

DIARY OF A 3RD YEAR PSYCHOLOGY UNDERGRADUATE

Thursday 21st September 1995

Induction Day – words which excited a sense of fatalistic unease in me, plus traumatic memories of being forced to give birth. However, it felt quite satisfying to fling open the doors of the Psychology Department and strut towards the third year notice board. Unfortunately, the notice boards had been swapped around during the summer break, but a nonchalant toss of the head and another short strut back up the corridor no doubt impressed the loitering first years.

At the third year notice board, a profane utterance seemed to launch itself involuntarily from my lips, as I discovered my options for the autumn semester – *Developmental Psycholinguistics* and *Applied Social Psychology of the Lifespan* were going to be such fun!

The next few hours were given up to rather a lot of silly scaremongering about exam technique, staying on top (academically) and career planning. Mostly, though, the emphasis was on the third year project. I began to develop a headache and flirted momentarily with the idea of dropping out and having another baby instead. However, this obviously hysterical reaction soon gave way to the intrigue of discovering the identity of my project supervisor. I found I had been assigned to someone who had the nerve to be on sabbatical for the autumn semester – hence my temporary assignment to someone else.

Friday 22nd September 1995

It's started already – the *angst*, the mind-racing confusion, the existential trauma ... I say this mainly because I was awake from 03.00 this morning, wondering what on earth I could do for my third year project. Perhaps I am simply neurotic. Perhaps I am an intellectual misfit. Perhaps I am not destined to graduate in psychology (if only I believed in determinism).

Monday 25th September 1995

I am destined to graduate in psychology – I am determined about this. Having spent the entire weekend in a house with no kitchen sink (an environmental crisis to last until mid-October), I am convinced of my fundamental need to avoid domestication at all costs.

This afternoon was the start of *Developmental Psycholinguistics*, which I almost enjoyed – being a logophile probably helped. The tutor soared even higher in my estimation when he announced there would be no enforced presentations (the bane of my life throughout the first and second years).

Despite a later nasty surprise at the photocopying machine (the system had been changed during the summer break, involving expenditure on a new photocopy card), I left the university feeling OK – a definite 7 out of 10 day.

Wednesday 27th September 1995

I arrived at the university (still feeling 7 out of 10) for the initial interview with my temporary project supervisor. It was all rather formal – as I was shown into Dr So-and-so's room, I had to fight the urge to tell him all about the annoying twinges in my back. Instead, I tried to articulate as lucidly as possible about my project ideas. On the whole, I don't think I succeeded very well and later escaped into the real world with another appointment for the following week – and feeling a rather deflated 4 out of 10.

Thursday 28th September 1995

Today was the first three hour session of *Applied Social Psychology of the Lifespan*. Although as a subject it promises to be very interesting, a group presentation looms in two weeks' time. My psychological health is now in jeopardy. I considered presenting myself in a weeping mess to my personal tutor. Luckily, he wasn't in his room, so I went home and did the crying thing there instead.

Monday 2nd October 1995

Despite no kitchen sink, I regained my equilibrium during the weekend. Unfortunately,

returning to university seemed to throw me into disequilibrium again and I spent most of the morning hiding in the library, staring at a journal and wondering why I felt such a weight of dread. I tried to avail myself of my personal tutor once more, but he seems to have escaped the building.

However, a meeting with my *Lifespan* group to organise the forthcoming group presentation developed very nicely when it was suggested that someone should see to the overheads and handouts rather than actually speak. I tried not to betray my desperate eagerness and allowed a full nanosecond to elapse before casually shouting, "I'll do it!" I was so elated that it was well over an hour into the afternoon's session of *Developmental Psycholinguistics* before I noticed I'd forgotten to have lunch. On the way home, I decided things weren't so bad and there was no need after all to make a *Cross Off Each Terrible Day* calendar with which to console myself.

