

# Introspection – A new look?

*It seems as if we can't trust what people say, after all.* **STEVE NEWSTEAD**

**I**NTEREST in the use of introspection has waxed and waned throughout the history of psychology. Wundt and his followers believed that it was primarily through introspection that psychological insights could be obtained (e.g. Wundt, 1896). In direct opposition to this, behaviourists argued that introspection can provide no insights whatsoever, since only overt, observable behaviour is of importance.

It is easy to show that introspective reports are not always reliable. Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson from the University of Michigan asked shoppers in a supermarket which of four pairs of stockings they preferred. In fact, all were identical, but there was a strong preference for the pair that was placed on the right-hand side of the display. Despite the persuasiveness of this positional bias,

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## Never mind the quality, look at the position

not one of the shoppers articulated position as a reason for their choice, instead talking of the better feel or quality of the pair they had chosen.

In their article in *Psychological Review* Nisbett and Wilson try to make some sense out of the empirical and theoretical findings. They consider such weighty questions as the reliability and comprehensiveness of introspection,

and whether it distorts ongoing cognitive processes. The authors seek answers to these questions by placing introspection within an information-processing framework. They claim that introspection can provide access to the contents of short-term memory – that is, people can accurately report what they are currently attending to.

This apparently simple claim has major ramifications. If what people are currently attending to is verbal in nature, then verbal reports will usually be accurate and are unlikely to interfere with the task being performed. When nonverbal material is being attended to, verbal reports may be less complete and may to some extent disrupt the task in hand. If a task is largely automatic, then it will not be introspectable since conscious attention may not be required; here again, verbal reports may give little insight into the processes. Retrospective reports, which tap longer-term memory of the activity, will often be inaccurate (as was the case with the stockings study reported above). And if people are asked to make general comments about their behaviour, as opposed to reporting the specific contents of consciousness, reports may be inaccurate.

All this means that some sorts of verbal report are inherently unreliable – reports may be delayed, nonverbal and general. Much more credence can be placed in ‘think-aloud’ protocols, when people are asked to report what they are doing during the course of a cognitive task. These are important claims, and ones for which there is considerable evidence. If they prove to be correct, this means that introspection can be reintroduced into mainstream psychology, not as the sole methodology for investigation but as one of a battery of measures that can provide insight into mental processes.

Nisbett, R. E. & Wilson, T. D. (1977). Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological Review*, 84, 231–259.

## Reference

Wundt, W. M. (1896). *Lectures on Human and animal psychology*. New York: Macmillan.

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To celebrate the Society's centenary year, we asked well-known researchers in their fields to each write a 'Research in brief' style review of a paper or book that they think has been the key piece of research of in the last 100 years.

This month Steve Newstead reviews a publication on language and thinking.

## Suicide and the death of Diana

*The death of a public figure can influence suicidal behaviour.* **NEIL MARTIN**

**S**UNDAY 31 August 1997 is a date that will be for ever associated with that rarest of recollections, the flashbulb memory. The death of Diana, Princess of Wales drew considerable public reaction and distress.

Now a group of researchers at Warnford and John Radcliffe Hospitals, Oxford, and the University of Manchester, has found an association between the death and an extreme form of public distress – a significant increase in suicide in a British sample in the month following the princess's funeral.

Keith Hawton and his group looked at the number of suicides in England and Wales in the month following the death of Diana and compared these rates with those obtained three months before and

for the same period in 1992–1996. Suicides increased by 17 per cent in the month following the funeral of the princess. It was particularly common in women (an increase of 33.7 per cent) and in those aged between 25 and 44 years (an increase of 45 per cent). Presentations of deliberate self-harm increased by 44 per cent in the week following the death. The authors conclude: 'The death of a major public figure can influence rates of suicidal behaviour. For deliberate self-harm, the impact may be immediate, but for suicide it may be delayed.'

Hawton, K., Harriss, L., Appleby, L., Juszcak, E., Simkin, S., McDonnell, R., Amos, T., Kiernan, K., & Parrott, H. (2000). Effect of death of Diana, Princess of Wales on suicide and deliberate self-harm. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 177, 463–466.

