



LETTERS

Letters should be marked clearly 'Letter for publication in *The Psychologist*' and addressed to the editor at the Society office in Leicester. Please send by e-mail if possible: psychologist@bps.org.uk (include a postal address). Letters over 500 words are less likely to be published. The editor reserves the right to edit, shorten or publish extracts from letters. If major editing is necessary, this will be indicated. Space does not permit the publication of every letter received. Letters to the editor are not normally acknowledged.

Unjustified publication?

AS psychologists working with lesbian and gay clients, and teaching about such issues on clinical psychology training courses, we were gravely concerned by letters recently printed in *The Psychologist* ('A paradoxical effect of homophobia', October 2003; 'Homophobia, homosexuality and evolution', December 2003). While we warmly encourage professional debate regarding issues of sexuality and difference, these letters suggest that our profession is still capable of publicly promulgating oppressive and heterosexist discourses. We are dismayed that the publication that is meant to represent us is in danger of encouraging this discourse by unquestionably printing such controversial material in an unjustified manner.

In responding, we decided not to enter into the evolutionary biological debate as it has been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Weeks, 1986). Essentially, our objections are theoretical, political and professional. Such a debate is steeped in eugenics and ignores the fact that 'scientific' theories do not arise in a vacuum but are linked to practices of power. Such debates encourage impersonal and dehumanising language (e.g. the discussion of 'offspring' rather than 'children'), as well as conveniently ignoring the power held in the heterosexual gaze to categorise, define and hence oppress those who do not self-identify as heterosexual or who practice same-sex sexual behaviour. To illustrate this point, it would be like holding a discussion about the evolutionary and reproductive importance of people from various ethnic minority groups or people with disabilities,

without a consideration of the impact of such a focus.

In our day-to-day clinical experience we frequently observe the damage such reductionist discourses have on people's lives by positioning



them as 'a problem'. Sadly, the printing of these letters demonstrates that our profession still entertains the homophobic and heterosexist discourse that leads to the oppressive and abusive practices uncovered in the McFarlane Report (1998) and in some psychologists' responses to the formation of the Lesbian and Gay Section of the BPS (Wilkinson, 1999). Professionally, we object to such arguments as they are in breach of the BPS Equal Opportunities

Statement and BPS accreditation criteria for training courses which promote diversity.

The publication of letters such as these emphasises the need for further training of psychologists in lesbian and gay issues and increasing awareness of the power of heterosexism. Similarly, we can only hope that *The Psychologist's* editorial board takes seriously its responsibility for the letters it prints and we invite the editors to comment on their criteria for publication of letters. Finally, we would join Ginestet in inviting a special edition of *The Psychologist* devoted to lesbian and gay issues (Letters, 'Homophobia, homosexuality and evolution', December, 2003). However, we feel it is important that such a publication is not devoted to explaining why homosexuality exists and in its current prevalence, but addresses such issues as the impact of oppression, heterosexism, marginalisation

and 'othering' on the mental, emotional and physical health of those who do not define themselves as heterosexual.

A. Accoroni, N. Adams, M. Babbs, A. Byrne, C. Butler, O. Davidson & M. Van Dijkhuizen
The Mortimer Market Centre London

References

- McFarlane, L. (1998). *Diagnosis: Homophobic*. London: PACE.
Weeks, J. (1986). *Sexuality*. Chichester, London and New York: Ellis Horwood/Tavistock.
Wilkinson, S. (1999, July). The struggle to found the Lesbian and Gay Section. *BPS Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section Newsletter*, Issue 2, pp.3-5.

Editor's reply: *We aim to stimulate debate without publishing prejudicial or offensive views – this often involves making difficult judgements. For our criteria, our policies and procedures, and how to propose a special issue, see www.bps.org.uk/publications/thepsychologist.cfm.*

Reviewing journal articles – A plea

AS an associate editor for one of the journals, I receive papers submitted for publication, which I then send out for review. I have an ever-expanding list of potential reviewers, and aim never to ask anyone to do more than one review a year. As an occasional reviewer myself, I know that this is one of our most thankless tasks. It carries with it considerable responsibility, it can take up a good deal of time, and all the reviewer gets out of it is his or her name listed at some point in the journal, alongside dozens of other names. (Reviewing a book is even more onerous but at least you get to keep a copy.) It is also however an essential part of the peer-review process: without it, readers could have little confidence in the credibility of what they read.

