Psycho? Logical? Bulletin

Volume 4, Issue 1
December 2005

In This Issue:

- Serious talk about logos (pg. 2)
- Mysterious doings on the South Side (pg. 4)
- The worst jobs in science (pg. 5)
- Identifying NRSA applicants (pg. 11)
- And much, much more!
IT’S TIME

Our psychology department excels in many, many areas. For example, the US News and World Report recently ranked Carnegie Mellon as the second best department in the nation for graduate study in Cognitive Psychology (I’m sure they ranked many other aspects of the department highly, too, but you have to pay to see the rest of the rankings, and after signing up for health care, I didn’t have a lot of spare change).

However, there is one area in which our department, sadly, does not excel. Unlike many other psychology departments, we do not have a logo. We are logo-less. Unlogoed. Ixnay on the ogoe-lay. If the US News and World Report ranked logos, our department would be last.

Don’t despair! This is a situation that can be remedied. In fact, Bobby Klatzky has already taken the first step toward remedying the logo situation, and has submitted a potential logo for your consideration (see adjacent picture).

There’s no doubt that Bobby’s logo is fabulous! But is it the best we can do? We won’t know until we try.

That’s right, you read it here first: we’re having a logo competition. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to design the best logo for the department that you can. Submit your entries to CMUPLB@hotmail.com. When we reach a critical mass of submissions, I’ll publish them all, and we’ll vote to establish our favorite logo. The creator of the winning design will win a fabulous prize.

Things we could do if we had a logo

1) Nifty uniforms for Intra-Mural teams
2) Put it on conference posters and talks
3) Not feel awkward when people from other departments get together to compare logos and exclude us
4) Mugs
5) Feature it prominently on web page
6) Have a local bakery design a cake where the logo is made out of frosting. We could then eat the cake.
7) Did I mention mugs?
8) Stationery!
Japanese Scientists Photograph Giant Squid

LONDON (Reuters) - Japanese scientists have taken the first photographs of one of the most mysterious creatures in the deep ocean: the giant squid.

Until now the only information about the behavior of the creature – which measure up to 18 meters (59 feet) in length – has been based on dead or dying squid washed up on shore or captured in commercial fishing nets.

But Tsunemi Kubodera, of the National Science Museum, and Kyoichi Mori of the Ogasawara Whale Watching Association, both in Tokyo have captured the first images of Architeuthis attacking bait 900 meters (yards) below the surface in the cold, dark waters of the North Pacific.

“We show the first wild images of a giant squid in its natural environment,” they said in a report on Wednesday in the journal Proceedings B of the Royal Society.

Giant squid have long attracted human fascination, appearing in myths of the ancient Greeks, as well as Jules Verne’s “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.” Scientific interest in the animals has surged in recent years as more specimens have been caught in commercial fishing nets or found washed up on shores.

Little is known about the creatures because it has been so difficult to locate and study them alive. Large ships and specialist equipment, which is costly, are needed to study deep sea environments.

The Japanese scientists found the squid by following sperm whales, the most effective hunters of giant squid, as they gathered to feed between September and December in the deep waters off the coast of the Ogasawara Islands in the North Pacific.

They used a remote long-line camera and depth logging system to capture the giant squid in the ocean depths.

“The most dramatic character of giant squids is the pair of extremely long tentacles, distinct from the eight shorter arms. The long tentacles make up to two-thirds of the length of the dead specimens to date,” the scientists said in the journal.
PITTSBURGH (PLB) – Carnegie Mellon University scientists have taken the first photographs of a mysterious crustacean that has terrorized Pittsburgh’s South Side for weeks: the giant crab. The giant crab surfaced without warning from the Monongahela River, according to local reports. It lurched toward shore, wreaking havoc amongst barge traffic, and then came to rest atop the new McCormick and Schmick’s restaurant.

Many local residents were reluctant to venture to the South Side even before the plague of humongous crustaceans, but Professor Nick Yeung led a team of photographers to the site of rumored huge-crab-related activities, and successfully photographed the beast.

“We show the first images of the giant crab in its natural environment, resting comfortably atop a seafood restaurant chain,” said Dr. Yeung in a press conference Monday.

Local members of the press expressed surprise that pictures of a giant crab emerged so soon after a team of Japanese scientists photographed a giant squid, but Dr. Yeung was irritated by any mention of the coincidence.

