

## **12. Department of Psychology Intern at a psychiatry postgraduate research institute**

### **A description of the organisation I worked for, how it is organised and what it does**

From the beginning of September 2007 to June 2008 I worked mainly at the Social, Genetic & Developmental Psychology (SGDP) Centre situated at a psychology postgraduate research institute. In addition to this I also spent some of my time at another college, as my supervisor and the research projects I was involved with were split across these two organisations. In order to portray the diversity of my job roles during my placement, I shall talk about both organisations and my involvement with them.

The institute, which is situated alongside a hospital, is a postgraduate institute for a major university and in recent years has also teamed up with another nearby major college. Its main role is to look for effective care and treatments for those with a range of mental disorders via extensive research and teaching. Most of the teaching programmes available at the institute involve an element of research and it has been awarded for the high quality of its research findings. My role as a researcher was based at the SGDP centre, where their main research focus is the gene-environment interaction phenomenon and the origins of the processes which underlie certain mental disorders e.g. depression, ADHD, anxiety and sleep disorders. As well as the research, the SGDP aims to teach others about these areas of psychology through postgraduate schemes, lectures, seminars and conferences.

In contrast, my role at the college was completely different to that at the institute. The college is primarily an educational facility and my work for the Psychology department was geared more towards the educational / admin side of psychology. Like many universities, it aims to teach a vast range of subjects to a diverse range of people. It also supports their PhD student in a range of further research studies.

### **An account of the range of tasks I performed during my placement, reports written, presentations given, research conducted etc.**

One of the best things about this last year is that I have had the opportunity to be involved in such a vast range of tasks both at the institute and at the college. Psychology itself is such a broad area and I feel the range of tasks I've done has allowed me to explore many of these.

Primarily, my role was that of a Research Assistant, especially during my time at the institute. When I started one of my first projects that I got involved with was called STEPs. This is a study which had been running for three years previous to when I joined and was entering its final stages of data collection. The purpose of the study was to examine cognitive and environmental influences on anxiety, depression and sleep disorders in young (primary school) children.

In order to be able to assist with the final data collection phase of this study (Wave 3) I had to undergo extensive training on how to correctly administer the test battery, how to appropriately interact with the children and how to gain the most rich, useable data without displaying experimenter bias. Once this was done, I then had to recruit participants, which was relatively easy as we already had a school on board from the previous stages of the study. I went into the primary school 3 weeks into the start of my placement. This was my chance to meet with the staff and pupils, as well as meeting my two other research assistants. We gave a small presentation to two classes about the study and handed out consent forms for the children to take home to their parents. Gaining participants seemed easy enough at the time, but I was

soon to find out just how difficult it was to get that all important participation rate up. In other words, I had to do all I could to ensure that the biggest percentage of the children we had access to took part in the study in order for our data to be highly valid. At first I struggled to make this happen, as eight year old children tend to be quite forgetful and have a habit of losing things. It took several visits (and a lot of reprinting consent forms) to get the desired return rate. I decided that perhaps a new tact was necessary to get them to remember their forms. As a standard 'thank you' for participating, each child received a £5 voucher and a small toy. I thought that pushing this would be the best way to get them to return their forms. So, after a trip to Woolworth's and a night decorating a 'special toy box' in shiny paper and exciting pictures, myself and my research assistants did one final presentation to the children. Amazingly we completed the testing phase with a participation rate of over 76%, something both myself and my supervisor were very happy with.

The testing procedure itself was perhaps one of the aspects I enjoyed most about my placement. The age range of our participants was 8-9 and, though some were hard to work with due to a limited attention span, they were on the whole a joy to work with. Altogether we tested roughly 45 children, 20 of which I tested myself. The testing procedure involved a range of different sleep and anxiety measures which were administered via computer based tasks and interview like questionnaires. Some of the measures were extremely standardised so had to be administered in a very specific way. Others were more laid back and gave the experimenter room to explore different areas of thought based on answers given. Of course I had to remain objective and not lead the participant into giving a particular answer. This was sometimes difficult to do, particularly in one task, where you had to make the participant understand the question without leading their answer. I found that after testing a few children, that they tended to all struggle with similar words, or parts of the tasks, so devised ways in advance in which I could overcome any problems. The testing procedure took between 1-2 hours, depending the on the individual child.

