Think parenting is about happiness?

In his well-written and thought-provoking article, Nattavudh Powdthavee reviewed a number of studies that support the evidence that having children does not make people happier (‘Think having children will make you happy?’, April 2009). There are other works which give mixed evidence (e.g. Kohler et al., 2003), but it is still, as Powdthavee has argued, surprising. The explanation was very interesting; however, I would like to suggest a few alternative explanations to this intriguing finding.

Powdthavee’s thesis is built on the underlying assumption that people make children because they want to become happier. Then it is really surprising that people keep having children despite the findings that parenthood does not increase happiness. I claim that although most people will anticipate that having children will increase their happiness, increasing happiness is not the reason why people have children. When a person announces he is going to become a parent, he will very seldom be questioned ‘Why?’ But, if a person reveals her decision not to have children, she will probably be seriously questioned. This is because having children is our default. As any other reproductive organisms, we reproduce ourselves by nature. We did it before we were capable of symbolic thought, and we will continue to do it until we cease to exist. I would dare to guess that people hardly ask themselves why to have children. They may consider the setting, the timing or their personal circumstances, but will not question the act itself.

Even though having children is such a natural part of us, we still tend to believe that people are happier when they become parents, and we thus find it surprising that there is a lack of correlation between having children and well-being. Several reasons can be given in order to explain this lack of correlation. First, as Leon Festinger showed so clearly already half a decade ago, we are not the rational beings we would like to think that we are. According to cognitive dissonance theory (Allyn & Festinger, 1961), people feel an unpleasant tension when their behaviour contradicts their beliefs, or when one set of beliefs contradicts another. In such case, they will tend to change some of their views in order to be more compatible with the others. Thus, people with or without children will tend to justify their choices. However, those who choose the less socially desired choice of not having children will put more effort in convincing themselves they chose well and may report somewhat elevated rates of well-being.

Second, as you mentioned yourself, people who have undergone major positive or negative changes in life such as winning the lottery or becoming handicapped, returned to their baseline level of well-being after an adjustment period (Csikszentmihalyi & Jeremy, 2003). There is growing evidence that happiness is a trait rather than a state, and that the ability to be happy is affected mainly by our genes and personality, and less by major life events (Kohler et al., 2005; Nes et al., 2006). If we assume that the ability to be happy is distributed evenly among those who have children and those who don’t (an assumption that needs to be checked) the results are not so surprising.

Third, maybe the problem is in the question, after all. How many of us, who develop demanding careers, will score high on a well-being questionnaire in a single day? Most of us feel overworked, underpaid and often frustrated, but seldom consider quitting, because our career is not merely a means to earn a living, it is part of our identity and one of those things that make us the person we would like to be. It is one of those things that give meaning to life.

By the same token, the experience of parenthood cannot be summed up by adding a most demanding object who occasionally smiles to you into your household. It is an existential change. It adds another dimension to your life, which interacts with all the other dimensions, and makes them, in my opinion, deeper and richer. I am not claiming a person cannot live a full life without having children, but this dimension will be lacking. Reducing parenthood to exhausting and boring routines with few highlights is like reducing love to endless care and compromising with some moments of joy and orgasms; by doing so you miss its very essence.
I should end with a word of encouragement. Raising children is not the toughest and the dullest job in the world. It is not easy, it is complicated and demanding, but it is certainly also the most fascinating journey on earth.

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References


Watching your language

The first two pages of correspondence in *The Psychologist* for March 2009 contain four letters, each of which contains sentences that remind me of a comment a supervisor made many years ago when reading an essay. I had described a set of ideas as ‘totalitarian’ and he scrawled in the margin, ‘The seeds of totalitarianism are in this very document.’ We do have to watch it when we think we have science behind us.

In ‘Greening our practice and research’ Rosemary Snelgar and Sarah Lewis note that ‘[c]onfirmation bias, the tendency to selectively attend to information that confirms our opinion or preconceptions, mean [sic] that people may primarily attend to minority views, even those not from climate change specialists, and will reject or deny evidence from specialist bodies.’ But if confirmation bias is a scientifically valid concept it will surely apply on both sides of any argument. They continue: ‘…a particular research challenge now is [sic] the psychological phenomena relevant to the problem of achieving behaviour change towards pro-environmental behaviours.’ So psychology is to be mobilised to change people’s minds towards a view decided on by ‘specialist bodies’ who are mysteriously immune from confirmation bias?