Wednesday 4th October 1995

Second consultation with my temporary project supervisor – which I have to admit I viewed with dread. A few problems were ironed out, but some more were raised and I left over half an hour later feeling as though a decent third year project is incredibly hard to achieve. I began to feel as though I would happily settle for an indecent one, just to avoid the mental anguish.

My feelings of dread and deflation seemed to propel me once more towards my personal tutor's room. Once more he wasn't there, but a notice had appeared on his notice board. It concerned his (un)availability and was both amusing and weird – I wondered briefly if his psychological health was in jeopardy, before going home to make a *Cross Off Each Terrible Day* calendar with which to console myself.

Thursday 5th October 1995

A usual day at this glorious educational establishment – a presentation group meeting, various tasks in the library and three more hours of *Applied Social Psychology of the Lifespan*. The summer was just a nice time I once had...

Monday 9th October 1995

Another horrendous kitchen sink-less weekend has passed, but a meeting with my *Lifespan* presentation group reminded me that others have problems too – and what importance does a kitchen sink have in the grand (psychological) scheme of things anyway? Unfortunately, the other people's problems meant they hadn't completed what they were supposed to give me today for the presentation overheads and handout. Still, the last two years have provided me with ample experience at completing rush jobs at the last minute.

In the *Developmental Psycholinguistics* break, a friend and I wandered along to the Student Union shop, where my normally quiet friend stood laughing hysterically at the cards on sale there. I was beginning to wonder if perhaps her psychological health was in jeopardy, when it suddenly struck me – PMS. She is no doubt manifesting the early signs of Project Mania Syndrome. Thank God I am not in such a bad state.

Tuesday 10th October 1995

I left the house in utter chaos to keep a 09.30 appointment with my temporary project supervisor. On the bus on the way there, I had a premonition – but nobody seemed to notice. Strangely enough, the premonition came true – my temporary project supervisor had left a very apologetic message to say he couldn't keep the appointment. I smiled magnanimously, then went outside and kicked the wall. Unfortunately, I had forgotten that it was a lovely sunny morning and I was wearing open-toe sandals. I limped to the library and developed a headache. No doubt this tacky display of emotion is one of the early manifestations of PMS.

Wednesday 11th October 1995

I switched on the computer this morning to add the final touches to the handout for tomorrow's *Lifespan* presentation, only to see a rude little message flash up on the screen saying the file could not be opened. After panicking inconsolably for a little while, I realised there was nothing I could do, as I had to hand in the handout (?) today in order for the *Lifespan* tutor to photocopy it for everyone tomorrow. Luckily the overheads were not affected.

I wish I could say the same for myself.

In the afternoon, I had the third consultation with my temporary project supervisor – not to mention my third experience of suffering from gross incoherence. However, apart from rewording my hypotheses, I can now fill out the form which will eventually go before the Ethics Committee. I left feeling a heady 5 out of 10.

Thursday 12th October 1995

The *Lifespan* group presentation went very well – my incomplete handout was actually praised. Presentations in which one does not have to speak are not so bad after all.

Monday 16th October 1995

I now have a kitchen sink – but unfortunately it has yet to be plumbed in. In my opinion, fitting kitchens should be added to the *Holmes & Rahe (1967) Social Readjustment Rating Scale*. At 07.00 this morning, I overheard my partner having a heated conversation with himself in the so-called kitchen about bending pipes and inserting fillets. His psychological health is obviously in jeopardy.

Monday 23rd October 1995

My temporary project supervisor has signed my project form, which can now be presented to the Ethics Committee. That's one big worry gone – now I just have to deal with minor incidentals, like finding 80 participants. As the kitchen sink has been plumbed in at last, I feel I should be writing essays or something – two of them, due in on 11th December – ages away!

Thursday 9th November 1995

My project proposal has been officially passed by the Ethics Committee. My psychological health is now not in any jeopardy whatsoever.

I spent hours in the library today, photocopying references for the magnificent essays I will be undertaking next week (Reading Week). I refuse to add up how much I spent on photocopying – it would be too depressing, considering how many times I have gone without essentials like coffee or chocolate in order to save a few pence (honestly!)