Once all the data collection had been completed it was then my job to make sure that it was all entered into SPSS ready for recoding and analysis. Luckily the templates for this were already set up from the previous wave. My supervisor went over some of the basics of data entry and also things to look out for to ensure minimizing errors and remaining consistent with previous data entry procedures. It was then my responsibility to show the other research assistants how to do this. After all the data was successfully entered, we then had to go through the process of data cleaning, which involves carefully checking the data entered in each field to ensure it is displayed in the correct way, in the correct field and that any missing data is checked against the original to see whether it was actually missing or just wasn't entered. This was done for waves 2 & 3 and was reasonably difficult for me, not because of a lack of understanding of how to do it, but because of the monotonous nature of the task and the length of time it took. However, I did get to appreciate just how important this part of the data analysis process this is in ensuring we have clean, usable data.

The STEPs research took up about the first 4 months of my placement. In between doing this I was loosely involved in another project running at the SGDP centre. This study was a large twin-based study, which was done on a much large scale to STEPs. I didn't get actively involved in the data collection with this study as such, but instead attended meetings with the team and took minutes for the meetings. Occasionally I would help with mail-outs for DNA collection as well as working with the original data in the project archive.

One of my final roles at the institute which I embarked on was being the SGDP Centre's annual Summer School Coordinator. I would like to point out at this stage, that this was technically a

separate job which was *not* part of my placement job description. Therefore, though both linked with the institute, I had to do it without it affecting my placement work. I feel it necessary to mention it though, as I consider it a big contribution to my work experience this past year. My job as coordinator involved dealing with applications for two summer school courses that were to be run in July 2008. I had to help with the screening and selection of applicants, send out acceptance and rejection letters, give out course details, organise catering for the summer school week, arrange timetables and course booklets to be printed, create name badges for every applicant and help organise a cocktail party for the summer school week. Unfortunately there is not a big enough word limit for me to do justice on just how much was involved in organising the Summer School. I had a huge amount of responsibility and a rather high workload on top of my placement and weekend job. At times I felt rather swamped with the combined workload and got quite stressed. That said, it was a great opportunity to be involved in it and I got to meet and work with some amazing people. I would recommend getting involved with the Summer School as well as a placement at the institute, as the skills I have acquired doing so are invaluable (more on this later).

During my time at the college, I got involved with the lecturing / educational side of psychology as well as the more administrative side of starting research projects. On a weekly basis I would help my supervisor prepare her lectures and get handouts printed for the students. There were also a number of other admin tasks I did such as photocopying, finding journals / articles as well as organising the applications for the next year's placement student. Although perhaps not the most exciting element of my placement, it allowed me some time to relax a little from the intense work of testing and data entry.

Finally, during the last half of my placement I had the unique opportunity for heading a brand new research project. This project was based on the ideas and interests of my supervisor and one of her MSc students, which stemmed from the previous research in STEPs. This project was STEPs Adolescence which myself and my two colleagues created a testing plan for, adapted measures and gained ethical approval. The study, like STEPs, examined cognitive and environmental influences on anxiety, depression and sleep, but this time included the influence of puberty on these factors. After recruiting a secondary school (which proved difficult after being turned down by 20 schools!) we went in and gave a presentation to 150 girls in year 7 who were aged 11-12. Over the next few weeks I revisited the school to collect consent forms, remind people about the study and give out more consent forms. By the time I started the testing procedure we had 40 consent forms returned. This was a good start, but I still needed to push for more returns.

The nature of the testing procedure was like that of the original STEPs, with some measures being computer based and some paper based. Some of the measures had been adapted from their original state so that they were appropriate for the target audience. However, adapting the measures was a task that proved quite tricky. I had to make sure that questions were not changed so much that it deviated too much from the original but at the same time had to change them enough to make the teachers at the school were happy with the questions we were asking, particularly when it came to some of the questions on the Puberty Questionnaire. After going back and forth between my supervisor and the teachers a couple of times we eventually settled on a test battery we were all happy with. Although frustrating at the time trying to keep both sides happy, I feel that in the end we produced the best possible testing battery for our audience, which hopefully provided the most valid and useful data.

I spent the next three months testing these girls and I was lucky to find that they were just as nice and easy to work with as the eight year olds. And it was particularly interesting to see the

difference in their answers and the way that they think compared to the primary school children we tested. I'm hoping that this will be reflected in the data we collected. This part of my placement was by far the best as I was given a huge amount of trust and responsibility from my supervisor to carry out a piece of meaningful research. I experienced the pitfalls, such as being continually turned down by schools, struggling to boost participation rate, as well as experiencing the excitement of research, collecting rich data and working with some great participants.

