Stapel – the final report

It’s nearly 18 months since the social psychologist Diederik Stapel was sacked for research fraud and yet still the fallout continues. Understandable perhaps when you consider the mind-boggling scale of his misconduct – 55 journal papers published over 15 years are now known to be tainted, together with numerous book and dissertation chapters.

The gory details emerge in the final, exhaustive joint report of the three investigative committees that were established at each university where Stapel last worked, chaired by Professor of Psycholinguistics Pim Levelt; the Noort Committee (at the University of Groningen); and the Drenth Committee (at the University of Amsterdam). Their final ‘Levelt report’ is based on an exhaustive analysis of Stapel’s entire research output, together with interviews with Stapel, his co-authors and students.

Consistent with an earlier interim report (see News, December 2011), the final report concludes that Stapel’s co-authors and students were not complicit in his fraud. In fact, it is thanks to three brave whistle-blowing students that his crimes were finally uncovered. However, the report raises an eyebrow at the failure of so many co-authors to spot the fact that Stapel was engaging in extensive fraud.

Part of the explanation for how Stapel was able to prosecute his fraud for so long is related to his status at his various research institutions. The report describes how at Tilburg he was considered a star and seen by his colleagues and students as charismatic, friendly and incredibly talented. He was afforded special financial privileges by the university in keeping with his prestige. He even taught his department’s scientific ethics course. Many students became personal friends. Stapel used his power to stamp out quickly any signs of doubt or dissent. The contact point for concerned students at Tilburg – the university’s Rector – may have seemed too lofty and distant, the report says, thus detering many potential whistle-blowers.

It is in its consideration of the wider contributing cultural factors that the final Levelt report is proving controversial. While acknowledging that it cannot comment on the status of social psychology as a whole (based only on an analysis of Stapel’s research), the report nonetheless goes on to conclude that there was ‘a more general failure of scientific criticism in the peer review system’.

DSM-5 APPROVAL AND DISAPPROVAL

It’s been a tortuous, torrid process, but the American Psychiatric Association (APA) has finally approved the next edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), which is due for publication in the spring. APA President Dilip Jeste said: ‘We have produced a manual that best represents the current science and will be useful to clinicians and the patients they serve.’

Some of the headline changes include: merging Asperger’s Disorder into a single Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis; the creation of a new Hoarding Disorder diagnosis; a new Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder to diagnose children ‘who exhibit persistent irritability and frequent episodes of behaviour outbursts three or more times a week for more than a year’, and removal of the bereavement exclusion from the diagnosis of depression (previously, the DSM advised against diagnosing major depression less than two months after a bereavement, unless the symptoms were very severe).

Unlike previous revisions, the new code has not experienced a massive increase in the number of diagnostic categories. ‘We have sought to be conservative in our approach to revising DSM-5. Our work has been aimed at more accurately defining mental disorders that have a real impact on people’s lives, not expanding the scope of psychiatry,’ said David J. Kupfer, chair of the DSM-5 Task Force.

The decade-long effort to revise US psychiatry’s diagnostic code has never been far from controversy. The British Psychological Society published its own reservations last year, stating it was ‘concerned that clients and the general public are negatively affected by the continued and continuous medicalisation of their natural and normal responses to their experiences.’ Along the way, there were also high-level resignations from the DSM-5 Task Force, as well as repeated accusations of vested interest.

The acrimony has continued since news of the DSM-5 approval was announced in December. Most notably, the Washington Post accused many of the DSM experts (especially those who recommended the removal of the bereavement exclusion from the depression diagnosis) of having links to pharmaceutical companies – companies that the Post implied will benefit from the change, as bereaved patients become eligible for antidepressant prescriptions. Based on financial disclosures, the Post claimed that ‘Eight of 11 members of the APA committee that spearheaded the [bereavement exclusion] change reported financial connections to pharmaceutical companies.’

