

How do we look?

SOME time ago I was on my way by taxi to speak at one of the Society's conferences. 'So what are we doing today?' the driver asked in that rather collegiate, caring-and-sharing way people have when they use the first-person plural of the pronoun, but still leave you feeling a bit irritated by it. 'I'm going to a conference of The British Psychological Society,' I replied. 'Psychology? That's a bit dodgy, isn't it?' was the response.

One of the themes I have been developing in this column over the past few months has been the impact of psychology on society, and how we represent our discipline to the outside world. No doubt we all have our own image of the discipline, and generally speaking I am sure it is a positive one. People do tend to think and speak positively of their own profession, but perhaps it is particularly the case that we are pleased to say that we are psychologists, or that our subject of study is psychology.

I was standing in a group at a social function recently, and in the course of exchanging notes on what we do someone said: 'I'm afraid I'm an accountant.' Clearly this suggested that the speaker had a view of the public image of his profession. The stereotype is that it is an important and essential job but it's an irretrievably dull world of really boring figures. He was hardly expecting the reply 'Now, that's interesting!' By contrast, I think we have come to expect that the words 'I'm a psychologist' will almost always be followed by a declaration that it is interesting. It is a subject the public always want to know more about.

The question 'What is the public image of psychology?' is one which should be of concern to all of us. Do people share our generally positive views of the discipline, or do they hold views that are perhaps neutral, uninformed or even negative? I am sure that something must have been published on this topic (indeed, see the conference report in this issue on the public image of psychology), so I will refrain from seeking to generalise from my sample of one in the taxi. I am not certain how my taxi driver might have developed his 'dodgy' construct, but it did seem to point to something rather suspect, possibly fitting in somewhere between crystal-gazing and

brainwashing. At any rate, it clearly fell short of my own image of a serious and important scientific discipline of central concern to society and its well-being.

In relation to this subject I was interested to come across two papers written a year or so ago by Stephen White and Sue Cavill of the Society's publications and communications staff. One was a discussion document entitled *Image of the Discipline*. In it they observed that in scientific terms we know very little about the public image of psychology. They also highlighted the legitimate role of public relations and 'image creation', and proposed a process that included carrying out research on the image people have of psychology, developing internal agreement on the image we want to project, and taking a range of actions to promote this.

The other paper was a report on a questionnaire sent out to everybody who serves on one of the Society's many committees. It included questions on both the image of the discipline and the image of the Society. Responses were obtained from about a quarter of those surveyed, resulting in a sample of 227.

Respondents were asked to list the five most important non-psychologist audiences with whom they interacted professionally and to answer the question 'How do you think the top two think about the discipline?' This exercise generated hundreds of positive and negative constructs in almost equal numbers. Interestingly, of the 10 most frequently used descriptions, nine were positive. At the top were 'professional', 'helpful', 'analytical', 'useful', 'rigorous', 'scientific' and 'interesting'. 'Naive' came in at number eight, and 'irrelevant' was 14th. The views expressed about the Society were also illuminating. When respondents were asked to list the five words they felt best described the Society, the top half-dozen were 'bureaucratic', 'professional', 'slow', 'supportive', 'efficient' and 'closed'.

Any exercise of this kind is, of course, rather limited in its methodology. Most significantly, in terms of public image it is psychologists' views of other people's perceptions. These views may be quite accurate or they may be very wide of the mark. Probably we have a tendency to feel that people know more about us and take

more interest in us than is actually the case, and perhaps the greatest danger is that many of the public have no particular view of the discipline at all. I noticed, for example, that when I looked up a haphazard list of professions in the index of *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* there were ample citations for doctors, teachers, lawyers, artists, musicians and others, but none for psychologists. It may just be that we have a long way to go to be seen as important and central enough for the public to hold any general perceptions of us at all.

Our Royal Charter charges us with a duty 'to advance and diffuse a knowledge of psychology'. We are already off to a good start in our centenary, and we expect better opportunities this year than ever before to enhance the public image of psychology and psychologists.

Tommy MacKay

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Press Committee

Media Training Days 2001

Tuesday 27 March

Monday 17 September

Media Training Days will be held in Glasgow on 27 March (pre Annual Conference), and at the Society's London office on 17 September.