In ‘Getting the message across’ Ron Roberts objects to a keynote address at a BPS event being given by ‘Ruby Wax, who it transpires is apparently completing “an MSc in Psychotherapy”.’ Leaving out the sarcasm and the scare-quotes, the truth is probably: ‘Ruby Wax is completing an MSc in Psychotherapy.’ But Roberts continues: ‘Can we sink any lower? As some psychologists somewhere are probably actually supporting the attack on Gaza, the answer is probably yes.’ Some Israeli psychologists, perhaps, or psychologists whose politics are different from those of Ron Roberts. Since I think it’s a nice idea that Ruby Wax should develop her people skills through an MSc in Psychotherapy, and since I was initially in favour of the Israeli attack on Gaza, I must belong among the lowest of the low. But, Ron, I’m a colleague, don’t forget.

In ‘Dyslexia – coping with the reality’ David Duncan is ‘scandalised’ and ‘horrified’ to see on BBC television ‘Professor Julian Elliott, described as a professor of educational psychology at Durham University, associate himself with the proposition… that “Dyslexia does not exist”.’ Professor Elliott, simply for associating himself with an idea with which David Duncan disagrees (he describes it as a ‘delusion’), gets the full sarcasm treatment – ‘described as a professor’. I’ve just checked on Google: he is a professor of educational psychology at Durham University.

Finally, in ‘Integrating psychology from all perspectives’, Philip Corr provides a rebuttal to a previous piece by Lynne Segal about Hans Eysenck, which he quotes: ‘Eysenck is no longer in fashion, and spent the last 20 years of his life pondering the merits of astrology.’ I doubt if Eysenck actually consumed 20 years on astrology. He did write a book on it, as well as holding down a university job, and writing on other themes. But get the sarcasm again: ‘pondering the merits’. Why shouldn’t he? Whether or not astrology is valid now, for a couple of thousand years it was the only scheme for understanding personality, Eysenck’s main preoccupation.

We had better be careful out if we are not ’in fashion.’ These two pages make me quake in my boots.

Seán Haldane
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Incredulity over lap dancing

I read the attack by Mary Boyle and Pippa Dell on Andy Field’s use of the lap dancing study in his teaching of statistics with incredulity (Forum, April 2009). The lap dancing study is a very innovative study within evolutionary psychology and tells us much about the unconscious processes in human sexual selection, as well as serving as an engaging way to teach dry statistical techniques. Any woman uncomfortable with hearing about this study on a psychology course really shouldn’t be there, and responses such as those from Boyle and Dell do nothing to further their cause.

Sallie Baxendale
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Mary Boyle and Pippa Dell may be surprised to know that I had many e-mails from women; some saying how useful my article in The Psychologist (‘Can humour make students love statistics?’, March 2009) was, and others distancing themselves from the sentiments in Boyle and Dell’s letter (Forum, April, 2009). Although I didn’t have the space to elaborate in the article, I would like to set the record straight that the way in which I present the lap dancing study ‘in a light hearted way’ is not, as Dell and Boyle assume, by making light of women as sex objects, but instead by speculating about the reaction that the male researchers might have received upon asking their funding council for money to visit lap dancing clubs.

As a male lecturer teaching (predominantly) female students I give a great deal of thought to how I present material such as this, and the examples that I use in my teaching reflect popular culture – a topic about which students are interested. Furthermore, Boyle and Dell’s portrayal of female students as shrinking violets too scared to voice their opinions not only does a huge disservice to these students but could not be more different to my own teaching experiences.

Although I’m sure Boyle and Dell will argue that, as a man, I am incapable of appreciating the power dynamics to which they allude, I think that their focus on gender obscures the real issue, which is whether you create an environment in which students feel that you are approachable and responsive to their concerns. Whether or not I create such an environment is something that Boyle and Dell cannot possibly know from reading my article, but to assume that I can’t because I am a man is unjustified.

Finally, unlike Boyle and Dell, I believe that The Psychologist, as a periodical that represents its membership (a great many of whom are teachers) has a duty to publish articles that encourage reflection about good teaching practice in psychology – even if those reflections are ‘that’s not the way to do it’.

