

Poster points

When I saw the front cover December's issue of *The Psychologist*, my first thought was what a lovely poster it would make for the classroom wall, and so I was delighted when I found this was exactly what was included! My next thought having examined it more closely was wouldn't it be wonderful if the Society would produce a close-up version focusing on the last, say, 20 years, where we could get an overview of the Society's thoughts on the most important pieces of more contemporary research, which is so important in ensuring that our psychology teaching both at A-level and within the International Baccalaureate is up to date, cutting edge and 'of the moment'! Would love to see this if anyone else thinks it would be a good idea.

With many thanks again for the excellent work in *The Psychologist*.

Amanda Wood

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In response to the letter entitled 'History poster' (January 2010), I would like to express gratitude (and regret) for all those concerned about the controversial nature of experiments involving animals,

especially the fact that there has been no mention of this specifically in the special issue about the 150 years of experimental psychology. Certainly this is truly a serious and meaningful area to discuss, and the letter has been a good first step in meeting this deficiency.

Nevertheless, to expect in particular, the poster (also referred to as the 'time chart') to mention ethical issues concerning experiments involving animals (e.g. the monkeys in Harlow's experiments) defeats the purpose of the poster in question. It is fairly clear from the poster that it aims to convey information about the 150 years of experimental psychology *per se* not the associated ethical issues or the strengths and limitations of experimental research, for example. From a technical perspective, the poster aims to describe or outline not

to analyse or evaluate the 150 years of experimental psychology. Of course the place for analysis and evaluation would be the pages of the magazine itself.

In credit to the poster, I commend the producers for their efforts and innovativeness. The images have been very carefully thought out and the accompanying text is very concise yet informative. The poster has proven to be a fantastic resource to have in various psychology settings whether it's a discussion tool in the psychology classroom (e.g. Is psychology a science?)

1938

B.F. Skinner's *The Behaviour of Organisms: an Experimental Analysis* launched behavioural analysis.



In praise of 'mind wandering'

I appreciate *The Psychologist* selecting as the first item on the letters page the hard-hitting critique offered by the Midlands Psychology Group of the current political enthusiasm for simplistic measures of happiness ('Happiness – a distraction from economic fairness', January 2011).

I would like to comment on the linked subject of 'National well-being and the wandering mind' (News,

January 2011). This article reported research by Killingsworth and Gilbert on the basis of which the researchers concluded that 'a human mind is a wandering mind and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind'. I do not dispute research indicating that activities that concentrate the attention on the here and now – playing sport and sexual activity are given as prime examples – bring their own particular brand of

happiness. But the idea that, overall, human beings would be happier without 'mind-wandering' is surely nonsensical.

An imaginary example: I am in the bar at the end of conference and I meet and chat with a man or woman I find extremely sexually attractive. Should I 'wander' back to the past and reflect on what I have learned from experience about my state of mind following a one-night

stand? Should I 'wander' forward to the future, when my current partner will surely ask me how I spent the evening? No! If I wish to maximise my happiness, I must resist 'wandering' and stay in the present, focus on nothing other than the thrill of the attraction and way things are shaping up.

A real-life example: I am getting dressed when I recall that I forgot to tell my partner that his sister phoned him

or in the display area of a psychology department. Evidently, the poster has further shown its usefulness by generating debate amongst a critical readership. I am sure others like me look forward to more interesting posters in the future issues and yes, now the 'Big picture' in the centre spread surely is an eagerly anticipated part of *The Psychologist*.

Bhupinder Kuwar
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The Psychologist and the authors of the poster on 150 years of experimental psychology have produced a splendid, clear and appealing document. It will surely stimulate interest among students and scientists. Yet many viewers will lament the omission of a favoured topic. Mine is the theory of signal detection, one of psychology's most influential scientific discoveries. It has, for example, had a huge impact on medical science in the evaluation of diagnostic systems. Just one of its concepts, the 'receiver operating characteristic', returned over three quarters of a million entries in Google. The citations of its main textbook, *Signal Detection Theory and Psychophysics* by D. M. Green and J. A. Swets, are massive and widespread (its most recent citation is in the *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders*). I would date the theory's inception from 1953, with the publication of an article

by W.P. Tanner and J.A. Swets in *Psychological Review*. I hope that the next edition of the poster finds room between Solomon Asch's group conformity and George Miller's magical number for this towering contribution.

