Psycho? Logical? Bulletin

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Department Kayaking Adventure

Saturday, September 9th, 3 PM (Barring storms)

On September 9th, the department will embark on a bold attempt to achieve naval superiority on the Three Rivers (or two rivers if you’re Ken, who doesn’t believe that the third river exists). The cost will be 24 dollars for 2 hours in a single kayak, and 35 dollars for two hours in a double kayak.

Everyone is invited! E-mail me if you’re interested in coming: thiessen@andrew.cmu.edu
Reminder: Pitt-CMU Research Symposium

The Pitt-CMU research symposium is SATURDAY, September 23rd.

Here’s an overview of the schedule:
9:30-10am Breakfast
10-11am Cognitive session
11:15am-12:15pm Social session
12:30-1:45pm Lunch
2-3pm Developmental session
3:15-4:15pm Cognitive session
4:30-6pm Reception and poster session

Talks will be in the Adamson Wing in the basement of Baker, lunch will be in 336B, and the reception will be in the lounge. RSVP to lclopez@andrew

Having attended before, I can tell you that I’ve really enjoyed seeing all the research presented at the Pitt-CMU Research symposium. AND there’s food. That’s a day that’s hard to beat.

Baker Hall Crime Spree

The last few weeks have seen an alarming increase in the crime rate in and around Baker Hall. Books have been pilfered from the mailboxes in the lounge, and the PLB’s own bike was stolen from the bike stand out in front of Baker. Just a word to the wise: don’t leave obviously valuable items out in mailboxes (new textbooks can be sold to book resellers for a decent price), and go ahead and invest in that second bike lock you’ve been thinking about.

The PLB will report on any further developments in this case. We’ve contacted James Caan’s PR staff to try and ascertain his whereabouts during the times of some of the most egregious thefts, but so far has received only a highly suspicious silence in reply.
PITTSBURGH, PA (PLB News): A peace summit many looked to in hopes of ending the age-old enmity between Ken Kotovsky and the squirrels of Squirrel Hill has failed, according to sources present at the negotiations. The summit, which began last week, appeared to be headed toward success in the evening before it disintegrated. The feuding parties had agreed to large portions of a 10-point peace plan tentatively referred to as the “Squirrel Hill Accords.” Had Kotovsky and the squirrels signed the Accords, it would have ranked among the most astonishing accomplishments in the career of legendary negotiator and former US President, Jimmy Carter. However, tensions broke out late in the evening despite Carter’s best efforts, and the Accords were scrapped.

Preliminary reports indicate that Kotovsky and the squirrels differed most vehemently on the highly emotional pear tree issue. Kotovsky was enraged that the “**** squirrels ate all of my pears.” The squirrel’s position is that the pear tree is outside, and they consider all territory out of doors to be their domain. The two sides were unable to come to a compromise.

Tempers grew heated as the night went on, and both sides claim the other made the first provocative move. Kotovsky claims that the squirrels taunted him by parading the core of an eaten pear around the summit grounds, and then tossing it at his head. The squirrels counter that Kotovsky placed squirrel deterrents on his bird-feeders in clear violation of the cease-fire negotiated for the summit. What is undisputed, however, is that open violence broke out at 12:05 AM.

Roaring “fuzzy-tailed rats,” Kotovsky charged at the squirrel delegation, who fled into the safety of nearby trees and began to pelt Kotovsky with nuts. Hostilities continued unabated until near dawn, when a UN peacekeeping crew arrived to intervene. Jimmy Carter declared that both groups were incorrigible, and that he was washing his hands of the entire situation.
This summer, I was elected to CMU’s Staff Council. Thanks to everybody who voted for me! My term runs to 2008. Your other H&SS representatives are Vera Lampley [Modern Languages] and Cassandra Stanley [Dean’s Office]. But you’ll have to go all the way to the 1st floor to visit them! Meetings are monthly and I’ll try to keep you updated on a regular basis here in the PLB.