The days will include:

- news writing
- snapshots of the media
- media releases
- interview techniques

For a registration form and further details contact:

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Heard the one about... our three new offices?

IN 1997 the Society published a strategic plan that contained a vision of the future in which there would be, among other things, greatly increased regional activity. A move towards realising that vision has been made with the setting up of three offices: in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Initially the principal function of the new offices will be to support the regional Branch committees and to serve strategic functions in relation to policy making in areas where decisions are being made independently of Westminster.

Chief Executive Barry Brooking said: 'The offices have been set up to help us service the discipline and our

members effectively and to take advantage of changes in government in Britain. All organisations need to recognise

that government is not just through Westminster but that there is one other parliament and two assemblies in Britain.'

REGIONAL OFFICES AND CONTACTS

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NATIONAL SCIENCE WEEK 16–25 MARCH

FROM 16 to 25 March 2001 National Science Week will involve over a million people in all manner of science events throughout the UK. Shopping centres, disused railway stations, art galleries, pubs and bars will host hands-on activities, debates, drama, films, competitions and demonstrations. The week, co-ordinated by the British Association, aims to provide 'the best in science activities and events for all members of the population'.

□ For full details of the programme and how to attend, contact the British Association, 23 Savile Row, London W1X 2NB. Tel: 0171 973 3051; website: www.britassoc.org.uk.

DEADLINE

We welcome News items from members for possible publication; deadline for the April issue is **2 March**.

CENTENARY EVENT

ON 22 February at the Royal Society, London, Professor Alan Cowey of the University of Oxford will give a public lecture entitled 'Functional localisation in the brain: From ancient to modern'.

This will be an account of how our understanding of the brain – and in particular where our mental functions are located – has accelerated in recent years with the advent of brain-imaging technology and magnetic brain stimulation. Professor Cowey will also refer to the attempts made by phrenologists in the 18th and 19th centuries to relate the relative size of different cortical areas in the brain to mental functions – more than a thousand years after scholars in classical Greece were considering how the various components of the 'soul' were housed in the brain's cerebral ventricles.



Brain Awareness Week

BRAIN Awareness Week is set to take place this year on 12–18 March, coinciding with Brain Awareness Week in the USA and overlapping with National Science Week in the UK (see box on this page).

Events will include conferences, exhibitions, lectures, open days, workshops and lab tours.

Last year's Brain Awareness Week involved over 1100 partner organisations in 41 different countries worldwide, and was hailed as a great success – for example: 'It is a pleasure to be involved in the global action' (Professor Risto



Kauppinen, Brain Research Society of Finland); 'We received lots of very positive feedback' (Professor Ding Jun, Institute of Cognition and Centre for Life Science, Ningxia, China); 'The whole Unit was involved in one way or another – very good for team spirit' (Nigel Morris, Rosehill Rehabilitation Unit, Torquay).

Brain Awareness Week is being co-ordinated by the European Dana Alliance for the Brain, which exists to raise the public profile of brain research and to promote 'brain research for a better life'.

□ Anyone wanting further information or who would like to participate in Brain Awareness Week should contact the European Dana Alliance for the Brain, 58–60 Kensington Church Street, London W8 4DB. Tel: 020 7937 7713; e-mail: edab@which.net.

NATIONAL HONOUR

IN the New Year Honours list Dr Reginald Brian

Stratford, a Fellow of the Society, and his wife Maureen (not a member of the Society) were made Officers of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to the mentally handicapped in Guangzhou, China.

Should we blame the bullies?

PETER K. SMITH on the launch of a new anti-bullying initiative and David Blunkett's view that 'we have to change the policy from the 90s, when there was too much of a no-blame culture'.

ON 13 December 2000 the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) issued its revised guidance for schools to tackle bullying – a second edition of the pack 'Don't Suffer in Silence'. This is an example of 'Bringing psychology to society', as advocated in the Society's centenary slogan. The first edition of the pack, issued in September 1994, was based on the findings of the Sheffield Anti-Bullying Project on the costs and effectiveness of various anti-bullying strategies in schools (Smith & Sharp, 1994).