“People always want to talk about giant squid,” he said. “Huge tentacles this, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea that. It isn’t as though Jules Verne only wrote about giant squid, you know. Were you aware that the first letter in the nineteenth word of Chapters 12, 11, 5, 6, 8, 7, and 13 in ‘The Time Machine’ spell out BIG CRAB? I didn’t think so.”

When reminded that H.G. Wells, not Jules Verne, wrote “The Time Machine,” Dr. Yeung stormed off the stage.

December Birthdays!

December 14: Erik Thiessen

If you, or someone you know, has a birthday, e-mail CMUPLB@hotmail.com so I can announce it in future issues!

Yes, it’s a pretty sparse list. Turns out, I don’t actually know anyone’s birthday.
Sometimes, no matter how much you enjoy your work, you have a bad day: you feel gloomy, depressed, or irritable. It’s especially likely when the weather is a bit overcast, or when you’re sharing an office with someone who can’t stop describing what’s wrong with their toes. It’s OK. We all need to be cheered up some times. And to help you out if you’re having one of those days, the PLB presents you with the five worst jobs in science. No matter how bad you feel, you don’t have it this bad!

(Submitted by Lori Holt, Editor Emeritus)

**Number Five: Semen Washer**

OK, OK, their real job title is usually something like “cryobiologist” or “laboratory technician,” but at sperm banks around the country, they are known as semen washers. “Every time I interview someone I make sure I ask them, ‘Do you know you’ll be working with semen?’” says Diana Schillinger, the Los Angeles lab manager at the country’s largest sperm bank, California Cryobank. Let’s start at the beginning. Laboriously prescreened “donors” emerge from a so-called collection room that is stocked with girlie mags and triple-X DVDs. They hand over their deposit, get their $75, and leave. The semen washers take the seminal goo and place a sample under the microscope for a sperm count. Next comes the washing. The techs spin the sample in a centrifuge to separate the “plasma” from the motile cells. Then they add a preservative, and it’s off to the freezer, where it can stay for 20 years. Or not. Thanks to semen washers (and in vitro fertilization), more than 250,000 babies have been delivered in the U.S. since 1995.

“The hardest part is explaining it to friends,” Schillinger says. “But we do have stories.” Like what? “Like the donor who was in the room for the longest time. We had a big discussion about who was going to check on him. Turns out he thought he had to fill up the entire specimen cup.”

**Number Four: Volcanologist**

Not to be confused with the study of Spock, volcanologists are perhaps the bravest of all scientists. When a volcano rumbles, spews ash, magma and incandescent rock, most people’s amygdala’s yell “Run away! Run away!” Then there are volcanologists, who—loaded down with monitoring gear and charged with the mission of predicting eruptions before they kill thousands—ignore the amygdala and run toward volcanoes.

Let us count the ways you can get offed as a volcanologist: There’s the magma, of course. There are also pyroclastic flows—in cinerating clouds of gas, rock, ash, trees and other debris—sulfur dioxide gas, and volcano-melted glaciers called lahars that descend down a mountainside like an avalanche of quick-dry cement. And then there are the garden-variety hazards of mountain climbing, and all those hours in helicopters. In the past couple decades, dozens of volcanologists have been killed on the job, and scores more have been wounded in near misses.

“It’s dangerous,” says Jeff Wynn, chief scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey’s Volcano Hazards Program, which monitors the country’s active volcanoes. “Just last September, when Mount St. Helens was getting very active, we had a failure of our seismic gear. A scientist flew up in a helicopter to replace the batteries. He was only allowed to stay on the ground for five minutes, and the pilot was told to keep the rotors going. Two days later there was an eruption, and the site was obliterated.”
Number Three: Nuclear Weapons Scientist
This job hasn’t been any fun since the disastrous espionage trial against Wen Ho Lee in 1999. Lee was a naturalized citizen who had worked for 20 years at Los Alamos National Laboratory’s highly prestigious and supersecret X Division, where some of the world’s biggest eggheads handle the applied physics of our nuke stockpile. The FBI suspected him of selling secrets to the Chinese.

After some seriously abusive jailhouse tactics, for which an appalled federal judge apologized, Lee pled guilty to one, almost trifling, count of mishandling classified data and was immediately released. Nevertheless, the X Division’s sterling reputation had been badly tarnished.