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Interesting as your wall chart on the history of experimental psychology is, I am astonished that you omitted one name: Hans Eysenck. I am of course biased, but his inclusion could be justified on two grounds. First, even his enemies would surely rank Eysenck as one of the most eminent psychologists of the 20th century. And, secondly and most importantly, he fostered a major research theme in experimental psychology; namely, the need to pay attention to the individual differences that are observed in all laboratory measured phenomena. Admittedly an embarrassment (or perceived source of error!) for general experimental psychologists, awareness of these variations goes back at least as far as Wundt, and any account of the history of the subject that fails to recognise the fact is seriously lacking.

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yesterday evening while he was out. I make a mental note to send him a text once I am dressed. While I have been getting dressed my mind has 'wandered' continuously. I have been engaged in that ubiquitous human activity, so ordinary and yet so complicated to put into words, of remembering the past and projecting myself into the future with the memory of the past in mind.

Our minds, it seems, are made for this. Unlike those of other species, our minds can range far and wide. For some of us, this itself is cause for happiness. Yes, to reflect on the past may evoke feelings of unhappiness. Yet not to do so is to rule out the possibility of

learning from experience, which the eminent psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion thought was the most important human capacity of all. To muse on the future may evoke anxiety or even dread. But it may equally engender the wonderful experience of joyful anticipation. And without the willingness to simply let the mind drift, would there be any great works of literature, poetry or music?

The researchers state that their results indicate that 'people, at least in the USA, generally mind wander a lot (46.9 per cent of the time, on average)'. My own equally subjective evaluation is that, given the human significance

of mind wandering, a figure of 46.9 per cent is not in fact 'a lot'. I would be interested to see an extension of this research into different populations, among people of different nationalities and among populations of artists and scientists engaged in creative and imaginative work, where I imagine figures well above 50 per cent may be found to be the norm.

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Tavistock Society of
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Rivers distorted?

My old friend Graham Richards, whose work I usually admire, has in his recent article ('Loss of innocence in the Torres Straits', December 2010) done rather less than justice to the Torres Straits Expedition. While he pays tribute to the researchers', and especially to Rivers, the general tenor of his piece more or less rubbishes them. This culminates in the sentence 'While academically sober, much of the text remained an entertaining "ripping yarn" from an outpost of Empire – Boy's Own Psychology if you like'.

At the time the members of the expedition took seriously Spencer's view that 'savages' spend so much energy on the observation of nature, at which they excel, that they have none left for the higher mental processes. And that was the reason why the researchers confined their work to sensory functions. The supposed greater visual acuity of 'savages', then widely believed, was quite a separate issue; and Richards' comments on this are misplaced.

The article gloats over the many failures, notably apparatus that did not work or was unsuitable. Richards advises (Lesson 3) 'Make sure the equipment works under field conditions before setting forth'. These days that is possible, and I have myself made preliminary trips to test equipment; but even if they had been able to anticipate the

need, it would have been hard to do when the journey lasted well over a month. The fact that Richards was able to document the failures in detail is testimony to the honesty of the reporting. Rather than giving credit for this, Richards maligns Rivers by saying that he could 'spin the write-up to maximum effect without outright dissembling'.

As far as results are concerned, it is true that the members of the team dealing

with such topics as hearing and smell did not arrive at reliable findings. But it must be remembered that they had no previous experience of field studies to go on. However, it must be stressed that this did not apply to Rivers' studies of perception. His work was meticulous and he had brilliantly innovative ideas that were highly influential. None of this is mentioned in the present article, though in

a previous chapter (Richards, 1998) there is one single revealing sentence: 'When cross-cultural variations in colour-perception and sensitivity to visual illusions resurfaced after the Second World War, Rivers' work invariably constituted the point of departure' (p.154).