Lifespan was interesting. We have now completed 'the middle years' – which I hereby rename 'the neglected years' – or 'the squashed between two sets of responsibility years'. I have decided that when I grow up I want to be eccentric and throw responsibility to the wind.

Thursday 23rd November 1995

Where is November going? Reading Week was quite productive – namely, five sixths of the first essay completed. Life now seems to revolve around thoughts concerning essays and exams. I have to say that PMS had abated very nicely until today, when I collected the questionnaires I had ordered for my project. I now have no excuse for procrastination – data collection *must* begin at once.

Thursday 30th November 1995

Data collection has not yet begun. This is due to the second essay – 2000 words in which to be consistently concise, coherent and relevant seems rather an exhausting exercise.

I decided today that I am not a model student. I have not, for instance, volunteered my services as a course representative, or attended any of the excellent, regularly held seminars. My guilt led me towards the notice boards, where I eagerly scanned news of current research and activities. Unfortunately, none of it seemed to inspire me passionately on the spot, so I caught the early bus home instead.

Monday 4th December 1995

Data collection has begun, but the essay has still failed to reach completion. This is partly due to a strange virus causing headaches and dizziness – it's rather hard to think straight when your head feels stranger than usual. Of course, it's possible that this is another symptom of the dreaded PMS...

Thursday 14th December 1995

Data collection is over half completed and both essays have been handed in – relief! Today was the last lecture-type day this year/semester. Unfortunately, I was absent due to my 14 year old daughter's distress after watching a video at school about the after effects of nuclear war. I achieved a rather impressive role combination of mother and 3rd year psychology undergraduate and wrote an assertive letter to the headmistress, advising her that such enforced input could put the psychological health of sensitive 14 year olds in jeopardy.

Thursday 4th January 1996

First sighting of the university this year! I was determined not to avoid a potential anxiety inducing situation and spent the whole morning in the library with a friend, photocopying references for the forthcoming exams. In the afternoon, I managed to catch my personal tutor in his room (well, somebody else's room, to be honest) and arranged to see him on Monday. He told me my timing was awful as usual – I love his friendly little jests.

Monday 8th January 1996

More photocopying in the library, plus a long talk with my personal tutor. He said I would probably start enjoying psychology again when I'd finished my degree – he could well be right! It felt good to talk about my quirky worries and to hear his (quirky) views on several aspects of life. Based on the premise that people joke derogatorily with people they feel comfortable with, I think he likes me – he said my writing was weird...

Monday 15th January 1996

Applied Social Psychology of the Lifespan exam! I woke several times last night feeling nervous – this has never happened before. Possibly the words 'Third year finals' had some influence. However, the exam questions could have been worse (possibly). I spent the evening in an exhausted stupor, but nobody seemed to notice...

Friday 19th February 1996

Developmental Psycholinguistics exam! My nervousness was even worse, but I sat and wrote and stared around with an intellectual frown, as one does. I was exhausted afterwards again, but I believe that Post Exam Nervousness (PEN) fatigue is a common phenomenon.

Monday 5th February 1996

Semester Two began with the first of my chosen Advanced Study packages – *Cognition and Emotion*. I was enjoying it immensely until the mention of forthcoming group work and a presentation. However, my group was very amenable to half of us doing handouts and overheads, while the other half actually speak. Naturally (for the sake of my psychological health) I volunteered to be in the former group.

Thursday 8th February 1996

Today I started 11 weeks of *Ageing (The Psychology of)*, to be precise. It seemed a personally appropriate choice, as I have never been so aware of my advanced years since becoming a 'mature' student. My real project supervisor, back from sabbatical leave, is presenting this option, but after three hours of intensive *Ageing* I felt too tired (and aged) to introduce myself. Besides, data collection is not yet complete.