The first meeting (July) was orientation; the August meeting was my first ‘real’ meeting. Here’s what I’ve learned so far: There are something like 70-80 reps. There was a lot of turnover from last year to this year, so there’re quite a few newbies like me. Mercifully, we were not subject to hazing, unless you count the beef salad at lunch (think tuna salad except with chopped beef). There are many committees; each rep is required to serve on at least 1 committee. The committees represent various issues or niche activities related to staff (you) and their (your) interests, such as Benefits, Communications, Kennywood Day, Take your Child to Work Day, Food Drive, and more. Some committees have frenzied bursts of activity once a year (e.g., Food Drive, Kennywood); some have stuff to do all year long. As an aside, I was one of the most informally-attired people in attendance at our first meeting…Folks, do not underestimate how good you have it here in Psychology: No ties! No heels! No pantyhose! But I digress..

Staff Council is trying to re-design itself, partly due to the results of a survey it did starting in 2002 among staff, focus groups, as well as comparisons to other universities similar to CMU.* One concern raised by these findings was that, compared with benchmark schools, CMU’s Staff Council is relatively bloated in number (think: our State Legislature). A rep raised a proposal, the details of which will be hashed out by the Constitution Committee, to reduce the population to roughly 50 by attrition and other (nonlethal) means.

Staff Council faced plenty of other challenges prior to the task force report. For example, how to boost awareness amongst all CMU staff that there is such a thing as Staff Council? And, if people were already ahead of the curve on that one, do they know what exactly it does for staff? Another goal mentioned in the August meeting was how to improve the at-times sparse attendance at monthly meetings (held at noon, typically on a Thursday. A rule that you can have no more than 4 excused absences has helped-- but not cured-- the problem). Another --perhaps related-- concern is the recent introduction of Robert’s Rules of Order (Parliamentary Procedures) at meetings (e.g., “I move to table the motion;” “State your point of order,” “I wish to amend the amendment”). A gavel is now a de rigeur accessory at meetings. There is actually a rep whose principal role it is at meetings to ensure that these rules are followed. Newbies were issued a pamphlet listing them in July. There were some concerns expressed that last year’s meetings got a bit bogged down thanks to this Robert guy.

At the August meeting, I cast my very first vote! It was exciting, and related to something about moving a motion off a table. Or onto a table. Into a closet? At any rate, on such a wired campus, I was pretty surprised that voting is not via electronic balloting, such as keypads at each seat (our meeting was in a modern classroom with Internet connections and power supply at each seat.) While electronic voting may not be such a confidence-boosting thing when you’re voting for President, it seems to be perfectly suitable for Staff Council, with the added benefit of anonymity, particularly if you’re voting on a hotly-contested issue, or a topic that might render you unpopular if you happen to vote in the minority (“But I like beef salad!”).

Our positions and time contributions are voluntary. I’m very happy to have the chance to serve. Some of my observations thus far have been pretty funny, and it is nearly irresistible to avoid sharing them with you. That said, opinions expressed here are strictly my own, and not those of Staff Council or CMU.

A special shout-out to Susan “Queenie” Kravitz, long-time Psychology Staff Alumna, who warmly greeted me at the August meeting.

*The report is available online at http://www.cmu.edu/staff-council/documents/task_force_report_05.pdf
August’s Graduate Student of the Month is Yan Mu, possibly the first person ever to refer to the chance to appear in the PLB as a “wonderful opportunity.” Clearly, Yan knows how to communicate with the press.

PLB: Tell us a little bit about your background.
YM: I graduated from Peking University, where I was a double major in psychology and economics. During my undergraduate years, most of my interest was in children’s social development. The lab I was working on was focused on theory of mind; for me, I was interested in how children use theory of mind in social interactions, like in decision-making situations.

PLB: How does college in China compare with what you’ve seen of college in the US?
YM: Here, people don’t seem to have a clear major in the same way. They choose courses because they’re interested in them. In China, students are accepted into the university, and they’re organized into their department. I entered Peking University directly into the psychology department. Most of my courses were about psychology, and most of those courses were required. We need to choose a major before we enter the university, and it makes the courses in school very clear.

PLB: What was it like making the move to a new country for grad school? What drew you?
YM: It was a simple decision. When I was doing my research on children’s decision-making, I realized that the cognitive requirements of those situations was challenging to the children. That’s why I’m interested in discovering the cognitive basis for their decisions in social situations, and how that changes with development. When I was reading papers on this subject, I saw that most of the leading scientists in this area were in the USA. And that’s the most important reason why I chose to apply to schools in the USA.