Not long after, more classified data-storage tapes went missing and then showed up behind a copier machine, and the FBI returned for more interrogations...er, interviews.

Then, in 2004, came an eye-burning laser accident with an intern, and yet another case of missing data tapes. The director ordered a costly months-long lab shutdown so that the scientists could learn to file paper like pro bureaucrats, not absent-minded professors. But wait, those last missing tapes? The FBI concluded that they probably never existed in the first place; it was a clerical error.

The federal government put Los Alamos’s management up for industry bid, offering an annual $79-million contract—nearly 10 times as much as the University of California is now paid to run the lab and fed-up scientists are retiring in droves.

As for the younger brainiacs, surely they can find a job in academia, right? Not exactly, lamented one X Division scientist, who declined to be quoted for fear of retribution. Since most of their work is classified, there’s often no record of having ever published anything.

Number Two: Kansas Evolution Teacher
“The evolution debate is consuming almost everything we do,” says Brad Williamson, a 30-year science veteran at suburban Olathe East High School and a past president of the National Association of Biology Teachers. “It’s politicized the classroom. Parents will say their child can’t be in class during any discussion of evolution, and students will say things like ‘My grandfather wasn’t a monkey!’”

First, a history lesson. In 1999 a group of religious fundamentalists won election to the Kansas State Board of Education and tried to introduce creationism into the state’s classrooms. They wanted to delete references to radiocarbon dating, continental drift and the fossil record from the education standards. In 2001 more-temperate forces prevailed in elections, but the anti-evolutionists garnered a 6-4 majority again last November. This year Intelligent Design (ID) theory is their tool of choice.

At the heart of ID is the idea that certain elements of the natural world—like the human eye—are “irreducibly complex” and cannot be explained by evolution. Therefore, IDers say, they must be the work of an intelligent designer (that is, God).

The problem for teachers is that ID can’t be tested using the scientific method. That’s because underpinning ID is religious belief. In science class, Williamson says, “students have to trust that I’m just dealing with science.”

Alas, for Kansas’s educational reputation, the damage may be done. “We’ve heard anecdotally that our students are getting much more scrutiny at places like medical schools. I get calls from teachers in other states who say things like ‘You rubes!’” Williamson says. “But this is happening across the country. It’s not just Kansas anymore.”
And the worst job in Science is...

**Number One: Monkey-pee collector**

“Have I been pissed on? Yes,” says anthropologist Cheryl Knott of Harvard University. Knott is a pioneer of “noninvasive monitoring of steroids through urine sampling.” Translation: Look out below! For the past 11 years, Knott and her colleagues have trekked into Gunung Palung National Park in Borneo, Indonesia, in search of the endangered primates. Once a subject is spotted, they deploy plastic sheets like a firemen’s rescue trampoline and wait for the tree-swinging apes to go see a man about a mule. For more pee-catching precision, they attach bags to poles and follow beneath the animals. “It’s kind of gross when you get hit, but this is the best way to figure out what’s going on in their bodies,” Knott says.

Knott analyzes fertility through estrogen and progesterone levels, and weight gain or loss through ketone measurements. DNA is extracted from the orangu-dookie, and stress levels can be measured by cortisol in the urine. The goal is to understand great-ape reproduction, and because of her unique urine-collection method, Knott isn’t limited to visual observations, as previous researchers have been. She has documented, for example, that female orangutans’ reproductive-hormone levels surge during periods when they are eating more. That timing is critical for the apes, which reproduce only around every eight years. It’s also highlighted how vulnerable the animals are to extinction, and that’s why, when she’s not sampling urine, Knott is working to conserve the rain forest. Rampant illegal logging—even in the park—has led to an 80 percent decrease in the orangs’ habitat, making it all the easier for hunters to prey on the animals. By some estimates, 50 percent of orangutans have been wiped out in the past decade.

[Elements of this story first appeared in *Popular Science*. If, by “elements,” you mean all of it.]
Rumor has it that Department Head Michael Scheier (see attached photo) had a birthday last month. Further, it appears that this birthday fell on a Wednesday! Most shockingly, Scheier did not celebrate his birthday by having a faculty meeting. At this time, it is unclear what Scheier could have been doing that would have been more fun than a faculty meeting. But rest assured, faithful reader, that the PLB is investigating.