Andy Field
Department of Psychology
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Multiple motivations for sadomasochism

We were pleased to see an article related to sadomasochism (SM) in The Psychologist (‘The psychology of “O”’, March 2009), particularly because, as the author Sallie Baxendale comments, there is still relatively little psychological research on this topic. This is despite the evident popularity of SM practices and fantasies. Around two thirds of people fantasise about bondage, one in seven report engaging in SM, there are over 27 million websites dedicated to the topic, and those who would probably not identify as engaging in SM ‘scenes’ are increasingly encouraged to ‘experiment’ with handcuffs, whips and other SM equipment and roles by shows like Sex and the City and shops like Ann Summers.

Baxendale’s article (and the subsequent letter from Stephane Duckett, April 2009) could be read as implying, however, that there may be a single (perhaps cognitive) explanation for SM practices, or at least for submissive ones. This is part of a wider trend within psychology to seek universal explanations for human behaviours, particularly those which are viewed as abnormal (SM...
I’m replying to Clement, Brohan and Thornicroft’s letter (March 2009) about help-seeking and stigma, in particular their discussion about the relationship to engagement. They raise an interesting point when they mention the literature that indicates how health problems may threaten or compromise an individual’s self-identity, which may deter help-seeking and engagement. I’ve worked for several years in a psychology service whose remit is to help with acceptance, adjustment and coping with health problems, my own work being with several teams under the umbrella of medicine (diabetes, cardiac, dermatology, gastrointestinal, respiratory). I feel we’ve made progress over the years in reducing stigma about meeting with a psychologist to discuss emotional issues related to health and to increase help-seeking and engagement, though clearly an audit might help clarify the extent of our success and whether self-identity is involved as a relevant factor.

I feel that this progress has been a result of engaging with our teams and patients. With the multidisciplinary teams, we have discussed and trained on how to understand the difference between referral of a patient for mental health issues and referral more for issues relating to physical health; how to identify patient emotional distress and an active request for help; and how to help patients be motivated to accept a referral to psychology. Ongoing support and consultation with the teams has consolidated their understanding of psychological issues.

With patients, we have led a focus group to discuss their engagement with the psychology service. Patients also helped us to design an information booklet for patients who may be, or want to be, referred to the psychology service. This is given to referrers, who are encouraged to give it to patients to help them understand why a referral may be helpful and to allow them to make an informed decision about that.

These two strands of action may help enable the patients to engage with referral to a psychology service. My view is that it’s the use of non-specific therapeutic factors (warmth, acceptance, unconditional positive regard), normalising responses to ill health, an understanding of motivational issues and a genuinely collaborative therapeutic focus that may help to keep a patient engaged. When I ask patients if they have found therapy helpful, the common response is an appreciation of being listened to, being respected and being helped to see a different perspective to their situation. I’ve no doubt that there are therapists up and down the land who would report similar experiences when they have successfully engaged with patients who have been brave/confident about help-seeking.

However, issues remain. Two disquieting comments were made to me by two separate patients in the past year: one said that the clinical psychology door sign in a busy hospital outpatient’s made her feel uncomfortable about being negatively judged by other patients when she entered the room; the other asked me to amend an appointment card (i.e. remove any reference to psychology) he had to give his employer to get time off to attend the appointment as he was afraid of being negatively judged. In both cases, the patients had mistakenly identified psychology as only being linked with mental health. Over the years, occasionally a patient will ask if their employment record will be affected by seeing a psychologist. Clearly there is still work to be done to enable people to accept the normality of human distress and to be resilient about admitting that to others.

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remains a diagnostic category in DSM-IV-TR).

We would like to caution psychologists who are drawn to seek such explanations for SM for two reasons:

1 SM is a broad umbrella term under which there are diverse practices, roles and identities.

2 Even within a single practice or identity, many different reasons are given for engaging in SM, which vary across people, and even within a person on different occasions.