PLB: Was it more difficult to apply to a school overseas than it is for a student in the US?
YM: The internet made it much easier! I needed to take the TOEFL, which is an additional test. The only trouble, to get here, was about the Visa. That’s kind of difficult. You need to make a reservation for an interview with the Visa officer, and prepare lots of materials.

PLB: What’s been the biggest adjustment for you? Both in terms of being in a new country, and in terms of shifting from undergraduate to graduate school.
YM: Well, firstly, life in the USA is different than life in China. Before I came to the USA, I lived in the dormitory of the university. Peking University is a really big university, and we had lots of services. I could do all kinds of things on campus. Now, in the USA, this is the first time I’ve lived all by myself. But I’ve survived! Regarding studies, compared to Peking University, CMU is a small university. And we have small classes. And graduate study is focused more on research than taking classes. But both of those changes are an easy part for me to adjust to.

PLB: Tell us a bit about your research.
YM: My first year project was on children’s representation of numbers, and the relationship between representation and their understanding of measurement. The idea is that the basic numerical representation is an important basis for all kinds of skills, like using rulers, and mathematical computation, and estimation. Abstract understanding of numbers is really helpful for more advanced understanding of other instruments or concepts related to numbers.
This semester I’ll be doing a follow-up experiment about the numerical representation and understanding of measurement. During the summer, when I traveled back to China, I contacted schools there to see if they’re interested to cooperate with our lab to do comparative studies with students in China. For a long time, people have found that Chinese children are better at math learning than children in the USA. But those findings focus on mathematic skills, like computation. We don’t know if Chinese children are better at those skills only because they have more practice, or because they have more advanced numerical representations.

PLB: So, when you’re not doing work or research, what do you do to entertain yourself?
YM: I like taking pictures, photography is one of my hobbies. I like listening to music and reading. Also, I’m really interested in Chinese calligraphy: writing the Chinese characters beautifully with soft pens. There’s no way to define what beautiful is. You can even develop your own style. A lot of people in China write really beautifully. It’s all about the structure of the character, and writing it beautifully.

PLB: What do you think of the Chinese food we serve in America?
YM: I’ve only tried a few Chinese restaurants around campus. American Chinese food is different than the, ah, real Chinese food.

PLB: Nick Yeung always used to say that American version of ethnic foods just involves taking some other kind of food and adding more butter and grease to it.
YM: That might be accurate! The American Chinese food is much sweeter than the ones in China.

PLB: is there Chinesized American food?
YM: I guess so. McDonald’s and KFC in China are different than they are here. The burgers are similar, but there are more kinds of foods in the McDonald’s in China. They cook the chicken wings differently. Also, the KFC in China provide salads, and snacks, and soups.

PLB: And now, we’ve come to the PLB’s patented Three Tough Questions. Except, we could only think of two this week. What, for you, is the big question you want to answer with your research?
YM: Right now, my long term goal is to understand how children come to a decision in a social interactive situation, and how that differs from what adults do? Do children have different features or different ways of making decisions they use? How do they come to be like adults?

PLB: That’s a very central question in development: why do we change with age. Good luck answering it! That question should keep us both busy for a while. OK, here’s the second tough question: Imagine that you’re stranded on a desert island, with one other person in psychology who is not your adviser. Who would you most want to be stranded with?
YM: That is a tough question. Wait: did you say which psychology department they had to be in?
PLB: I guess I didn’t.
YM: Well, that makes the question easier! I’d pick my girlfriend. We were students together in Peking University. Now she’s a graduate student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She’s working with Renee Baillergeon. That’s who I’d want to be on an island with.
Nick Yeung’s departure leads to new Number #1!

Now that Nick Yeung has left CMU, taking a position at Oxford University, Erik Thiessen is indisputably the most popular male assistant professor in the psychology department. Dr. Thiessen took a moment out of his schedule to talk with the PLB about his new status.

**PLB: Have you been busy?**

**ET:** It’s been a whirlwind. Autographs, photographs, phonographs: you name it, if it ends in ‘graph,’ I’ve been providing it to the public.