The APA has answered these charges. Kupfer issued a statement reiterating the extensive measures taken by the DSM-5 Task Force to avoid bias, including the creation of a five-member expert group with no industry ties who approved all guidelines before they were published. ‘Removing the bereavement exclusion helps prevent major depression from being overlooked and facilitates the possibility of appropriate treatment including therapy or other interventions,’ Kupfer said. CJ
community and a research culture that was excessively oriented to uncritical confirmation of one's own ideas and to finding appealing but theoretically superficial ad hoc results. The report is particularly concerned with the prevalence of 'sloppy science' practices, including selective reporting and data polishing, which, based on interviews with co-authors, they suggest is endemic in the field of social psychology. This is based in part on interviewee testimony stating that journal reviewers are often the ones to encourage questionable practices, such as dropping experiments with negative results and inserting pilot studies retrospectively. 'Not infrequently reviews [of social psychology journal articles] were strongly in favour of telling an interesting, elegant, concise and compelling story, possibly at the expense of the necessary scientific diligence,' the report says.

The British Psychological Society's own Social Psychology Section has criticised this aspect of the report. Writing to the Times Higher Education Supplement on behalf of the Section (see p.80 for a fuller version of the letter), Stephen Gibson at York St John University, points out: ‘...there are no grounds for concluding either that research fraud is any more common in social psychology than other disciplines or that its editorial processes are particularly poor at detecting it’, adding that: 'Our subdiscipline does not deserve the harm to its reputation that may be provoked by the careless implication of “unique” deficiencies.'

The final Levelt report was also criticised by the European Association of Social Psychology in an open letter to its members in which it denounces 'attacks against social psychology as unwarranted and unscientific'. Citing research showing that social psychology has in fact suffered fewer frauds than other disciplines and that it is unusual for peer review to detect fraud in any field of science, the Association's Executive Board suggest that the report itself seems to be an unfortunate example of the verification bias that it seeks to criticize.

Following an approach from us, Willem Levelt and the chairs of the other investigating committees have jointly published a sole and final rejoinder to these and other criticisms in this issue of The Psychologist (see p.81). Levelt et al. acknowledge that they did not compare the situation in social psychology with other disciplines. However, they note, 'such a comparative investigation was not part of the Committees’ commission. The terms of reference, specified in the opening section of the report, limit the investigation to determining which are fraudulent and to offering a view on the methods and the research culture that may have facilitated this misdemeanor.'

Meanwhile, Stapel has given his side of events in a 315-page autobiography entitled Ontspringing (Derailed), described by the Dutch psychologists Denny Borsboom and Eric-Jan Wagenmakers as 'priceless and revealing' in a review for the Association for Psychological Science. Stapel says the rot began when he was sitting alone in his office in Groningen and he changed 'an unexpected 2 into a 4'. The story that follows, Borsboom and Wagenmakers say, reveals that Stapel’s trickery was 'remarkably unsophisticated, even clumsy.' There are also further signs of an individual who struggles to accept responsibility — ‘Nobody ever checked my work,’ Stapel complains — and of a man who remains untrustworthy.

According to the reviewers, the final, 'unexpectedly beautiful' chapter is full of lines taken from the writers Raymond Carver and James Joyce, entirely unattributed but for a listing buried in the appendices. The reader cannot help but wonder whether there may be yet another literary layer of deceit under the apparently candid book,' write Borsboom and Wagenmakers.

Towards better communication

The Department of Education have published results from the Better Communication Research Programme (BCRP), the largest-ever UK study of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). The programme was led by educational psychologist Professor Geoff Lindsay (CEDAR, University of Warwick), a Fellow and Honorary Life Member of the British Psychological Society. Lindsay was supported by fellow psychologist Professor Julie Dockrell (Institute of Education, University of London), and speech and language therapists Professor James Law (Newcastle University) and Professor Sue Roultstone (University of West of England, Bristol).

