

The Blackboard Jungle

I have come to the conclusion that all those involved in teaching psychology portray a fascinating but not at all representative sample of the population at large.

Initially I thought I could detect a certain homogeneity of self-presentation which manifested itself in widespread sporting of jeans and trainers, worn with a kind of intensely casual, semi-trendy, intellectually once-removed-from-the-world demeanour. This was heightened by the fact that a great many psychologists use the casual form of their first name. However, this is statistically confounded when one considers, for instance, names such as Ian or Anne, which only result in compromising the credibility of their owners when shortened.

I also noticed a rather more sinister similarity in the hungry, desperate look which invariably overcomes certain teaching-type individuals from time to time as they enter lecture theatres. On these occasions, the individuals in question are usually weighed down with a huge pile of photocopies and appear to be mentally counting the number of bodies present. This scenario will be familiar to many current and ex-students – the photocopies turn out not to be handouts, but questionnaires – and the words, “This won’t take five minutes” turn out to be prophetically true, as 20 minutes later, people are still ticking ‘neither agree nor disagree’ columns with an air of terminal boredom. To be fair, ethical considerations are always taken into account, as the teaching-type individual ensures the balance of no-one’s mind is more disturbed on leaving the lecture theatre than it was when entering. Sadly, this does not seem to apply to lectures *per se*.

After a few months of being an undergraduate, I was able to detect a few distinct categories of lecturer. Firstly, there is the sort who are so involved in their chosen subject that they seem incapable of speaking more than a few words at a time before lapsing into esoteric obscurity. This category often stand remarkably still in front of copious tightly-packed notes on the overhead projector, occasionally lapsing into silence as they are helplessly overcome by their own deep thoughts. This is impressive but very frustrating.

Secondly, there is the type who are visibly excited by their subject matter and can even manage to talk about it relatively clearly. This type can often be identified by their spontaneous use of the overhead projector – which is only to be admired, as freehand drawings of population curves, rats, brains, etc, in front of an audience ready to snigger at the slightest mistake is enough to make anyone’s hand shake uncontrollably.

Thirdly, there is the type who are ostentatiously laid back. This category ranges from those who sprawl over any available furniture, using colourful language and spasmodically laughing out loud, to those who say hopefully, “You can take the handouts and go to the pub if you’d rather.”

Having finished my degree, however, I now know that categorisation is a dangerous pursuit. The sheer diversity of academic staff must simply not be understated. In fact, I believe that the uniqueness of the individual is a daily pleasure to experience – the uncertainty of who will bestow acknowledgement in the corridor, for instance, or who will give consistently low marks as a matter of principle, can give one quite a little frisson of excitement. As a species, psychology academics are in a world of their own, but as individuals, they are clearly out of this world!

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