# Are we a nation of mental health illiterates?

*Mental illness still confuses the public, according to a recent review.* **NEIL MARTIN**

**O**f all the areas of psychology, probably the one to have suffered from the greatest misunderstanding is the study and treatment of mental health. It is the behaviour that psychologists are most closely associated with – at least in the public mind – and, as a recent ‘Research in brief’ report showed (October 2000), it is one of the most misrepresented behaviours in the media.

A review by A.F. Jorm (Australian National University) in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* has investigated what the public does and does not know about mental illness, its causes and its treatment. It makes illuminating reading.

Members of the public have difficulty correctly recognising mental disorders, with schizophrenia often mistaken for depression. Most people believe that

depression and schizophrenia are caused by the social environment, especially stressors. These are important aetiological factors, Jorm argues, but environmental stressors in schizophrenia are triggers rather than causes.

In terms of treatment, the public’s view of psychotropic medication is almost uniformly negative, contrary to the views of clinicians and to evidence from randomised controlled trials. When people are asked why their views of drugs are negative, they usually cite side-effects and dependence. Natural remedies (such as vitamins) are regarded more positively.

Where the public gets information about mental illness is still something of a mystery. One study reported that 33 per cent of people obtained information from a close relative or friend with mental illness. Another

study found that 32 per cent of people obtained such information from the media.

Compared with efforts to improve public understanding of cancer and heart disease, information campaigns about mental illness have not been a resounding success, or particularly numerous. Those that are run show small but significant improvements in understanding; but, as the authors note, they are not evaluated in a scientifically sound way. The authors suggest, however, that targeted campaigns – aimed at specific groups – are quite successful.

This provocative review suggests that we have long to go before the public’s mental health literacy is improved.

Jorm, A. F. (2000). Mental health literacy: Public knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 177, 396–401.

## One about the rabbi and the psychologist

*Do rabbis and clinical psychologists perceive psychological problems differently?* **ANTHONY C. EDWARDS**

**T**O whom would you turn to discuss your problems – a member of the clergy or a clinical psychologist? Glen Milstein and his colleagues at Cornell University suggest that people in general would sooner take their psychological problems to a religious professional than a medic or a psychologist. This raises important questions about whether the two types of profession perceive certain psychological problems differently. Would this be the reason why people would prefer to talk to a priest or a rabbi?

Milstein and his group prepared three brief vignettes of categories identified as problems by DSM-IV. The psychiatric problem featured a schizophrenic; the spiritual religious vignette featured a person who had had a mystical experience (such as standing on a hilltop and feeling at one with God); the purely religious problem featured a man who had respected his deceased father’s wish to be cremated, but had religious convictions against

cremation and now felt unsure how to mourn for his father. Rabbis and clinical psychologists were asked to rate the extent to which each problem was likely to have a spiritual or religious aetiology; the extent to which psychiatric medication would help; and the seriousness of the problem.

Rabbis and clinical psychologists agreed that schizophrenia was less likely to have a spiritual aetiology than the mystical experience, which in turn both professions saw as less likely to have such an aetiology than that of the mourning-related case. Rabbis saw schizophrenia as more likely to have a spiritual aetiology than did the psychologists and were less likely to think that medication would benefit the schizophrenic.

The seriousness of the problems was ranked similarly by both professions, with schizophrenia ranked most serious. However, the mourning case was regarded as more important by the rabbis than by the clinical psychologists.

Overall, however, similarities between the two groups outweighed differences. Rabbis and psychologists alike seem able to distinguish between psychiatric, spiritual-religious and purely religious problems.

Milstein, G., Midlarsky, E., Link, B., Raue, P., & Bruce, M. L. (2000). Assessing problems with religious content: A comparison of psychologists and rabbis. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 188, 608–615.

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# Genes, environment and sexuality

*Behaviour genetics has revealed more about male and female sexual orientation.* **QAZI RAHMAN**

**G**ENETIC research into human sexual orientation has provoked much scientific and political interest in the past decade, along with an equal measure of controversy. Were respondents with exclusively homosexual orientations overrepresented in previous samples, thus masking any continuity in sexuality? And what is the heritability of childhood gender nonconformity, a primary correlate of sexual orientation?