Professor Geoff Lindsay told The Psychologist that the BCRP comprised 10 research studies including a prospective study of children with language impairment or ASD; a review of the efficacy of interventions; and the development of a Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool. The research included studies of practice of speech and language therapists and educational psychologists as well as teachers, and the perspectives of children with SLCN and their parents. Other psychologists leading projects include Professors Maggie Snowling and Charles Hulme. Devised as a practice- and policy-related research programme, the aim throughout was to use rigorous quantitative and qualitative research to address practice and policy issues,’ Professor Lindsay said. ‘We’re now working with the Communication Trust to disseminate the findings of the BCRP and to develop practical resources.’ The research was welcomed by the Children and Schools Minister Edward Timpson, who said: ‘The Better Communication Research Programme provides a rich and extensive source of evidence on what works in identifying the needs of children and young people with speech, language and communication needs. It will help all those commissioning and providing services, across education and health, to improve their planning. It will also improve the effectiveness of the support provided, and help in developing a welcoming classroom that supports communication.’
Public perceptions of psychology

Eighteen months ago, the clinical psychologist Scott Lilienfeld published a clarion call in the American Psychologist about scepticism towards psychology (see News, August 2011; tinyurl.com/news0812). He reminded us of data showing the widespread public belief that psychology is not a proper science. He also diagnosed the causes, including people’s overconfidence in their understanding of psychological concepts, and the high media profile of pseudoscientific quacks. Now the issue has been revisited with publication of three commentaries on Lilienfeld’s article (tinyurl.com/byfpz58). Leonard Newman and colleagues at Syracuse University felt Lilienfeld had missed a key observation – the fact that the public have an inclination to prefer some explanations over others. For instance, people often favour dispositional explanations for bad behaviour. And when psychologists propose social explanations, the public interpret this as a sign that the psychologists are attempting to exonerate the offenders. People are more likely to accept psychological explanations when these build on their intuitions, Newman et al. proposed, for example through interactionist models. ‘Such an approach will more generally be the most effective way to defuse reflexive scepticism,’ they said.

Warren Tryon at Fordham University felt Lilienfeld had been too generous towards the achievements of psychology. To Tryon, many psychological models – such as the biopsychosocial model – provide mere lists of ‘ingredients’, without any explanatory mechanism. He also criticised psychology for alluding to nonexistent psychological substrates for its models, out of fear of biological reductionism. Tryon believes that psychology can be more persuasively integrated with biological accounts through connectionist models, facilitating ‘the public perception of psychology as a serious science.’

Most critical of Lilienfeld’s article was the historian Thomas Teo at York University, Toronto. Teo argued that psychology would gain more credibility by being more open about its limits, the inevitably biased personal and political positions of psychologists, and the way that psychological interpretations are affected by history and culture. ‘Instead of a celebratory selling of goods to the public, I recommend knowledge about the limitations of psychological methods, modesty when making generalisations, and, most of all, honesty about the contingencies of knowledge produced in psychological research,’ Teo wrote.

Lilienfeld welcomed the responses and concluded with his own timely message. ‘Ultimately, our field will earn credibility in the eyes of the public not by instilling false hopes but by striving for intellectual honesty, he said. ‘This honesty, in turn, impels us to be circumspect when telling the public what we know – and to openly acknowledge what we do not know.’

National honours in psychology

We’re delighted to report that two psychologists were recognised in the New Year’s Honours List. Professor David Clark, an Honorary Fellow of the BPS, is appointed CBE for services to mental health. Clark, a clinical psychologist, established the Oxford Centre for Anxiety Disorders and Trauma at Oxford University in 2012, where he’s currently based. He continues to conduct ground-breaking research on cognitive approaches to anxiety and is currently acting as National Clinical Advisor to the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies programme in England. ‘I am honoured and delighted to receive this award which provides important recognition in the UK of the value of scientific research on psychological therapies and their dissemination,’ Clark told us, ‘as well as the need for public transparency in reporting the outcomes of our mental health services.’

Chartered Psychologist Professor Michael Brookes, an Associate Fellow of the BPS and director of therapeutic communities at HMP Grendon, is appointed OBE for services to HM Prison Service and the care of prisoners. HMP Grendon in Buckinghamshire houses prisoners diagnosed with antisocial personality disorders, with each wing operating as an autonomous therapeutic community. Brookes, a forensic psychologist and also visiting professor at Birmingham City University, said: ‘I am very encouraged that the therapeutic work undertaken at Grendon Prison has again been nationally recognised. Grendon is a unique penal establishment with a regime focused on addressing residents’ offending behaviour and psychological disorders.’ Brookes is currently focused on ‘continuing to ensure the safe and effective delivery of therapy in a world of diminishing resources and, with the opportunity afforded by my visiting professorship at BCU, publishing articles on Grendon’s work.’