Professor Sheldon Cohen was featured in a New York Times article on the possible relation between stress and cancer. The article, which ran in the November 29th issue of the famous paper, summarizes a wide variety of research on the topic of stress and cancer. Dr. Cohen was asked, by reporter Gina Kolata*, whether reducing stress can improve the prognosis of patients who already have cancer.

“If the question is, Have we established it?, the answer is, Absolutely not,” said Sheldon Cohen, a psychology professor at Carnegie Mellon University who has studied the role of support groups and stress reduction in cancer. “If the question is, Would it work?, we don’t know that, either.”

*The PLB has confirmed that at no point during the interview did Dr. Cohen ask “Do you like Gina Kolata? Or getting caught in the rain?” The PLB supposes that this makes Dr. Cohen a better person than the editor-in-chief.

Remember to mark your calendars: the Annual Psychology Department Non-Denominational Holiday Party is Thursday, December 15th. The famed Super Secret Social Committee (whose secret identities are almost as well-guarded as Batman’s!) have been working round the clock to make sure that it’s the holiday event of the season. You won’t want to miss it. See you there!
As a new faculty member, I’ve learned that the department is full of people who are tremendously helpful. I couldn’t get half the work done that I do (insert own joke about “half of zero” here) without the help of other faculty, staff, graduate students, and postdocs. So the new “Department Shout Out” feature is an opportunity to recognize people who go above and beyond to make our lives easier or better. Anyone can nominate anyone; submit all nominations to CMUPLB@hotmail.com. Each month’s winner will receive a small prize. But not a mug with our department logo. Because we don’t have one yet.

December’s shout out goes out to Tisha Anderchack and Michelle Terrick. I submitted a few grants a month or two ago, and it would have been completely impossible without Tisha and Michelle holding my hand through the tough stuff. I started out asking Tisha for help with my budget (My exact question was “So... what goes in a budget?”). By the end of the process, Tisha and Michelle were literally doing all of the hard parts. I wrote the research plan, and they took care of the rest. I had been dreading the grant application process. But thanks to Tisha and Michelle dealing with all of the technical details and making sure that all of the forms were filled out appropriately, the process was much, much more effective and pain-free than it would have been had I been left to my own devices. Thanks Tisha and Michelle!

Auto Review: Chevy Cobalt Behind the Times

Recently, the staff of the PLB took a trip to Iowa (state motto: Our liberties we prize and our hogs we will maintain!). In the course of the journey, we rented a Chevy Cobalt and drove it extensively, and learned that the Cobalt does something we’ve never seen any other automobile do.

As you can see in the attached picture, the Cobalt flashes informative pop-culture messages in its dashboard display. This is an innovative feature, but one that is badly in need of updating. For example, the message shown in the picture is “Cruise Engaged.” That’s just unacceptable. Tom Cruise has been engaged for months now, and the Cobalt is still telling us about it? If Chevy wants to focus on Tom Cruise, it could at least deliver more timely updates like “Holmes Pregnant.”

Further, the Cobalt did not once inform us about the most important news of the weekend, the split between Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey. We had to find out about that from the Internet like everyone else (we were, uh, doing background research for, ah, an article).
Study Reveals Pittsburgh Unprepared For Full-Scale Zombie Attack

PITTSBURGH (Onion News) - A zombie-preparedness study, commissioned by Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy and released Monday, indicates that the city could easily succumb to a devastating zombie attack. Insufficient emergency-management-personnel training and poorly conceived undead-defense measures have left the city at great risk for all-out destruction at the hands of the living dead, according to the Zombie Preparedness Institute.

“When it comes to defending ourselves against an army of reanimated human corpses, the officials in charge have fallen asleep at the wheel,” Murphy said. “Who’s in charge of sweep-and-burn missions to clear out infected areas? Who’s going to guard the cemeteries at night? If zombies were to arrive in the city tomorrow, we’d all be roaming the earth in search of human brains by Friday.”

Government-conducted zombie-attack scenarios described on the State Department’s website indicate that a successful, citywide zombie takeover would take 10 days, but according to ZPI statistician Dr. Milton Cornelius, the government’s models fail to incorporate such factors as the zombies’ rudimentary reasoning skills and basic tool use.

“Today’s zombies quickly learn to open doors, break windows, and stage ambushes,” Cornelius said. “In one 1985 incident in Louisville, a band of zombies was able to lure four paramedics and countless law-enforcement officials to their deaths by commandeering an ambulance radio and calling for backup.”