As an editor, then, I am dismayed by those who return the paper saying they are 'too busy' to review it. Some have done this repeatedly. They are all themselves published authors – they

have depended on the goodwill and hard work of others to see their own work in print. It is surely not too much to ask that they be willing to carry out this task in their turn.

Most reviewers respond with careful, thorough, kindly phrased reviews, usually returned with commendable promptness. Although there will be times when the request for a review is just a straw too many for a staggering camel, this is a plea to the remaining few to rigorously examine their consciences before returning a paper unreviewed on the grounds that they are 'too busy'.

Janet Carr
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Editor's comment: *We welcome views on whether changes in journal publishing will affect this problem, tips on reviewing, etc.*

Is the Society failing sixth-formers?

THE question 'Are exam boards failing?' appeared over a letter from Gill Doble about A-level psychology (December 2003). The simple answer is 'No'. But if you ask 'Is the Society failing most people who study psychology', then the simple answer is probably 'Yes'.

Doble suggests that examination boards 'massage the statistics' to fit an 'acceptable distribution'. This is a racy interpretation of what happens. Statistics are used to arrive at the best possible answer to the difficult question of assigning grades, but it is not fair to call this massaging.

Unlike university marking, where grade divisions are known before marking takes place (i.e. $59 = 2:2$, $60 = 2:1$), A-level marking sets out to achieve a rank order of students. Only when that has been achieved are the grade boundaries drawn. Markers do not know what grade will be awarded for a particular score. The evidence used to arrive at the boundaries is, first, the judgement of the examiners, but also included in the process are statistical comparisons with different components of the examination, the estimations of teachers and the performance of similar cohorts in previous years. This process acknowledges that some papers are more taxing than others.

It is entirely appropriate to look at these statistical data, as it is the best way to ensure fairness from one year to the next. If we have 10,000 A-level candidates each year and if they come from largely the same schools, we would expect similar outcomes from year to year. Therefore, all examination boards use historical data to help set grade boundaries.

Compare this data-driven process with the way that university degrees are awarded.

Over the last 20 years psychology degrees have gone from being mostly 2:2s to predominantly 2:1s. It is unlikely that the performance of students has advanced by such a dramatic amount, especially in a time of increased student numbers and reduced support, contact and resources. The failure to use historical data in universities means that we cannot be confident of the relative value of degrees over time. This is not the case with A-levels – they are a beacon of good practice rather than the cause for concern suggested by Gill Doble.

I agree with Doble's suggestion that the Society should take more interest in A-level. The Society's Psychology Education Board has put the issue high on its agenda, but it is fair to say that many psychology departments have not grasped the issue of prior knowledge of the subject that students bring to their university studies. What other science subject does not require students to have prior knowledge? Can you imagine a physics or chemistry department taking no notice of whether applicants studied the subject at school? Perhaps it is time to embrace secondary education, recognise that psychology is now an important component of the school curriculum and engage with examination boards to devise a curriculum that develops from lower school through to master's level.

This summer over 70,000 students will take an AS-level in psychology and a further 40,000 will complete their A-levels. The nation is becoming psychologically literate, but it is largely being achieved outside the confines of the Society and outside the influence of university departments.

Phil Banyard
Nottingham Trent University

QUESTION TIME

Is theoretical understanding of child development correlated with good parenting?

PATRICIA Crittenden has shown that some physical abuse of infants stems from parental ignorance of normal developmental milestones (or, at least, very high expectations). These parents punish their children for being less than perfect in their eyes. However, Crittenden argues that these parents, unlike neglectful parents, have the best interests of their children at heart, and respond well to therapeutic interventions that teach them more normal expectations.

