yet, but I’m sure he’ll be cool with it, once he sees how it’ll clarify our lives!
Holiday Party Pics

The party may be over, but at least we’ve got the pictures to see us through until the next one!

Erin, Ginger, and Emilie know how to have a good time!

Really, the only reason I even provide a caption for this picture is to have an excuse to use “Davey.”

The conversation was going very well until I suggested tripling the PLB’s budget.
The whole Koedinger/Kotovsky thing has been giving the PLB some trouble, as well. I’m thinking of using “Kenneth” or “Kensington” to clarify the situation.

Ah, the University Center was decked out in full holiday splendor.

You can almost see the relief in Jared’s eyes that there are no other Jareds in the department. If we ever hire the Subway guy, though... look out!