



The day my life changed forever

by Judit Varkonyi-Sepp

When I went to university to study psychology I knew one thing for sure: I did not want to have much contact with numbers and calculations. This antipathy went back to my college years. My maths teacher was a frustrated, elderly lady who could not accept that she had to teach average 16-year olds, rather than future professors at a prestigious university, and made no efforts to modify or soften her message about the beauty of the world of mathematics to ease our understanding.

More than 20 years on I still have nightmares (after a substantial dinner) of failing my maths A-levels and hear Mrs X's sarcastic, satisfied voice: Miss Sepp, failed!

So, shock of my life when we got the university curriculum and schedule: statistics—3 lectures a week for 2 years! Worst nightmare: 3 oral exams and one written! My first reaction was immense panic. If it had not been for my good friends, I would have given up there and then.

Next, it got worse: my professor was too clever. He was, in fact, a genius. A young gentleman so clever, almost unworldly. Unfortunately, he also spoke an unworldly language that I could not understand. He was a very keen football player and I would have liked to have a friendly conversation with him about other topics than stats in the faint hope that I might understand what he said, but it proved to be a futile attempt—I did not get what he said at all!

Then came the exams. I don't know how I survived these at all. I clearly remember though that I was never so scared in my entire life. For 4 days before the final oral exam I locked myself in my room, brewed copious volumes of strong black coffee and frantically revised and memorised the formulas verbatim. No understanding though. P-values, T-test, hazard ratio formed a big confused mess in my poor brain. In retrospect, I think I was in a different state of mind then. I do not understand even today how I passed, even with an acceptable grade. Another nightmare that stayed with me from that part of my life was that I was about to graduate but had not yet done my statistics module. All my peers got their diploma except me and time passed, years went by and I still couldn't get myself to do my stats. Then I wake up and...phew, thank God it was just a dream!

After this things went relatively well until the final year (year 5) of my studies. I was quite interested in organisational and work psychology and the department offered me the opportunity to stay and work as a reader once I graduated. I would have liked to but the research!! Statistics got in my way big time. I felt completely incompetent and unable even to think about analysing or interpreting any research I would need to be doing. So, to everybody's regret (and mine was by far the biggest) I had to turn the offer down.

At the same time I realised that my dreams of becoming an eminent, world-famous psychology professor had been shattered by evil statistics and I went to work in project management.

I cannot say I have done badly in project management and I have had quite a nice, diverse life, yet the dream of seeing myself at many of the big conferences presenting my latest research and defending my position with strong data stayed with me as a small painful marble in my heart. It was not meant to be for me...

But then....

Last year my company organised a series of statistics lectures for staff and as I have some encounters with research data I was strongly advised to go. I would not have done so but the lectures were enthusiastically co-ordinated by one of my good fellows so I thought I should go to the first few as a favour to him. Little did I know that my life would never be the same again.

The lectures were delivered by a young statistician from the Institute of Tropical Diseases. The first lecture was clear, straightforward, understandable and fun; oh what fun it was! He stripped all mystery, and misery, off statistics; made us laugh out loud at some of the obvious blunders we made with insufficient statistics and their consequent misinterpretation; we heard juicy statistics gossips; I promise you it was such a party time, I could not wait for the next lecture to come!!!

And so it went. Slowly, everything started to make sense and become friendly: confidence interval, standard error, relative risk... I felt like Dr Doolittle's little daughter when she realised she was starting to understand animal language. It is very empowering, I must say.

There is still a lot for me to learn. The door is now open to this new world and I take the journey with the enthusiasm of a little child. So much to see in the Land of Statistics! Here a small bush of graphs, there a few flowers of values.

The sun is shining and I am happy. The world is my oyster. I might never become the famous psychology professor I once dreamt to be, but Statistics Land is now a familiar and exciting place where I keenly go for an enjoyable brain-teasing safari. I read research articles with joy in my free time, even bed-time. And no more nightmares! My life has changed forever.

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