### **An evaluation of the utilisation and extension of my previous skills and knowledge**

Because of the diversity of the tasks I completed on placement I got a chance to expand on some of the previous skills and knowledge that I had gained in my first two years at University. Some of the most noticeable are listed below:

#### **Practicalities of Research**

During my first two years at University I only really got to understand the basics of conducting research and the research projects I did do were on a small scale. The research I embarked on at the institute, however, demonstrated to me just how difficult conducting real life research is. There are so many practicalities you have to consider prior to conducting it and so many obstacles you will face during and after the data collection. I was taught how to overcome these issues along with being given a greater understanding on the importance of thorough planning, something I didn't have before. It also allowed me to be able to train others on testing procedures.

#### **Importance of ethics and confidentiality of data**

Again, prior to my time at the institute, I used to take for granted just how important ethics and data confidentiality is in research. Although I had a standard knowledge of ethical procedures and participant data confidentiality, having to put it into practice showed me *just* how important it is. After each testing session I had to secure the data by copying all files onto a memory stick from the testing computer. The testing kit was then locked away, and I would return to the institute with the memory stick and any testing booklets and place them in the archive, which is double locked for security. I also had to ensure that all participants were identified by a test number, age and sex only, with no names being given other than on the original testing booklet. This was a very important part of not only protecting our participant's identity, but the protection of our data.

#### **Using SPSS, data entry, cleaning and recoding**

SPSS is an extremely useful package to be able to use, particularly for analysis of psychological research. Although I didn't do any complex data analysis, my use of SPSS over the year allowed me to brush up on some of my previous skills as well as helped me understand some of its features for data entry, cleaning and recoding. I feel this will be hugely beneficial for me in my final year.

#### **An evaluation of any personal change and development as a result of the placement**

My placement at the institute was not only great for what it taught me about psychological research but it also taught me a lot about myself and my capabilities. One thing that improved greatly during my placement was my confidence, particularly with meeting new people. Prior to my placement I used to be quite shy meeting new people, but after working with people from all different ages, from all different backgrounds and different professions, I now have much less apprehension when meeting new people. The elements of my placement that helped with this was having to attend meetings and contribute to the content of these meetings, giving

presentations in schools to audiences of varying ages and liaising with people from all around the world during the Summer School.

Another notable change was my organisation and time management skills improving. I've always been fairly organised, but now I can be even more organised and manage my time effectively. This is due to the sheer number of task / jobs that I had to juggle at the same time. I had weekly 'To-Do Lists' which had a range of tasks from testing to photocopying and I had to make sure that most, if not all of these tasks were completed by the end of the week. This became increasingly difficult during the second half of my placement as I had not only taken on the Summer School, but was also working weekends at my Saturday job. To make sure that I had everything done I drew up spreadsheets and tick lists to break up my week and keep on track of what had to be done and when. My time management also improved as I had a two hour commute to and from where I worked, as well as travelling to and from schools to test. I had to make sure I had enough time to complete my journeys and allow for typical delays that occur on the trains.

With the above in consideration I also learnt to deal with stress and lack of sleep in a way which I haven't had to before. Because of having three jobs with occasional high work load and long travelling hours I was often quite tired which made dealing with problems and stressful events even more difficult to deal with. I dealt with this by compromising some of my social life in order to get a good nights sleep, took some time off from my weekend job and utilised my travelling time to do something productive towards my placement e.g. reading journal articles. I also learnt that getting stressed was not an effective way to deal with problems, so developed a calmer, more rational attitude to problem solving. All-in-all my placement has helped me grow and develop in a way in which I never would have had I not done a placement year.

### **Any other notable features of the placement**

For anyone considering a placement year in psychological research I would highly recommend doing one at my institute and college. The diversity of the things I was involved with and the skills I learnt has made this one extremely valuable year. On top of that I have met some very inspirational people during my time who have given me a drive to take up a career in clinical psychology. As I've mentioned I have seen the downsides to research, but I feel the benefits of a good piece of research outweigh these and I would love nothing more than to one day submit a research paper of my own.

There is, however, something you should consider when taking a placement, not just at my site but in major cities in general, is that they tend to be unpaid, particularly in this area of psychology. I did get a contribution of £70 towards my travel, and I was lucky in the respect I lived at home and didn't have to pay rent, however I still had to work at weekends in order to get any disposable income. At times this would hinder my work at the institute due to the fact I was so tired from having three jobs. The downside of living at home was of course the long travelling hours, so if you take a placement far away you may want to weigh up the costs and benefits of living close to your placement or living at home. You will also want to budget for your year ahead.

I wouldn't consider the above to be reasons not to do an unpaid placement. One thing I was told before I joined was that you will get as much out of it as you put in. I can't emphasise just how true this is as I got so much out of this placement, a lot of which was due to having such a fantastic supervisor who allowed me to get involved in so much. I would without a doubt do it again.