To address these questions, Michael Bailey and colleagues from Northwestern and Queensland Universities in Australia examined the largest and most carefully acquired sample of twins to date. Over 900 identical and 500 non-identical twin pairs completed questionnaires measuring sexual orientation (in terms of sexual fantasy, sexual attraction and sexual behaviour) and childhood gender nonconformity (e.g. assessing gender identity and childhood

sex-typical behaviour – boys playing football, girls playing with dolls, and so on).

Bailey and colleagues found that the rate of exclusive heterosexuality was similar for men and women (almost 92 per cent), whereas scores for non-heterosexual orientations differed between the sexes. Men were more likely to show evidence of strong homosexuality, whereas women were more likely to express light to moderate degrees of homosexuality. This confirms previous reports of the bipolar nature of male sexual orientation and suggests that female sexuality may need different explanations. The investigators also found a much lower rate of genetic concordance for sexual orientation than found previously. In contrast, childhood gender nonconformity was highly heritable.

Khytam Dawood, also at Northwestern, and colleagues from Boston and Illinois State Universities examined a separate sample of gay brothers and found that they were also strikingly similar in childhood gender nonconformity reports. Brothers reported having homosexual feelings and relations before they knew their brothers were gay.

Finally, Bailey and colleagues also examined sex differences in the trait of 'sociosexuality' which refers to the tendency to engage in casual sex. This shows

variability within both sexes. Social theories have proposed that sociosexuality may be acquired by observing parental mating strategy. The authors found that parents' marital instability was indeed mildly related to sociosexuality, although this may have been due to either genetic or social factors.

The authors conclude that their work on familial influences on sexual orientation in men is consistent with much of the recent evidence. 'Among gay men,' they report, 'childhood gender nonconformity was familial and it was also associated with different early sexual experiences.' They suggest that genetic research on sexual orientation should routinely include measures of childhood nonconformity 'in order to examine alternative pathways to adult homosexuality'.

Bailey, J. M., Dunne, M. P., & Martin, N. G. (2000). Genetic and environmental influences on sexual orientation and its correlates in an Australian twin sample. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 524–536.

Bailey, J. M., Kirk, K. M., Zhu, G., Dunne, M. P., & Martin, N. G. (2000). Do individual differences in sociosexuality represent genetic or environmentally contingent strategies? Evidence from an Australian twin registry. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 537–545.

Dawood, K., Pillard, R. C., Horvath, C., Reville, V., & Bailey, J. M. (2000). Familial aspects of male homosexuality. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 29, 155–163.

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## Childhood gender nonconformity?

# The food of hate?

*Violent rap music can prime undesirable stereotypes.* **NEIL MARTIN**

**J**AMES Johnson and his colleagues at the University of North Carolina and Colgate University have found that exposure to violent rap music can negatively affect evaluations of black people – even those by black people themselves.

In their study, three groups of white and black men were exposed to different conditions. One group listened to violent rap music by black artists, and another group to non-violent

rap music by black artists, a control group was not exposed to any music. After exposure, participants were asked to engage in ostensible 'decision-making tasks'. These involved: reading a newspaper report of a violent assault (a white or black man hit his fiancée) and evaluating whether the aggressor was acting dispositionally or not; assessing the CV of a black or white male applicant for a management position; and

assessing the spatial skills of black and white applicants to a helicopter pilot school.

The bias towards rating violent behaviour as dispositional when it came from a black person was more evident in the participants who listened to violent rap music, whether they were black or white. They also regarded a black applicant's qualifications for a management post to be poorer than that of a white man's. There was no effect

of the violent music on spatial skill rating, the one dimension that was nonstereotypical.

The fact that both black and white participants responded to black targets more negatively after hearing the music suggests a problem. 'The impact of stereotypical media exposure', the authors conclude, 'may be both significant and insidious.'

Johnson, D. J., Trawalter, S., & Dovidio, J. F. (2000). Converging interracial consequences of exposure to violent rap music on stereotypical attributions of blacks. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 36, 233–251.