Richards emphasises the racist orientation of the members of the expedition, and one cannot deny that they

were children of their time. Rivers himself later abandoned what he came to see as Spencer's crude evolutionary theory; and in a piece probably written before the First World War declared that '...I have been able to detect no essential difference between Melanesia and Toda and those with whom I have been accustomed to mix in the life of our own society' (Rivers, 1926, p.53 – posthumous).

No cloak of objectivity

I hope that readers are not disappointed by the remarkable de-escalation in the Battle of the Sex Differences being staged for their entertainment. I myself am delighted that Simon Baron-Cohen (Letters, January 2011) now regards my criticisms of his research in a newly positive and appreciative light. I thank and admire him for his concessions, and for his engagement in the debate: It would have been much easier for him to ignore my book, and I am glad that he did not.

I, in turn, have been thinking about Baron-Cohen's continued claim and concern that my book 'fuses politics with science'. This needs some unpacking since, as both Gina Rippon and Karen Moloney pointed out in December's (2010) Forum, the two are not so easily segregated.

We can all agree that political values should never, ever count as evidence for or against a particular hypothesis: political correctness and wishful thinking do not license us to ignore evidence. (For example, while we can all wish that we lived in a society in which people 'never stereotype' because '[s]tereotyping is wrong', that desire does not allow us to ignore the substantial evidence that egalitarian beliefs do not infallibly protect against unintended bias.) Rather, again and again in my book, I show that the evidence scientists provide as support for essentialist claims is simply not as strong as they seem to think it is. But I make the case from science's own standards, not political desire.

Baron-Cohen's counter-response alone provides two good examples. First, Baron-Cohen cites a small pilot functional neuroimaging study as evidence for sex differences (presumably not behavioural ones, since it found none) in 'theory of mind'. Yet spurious results are a serious

issue in the neuroimaging literature, exacerbated by the pervasive practice of reporting sex differences based on small sample sizes (Fine, 2010).

The newborn study provides a second example. I am happy to learn that the sequential presentation of the mobile and the face was successfully counter-balanced (although my understanding is that the standard is nonetheless for simultaneous presentation where possible, since this reduces sources of noise other than fatigue). However, given the minimal effort made to keep experimenters blind to the babies' sex, I would dispute that the authors can offer an estimate of what percentage of trials were successfully blinded. Baron-Cohen underestimates the potential for bias when he doubts any effects on the experimental findings. It is well known that we do not have to be consciously aware of stimuli for them to affect our behaviour, and maternity rooms offer considerable scope for gender clues that can be processed unconsciously. That blinding is not normally done with a 'good enough' attitude argues against the claim that my criticism of the quality of the evidence is politically, rather than scientifically, based.

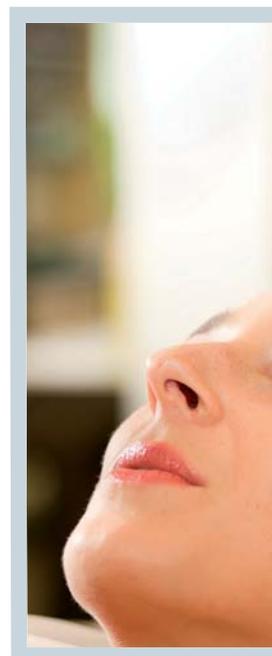
Does that mean politics has no legitimate role in this topic? Philosopher of science Heather Douglas has argued that social values can safely play an *indirect* role in scientific reasoning, by 'shifting the level of what counts as *sufficient* warrant for an empirical claim' (Douglas, 2008, p.9). For example, we might demand a higher standard of evidence for the claim that a pill will keep a fatal disease at bay than for the claim it will make our hair glossy. The greater the social cost of potential error, the better the standard of evidence we require.