In the book that I edited with Kevin Browne and Peter Early *Prediction and Prevention of Child Abuse* (Wiley, 1988) we wrote: '...we feel that there is a case to be made for a considerable enhancement of our awareness as a society about the needs of children. Concomitantly, we need to establish rather different, and very explicit, societal expectations about the levels of care that children can be afforded...psychology has a substantial role here in establishing clearly what the needs of children are, and how they can be met within the child-rearing structures that we have available' (p.301, but also see chapter 1 by Michael Lewis and chapter 11 by Patricia Crittenden).

More recently I have supervised a number of student projects (including an unpublished PhD thesis by Petri Rahman) in which we have asked mothers of pre-school children to tell us what they can and can't do, and have then compared the parents' answers with the children's actual tested performance (using the BSDI). It turns out that parents are pretty good at saying what their children can do at the moment, although with a small but consistent tendency to exaggerate (a phenomenon I call 'parental optimism'), but they are much less good at remembering what they did in the past or predicting what they will do in the future. Furthermore, parental optimism correlates positively with how much time the parent spends with that child, but not with how much they have read about child development in general.

Cliff Davies
University of Manchester

AS a lecturer in developmental psychology with over 20 years' experience and as a parent of a 14-year-old and a 12-year-old, I think the simple answer to your question would be 'No'!

However, since, as a good psychologist, I know that correlation does not imply causation, I would suggest that my theoretical knowledge has benefited from my parenting experiences far more than the other way round. I regard my direct experiences, and those of friends and colleagues I have observed, to be a critical lens through which I reconsider and reflect on theory. This sometimes suggests research that needs doing.

A second issue would be that good parenting theory might correlate with theoretical understanding of child development, but my practice is far from perfect (theory of planned behaviour?).

Juliet Goldbart
Manchester Metropolitan University

Editor's note: We welcome thought-provoking or offbeat questions from readers. Send your question to the editor on (jonsut@bps.org.uk).

Goodbye to misleading stereotypes

WE are writing in connection with your report on the British Association Festival of Science (November 2003). In the box entitled 'Goodbye Freud' you cite Lewis Wolpert from UCL as stating 'the Tavistock Clinic is evil'. We find it surprising that you are willing to put this provocative and irresponsible nonsense into print. It seems unlikely that you would have done

DAVE ROBERTS

so if the organisation referred to had been the British Psychological Society rather

Statue of Freud that stands outside the Tavistock Clinic

than the Tavistock Clinic. A very large number of members of the British Psychological Society work at the Tavistock Clinic in London and are naturally offended not only by Professor Wolpert's misguided comments but also by your willingness to put them into print so that they can be read by the entire community of psychologists with no possible recourse on the part of the Clinic

nor any opportunity for open debate. It is this kind of thoughtless activity that perpetuates misleading stereotypes of the kind the Society might ordinarily be expected to wish to minimise.
P.H. Richardson
Head of Psychology Services
N.O.T. Temple
Chief Executive Officer
Tavistock Clinic

Editor's comment: The Psychologist aims to serve as a forum for discussion and debate, so we feel a duty to report what was said at conferences even if it is negative (and yes, even if it is about the BPS). Equally I agree

INFORMATION

■ I AM interested in making contact with **counselling psychologists working in the NHS** in order to network.

Gary Varney

Tel: 020 8579 8110; e-mail: relib97@hotmail.com

■ FOR my PsychD research I am interested in exploring the experiences of researchers (psychologists/trainees/assistants/fellows, etc.) who have carried out qualitative research on the topic of **rape and sexual violence**. I am particularly interested in **how conducting such research may personally or emotionally affect researchers**. If you are willing to be interviewed for about one hour, please contact me. I am based in SW London but am happy to travel.

Heidi Ashley

Trainee Counselling Psychologist
 University of Surrey
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■ I HAVE recently graduated in social psychology with a first and I am hoping to study for an MSc in occupational psychology next academic year (2004/2005). In the meantime I would like to gain some practical experience, either by assisting an occupational psychologist or by working in a

human resources setting. Any opportunities for **voluntary work in the London area**, or helpful advice, would be gratefully received.