Other honours of relevance to psychology went to the psychiatrists Janet Treasure and Simon Wessely. Professor Treasure, based at the Eating Disorder Unit, South London Maudsley Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, is appointed OBE for services to people with eating disorders. Wessely, Professor of Psychological Medicine at the Institute of Psychiatry, is knighted for services to military healthcare and psychological medicine.
IQ ‘myths’ debunked?

Psychologists in Canada have rekindled a century-long debate about whether intelligence is a unitary construct. Adam Hampshire, Adrian Owen and Beth Parkin at the University of Western Ontario, together with former New Scientist editor Roger Highfield, claim in their Neuron paper that intelligence is made up of three components – memory, logic and verbal – each reflected in the functioning of a discrete brain network.

The researchers arrived at their conclusion based on the results of a 30-minute online cognitive test completed by over 100,000 participants, combined with the results of an imaging study, in which 16 people had their brains scanned while they performed the same half-hour cognitive challenge.

The test contained 12 types of task, including spatial, verbal and memory batteries. The different types of task led to different amounts of activity in the three brain networks. Tasks drawing more on memory were associated with greater activity in a network located towards the front of the brain; tasks tapping logic were associated with greater activity in a network spanning frontal and more posterior regions; verbal tasks were associated with more activity in fronto-temporal networks.

Hampshire and his colleagues said this tripartite view was supported by demographic data collected as part of the online testing. For instance, based on an analysis of a subset of 44,600 participants (omitting incomplete tests; the very young and old), memory and logic performance declined with age, but verbal performance did not.

Excessive smoking adversely impacted on memory and verbal performance, but not logic. ‘Human intelligence is most parsimoniously conceived of as an emergent property of multiple specialised brain systems,’ the researchers concluded, ‘each of which has its own capacity.’

Presenting their findings to the media, Hampshire and his team were less restrained. ‘The world’s biggest study of its kind has put paid to the simplistic idea that we can use an IQ figure to describe the astonishing abilities of the human brain,’ wrote Highfield.

‘Intelligence too complex to boil down to a single factor’

In a piece for the Daily Telegraph, in an article for the Discovery Channel titled ‘The myth of IQ’, Owen wrote that ‘what we often call intelligence… is too complex to boil down to a single factor or “IQ”’. A university press release boasted that the IQ myth had been ‘debunked’.

In the parlance of intelligence research, it seems the researchers are attempting to dismiss the idea of ‘g’ or ‘general intelligence’ – the fact that people’s performance on one type of intelligence task tends to correlate with their performance on other types of test – first noted by the British psychologist Charles Spearman at the beginning of the 20th century.

It takes more than a single paper to turn over such an established concept. Many psychologists and commentators have taken to social media outlets to air their criticisms of the new paper and the researchers’ public pronouncements, pointing out, for example, that there is evidence of g in the new data and that previous intelligence studies have featured over a million participants.

We asked Professor Richard Haier at University of California, Irvine, an expert on the neural correlates of intelligence, what he thought. He didn’t hold back: ‘The University of Western Ontario should be ashamed for hyping conclusions and quotes from the authors that actually are not supported by the paper,’ he said. ‘If the researchers approved the University press release, they need to explain why they think IQ is “debunked” when their own data show a general factor (g) and why they assert that the claim that a single number like an IQ score captures the complexities of human intelligence is a myth when, in fact, no one has ever made this claim. No one. They “debunked” a viewpoint that doesn’t exist.’

What about the merits of the study methodology? Haier was critical here too. '[It] uses a type of factor analysis that is designed to create independent factors whether they exist in nature or not. This essentially negates their conclusions and does not advance the field at all,’ he explained. ‘There are many brain imaging studies that already show different networks related to intelligence scores so I don’t see any news here, especially since they studied only 16 people. There are many mysteries about intelligence and the general factor. Now there is a new one – how did this paper get published?’