Common explanations given by people include: stress relief, enhanced sexual pleasure, fun, switching off, feeling fully engaged, feeling in control, being able to lose control, revisiting difficult situations in a safe setting, spiritual transcendence, excitement, relaxation and much more besides. Readers may find this difficult to relate to, so perhaps we can clarify by making an analogy to that other popular ‘English vice’ – going for a drink. Clearly, under this umbrella there are a number of, actually very different, activities (meeting a friend in a wine bar, having a swift pint with lunch, a lads’ night out, or popping down the local). Any one of these may be engaged in for a multiplicity of reasons, both between people and within the same person (companionship, relaxation, to decrease inhibitions when meeting a potential partner, to escape daily stresses, a sense of belonging, the physical pleasure of drinking, etc.).

We join Baxendale in encouraging psychologists of all kinds to continue exploring the fascinating world of SM, and the diversity of potential pleasures, roles and power dynamics in sexuality more broadly. However, we would urge researchers to be cautious about tendencies to seek overarching explanations with such complex behaviours and identities. In this regard SM may not be so different from many much more everyday activities (taking part in sports, watching movies, and wearing certain fashions) and, like these, there may be shifting, multiple reasons for engagement in it. Interested readers may enjoy the edited collection that we recently put together, which includes the research drawn on here: Safe, Sane, Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

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Encouraging help-seeking
Facing up to the climate threat

We are heartened by the many positive responses received to our article 'Climate change – psychology’s contribution' (February 2009). However the letter by Stephen Murgatroyd (April 2009) argues that (a) we show uncritical, unscientific thinking to draw the conclusion that anthropogenic causes of global warming are undisputed within the scientific community; (b) that there is a large body of scientists (over 650 according to Murgatroyd) who have 'signed up' to being sceptical about the dominant climate change thesis; and (c) that a properly scientific approach should seek to ‘go beyond media reporting of this issue (especially in the UK)’.

Of course, we can fully agree that media reporting is the last thing one should base a scientific opinion on. While psychologists by training, all three of us have spent proportions of our time working on environmental issues with natural scientists and engineers. As the interview with Patrick Devine-Wright (February 2009) clearly illustrates, the challenges of climate change do not respect traditional disciplinary boundaries. One of us (Pidgeon) held a Chair at the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia, home to some of the UK’s, and the world’s, best climate science as well as the UK research councils’ Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. Our paper therefore draws upon a collective and ongoing interaction with leading climate scientists, learning from and debating the issues with them, as well as our reading of the contemporary peer-reviewed scientific literature on the topic. We would argue that it is engagement with the latter that marks out a genuinely critical scientific approach.

While there is always room for doubt with any proposition, scientific or otherwise, the IPCC framework assessments are clear and authoritative in their synthesis of the now extensive peer-reviewed evidence about climate change and the anthropogenic contribution to this. The most recent IPCC in 2007 involved 2500 expert reviewers, 800 contributing authors and 450 lead authors from more than 130 countries, who confirmed, in the words of Dr Rajendra Pachauri, Chair of the IPCC, that ‘Today, the time for doubt has passed. The IPCC has unequivocally affirmed the warming of our climate system, and linked it directly to human activity.

Regarding the 650 ‘climate sceptics’, we presume this refers to the recent US Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works publication, a minority committee report that presents a series of quotes...
from individuals with little context, conventional scientific evidence, or supporting peer-reviewed references. This report should of course be interpreted against the highly partisan nature of contemporary climate politics in the USA (see Dunlap & McCright, 2008).

We reiterate our judgement that climate change is serious, real and a threat that we all need to face up to. Shortly after the publication of our article in The Psychologist over 2300 academics, from both the natural and social sciences, met at a major climate conference in Copenhagen. A recurrent theme was that behaviour and behavioural sciences were urgently needed in the fight against climate change, and that if anything the current interpretations of the established science underestimate the risks that we all face. We do firmly believe that our article and its conclusions will withstand the march of time, while those of any remaining climate sceptics by contrast will not.

Nick Pidgeon
Alexa Spence
Cardiff University
David Uzzell
University of Surrey

Reference

Leave them kids alone!

In response to Jennie Lindon’s pertinent letter about the Channel 4 series Boys and Girls Alone (April 2009) I concur with her wholeheartedly in her suggestion that such a project would never be passed by a university ethics committee. Further, the issue of the use/abuse of children in television programmes has been publicly raised before, and Channel 4 researchers ought to be aware of this.