Thursday 15th February 1996

There have been three group meetings for *Cognition and Emotion* so far, which mainly seems to involve studies of anxiety and depression. I find I am being strangely quiet (or possibly quietly strange) about my intimate acquaintance with anxiety – which I have to say has intensified since becoming a 'mature' student.

Ageing was quite successful this afternoon, however – not too many excess wrinkles. I decided not to introduce myself to my real project supervisor, as he looked a little tired (and rather endearingly aged). Besides, data collection is still not quite complete.

Thursday 22nd February 1996

During the last week I have scored 80 questionnaires and embarked tentatively on statistical

analysis. I was also awake last night wondering whether introversion is the same as non-extraversion, a factor which is crucial to my third year project and responsible for a sudden onrush of PMS.

I had made up my mind to introduce myself to my real project supervisor today, until during *Ageing* he started to talk in depth about methodology and analysis which I recognised as relevant to my project. I was overcome with abject inadequacy and decided I should spend the entire weekend immersed in statistical analysis.

Monday 26th February 1996

I spent a very relaxing weekend immersed in a novel – I'd almost forgotten they existed. This morning, though, I became very unrelaxed as I tried to get to grips with statistical analysis. Suddenly and intensely, I wished I had opted for a project involving qualitative analysis.

This afternoon was a three hour long *Cognition and Emotion* seminar. I found it very interesting indeed, but by the end was drained of all emotion except the desire to go home.

Thursday 29th February 1996

Trying to use a statistics package on a computer in the Psychology Department this morning was not a good start to the day! However, in the *Ageing* break this afternoon, I actually introduced myself to my real project supervisor. He seems such a nice person – it will be a pity to reveal to him during our appointed meeting next week that I am obviously much less intelligent than I perhaps appear to be (if only anyone really knew what 'intelligence' really is).

After *Ageing*, I was about to knock on my personal tutor's door to collect my January exam results, when he suddenly opened the door, narrowly missing being rapped on the chest by my already raised hand. After one of his friendly derogatory comments about my timing, he gave me my results. I am completely unsure whether I am satisfied with them or not. It does seem rather unfair that exams are weighted as 80% of the overall module mark, when all of my highest marks are for course work!

Monday 4th March 1996

The second of my chosen Advanced Study Packages started this afternoon – *Foundations of Discourse Analysis*. It promises to be quite a change from other subject areas I have studied. In fact, the breadth of psychology has never ceased to amaze me – and to worry me slightly by the sheer diversity of all I am supposed to know in order to pass exams (albeit not exceptionally well!)

Monday 11th March 1996

My first (and possibly only) meeting with my real project supervisor went very well this afternoon. I came away feeling that I now actually know what I am doing – a heady feeling of being academically on top at last – rather a pity my degree is five sixths over! To celebrate, I went to see my personal tutor. Alas, he was otherwise engaged, so I went to the Student Union and bought a Mars Bar instead.

Thursday 14th March 1996

Another encounter with the statistics package on a computer in the Psychology Department was quite productive if the size of the print-out is anything to go by. *Ageing* this afternoon was also quite painless, despite the fact that I am one of the most aged in the group.

Monday 18th March 1996

A successful encounter with my personal tutor was achieved this morning. What was essentially a progress report (on me, not him) seemed to turn into an interesting discussion about individualism. It's beginning to disturb me a little how many times the word 'weird' crops up in our conversation, though!

Wednesday 20th March 1996

A rescheduled *Ageing* session this morning marked the end of contact time for four weeks. It is now time to spend the entire Easter break writing up the glorious third year project...

Monday 22nd April 1996

I can hardly believe the Easter break (which I did not entirely spend writing up the glorious third year project after all, due to minor setbacks involving blocked drains, falling bits of chimney and council tax demands) has passed so quickly. However, it was actually quite pleasant to be back at university, seeing lots of familiar (anxious) faces. With the project deadline only ten days away now, PMS seems to be rampant. It's not that I like to see others suffering, but it helped me not to feel alone in my advancing state of panic.