**PLB: Can you follow in the footsteps of the man with the million dollar smile?**

**ET:** I continue to maintain that the value of that smile has not been empirically established.

**PLB: So... who’s the LEAST popular male assistant professor in the psychology department?**

**ET:** This interview is over!
We had 3 possible captions submitted, all by the PLB’s overseas correspondent Nick Yeung:

My junior colleague got married, and all I got was this lousy garter!

At Rakison’s wedding reception, there was only ever going to be one winner of the remove-your-frilly-underwear-and-hang-it-out-to-dry competition

Nick Yeung will always be the #1 most popular male assistant professor in psychology (and I have the garter to prove it)!

Turn to next page to see this month’s captionable photo!
PLB Content Warning:

What follows on the next page is a transcription of quotes from a conversation the PLB witnessed at lunch a few weeks ago. Initially, the PLB was not going to publish it, because the PLB is a family publication. However, Editor-emeritus Lori Holt requested it, and when Lori Holt says “Jump,” the PLB just asks, “How high, Lori sir!”

Regardless, the following conversation is rated at LEAST PG-13. Parents are warned that their children should not read the following transcript until they are at least 32 years old, and probably never.

The names have been changed to protect the... well, they’re not “innocent,” precisely, but you get the idea.
Once again, The Washington Post has published the winning submissions to its yearly neologism contest, in which readers are asked to supply alternate meanings for common words.

The winners are:

1. Coffee (n.), the person upon whom one coughs.

2. Flabbergasted (adj.), appalled over how much weight you have gained.

3. Abdicate (v.), to give up all hope of ever having a flat stomach.

4. Esplanade (v.), to attempt an explanation while drunk.

5. Willy-nilly (adj.), impotent.

6. Negligent (adj.), describes a condition in which you absentmindedly answer the door in your nightgown.

7. Lymph (v.), to walk with a lisp.

8. Gargoyle (n.), olive-flavored mouthwash.

9. Flatulence (n.) emergency vehicle that picks you up after you are run over by a steamroller.

10. Balderdash (n.), a rapidly receding hairline.

11. Testicle (n.), a humorous question on an exam.

12. Rectitude (n.), the formal, dignified bearing adopted by proctologists.

13. Pokemon (n), a Rastafarian proctologist.

14. Oyster (n.), a person who sprinkles his conversation with Yiddishisms.

15. Frisbeetarianism (n.), (back by popular demand): The belief that, when you die, your soul flies up onto the roof and gets stuck there.

16. Circumvent (n.), an opening in the front of boxer shorts worn by Jewish men.

Submitted by Theresa Treasure!
Fantasy Football Draft: All the excitement of sitting still and reading!

Mike Scheier chortles while thinking about all the points LaDainian Tomlinson will score for his team

Is it cheating to ask Berkeley the Wonder Pup for advice?

As Erin and Jason demonstrate, everyone’s friendly until the first game starts
Erik Thiessen Pitches CNBC Cartoon

Thiessen comments the project is still in its nascent state, but describes the cartoon as a mixture of the X-Files, X-Men, and a Western. He adds, "I'll, of course, be the star of the cartoon. After Napolean Dynamite, I was looking for something to really broaden my professional experience and open me up as an actor/writer/producer/
cartoon figure. Then I had a dream about a RadicalNativist Zombie Army - I woke up screaming, but instantly knew it would be a hit. Plus our department's talents are squandered within the confines of academia. What are we teaching our students if their abilities are not extended to greater societal impacts?"

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yvonne</strong></td>
<td>Conducts an fMRI scan of her own brain to discover and cultivate aerial self-propelled and instantaneous motion production systems (read: she can fly &amp; teleport)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Jared</strong></td>
<td>Discovers the common denominator between past &amp; future information retrieval; uses imaginal buffer to make objects appear (read: clairvoyant &amp; he thinks it, it appears)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gary</strong></td>
<td>Constructs an expandable neural net - a single node carried in the palm of the hand is capable of instant proliferation and synaptic connection (read: he lassos villains with his neural net)</td>
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<td><strong>Roxanne</strong></td>
<td>Token social student; expertise in social info processing enables unobtrusive perception &amp; exploitation of villains' own evil motivations (read: invisibility &amp; mind control)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Christine</strong></td>
<td>Mastery of speech production processes results in the abilities to rescind speech from those who abuse it, and to impart language to non-linguistic entities</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Katia</strong></td>
<td>Studies of graded representations result in supernatural synesthesia - she can smell fear and danger miles away, taste the premonition of success/defeat, and see the true meaning in spoken language.</td>
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Subject: Thinkers Anonymous