WRITING PRIZE

Psychologist and former ‘New voices’ author for this publication is a winner of the Wellcome Trust Science Writing Prize 2012. Cassie Barton, who studied psychology at the University of York and is currently working at the disability charity Scope, explored cross-modal perception in her winning article ‘The smell of music’. You can read it at tinyurl.com/cartonprize and her ‘New voices’ piece is at tinyurl.com/newvoices0412.

If you would like to announce yourself on the psychology stage as a genuine ‘New voice’ on a topic, see www.bps.org.uk/newvoices for more information.

NHS DEVELOPMENTS

The Coalition Government has announced that mental health patients in England are to be given more choice about where and how their condition is treated on the NHS, bringing their treatment more in line with the situation for physical conditions. The promise was made in the government’s response to its consultation ‘Liberating the NHS: No Decision About Me, Without Me’. The government also published details in December of the six sites piloting the extension of the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies programme to people with severe mental illness, including psychosis and bipolar disorder (tinyurl.com/bmh8k5g).

GLOBAL YOUNG ACADEMICIAN

Chartered Psychologist Rob Jenkins (University of Glasgow) has been selected for membership in the Global Young Academy (GYA) – the voice of young scientists around the world. The 172 current members include leading young scientists from 54 countries and all continents. Four of the current members are based in the UK, Rob is the first UK psychologist to be selected for the GYA.
A richer understanding

Catherine Loveday [University of Westminster] reports from the Society’s student-focused London Lectures

This year’s London Lectures opened with Professor Sophie Scott (University College London), who provided a fascinating and rib-tickling insight into the psychology and neuroscience of laughter. The audience was soon in hysteric as Scott used the famous clip of cricket commentators Johnston and Agnew giggling, to show that laughter is a distinct, unmissable and universally recognised set of sounds that is highly infectious. She also talked us through the physical changes that happen as someone becomes quite literally helpless with laughter, for example how impossible it is to breathe or talk normally. But, she asked, what is the function and purpose of laughter? Scott believes that it is a social glue that binds us together – think of the joy of tickling a young baby and seeing them chuckle – and that it even gives us clues as to who we like and don’t like, for example, that dreaded colleague whose earnest jokes just never make you laugh. Her views on laughter were beautifully summarised by Victor Borge’s quote that ‘Laughter is the shortest distance between two people’.

Next up, was Dr Mark Wetherell (Northumbria University) with his entertaining and informative take on the ways in which stress can be measured and manipulated (reprinted from his talk at the 2011 North event: see tinyurl.com/lect2011). Professor Mick Cooper University of Strathclyde then took the audience on a tour of how relational depth can be used in counselling. He invited the audience to think about what it is like to really feel connected to someone and discussed research that suggests this may be a useful way for a therapist to relate to their clients in therapy, stating that moments of deep connection in therapy are facilitated by a genuine warmth and openness and by a commitment to engage deeply.

Lunch was followed by two hot topics sessions on what it’s like to study psychology, delivered by undergraduates, and then Professor Ulrike Hahn (Cardiff University) invited us to think about cognitive psychology: what it is and why it matters. Hahn provided a whole host of studies to convince the audience that it is almost impossible to learn something about human beings and not have some kind of immediate practical use for it. Her research dovetailed neatly into a hugely entertaining final talk from Professor Chris French (Goldsmiths, University of London), who began his talk by convincing all 700+ delegates that he could read their mind! He went on to explain how expectation and systematic bias can lead people to believe that paranormal forces are in action, particularly when we experience coincidences. For example, how many people do you think you would need to have at a party for there to be a 50:50 chance of two of them having the same birthday? In fact it is only 23. French then demonstrated the fallibility of memory by asking the audience what a number 4 looks like on a clock with Roman numerals – most said ‘IV’ but in fact for the vast majority it is ‘III’. He then gave us an intriguing set of examples of the brain seeing and hearing what it wants to hear, finishing with a clip of Led Zeppelin played backwards and showing us that with a bit of priming, gibberish can be made to sound like anything you want it to!

There was a fantastic level of engagement from the students throughout the whole day and some impressive and searching questions. I have no doubt that this year’s delegates went away with a richer understanding of what psychology has to offer the world.
Dementia lottery?