It is now a legal requirement for schools in England to have some anti-bullying policy or action framework, and the revised pack includes an update of these legal issues alongside new material on working with parents, and on specific types of victimisation based on race, gender, sexuality and disability. More recent statistics from English schools are included, suggesting that the incidence of bullying may be showing some decrease since the early 1990s (Smith & Shu, 2000), despite continuing and often intense media coverage of bullying as an issue (including the recent Damilola Taylor killing). The new pack will again be available to schools across the country; over 90 per cent requested the first edition.

A particular press spin was put upon the new pack when it was launched – that it was adopting a tougher approach than its predecessor. Secretary of State David Blunkett was quoted as saying that 'we have to change the policy from the 90s, when there was too much of a no-blame culture' ('Blunkett launches anti-bully guidelines', *The Guardian*, 11 Dec 2000).

Ironically, the pack was launched at a Family Service Unit conference in London, which was advocating non-punitive approaches to bullying. The afternoon keynote speaker was George Robinson, a joint author of the 'no-blame' approach! In his opening address at this conference, David Blunkett took a more 'middle-of-the-road' approach than the press releases. He said it was important to use approaches that worked; tough measures would be necessary if other approaches were not working, or in serious cases where a victim would be frightened

to stay in the same class (so by implication the bully should be moved, not the victim).

On the same day as this conference an article by Michele Elliot, Director of the children's charity Kidscape, appeared in *The Guardian* attacking non-punitive methods and specifically the no-blame approach. This is a problem-solving method of tackling bullying, now often called the 'support-group' approach to make it more acceptable in the current political climate. Elliot argued that the method should be rejected outright, saying that she had a file of negative comments from teachers about the method, and that the leading authority on the topic, Dan Olweus, condemned it.

Although Olweus does attack this approach, I view the situation differently, as do other international researchers such as Rigby (1996) and Sullivan (2000). If teachers really do not like the no-blame approach, it would be useful to see this evidence properly documented. However, many teachers like the no-blame approach and the similar Pikas method of common concern. One example is Carterton Community College, in Oxfordshire, which has used a modified no-blame approach with some success; this was put forward for the DfEE pack and the case studies to be posted at www.dfee.gov.uk/bullying, but was rejected because of sensitivity over the no-blame issue.

There is some more general evidence on the popularity of different strategies. Following the issue of the first pack, 155 schools across England were asked to rate the success of their anti-bullying methods on a scale from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied) (Smith & Madsen, 1997). Whole-school policies and the Pikas method scored 3.9, and the no-blame approach 3.5. School tribunals or 'bully courts', in which pupils choose the punishment, were the only method rated below the mid-point, at 1.8.

So perhaps teachers tend to see bully courts as being *too* punitive. However, they have had some reported success: school tribunals were advocated by Kidscape in the early 1990s, and Elliot (1991) reported a drop of victimisation from 70 per cent to 6 per cent over a three-month period following their introduction in 30 schools. Unfortunately, Kidscape has not kept

records of this data or even of the identities of the schools involved (see also Smith & Sharp, 1994).

In fact, there is some evidence that both 'punitive' and 'non-punitive' methods can work. So the revised pack does contain details of non-punitive measures, amongst a range of other approaches, including peer support, curriculum work and playground work, that can supplement the effectiveness of a whole-school policy on bullying. It is vital to adapt approaches to local school conditions.

We still have a lot to learn about what does work and what does not, in anti-bullying interventions. Although Dan Olweus did report a 50 per cent drop in victimisation in Bergen, a number of other researchers using similar procedures (in England, Flanders, Germany, Canada and the USA) have achieved much more modest results. While school action can have some modest effect in reducing bullying (more in primary than in secondary schools), the dramatic success of the Bergen study is not yet replicable. In the circumstances, premature rejection of non-punitive approaches is just that – premature. We still need a lot more impartial research, and understanding of the dynamic and social context of bullying, before we can start saying that certain approaches do not work. Meanwhile, despite the public relations spin, the DfEE pack does give information on a broad range of approaches for schools to work with.

■ Professor Peter K. Smith is Head of the Unit for School and Family Studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

References:

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- Sullivan, K. (2000). *The anti-bullying handbook*. Oxford: OUP.