

School work

JUSTINE HOWARD reports on the 2000 Education Section Conference held at Stanford Hall, Loughborough, 3–5 November 2000.

THE torrential rain and widespread flooding that disrupted most of the UK at the beginning of November could not dampen the success of this conference. With an improvement in the weather over the weekend, the bright mornings were ideal for an invigorating walk in 300 acres of beautiful parkland surrounding the 18th century Stanford Hall. The diverse nature of current educational research was highlighted well by research on education through the lifespan, and the annual theme of 'Working together for education'.

Mel Ainscow (University of Manchester) delivered the opening address, 'Understanding and developing inclusion practices in schools'. It raised interesting questions about government drives towards standards and standardisation and drew attention to a key issue in research, namely the need to provide operational definitions of terms. Ainscow argued that focusing on standardisation and assessment did little to promote a participatory climate. The predominance of rigid legislative requirements left little time for the celebration of achievement and did not allow for improvisation, a central feature of teaching excellence. Rather than perceiving individual differences as problematic in the classroom, he proposed that these differences could in fact provide learning opportunities.

Many presentations on the first day looked at social interaction, literacy and numeracy in the primary sector. Donald Christie (University of Strathclyde) and Peter Kutnik (University of Brighton) spoke about the significance of peer grouping and social interaction for the facilitation of learning in the primary school. Jane Hutchinson (University of Central Lancashire) reported differences in text comprehension in children for whom English is a second language. She proposed that such difficulties must be considered by teachers when planning educational provision. Chris Smith (University of Central Lancashire) investigated teachers' perceptions of the literacy and numeracy strategy, noting that the numeracy hour was perceived far more favourably than the literacy equivalent. This, he suggested, is

DAVE ROBERTS

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because the guidelines for numeracy are more flexible than for literacy, allowing increased teacher freedom. This supports Ainscow's perspective that rigidity in legislation does little to increase teachers' confidence in their professional skill.

The 2000 Vernon Wall Lecture, delivered by Carol Fitz-Gibbon (University of Durham), provided a stimulating insight into the significance of using appropriate research methods in Educational research. Describing how statistics were frequently misused or badly reported she reiterated the alarming reality of the famous quote: 'There are three kinds of lies – lies, damned lies and statistics.' Her comment that the .05 significance level became the norm simply by accident (as the patent for others was unavailable!) will come to mind when reporting significance levels in the future.

On the final day of the conference Russell Roberts (Griffith University, Queensland) reported surprisingly high levels of depression and anxiety suffered by the under-18s in Australia and indicated comparable levels in the UK. He detailed the successes of the Positive Approach to Life Situations (PALS) programme, an

intervention strategy aiming to teach coping skills. The PALS intervention programme improves mental health (depression and anxiety) and is particularly effective when presented by a teacher in the role of significant other.

Further research on psychosocial difficulty was then presented by Emily Lovegrove (University of the West of England), describing the experiences of adolescents with disfigurement. Her research demonstrated how 'image was everything' to the adolescent. The main concern of the paper was the effect this negative self-image can have on classroom interaction and consequent academic achievement, and the need for appropriate intervention strategies.

Every credit must be given to Nigel Hastings (Nottingham Trent University) and his team for their organisational skill. I look forward to the joint Education and Developmental Section Conference to be hosted by University College Worcester in September 2001.

■ *Justine Howard is a lecturer at University College Worcester.*

Debriefing the trauma trap

ALEX LINLEY reports from 'Trapped by Trauma: Dissociation and other Responses', the Defence Medical Services Psychological Injuries Unit International Conference held in York, 26–27 October 2000.

POST-TRAUMATIC stress disorder (PTSD) has had an uneasy history in military psychology. This conference demonstrated just how much progress in research and practice has been made in recent years.

The first day was devoted to workshops hosted by Roger Pitman (Harvard Medical School) and Arieh Shalev (Hadassah University Hospital, Jerusalem), each a world authority on PTSD. Pitman emphasised a biological explanation of PTSD drawing on evidence that PTSD patients evidence stronger indicators of physiological arousal than do controls. Shalev went on to discuss acute responses to trauma, showing how dissociation and depression are the strongest predictors of subsequent PTSD.