Figures released by Alzheimer's Society in January have revealed wide variations in how many people are receiving a diagnosis of dementia in Britain.

Based on population prevalence estimates from previous studies (see tinyurl.com/bks3avc), the charity estimates that there are 428,000 people in the UK who are living with the condition but who are not diagnosed. Diagnosis rates range from 31.6 per cent in East Riding of Yorkshire to 75.5 per cent in Belfast, and Alzheimer's Society has produced an interactive map (www.alzheimers.org.uk/dementiamap) which highlights the number of people who have a diagnosis of dementia in different Primary Care Trusts in the UK.

To investigate the quality of assessment people with dementia are receiving, memory clinics in the UK were surveyed. Evidence indicated that just 11 per cent of clinics are accredited. The survey showed the average waiting time for an appointment is 32.5 working days, which is over the 4-6 weeks recommended by Memory Service National Accreditation Programme. Some memory clinics reported longer waiting times of up to nine months.

Jeremy Hughes, Chief Executive at Alzheimer’s Society, said: ‘It’s disgraceful that more than half of all people with dementia are not receiving a diagnosis, and disappointing to see such a disparity in diagnosis rates in different regions of the UK. This goes against best clinical practice and is preventing people with dementia from accessing the support, benefits and the medical treatments that can help them live well with the condition.’

Professor David Bunce, a director of the Brunel Institute of Ageing Studies, told The Psychologist: ‘I agree that coverage is patchy across the UK. Part of the problem may be inconsistencies in the training of primary care practitioners in the use of appropriate neuropsychological measures. Administration time in busy general practices is another issue, and a major question is whether existing tests are appropriate for use in minority groups of non-English speaking background. Such factors may contribute to referrals to specialist Memory Clinics being below expectations.’

Cells to society

The European Science Foundation, which brings together 72 national funding agencies across the continent, has published a strategic report outlining the direction for future European brain research: The Human Brain – From Cells to Society: Towards Better Mental Health in Europe. The document is based on discussions held in Berlin in 2011, involving experts across many psychology and neuroscience related fields. The report highlights five key areas for future research to focus on: developing integrated neuropsychotherapeutic approaches to treating psychiatric disorders; developing more valid disease models for psychiatric disorders; improving our understanding of mechanisms underlying the relationship between biology and the environment; exploring how neuroscientific concepts are received and understood in different socio-cultural contexts; and investigating the legal and ethical implications of neuroscience advances. ‘The next step will be to formulate specific recommendations that allow these challenges to be implemented effectively,’ the report says. C J

1 www.est.org/humanbrain

FUNDING NEWS

As reported in Research Fortnight, a new mental health research funder is to be launched in 2013. Currently called Insight: Research for Mental Health, the objects for the new foundation are to support scientific research into the nature, causes, diagnosis, prevention, treatment and cure of all forms of mental illness and promote knowledge and public understanding of mental illness and mental health and welfare. Initial funding has come from the Institute of Social Psychiatry and a grant of £20 million from the Wellcome Trust. Future funding will be through investments and public donations. A research programme has yet to be announced but supporting early-career researchers will be a priority.

The Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowships fund is now open for applications. The Fellowships provide postdoctoral career development opportunities for those who are at a relatively early stage of their academic careers and it is expected that a Fellowship will lead to a more permanent academic position. Applications can be made from any academic discipline. Approximately 80 Fellowships are available in 2013. Full details of the application procedure are available on the Leverhulme Trust website. The closing date for applications is 4pm 7 March 2013.

www.leverhulme.ac.uk/funding/ECF/ECF.cfm

The Sir Halley Stewart Trust has funding available via its social and educational priority areas for feasibility or piloting stage, or the dissemination and practical implementation stage of projects. The Trust supports innovative projects that prevent and resolve conflict, promote reconciliation and re-connection between family members; are social and family based aimed at helping people move beyond disadvantage; address the needs of elderly people who may be vulnerable or exploited; and disseminate results to practitioners in a form that is likely to result in change in their way of working. Applications should be made by those directly involved in the work. Applications from those at an early career stage are encouraged. Full grant details are given on the Trust’s website. Applications can be made at any time; however the next Trust Board meeting at which new submissions will be considered is June 2013.

www.sirhalleystewart.org.uk/socpriority.html

Parkinson’s UK offer fully funded PhD studentships for outstanding students undertaking research into Parkinson’s. Applications have to be made by the potential student’s supervisor who must be based at a UK university, hospital or research institute. Students must have a first or upper second class honours degree in a relevant subject to apply. PhD students who have already started their studies cannot apply. The next deadline for applications is 17 June 2013.