ZPI researchers noted that tens of thousands of Pittsburgh citizens live in close proximity to a cemetery. This fact, coupled with abnormally high space-radiation levels in eastern Pennsylvania and ongoing traffic issues in the East Hills and Larimer areas, led Cornelius to declare the likelihood of a successful evacuation as “slight to impossible.”

“The designated evacuation routes would be hopelessly clogged, leaving many no choice but to escape by foot,” Cornelius said. “Add a single lurching zombie into that easily panicked crowd and you’ve got a nightmare scenario.”

Pittsburgh’s structural defenses are particularly inadequate. The city’s emergency safe houses, established by a city ordinance in the early ‘70s, lack even the most basic fortifications for zombie invasion.

“Under the ordinance, wooden tool sheds and rusty station wagons are classified as adequate shelter,” Cornelius said. “But once dozens of zombies hungering for living flesh begin pounding on the walls and driving their half-decomposed fists through the windows, sheds and cars quickly give way.”
An important aspect of zombie-safety is distinguishing the living from the living-impaired population. This will be especially critical in the coming weeks as the deadline for submission of the National Research Service Award (NRSA) nears. While all grant application deadlines are difficult, the NRSA application is often particularly difficult, as for many students it represents the first experience with grant applications.

The stress and effort associated with completing the NRSA have left many graduate students in a “zombie-like” state. However, the appropriate response when dealing with an exhausted NRSA applicant (offers of sympathy and caffeinated beverages) differs drastically from the proper response when dealing with zombies (shooting them in the brain). So, as the NRSA submission deadline nears, the PLB offers these handy tips for distinguishing between zombies and NRSA applicants:

1) Both Zombies and NRSA applicants look pale, exhausted, and unhealthy. But zombies usually look slightly worse.

2) Zombies consume only human flesh and brains. NRSA applicants consume only junk food and caffeinated beverages.

3) Zombies can be identified by their distinctive groan of “braaaaaains.” NRSA applicants often groan too, but not so much about brains.

4) After consuming your brain, zombies will usually go off in search of more brains. After successfully submitting an NRSA application, NRSA applicants don’t usually do anything for days.

5) If you are confronted by an ambiguous person, quickly ask them “Brain for eat, or brain for think?” If they answer that brains are for thinking, they are an NRSA applicant. If they proceed to eat your brain, they are a zombie.

6) Zombies run faster than NRSA applicants.

7) Zombies are often featured in movies. NRSA applicants are never featured in movies. If there are movie cameras nearby, you may have a zombie problem.

8) NRSA applicants know exactly how many hours they have left before their application is due. Zombies don’t even know how to use a watch.

Good luck to all of our NRSA applicants! If you see them wandering the halls, be sure to offer them sympathy and highly caffeinated beverages!
Department Intra-Mural Teams Savor Taste of Victory

The Fall Intra-Mural sports season has come to an end, so let’s take a moment to remember the heroic endeavors of the department’s valiant intra-mural athletes. The department competed in two sports: tennis and soccer. The tennis squad was captained by Joan Knihnicki, while the soccer team was helmed by David Rakison.

Both teams knew the savory taste of victory when they showed up for matches that the other team forfeited. “Four fit. Those are the two sweetest words in the English language” said David Rakison while reminiscing about the season. While neither team won a match where the other team made an appearance, that’s undoubtedly a statistical fluke. It’s a small sample size.

The tennis team’s season was especially memorable. The team (the Psychos) started the season 2-0 when neither of their first two opponents could field a team. However, just as a playoff berth appeared certain, team captain Joan Knihnicki was struck by a virus. This was no normal virus, either. Sources report that it was some kind of crazy alien space-virus, the kind of virus that crushes empires and causes the Kleenex Corp.’s profits to triple. Bereft of Knihnicki’s leadership, the rudderless Psychos forfeited their final two matches. So the team finished 2 and 2, never having played an actual match, and just out of the playoffs.

Both teams are optimistic about next year. David Rakison plans to import soccer hooligans from England for his team, while the tennis team plans to have all of its members live in bubbles during the next year to avoid exposing their immune systems to any virii or bacteria.

The department’s trick or treating crew. From left to right: Erin Donahoe (Costume: Big Ben); Kim Murray (Kim Murray); Shellie Sherman (something scary), Theresa Kurutz (candy loving monk).