On the second day Suzanna Rose (West Berkshire Traumatic Stress Service) discussed her involvement in a systematic review of evidence from studies of single psychological debriefings following trauma. Rose concluded that existing research was frequently methodologically flawed, and often went beyond the interventions for which the single psychological debriefing protocols had been originally designed. She called for further high-quality investigations that could properly inform decisions as to best practice, and suggested that until such time as consistent findings could be presented, single psychological debriefings following trauma should be used with the utmost caution.

Several presentations addressed the relationship between PTSD and other disorders. Allison Harvey (University of Oxford) emphasised the role of dissociation in the pathogenesis of acute stress disorder (ASD), and suggested that a diagnosis of ASD predicted a later diagnosis of PTSD. Stephen O'Brien (Aintree Hospitals NHS Trust Mental Health Services) discussed the problems of understanding causality in the relationship of PTSD with substance use.

Gillian Haddock (University of Manchester) discussed the role of trauma in the onset of psychosis, showing evidence for a high prevalence of PTSD in severe mental illness. However, research has yet to delineate the distinct pathways through which these processes operate.

Out-of-body experiences in psychological trauma were examined by Gordon Turnbull (Ticehurst House Hospital, East Sussex), illustrated by the case of a woman who was afraid to look in a mirror because of what she might not see, thus confirming her belief that she was already dead. Turnbull described how such dissociative responses can be adaptive in the short term, but in the longer term can lead to PTSD.

Chris Brewin (University College London) described his dual representation model of PTSD, which is based on traumatic memories being encoded as situationally accessible (and therefore involuntarily reactivated), compared with normal memories, which are verbally accessible (and hence consciously and voluntarily reactivated).

Complex trauma reactions (typically

following prolonged, multiple traumas) were the subject of Stuart Turner's (Traumatic Stress Clinic, London) presentation. Having faced the reality of death, some people may struggle to re-engage with life, and hence remain trapped in their traumatic experience. Left pondering questions about the meaning of their existence, the just nature of the world, or the foundations of their religious beliefs, Turner asked whether psychologists and psychiatrists are the appropriate agencies to treat these existential dilemmas.

Following the conference I, for one, was confirmed in my belief that the spectrum of adaptation to trauma is far wider than the explanation offered by any single approach.

■ Alex Linley is an undergraduate at the University of Leicester.

GET THE IDEAS IN AT THE BAR

THE first British Association organised 'sciBAR' threatened to be a victim of its own success. Few could have expected that such a large crowd would pack out a small wine bar for an informal debate between scientists and the public on the topic of scientific risk. Whilst the proceedings occasionally had the feel of *Question Time* at closing time, Colin Blakemore (University of Oxford) led the discussion admirably.

The 'public' there dealt comfortably with issues such as how risk is communicated, whether we can expect to live in a 'risk-free society', and the worrying commercialisation of science. The discussion chugged along at a fairly high level, only occasionally derailed by the odd maverick with a personal or political cause to promote. You did get the impression that the majority of people there were *Guardian*-reading science graduates – how to open the events up to a truly representative cross-section of the population is the next mission for the BA, should they choose to accept it.

There is clearly increasing public interest and concern over science and the way it is communicated, and it was good to hear the message hammered home that this isn't just about 'public understanding of science': it's about science understanding the public. A one-way view of the communication process with scientists as the all-knowing arbiters of certainty and the media as a 'distorting lens' is simplistic at best, and it was refreshing to hear Blakemore espousing an independent and fairly critical stance on our role and responsibilities.

SciBAR was described as an event to build a 'programme of expectation' towards the opening of a new building near the Science Museum, where regular large public forums of this kind could be held. 'There are many people with a passing interest in science and how it affects their lives, who wouldn't dream of attending a formal lecture,' said Peter Briggs, Chief Executive of the BA. 'The sciBAR is aimed at them.'

□ For information on future events, contact the BA's Press Officer Sallie Robins on 020 7973 3078, or see www.britassoc.org.uk.

Imagination and transformation

JANE HENRY takes stock of the 2000 Consciousness and Experiential Psychology Section Conference.