Sophie Crichton

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■ I AM a psychology graduate (2:1) eager to gain **work experience in areas of clinical psychology** to begin my career. I am looking for voluntary clinical work in Nottingham/Peterborough or near Grantham with any client group. Any offers gratefully received, and advice is welcome.

Rachel Buffham

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■ A NUMBER of my colleagues and I would like to be **taught how to use EQS** so we can begin to use structural equation modelling, confirmatory factor analysis and other more sophisticated statistical techniques. We are all psychologically oriented psychologists familiar with and competent in the use of regression

and factor analysis, but insufficiently mathematical to interpret the screeds of output EQS seems to generate. Is anyone aware of either a UK-based course that we could go on or someone who would be willing to run a brief and practical course on EQS to illuminate us in the latest of psychology's black arts?

Vincent Egan

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■ RECENTLY completed postgraduate conversion in psychology (excellent results). Extensive experience of criminal justice system. Recent experience of working in secure unit. Request **voluntary placement two or three days a week in a forensic setting** Kent/London area.

Wendy Frappell-Cooke

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■ I AM in my second year of university in Cardiff, studying psychology. I am very keen to pursue a career as a clinical psychologist, specialising in eating disorders. I would appreciate any **voluntary work experience in**

clinical psychology in the Cardiff or Somerset area. Any advice or offers gratefully received.

Claire Affleck

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■ I AM a psychology professor at Cairo University. There is a possible opportunity for funding from the EC to enable **school psychologists in Egypt** to deal with common problems at school, like tobacco smoking, drug abuse and violence, and for the prevention of common mental health problems. These are BA in psychology graduates with no prior professional training on dealing with such problems. The funding conditions require that we **cooperate with colleagues from at least two EC countries**. Would anyone interested in the subject, or who knows of anyone who is, contact me please? I will also be very grateful for any advice or references in this matter.

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we should give wounded parties the opportunity to defend themselves, in a letter

or in a wider debate. We apologise if offence was taken: none was intended on our part.

Fainting, physiology and cognitive change

GEORGINA Krebs's interesting reply, regarding the modelling of panic (Letters, January 2004), contained an important inaccuracy – that 'actual fainting is not possible in panic attacks'. In fact, the physiology of fainting – vasovagal syncope – shows a biphasic course. As anxiety increases an individual shows the typical parasympathetic nervous system changes (e.g. raised blood pressure) until a critical level is reached. At this point there is a sudden

slowing of the heart and drop in blood pressure resulting from massive vasodilation (a paradoxical sympathetic nervous system effect). This reflex overrides the flight/fight response and fainting occurs as global cerebral blood flow drops by more than two thirds.

From this perspective, it might be suggested that cognitive models of anxiety disorders including panic disorder cannot be sensibly developed in isolation from a proper understanding of physiology (and, for example,

the particular non-linear dynamics of the arousal system).

On a practical note, incorporating physiology (and ideas from other areas of knowledge, such as evolutionary theory) into cognitive models provides a means of guiding therapeutic practice. For example, in cognitive therapy simple coping strategies grounded

in physiology (leg crossing and muscle tensing) can be used to circumvent fainting, while in brief strategic therapy cognitive change is promoted by helping the client understand anxiety as an evolutionary adaptation, with a vital protective function.

Michael Church
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If you read an article in *The Psychologist* that you fundamentally disagree with, then the letters page is your first port of call: summarise your argument in under 500 words. But if you feel you have a substantial amount of conflicting evidence to cite and numerous points to make that simply cannot be contained within a letter, you can write a 'Counterpoint' article of up to 1500 words, within a month of the publication of the original article. However, it is best to contact the editor about your plans, on jonsut@bps.org.uk. We hope this format will build on the role of *The Psychologist* as a forum for discussion and debate.

Teaching and learning

HOW refreshing to read Professor Schwartz saying, 'We academics are not here to teach students, but to show them how to learn' ('Time to bid goodbye to the psychology lecture', January 2004).

Over the years I have had the opportunity to extol the virtues of experiential learning practices, of which problem-based learning would be one, at a number of universities and business schools. I have always encountered robust resistance!