For more, see www.bps.org.uk/funds Funding bodies should e-mail news to Elizabeth Beech on elibeel@bps.org.uk for possible inclusion
DIGEST

How much would you pay for an hour of love?

Would you pay more cash to experience intense happiness or to avoid intense embarrassment? Your answer may depend on the culture you live in.

A team led by Hi Lau at the University of Hong Kong used this ‘willingness to pay’ approach to find out how students in Britain and Hong Kong value different emotions. For the first study, 97 British students chose how much they would be willing to spend (from £10 to £150, in £10 increments) to enjoy various positive emotions intensely for an hour, or to avoid various negative emotions for an hour.

Overall, the students were willing to pay more to experience positive emotions than to avoid negative ones. An hour’s worth of love was the most valued, followed by an hour’s worth of happiness and then an hour without sadness. Bottom of the list was disgust – the students were only prepared to pay an average of £43 to avoid an hour of disgust (compared with £95 to have an hour of love).

Next, the research took in the choices of 46 students in Hong Kong as well as 41 Brits, and the range of emotions was expanded. The findings for the British students was largely a replication of the first study, with a greater willingness to pay for positive emotions than to avoid negative ones. The Hong Kong students showed a more balanced set of responses, being just as willing to pay to avoid negative emotions as to experience positive ones. Focusing on specific emotions, the Brits said they’d pay more than the Hong Kong students for happiness, delight and calm; the Hong Kong students meanwhile said they’d pay more than the Brits to avoid regret, embarrassment and frustration.

Lau’s team, including University of Cambridge researcher Simone Schnall, said their approach offers a new, advantageous way to gauge people’s attitudes towards emotions. The findings complement questionnaire-based research on people’s beliefs about which emotions matter most to them, and their beliefs about which emotions will have more of an impact on their long-term wellbeing. There’s some evidence that an absence of negative emotion is more important for well-being than positive emotion, in which case the British participants in the current study may have been unwise in their choices. By putting price-tags on emotions we might come closer to understanding the value of human experience in order to aid policies at enhancing well-being,’ the researchers said.

What people really think of their personality

A problem with your standard personality questionnaire is that most people like to make a good impression. This is especially the case when questionnaires are used for job candidates. One way around this is to use so-called implicit measures of personality, designed to probe subconscious beliefs. The famous Rorschach inkblot test is one example, but many psychologists criticise it for its unreliability. A more modern example is a version of the implicit association test, in which people are timed using the same response key for self-referential words and various personality traits. If they associate the trait with themselves, they should be quicker to answer. Now a team led by Florin Sava have proposed a new test based on what’s called the ‘semantic misattribution procedure’.

Nearly a hundred participants watched as personality traits were flashed one at a time for a fifth of a second on a computer screen. After each trait (e.g. ‘anxious’), a neutral-looking Chinese pictograph was flashed on-screen. The participants didn’t know what these Chinese symbols meant. Their task was to ignore the flashed personality traits and to say whether they’d like each Chinese symbol to be printed on a personalised t-shirt for them or not, to reflect their personality.

This method is based on past research showing that we tend to automatically attribute the meaning of briefly presented words to subsequent neutral stimuli. So, in the example above, participants would be expected to attribute, at a subconscious level, the meaning of ‘anxious’ to the Chinese symbol. When assessing the suitability of the symbol for their t-shirt, it feels subjectively as if they are merely guessing, or making their judgement based on its visual properties. But in fact their choice of whether the symbol is suitable will be influenced by the anxious meaning they’ve attributed to it, and, crucially, whether or not they have an implicit belief that they are anxious.