This afternoon, I quite happily started my third and final Advanced Study Package – *Stress*. It proved to be quite painless (and stress free, due to no looming presentations). Even a chance meeting with my personal tutor was enjoyable. An outstanding 8.75 out of 10 day.

Thursday 25th April 1996

This morning was hopefully my final encounter with statistical analysis of the psychological kind – a potential 10 out of 10 day! There was a considerable amount of absenteeism at *Ageing* this afternoon, PMS must really be taking its toll. Seven days to the deadline and counting...

Thursday 2nd May 1996

My third year project was delivered to the office at 11.00 hours this morning, with a sense of relief second only to that of giving birth. Only one essay and three exams to go! This afternoon passed quickly – I never thought I would find *Ageing* so enjoyable!

Monday 13th May 1996

Quite unbelievably, the last week of contact time has arrived. A short session of *Stress* this afternoon led to talk about exams – which naturally led full circle to stress. Still, an unexpected gift from a friend in the form of a badge saying *Handle With Care – Hospital Sample* eased the tension. It's amazing what small things can give one pleasure – rather worrying, actually.

Thursday 16th May 1996

The final contact day at this wonderful seat of learning! Unfortunately, my mind was elsewhere, as last night my 19 year old son had been attacked and hit in the face while walking home. By the end of the *Ageing* session this afternoon, maternal feelings had completely overcome me and I declined a visit to the pub. I do believe that being a student of the so-called mature kind is qualitatively different from being a student of the other variety. I have hardly spent any time in the pub at all!

Monday 3rd June 1996

Psychology of Ageing exam this morning – three hours in which I felt as though I was ageing at twice the normal rate. It could have been worse, but on the other hand it could have been better, by including a question about the functional disorders of older age. Undaunted, however, I dragged my tired old functionally disordered carcass to the library and read a couple of journal articles for the next exam. I nearly fell asleep, but nobody seemed to notice...

Thursday 6th June 1996

Current Psychological Literature exam. From a choice of two books with which I had recently become semi-intimately acquainted, a question about my favourite book did not appear. Consequently, I was forced to write for one and a half hours about irrationality – a task which I found irrationally difficult.

Tuesday 11th June 1996

This morning was the dreaded Advanced Study Package exam, for which I became incredibly nervous at least three days previously. It was almost a relief to sit in the examination hall and hear the familiar words, "You may start writing." However, although I was happy enough to start writing about *Cognition and Emotion*, I found writing about *Stress* and *Foundations of Discourse Analysis* to be a blank minded nightmare. Possibly nervous exhaustion had taken its toll, or else it was just a plain failure to access material which I knew with extreme frustration was lurking in there somewhere. Whatever my excuse, it was exciting to hear a heartfelt

resounding cheer from certain regions of the hall, as the words, "Please stop writing" marked the end of three years' hard slog.

The atmosphere post-exam and pre-group photo was one of tired elation, marked by the sudden appearance of bottles and cans of alcohol. After a final look at the notice board for old times' sake, I went to the pub with some friends, as the knowledge that it was over (excepting possible resits) gradually began to filter through.

Later in the afternoon, I popped in to say goodbye to my personal tutor. However, by that time I was verging on the edge of exhausted incoherence (or something), so I promised to return for a proper talk at a later date. As I left the now familiar room, I can remember him smiling wanly as he muttered kindly, "See you soon."

Friday 19th July 1996

My heart was racing as I opened the dreaded envelope, but to my vast relief I saw I had been awarded a 2:1. The Post Academic Interim Neurosis I had been suffering for over a month seemed to evaporate on the spot – I had been really worried two weeks ago when I found myself furtively entering the university library to photocopy a couple of journal articles for pleasure.

Now the degree experience is over, I would like to think that my intellectual horizons have irrevocably altered and that my powers of discernment and discursive reasoning have been refined in a (statistically) significant way. If only I could stop longing to make a facetious response to the question, "So what are you going to do with your degree?"

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