In one well-known UK business school (that had better remain nameless) a professor decided to put a toe in the water and experiment by ending his lectures with a 15-minute participative learning review. But whenever the time came to launch the review, his courage failed him and he simply carried on with his usual didactic approach!

The sad truth is that lecturing is easier than the alternatives, and lecturers can always kid themselves that

teaching equals learning. It reminds me of a cartoon I once saw where a dog owner tells his friend that he has taught his dog to whistle. The friend says, 'I can't hear him whistling', to which the dog owner replies, 'I said I'd taught him to

whistle, I didn't say he could whistle!'

Helping students to learn involves much more than teaching and lecturing.

Peter Honey
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Mystery is not hysteria

FURTHER to Peter Spencer's 'Personal space' article ('Of witch crazes and health scares', November 2003) and Paula Burns's letter in response (December 2003), I would like to contribute to the debate as someone who has suffered from ME/CFS for 14 years and who previously led a very busy active life. Speaking as a member with the graduate basis for registration, I have attempted to appraise my own situation from the psychological perspective.

Firstly, any depressive component of my condition is the *effect* of being unable to function properly and not the *cause*. My motivation to lead a full life is very strong. Secondly, I have observed that my condition fluctuates according to what viruses are circulating at any particular time. Thirdly, whilst psychological stress has an adverse effect on my health, this is also the situation regarding many other organic disorders. Fourthly, it is very easy for people who are fit and well to be dismissive of illness they haven't experienced. Finally, my GP described ME/CFS as a condition whereby the immune system overreacts to subsequent

infections, often originally being attacked by a particularly virulent virus. My own condition originated during the 1989 flu epidemic, which was combined with severe overwork and childcare responsibilities.

Does it not occur to Peter Spencer that just because medical science is unable to detect the cause of an illness doesn't mean that it doesn't exist? I think legionnaires' disease is a good example of this, as this was a 'mystery illness' in the early days before the connection between sufferers and an air conditioning system was discovered. Also, people suffering from viral and other prevalent infections are likely to attribute their symptoms to an existing external source – health hysteria in action.

Personally, as someone who has had her life destroyed and a career thwarted by what now has been defined by the World Health Organization as a neurological disorder, I feel it is arrogant to discuss as hysteria conditions that healthcare professionals do not have the resources to diagnose and treat.

Christine Corbett
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Crawley

REMEMBERING ROY DAVIS (1930–2003)

ROY Davis was my first tutor in psychology, after I had switched from classical moderations to PPP (Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology). He was part of an astonishing stable of future stars in psychology that Professor Oldfield had collected in the Institute of Experimental Psychology at Oxford (at that time operating out of a rambling Victorian house in Banbury Road, with portacabins in the garden): Tony Deutsch, Harry Kay, Michael Argyle, Ian Howarth, Michael Treisman, Stuart Sutherland, Brian Farrell, with Ian Oswald, John Annett and Ann Taylor as postgraduate researchers.

He gave me 'The Eye' for my first tutorial. I had dropped science at the age of 10, to be groomed for a classical scholarship, but reading the references for this started a lifelong interest in psychology. He was enormously gentle and patient, and I think of him puffing on a pipe (which may not be true), and gradually leading me through the maze of science. His own PhD was an elegant study of where all the milliseconds went in the difference between simple and choice reaction time, so nobody could have been wiser. I remember he also strummed a competent folk guitar at social events.

We lost touch as he went on to be Prof. at Newcastle and then Reading, and it was lovely to meet him at the 2003 Annual Conference. He was as wise and kind as ever, and it was only in his death notice that I discovered he was only five years older than me. His cogent letter to *The Psychologist* this summer made a powerful case for avoiding making *psychologist* pure and simple a protected title under statutory regulation. We have fallen into line with that appeal.

The notice in the paper said he died peacefully in France.

What a good way to go.

Zander Wedderburn
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PROFESSOR SIMON WESSELY

A letter in our January issue contained criticism of Professor Simon Wessely, to which he has objected. Although Professor Wessely has chosen not to reply, we accept that in terms of our policy we were wrong to publish the letter in this form and we apologise for any offence caused.