In this initial study, and two more involving nearly 300 participants, Sava and her colleagues showed that participants’ scores on this test for conscientiousness, neuroticism and extraversion correlated with explicit measures of the same traits. The new implicit test also did a better job than explicit measures alone of predicting relevant behaviours, such as church attendance, perseverance on a lab task, and punctuality. The implicit scores for extraversion showed good consistency over six months. Finally, the new implicit test showed fewer signs of being influenced by social desirability concerns, as compared with traditional explicit measures. Next, the researchers plan to test whether their new implicit measure is immune to attempts at deliberate fakery.

‘The present study suggests that the Semantic Misattribution Procedure is an effective alternative for measuring implicit personality self-concept,’ the researchers said.
When parents lie to their children

In the International Journal of Psychology

We teach our kids that it is wrong to lie, even though most of us do it every day. In fact, it is often our children who we are lying to. A new study, involving participants in the USA and China, is one of the first to investigate parental lies, finding that the majority of parents tell their children lies as a way to control their behaviour.

Gail Heyman and colleagues presented 114 parents in the USA and 85 in China with 16 so-called ‘instrumental lies’ in four categories – lies intended to influence the kids’ eating habits (e.g. ‘You need to finish all your food or you will get pimples all over your face’), lies to get the children to leave or stay put (e.g. ‘If you don’t come with me now, I will leave you here by yourself’), lies to control misbehaviour (e.g. ‘If you don’t behave, I will call the police’); and finally, lies to do with shopping and money (e.g. ‘If I don’t bring any money home, you will not be able to buy the chocolate you need’).

Eighty-four per cent of Chinese parents and 98 per cent of US parents admitted telling at least one of the 16 lies to their children, and a majority of parents in both countries admitted to telling lies from three of the four categories. The exception was the misbehaviour category – just under half the US parents said they told lies to make their children behave better, compared with 80 per cent of Chinese parents.

The lie that the greatest proportion of parents said they told was threatening to leave a child behind if he/she refused to follow the parent. Rates of lying by parents were higher in China than in the US, especially in relation to misbehaviour and eating. The Chinese parents also were more approving of instrumental lying by parents than the US parents were; at the same time, they (the Chinese) viewed lying by children with more disapproval.

As well as looking at instrumental lies, the study also asked parents about untruths they told their children regarding fantasy characters like the tooth fairy, or to make their children feel better, for example praising a poor piano performance. Here there were no cultural differences in rates of lie-telling, although the Chinese parents showed less approval toward lying about the existence of fictional characters.

The two samples differed in other ways besides their culture – the US parents being more highly educated, for example. And of course there was a reliance on self-report rather than an observation or record of actual lies told. Despite these issues, acknowledged by the researchers, Heyman said their study ‘helps fill a void in an understudied area that may have strong implications for children’s social and moral development’.

The psychology of online reviews

In the December issue of the Journal of Economic Psychology

We remain impressed after reading early positive reviews online, even if negative reviews come later. That’s according to a pair of studies by Brent Coker.

Seventy-six undergrads were told all positive facts about one fictional coffee brand and all negative facts about another, along the lines of: ‘The company has put green policies in place’ and ‘The company has tried to cover up exploitation of its workers’. Then a research assistant told the participants that a mistake had been made – the sheets had been wrongly labelled, so that the positive statements actually applied to the other coffee brand and vice versa.

The key finding here was that the impact of the early positive facts lingered, leading to enhanced ratings for the brand that was originally misdescribed in glowing terms. In contrast, the strain of negative facts wore off. The brand originally misdescribed in negative terms was given fair ratings by the participants, as if they were able to forget the mistaken negative associations.

A second study tested this principle with online reviews for an LA hotel. Undergrads read five Trip Advisor reviews for the hotel, ordered so that they went either from positive to negative, or from negative to positive. The participants showed more approval for the hotel when they read the more positive reviews first, again showing how the impact of early positive reviews appears to linger. This remained the case even when the reviews were labelled such that they appeared to have been written over the course of a year (so giving the impression that the hotel had deteriorated during that time).

Coker concluded that ‘…Consumers may overshoot their judgments towards brands when positive information is replaced with negative information’.

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