THE CEP's 4th Annual Conference took place over the weekend of 22–24 September 2000. As usual, the setting was superb – a sunny weekend in the tranquil quads and gardens of Somerville College, Oxford.

Anees Sheikh (University of Milwaukee) discussed how mental imagery has changed from being a topic on the periphery of psychology to becoming key to a variety of areas. With illustrations from research and clinical practice, he made clear how powerfully and rapidly imagery techniques can improve a person's sense of well-being. Max Velmans (Goldsmiths College) elaborated on the nature of the interface between imagery and both psychological and physiological change.

A number of the speakers offered a spiritual perspective on transformation and imagery. James Low (Guy's Hospital) argued that catharsis does not always bring about transformation and reminded us that

the Tibetans liken this approach to drinking salt water in its capacity to create a need for more of the same. Brian Lancaster (Liverpool John Moores) argued that cognitive psychology's approach may be complemented by views of preconscious processes found in spiritual traditions.

The phenomenological exploration of consciousness was another strong theme. An interesting set of papers explored how conscious experience is embedded in the world, yet possesses the quality of 'being mine' (Peter Ashworth, Sheffield Hallam University). How conscious experience emerges from interactions (Trevor Butt, University of Huddersfield), and its close relation to creativity (Nigel King, University of Huddersfield) were also covered.

Amongst the individual papers Gidi Rubenstein (Netanya College, Israel) argued for the merits of defensive pessimism as a good coping strategy

for anxious people. Indeed, Rubenstein argued that forced optimism, an approach that is prominent in many 'personal development' approaches, can be counterproductive. Francis Reynolds (Brunel University) described how creative activity provides people with new meaning when they are faced with chronic illness. Her sample of chronically ill females had found needlework an absorbing way of structuring time, which offered a sense of control, mastery and social contact, plus a means of leaving a legacy.

The conference also provided an opportunity for networking – an important exercise in a subdiscipline where psychologists can be a bit thin on the ground. The chance to meet with kindred spirits is a much appreciated aspect of CEP conferences.

■ Jane Henry is with the Experiential Research Group at the Open University.

RELIGION – A MOOT POINT

KATHARINE J. HOLDEN went to a Cambridge Union debate on the motion 'This house believes that religious faith is more than a psychological crutch'.

THIS well-attended debate took place just days after a newspaper headline appeared declaring Britain to be a 'society of atheists' who find hope in family possessions and personal fulfilment rather than the Church. The fact that the chosen speakers were as charismatic as they were controversial made for a lively debate, although it was evident throughout that some speakers who had been allocated one particular stance would have actually been more suited to adopting the other.

Speakers for the proposition included Denis Cobell, the President of the National Secular Society, the Venerable Nagasena Mathathera, a high-ranking Buddhist *bhikku*, and the Revd Dr Chris Hancock, Rector of Holy Trinity College, Cambridge.

Cobell argued that one

only has to be reminded of persecution and wars waged in the name of religion to see that religious faith is far more than a psychological crutch: it is also a weapon! More positively, other proposers argued that religion is capable of answering many questions that science cannot, and is simply too inspiring to be just a psychological crutch. Religious faith, it was argued, is founded on fact and personal experience. It was asserted that religious faith is not an easy option: it can be comforting when life is uncomfortable, but discomfiting when life is comfortable.

Speaking against the motion were Babu Gogineni, Chief Executive of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, Professor Peter Atkins, a professor of



chemistry at Lincoln College, Oxford, Dr Chris French from Goldsmiths College, and Sir Ludovic Kennedy, the journalist, writer and broadcaster.

The opposition agreed that religion may appear to provide many answers that science cannot, and that it serves as a useful psychological crutch for people by providing a sense of purpose and meaning to life. It was argued that religion is adopted by people in an attempt to meet certain psychological needs, such as the need for personal fulfilment and happiness, rather than out of a response to evidence. In addition, 'personal experiences' of religious faith such as out-of-body experiences and visions can be explained by psychology, without resorting to religious or spiritual explanations.

The final vote supported the proposition.

■ Katharine J. Holden is a postgraduate student at Goldsmiths College, London.