In 2001, my colleague Nick Mosdell and I published a report commissioned by the then regulator, the Broadcasting Standards Commission (since replaced by Ofcom), on the use of children in non-fiction TV programmes (Davies & Mosdell, 2001).

The BSC commissioned this study because it had received a number of complaints from viewers about the ‘exploitative’ use of children, some very young (and not professional child performers) in adult documentary, magazine and comedy sketch programmes. For the study, we reviewed the relevant legislation, the regulatory and internal producer guidelines, and also the procedures used by children’s TV producers, which were much more protective and ethically based than those used by adult producers. We also conducted a content analysis of a sample of daytime programmes in which children turned out to be quite extensively used as ‘props’ or ‘entertainment’, and we also conducted qualitative audience research with families. The issue of ‘informed consent’ is crucial, but legally there is a grey area concerning children’s ‘competence’, which producers exploited then – and clearly still do now – in which parental consent was seen to be adequate for children’s participation.

The findings of our research indicated that it is not. Our research with families showed marked differences between children and parents about the desirability of children appearing on TV, with children much less enthusiastic than adults. It also indicated that children aged between 7 and 14 (the age group used in our study) were perfectly competent in understanding the ways in which children were represented, or misrepresented, in the media and the issues raised, and had strong views about it.

Our report had a number of recommendations, most important of which was the advice that children’s consent to appear on television should be sought independently of their parents; producers should make sure that this consent was informed, by letting children know in advance what kind of programme they would be appearing in, and by having a member of the production team who could give, or seek, appropriate legal and ethical advice. There should also be no financial incentives to parents, and we suggested that the good practice already used by children’s producers should be adopted by adult producers.

Our report was accepted by the BSC and passed to the relevant broadcasters, including Channel 4 – who had already, at that time, been formally reprimanded by the Independent Television Commission for using children in a game show in a way that resulted in the children bursting into tears and having to be removed from the set.

Máire Messenger Davies
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University of Ulster, Coleraine

Reference
Animated learning

I am the writer of the 1980s television series Henry’s Cat. During the 1980s and 90s I ran a number of animation workshops in schools for special needs children with communication and behavioural problems. The outcome of these workshops is a website www.makemovies.co.uk. Though the workshops were primarily as an extracurricular subject the results might be of interest to educational psychologists. First the drawing age of some children was significantly different from their writing age on which they were judged academically (most noticeable with dyslexic children). Secondly some children with behavioural problems became quite disciplined when collaborating on movies. Some children who would not make eye contact would talk well to the camera, and some children who would not normally write or draw at all, would readily do so when using an animation light box.

As animation equipment and techniques are rarely found in classrooms there is little chance that these factors would be noticed in the normal course of events. I would be interested in discussing these with someone who is interested in whether such events might be developed further in the classroom.

Stan Hayward
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prize crossword

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no 44 solution Across 1 Corpus callosum, 9 Not up, 10 Broadbent, 11 Ring road, 12 Poser, 14 Laid, 15 Actual, 17 May, 18 Cue, 19 Shrink, 20 Whim, 23 Robot, 25 Patterns, 28 Easter egg, 29 Resin, 30 Screen memories. Down 1 Central, 2 Retentive, 3 Uppers, 4 Cobra, 5 Look, 6 Oedipal, 7 Users, 8 Storey, 13 Turn, 16 Care, 17 Maharishi, 18 Cortex, 19 So there, 21 Musings, 22 Stereo, 24 Basic, 26 Angle, 27 Seen.
A not insignificant unconventionality

I read with great interest ‘Think having children will make you happy?’ article in the April issue. It was both novel and rather unconventional. It has and will surely generate numerous debates on the topic. For me and other budding psychologists, this unconventionality further violates what we have been taught both by a number of books and psychology lecturers for research methods. It appears that the article uses the term ‘statistically insignificant’ on two occasions. Quoting Coolican (2004, p.354) as an example:

if this result were not significant do not say it was ‘insignificant’, write ‘This increase was not significant…’.

So is it OK to use this term and not be marked down or be violating ‘academic conventions’ or is it not appropriate? Bhupinder Kuwar
Birmingham

Reference

Peter Thompson is at the University of York. This column aims to prompt discussion and debate, and the odd wry smile.