My book extensively documents the

evidence that the gender stereotypes reinforced and legitimated by essentialist claims are not psychologically and socially inert, but have self-fulfilling effects that hinder progress towards greater equality. But even if you disagree that these social costs of potential error are legitimately taken into account in scientific reasoning, in fact, social values are not so easily avoided.

As Douglas points out, in going about their work scientists must make choices – for example, in the methodologies they use to collect their data, and the background assumptions they depend on to interpret it (Douglas, 2007). And these choices build layer upon layer of potential error into the scientific 'facts' they ultimately produce. Importantly, which is the 'better' characterisation, or the 'better' background assumption is not, Douglas argues, solely a scientific issue. It is also a political one, when it is influenced by how you balance the social costs of potential error. For example, Baron-Cohen's explanation that they chose to use a real face for the newborn study that (with inadequate blinding) could introduce bias, instead of a computerised one less likely to elicit newborn interest, reveals implicit values at work: Better to introduce the error of bias than the error of insensitivity.

A white lab-coat is not a cloak of



It is regrettable that a fine historian like Richards has seen fit to provide such a distorted account of the Cambridge Expedition to the Torres Straits. It was a remarkable pioneering effort to apply psychological methods in the then greatly challenging circumstances of a non-Western culture.

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objectivity, and the very sorry history of the scientific investigation of sex differences reminds us not to forget that. By thinking about the relationship between politics and science in a more sophisticated way we can get a clearer picture of the landscape of barriers to disagreement – and then make better moves to navigate them.

Cordelia Fine

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We might demand a higher standard of evidence for the claim that a pill will keep a fatal disease at bay than for the claim it will make our hair glossy

FORUM WEB CHAT

In the days following the Arizona shooting of a US congresswoman and 19 others at a Tucson supermarket, news sites and blogs were packed with comment on the interaction between mental illness, political rhetoric and violence. Sarah Palin's tweet 'Don't retreat, instead – Reload!' and her map with crosshairs over Arizona seemed unwise to say the least, but do such messages actually incite such extreme action? Or was Jared Lee Loughner simply a mental timebomb? (Why all three names? See tinyurl.com/4vafdf8)

According to Peter Ditto, a psychologist at the University of California, Irvine, the debate echoes that which took place after the November 2009 Fort Hood shooting. US Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan was charged with gunning down 13 people and wounding 30 others, and speaking to Live Science (tinyurl.com/48t98zk) Ditto said 'In that case, it was the right [in the political sense] that's saying, "This guy did it, this was caused by jihadist motivation," and the left was saying, "Oh, you know, he was just crazy." So, that was a perfect example of the sort of mirror-image phenomenon.'

On Twitter, award-winning science blogger @edyong209 asked whether research had found a link between the type of rhetoric used by the US Right, and incited violence. The answer appeared to be that the phenomenon is so rare that it would be difficult to get good data. 'Whether [demonising political language] causes somebody to act in some way is really a complicated one,' Ditto said. 'You're never going to get science to speak to whether some sort of violent political rhetoric caused this particular individual to shoot at the congresswoman.' However, a recent study by University of Michigan researchers (tinyurl.com/22q5d3c), as yet unpublished, found that overall, watching a political ad with violent words [such as 'fight for you' instead of 'work for you'] did little to change people's opinions on whether political violence could be justified. However, people who saw the violently worded ads who were already high in aggression became more accepting of the idea of political violence.

For clinical psychologist and blogger Vaughan Bell, writing at Slate (tinyurl.com/27oa4ks), it is all too easy to invoke the image of a troubled mind. 'The fact that mental illness is so often used to explain violent acts despite the evidence to the contrary almost certainly flows from how such cases are handled in the media. Numerous studies show that crimes by people with psychiatric problems are over-reported, usually with gross inaccuracies that give a false impression of risk. With this constant misrepresentation, it's not surprising that the public sees mental illness as an easy explanation for heartbreaking events.'

