Perfect and improving

As a child I always used to wonder how someone could be described as a "perfect stranger". Not only did I not know any strangers (by definition), I also didn't really see how anyone could be called perfect – that seemed a bridge too far. Nowadays, however, in my early dotage/mid-life crisis/eternally youthful existence (depending on whether you are talking to my friends, family or me) I begin to see that perhaps at last I have achieved a level of perfection not anticipated in my youth. You see, I have almost completely transmogrified myself from a real physics teacher into a pretend sociologist. I am now, and intend to continue to be for some time, a perfect fraud.

Never having done as much as 20 minutes formal training in anything sociological, in 2005 I catapulted myself into a taught Master's course in applied social research – and loved it. The statistics was a piece of cake, of course, although listening to others in the group struggle with the notion of genuine randomness did induce a light coma. Anyone who has marvelled at the notions of stochastic cooling, probability wavefunctions and Schrödinger's cat cannot fail to be amused at social scientists struggling with the idea that correlation does not imply causality.

But my smugness was too hasty as we hurtled at breakneck speed through qualitative investigations of various forms of stigma. Where were the units? Was being found drunk and disorderly after finishing an assignment a millistig or several megastigs? Without units, how could we compare two different cases? Things took a turn for the worse as it slowly dawned on me that nowhere was there an equation to be seen.

I finally resorted to producing my own, as a comfort blanket if you will. This so-called Kerr equation takes the form $S = \log_w(E) + r$, where S is the level of stigma and E is a measure of the stigmatizing event, both of which are in arbitrary units that do not necessarily have anything to do with each other. To compensate for this potential mix of SI, imperial and made-up units, the base w is chosen at will to give a nice answer. Finally, there is the "Robert constant", r, which is (of course) a variable number that can be added to or subtracted from the answer you actually got to produce the answer you wanted to get.

With this rather useful equation as evidence, you can now show your own situation in any light you wish. For example, imagine you have just discovered your research work to be based not on an obscure passage from Stephen Hawking as you thought, but on a page untimely ripped from an Enid Blyton classic. Imagine your horror when you discovered that a Noddy was not an oscillating quantum superposition of a strange particle and its antimatter equivalent. Here we may choose $E = 2.871$ and let's take w to be 1.38976, for instance. Thus, S_0 is about 3.2. When discussing this state of affairs with your co-workers you admit that r approximates to 9, giving a total stigma rating of 12.2, which is clearly high. On the other hand, at the press conference called after someone from the lab leaks the news, r acquires a value of –3.1 so that S becomes 0.1 and the event is trivialized nicely.

Armed with this self-defence mechanism and now firmly divorced from my previous life indoctrinating physical concepts into young minds, I decided to take the plunge into PhD research in social policy. Finding a supervisor was the easy bit, it transpired. I wrote a piece for her and eagerly awaited the reaction. "You're very positivist," she said. I thought that sounded good and rather hastily said so, but apparently this was not the case. Whereas in mathematics 2 + 3 can be confidently asserted to be 5, in social science we can only claim the existence of "some evidence to suggest that, given the correct initial conditions, 2 and 3 can sometimes add up to 5". Perhaps many of my former mathematics students were actually sociologists, based on the unusual calculations that appeared regularly in their exam scripts, where the sum of 2 and 3 was not even necessarily a real number.

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I ploughed on relentlessly, struggling with this new language and a mode of thinking more counterintuitive than quantum mechanics. At one early meeting my mentor suggested that I should be looking at "social constructivism and post-oedipal triangularity in hegemonic masculinity". While frantically writing down the offending phrase and with my mind in a whirl, I found myself nodding sagely at her and saying "Yes, that's a good point". I'm still not sure if it is, but, like all good scientific researchers before me, I changed direction slightly to avoid running into this particular roadblock. More than once I have discovered that mistakes can be the stepping stones to failure, and as I proceed I have growing empathy with the man who claimed that a conclusion is the place where you got tired of thinking.

Recently my supervisor said I'm "improving". In my former life, when a student asked a question like "But sir, what exactly is an electron?". I could answer with confidence, giving what I considered to be enough information for the student's educational level. Nowadays, however, I doubt if I could give a clear exposition on any topic for any money. Can it be that losing my certainty in the formalisms of physics is an improvement? Who knows? All I can say is that, considering the initial boundary conditions, there appears to be some evidence that may indicate some slight shift in my possible thought position. Oh, dear!

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● This is the winning entry in the Lateral Thoughts competition launched in June. Congratulations to Robert Kerr who wins £100