

Lose yourself in the moment

ONE of my PhD students recently put it to me that a PhD

is like a three-year sabbatical. Being in a teaching position now, I think this student is absolutely right. I look back to my PhD days as the time when I could lose myself in the fascination of psychology, without the competing demands of teaching and administration. Teaching has its own joys, but research in psychology never loses its excitement for me. I only hope today's PhD students who may be reading this don't take their three years for granted, but instead enjoy them to the full.

Part of the excitement when I did my PhD in UCL back in the early 1980s was the realisation that our science is still such a young science – relatively speaking – that there

are still a lot of basic questions that can be asked, and the results will be new. Psychology is the kind of subject where it is still possible to go out and 'discover' things quite easily. And for me, more than 20 years later, that buzz arising from the sense of discovery is no less exciting.

I'm also glad that the research area I chose for my PhD – autism – is one of those topics that can lead to basic science, or it can lead to applied science. I'm still working in the same field, and get equal pleasure from knowing I have inched forward at the basic science level, or have developed something that might have a practical value in people's lives. For me, working

BY SIMON BARON-COHEN

in a field with these two dimensions is a great privilege, since it means that when pursuing academic questions that might border on the obscure, there is nevertheless a parallel opportunity to demonstrate their real-world relevance.

As a young research student of psychology, I had two pieces of good advice given to me by my elders. My then supervisor, Uta Frith, reminded me that science is the art of the possible. That was a great phrase, based on Peter Medawar, and ensures that experiments are designed on the basis of their feasibility.

And one of my subsequent heads of department, Jeffrey Gray, reminded me that science is like making a hole in the polar ice to go fishing. You don't really know if you have made a hole in the right place, and some scientists might worry whether they should have made their hole in a different place. But the surprise, as Jeffrey pointed out to me, is that once you are under the ice, you find unexpected connections. That is, different topics in

psychology may appear unrelated, but join up in exciting ways.

■ *Professor Simon Baron-Cohen is at the Autism Research Centre, Cambridge University (www.autismresearchcentre.com).*

Like Simon Baron-Cohen, you don't have to be a student to write for the 'Students' page. If you have something worth saying to students and you'd like to contribute, e-mail Nicola Hills, the new associate editor, on Nicola_Hills@hotmail.com. We welcome short articles and snippets that give students a flavour of life in psychology – tips and experiences worth passing on, the best and (perhaps sometimes) the worst of the discipline, then and now comparisons, even the controversial or wry.

Associate Editor: NICOLA HILLS
Articles, news, tips, quotes, cartoons and other contributions for the 'Students' page are most welcome. Send to: Nicola Hills, c/o the Society's Leicester office. E-mail: Nicola_Hills@hotmail.com.

SO MUCH NEW RESEARCH, SO LITTLE TIME?

The best new psychological research delivered free to your inbox

Examiners like students to show they're up to date with the latest research. But there's so much of it...journals can be expensive, and in any case who has the time to wade through them all and understand the studies? Well, we do.

The Society is setting up a new e-mail research digest service aimed primarily at A-level and undergraduate students and their lecturers. We will trawl the journals for the best psychology has to offer, compile a digest of short, lively accounts of the studies, and show you how they fit in with your syllabus. We hope to launch the service in time for the 2003/2004 academic year. The research digest is free and available to all.

You can sign up now by e-mailing subscribe-rd@lists.bps.org.uk. And there's still time to shape the service: we'd love to hear your views on what you would find most useful (how long, how often, how interactive, etc.). E-mail Christian Beresford Jarrett, the research digest editor, on chrber@bps.org.uk.