It started out innocently enough. I began to think at parties now and then -- just to loosen up. Inevitably, though, one thought led to another, and soon I was more than just a social thinker. I began to think alone -- “to relax,” I told myself -- but I knew it wasn’t true.

Thinking became more and more important to me, and finally, I was thinking all the time. That was when things began to sour at home. One evening I turned off the TV and asked my wife about the meaning of life. She spent the night at her mother’s. I began to think on the job. I knew that thinking and employment don’t mix, but I couldn’t stop myself. I began to avoid friends at lunchtime so I could read Thoreau and Kafka. I would return to the office dizzied and confused, asking, “What is it exactly we are doing here?”

One day the boss called me in. He said, “Listen, I like you, and it hurts me to say this, but your thinking has become a real problem. If you don’t stop thinking on the job, you’ll have to find another job.” This gave me a lot to think about. I came home early after my conversation with the boss.

“Honey,” I confessed, “I’ve been thinking . . . “

“I know you’ve been thinking,” she said, “and I want a divorce!”

“But, Honey, surely it’s not that serious.” “It is serious,” she said, lower lip aquiver. “You think as much as a college professor, and college professors don’t make any money. So if you keep on thinking, we won’t have any money!”

“That’s a faulty syllogism,” I said impatiently. She exploded in tears of rage and frustration, but I was in no mood to deal with the emotional drama.

“I’m going to the library,” I snarled as I stomped out the door. I headed for the library, in the mood for some Nietzsche. I roared into the parking lot with NPR on the radio and ran up to the big glass doors. They didn’t open. The library was closed.

To this day, I believe that a Higher Power was looking out for me that night. Leaning on the unfeeling glass, whimpering for Zarathustra, a poster caught my eye.

“Friend, is heavy thinking ruining your life?” it asked. You probably recognize that line. It comes from the standard Thinkers Anonymous poster.

Which is why I am what I am today: a recovering thinker. I never miss a TA meeting. At each meeting we watch a non-educational video; last week it was “Porky’s.” Then we share experiences about how we avoided thinking since the last meeting.

I still have my job and things are a lot better at home. Life just seemed easier, somehow, as soon as I stopped thinking. I think the road to redemption is nearly complete for me. Today I took the final step to recovery.

Today I registered to vote as a Republican.
This month’s PLB Shout-Out goes out to Terri Jones-Davis and Shellie Sherman. Recently, my lab manager of almost 2 years went on to graduate school, and I needed to hire another one. I don’t know if any of you have ever tried to use CMU’s “Talent Management System,” but it’s not exactly user-friendly. Unless, perhaps, the user is a masochist. Fortunately, Shellie and Terri got me set up, put the announcement out, and managed to stop the system when I had finally found someone!

What we did with our Summer Vacations
An Essay by the Psychology Department

Ken and Avis went to Italy

Which resulted in this startling photographic proof that Ken owns a tie!
Nick Pegg camped out...

... At the Indianapolis 500(!)... 

... Where he held his annual Mike Scheier look-alike competition. Hawaiian shirts for everyone!
Lynne and John went to Norway...
... And also to Machu Pichu
Vicki Helgeson reports that she “hiked up a mountain in Yellowstone 6 miles to see a big horn sheep - and sure enough, one was in our path near the top of the mountain.”

Saudamini got married

The graduate students took the opportunity to get all dressed up
A wedding isn’t the only event that can lead to some elaborate costumes. Murder mysteries apparently have the same effect.
Speaking of elaborate costumes, Lori Holt married a well-dressed gentlmen, and then took her honey-moon in Italy
Brian and Mary MacWhinney went to Korea...
... where they ate exotic foods...

... took suggestive photos...

... and eventually went to prison.