Others asked 'could the system have prevented rampage?' At tinyurl.com/4a8mv7e, Dewey Cornell, a forensic clinical psychologist at the University of Virginia, blamed years of cuts to mental health programs and treatment facilities. 'The cost of prevention is minuscule,' he said, 'compared with the millions spent to prosecute and incarcerate one violent offender, not to mention the substantial costs sustained by the victims, many of whom will need mental health services that are not available in most communities.' According to Cornell, 'threat assessment is a practical, safe and efficient strategy'.

Cornell closed by suggesting that free speech should not mean unlimited speech. 'No one can create a "clear and present danger" by falsely shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theater...With all of the exaggeration, accusation and misinformation that pervades political discourse, is there a point at which shouting "Fire!" – or drawing cross hairs on a map – can present a new "clear and present danger"?'

Jon Sutton is Managing Editor of The Psychologist.
Share your views by e-mailing psychologist@bps.org.uk.

Coming to terms with diversity

The letter from Sylvia Kapp regarding the treatment of homosexual desire (December 2010) employs some questionable arguments.

Firstly, Ms Kapp contrasts the pathological and deviant with the 'broad spectrum of human [sexual] behaviour'. This is surely mistaken. The 'broad spectrum of human behaviour' includes a wide range of behaviours, from the undeniably socially acceptable to the undeniably unacceptable, and embracing all kinds of widespread criminal and pathological behaviours that most people would see as needing some sort of treatment, or amelioration. What is appropriate and desirable in human society is measured against ethical norms rather than statistical norms.

Secondly, the fact that current treatments for a condition are ineffective is not normally seen as a reason for doing nothing or for accepting the condition as normal and desirable. Serious personality disorders seem to be resistant to cure, as opposed to amelioration through a variety of therapies, but there seems to be no suggestion from psychiatrists or clinical psychologists that searches for effective treatment should not continue, or that attempts to ameliorate such conditions should be abandoned.

Thirdly, as with many arguments regarding non-heterosexual sexuality, Ms Kapp's letter focuses only on those forms approved by liberal societies. One might equally speak of the marginalisation of sexual behaviours that most people would not be prepared to characterise as anything other than deviant, where there would be few suggestions of support or sympathy for individuals 'struggling under these circumstances' to use Ms Kapp's words. Psychology needs to address the issues raised by all forms of sexuality, rather than to cherry pick particular areas that are politically fashionable.

It may well be that attempts to treat homosexuality are futile and best avoided. However, better arguments than those currently on offer are needed before this can be confidently asserted to be so.

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I was interested to see a letter in the December issue of *The Psychologist* suggesting that the clinical treatment of homosexuality might be considered unethical and possibly contrary to human rights codes. Further, that the best way of handling many of the problems that homosexuality poses has to do with wider acceptance of diversity.

However, exactly the same arguments apply to the compulsory, or semi-compulsory, treatment of those suffering from such 'disorders' as dyslexia, and ADHD. As with homosexuality, the main problem lies in society's unwillingness to come to terms with diversity and its quest to have people fit

into a single mould. In this case an educational and employment system which, at best, fails to accept, nurture and utilise the wide huge range of talents that are available and which, if the truth were told, actively destroys many of them. A shocking report addressed to the government but drawing on studies conducted



TIM SANDERS

by psychologists – and which advocates individual treatment rather than institutional reform in this area – was published in *Nature* by none other than Beddington and others in 2008.

One sees the same tendency toward individualisation of 'treatment' in discussions of what can be done to improve quality of life. In reality, quality of life in modern societies is mainly dependent on quality of working life. As Robert E. Lane (1991) and others have shown, this is driven down by market processes. The most important actions required to improve it are societal, not individual.

It seems that it is not only government that is unwilling to hear such things. The thoughtways contributing to single-factor concepts of quality (now, it seems, even personality) and the individualisation of remediation and adjustment to a single norm seem to pervade society and our profession in a more than disturbing way.

John Raven
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