

# Psychologists to clear up messy fingerprints

Two cognitive psychologists are part of a University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) team commissioned by the US National Institute of Justice to investigate the reliability of fingerprint analysis.

The new investigation was commissioned after a National Academy of Sciences report last year, which concluded that nearly all forensic methods, from ballistics to fingerprint analysis, lacked a scientifically sound evidence base.

TV crime dramas and Hollywood thrillers have for years given the impression that fingerprint evidence is objective and easily interpreted. However,

research by psychologists has shown the reality is far messier.

In studies conducted in 2006, for example, Dr Itiel Dror – one of the members of the new UCLA investigation – and his colleagues, who are now at Bournemouth University, showed how easily context could influence the judgement of fingerprint experts (e.g. <http://bit.ly/dr8StC>).

Dror presented dozens of fingerprints to experts who in the past had declared them confidently as matches. Now the prints were presented within a variety of contexts that suggested they were not a match (e.g. the suspect had an alibi,

another suspect confessed to the crime, etc). With these background contexts, many experts reached different conclusions from before.

Another study published last year by John Vokey at the University of Lethbridge in Canada bemoaned the lack of research into fingerprint experts' accuracy (<http://bit.ly/alxuD5>). As a starting point, Vokey's team tested the ability of naive undergrads to match up prints. The students performed significantly better than if they'd just been guessing, but accuracy was found to vary by digit (prints from the little finger were particularly awkward) and, less surprisingly, accuracy also dropped when matching up prints from within sets having less variability.

Dr Dror, who's now at

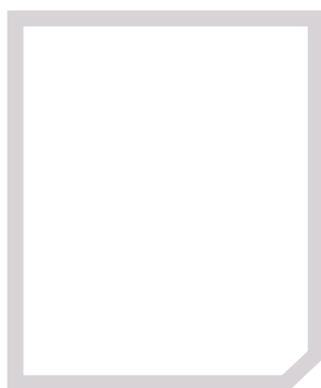
## Science and psychology under threat

A Royal Society report, with input from the British Psychological Society, has warned that the UK risks losing its pre-eminence in world science if funding is not protected from cuts.

Entitled *The Scientific Century: Securing Our Future Prosperity*, the report argues that our universities – currently ranked second in the world behind the USA – have risen to the challenge of exploiting the economic potential of research findings, with patents granted to UK universities having increased by 136 per cent between 2000 and 2008.

However, with the US, France and Germany all increasing their science budgets as a way to climb out of recession, and with the stature of science in India and China ever-growing, the UK is in danger of getting left behind.

Lord Waldegrave, a former science minister and advisory group member for the report said: 'Science is one of the



Dr Emily Holmes

jewels in our crown but it yields its dividends over decades. Investment in science cannot be turned on and off on a political whim – we must have a long-term investment.'

The report's six key recommendations are: for science and innovation to be put at the heart of the country's long-term economic strategy; to prioritise investment in excellent people; to strengthen the government's use of science; reinforce the UK's position as a hub for

global science; to better align science with global challenges; and to revitalise science and maths education.

Dr Emily Holmes, a Chartered Clinical Psychologist and Royal Society Dorothy Hodgkin Fellow at Oxford University was on the report's advisory group, which also counted five Nobel Laureates among its members. She told us that psychology has a huge opportunity to be at the forefront of contemporary developments and issues in science and that the British Psychological Society's activities align closely with many of the report's recommendations.

'Psychology can be used to tackle contemporary problems from health to climate change and is also ideally placed to deal with interdisciplinary issues, working both on exciting blue skies discoveries and translation of research to potential applications,' Holmes said.

Regarding the second recommendation about

investment in people, Holmes told us that there is more we could do to sustain first-class careers in psychological science, and that psychology is well placed to consider how best to support science careers, for example through mentoring schemes involving retired psychologists and by tackling issues such as the need for flexible working for male and female researchers.

'Psychology runs a danger of lagging behind other sciences unless it looks outwards and rises to the challenges ahead,' she said. 'The Society should be at the forefront of that.'

In its submission, the Society emphasised that psychology is central to a successful knowledge-based economy and underpins science-based technologies, including IT and health care. **CJ**  
**I To read the report and the British Psychological Society's submission, see:**  
<http://royalsociety.org/the-scientific-century>

UCL and Cognitive Consultants International, told us that psychology remains central to fingerprinting, even with the increasing use of computer algorithms. 'In fact, the use of these algorithms introduces biases and psychological issues that did not exist before,' he said. 'The computerised systems will not replace the human experts (as seen in TV CSI) as humans are very flexible and can perform pattern matching that is way beyond the current and foreseeable future ability of computers.'

Dror and his colleagues will be working with fingerprint experts from the US as well as several other countries, including the UK, as part of the new investigation. 'I have been working with them for over five years, and some examiners and agencies are very open and want to help, however, others are very resistant to change,' he said.

Will findings from the UCLA investigation inform future policy here in the UK as well as the USA? 'That's a very interesting question,' Dror told us. 'The UK used to be leading in forensics,

but has been in total denial about the psychological and cognitive issue, and in particular to issues of bias. I find it frustrating that the US National Academy of Sciences report refers repeatedly to my work and findings, that several US agencies are funding me in a number of projects, but here in the UK, there is a bit of "putting their head in the sand" on all these matters.'

'I would say that cognitive psychology has a lot to contribute to forensic decision making,' Dror added. 'There has been some reluctance to take on board the science, but now the US and other countries are opening up and welcoming the research, and are changing and improving their provisions.'

The investigation is due to complete in 2013 and is headed by Jennifer Mnookin, Professor in UCLA's School of Law. 'By the end of this research project,' she said, 'we aim to have developed a scientific metric for assessing difficulty that could allow us to take a given pair of fingerprints and associate it with a potential error rate.' As well as Itiel Dror, the other psychologist on the investigation team is UCLA Professor Phil Kellman. CJ

## Game of death

A game-show adaptation of Milgram's classic obedience experiments was broadcast on prime-time French TV in March, showing once again the apparent willingness of most ordinary people to inflict harm on an innocent victim.

The state-owned channel France 2 invited participants to take part in what they thought was a game show pilot. Eighty participants were encouraged by a female TV host to apply ever-stronger electric shocks to another contestant (played by an actor) whenever he answer quiz questions incorrectly.

The French psychologist Jean-Léon Beauvois was involved in the programme. He told us that the aim was not just to replicate Milgram but to see if a television presenter

is imbued with enough authority to cause people to commit immoral acts.

The study had several conditions including telling the participants that the show either was or wasn't going to be broadcast; a 'social support' condition in which the production assistant (actually a research confederate) rushed out and asked that the game be stopped because it was too immoral; and a 'presenter withdrawal' condition in which the TV host left after the 80-volt level. The key finding was that more participants went all the way when the host stayed, thus suggesting it was her authority which drove the participants' obedience.

'To our knowledge, this is the first time Milgram's procedure has been

carefully replicated in a social field where science was not the source of legitimacy for the agent of authority,' Beauvois and his colleague Dominique Oberle said. 'The striking thing here is that the obedience rates in the two contexts were equivalent, despite how different they were in setting, purpose and potency when it comes to affecting people's daily lives.'

A major obstacle to many researchers in the UK investigating Milgram's classic paradigm is ethical approval – how was this new study able to pass this hurdle? 'Up to today, in France, the ethical approval is obligatory for biomedical research but not for behavioural social experimental research,' Beauvois and Oberle said. CJ

## IN BRIEF

**A resource developed by speech and language therapists and psychologists at the University of Stirling has won an award for enhancing self-care and independent living.**

**The Advancing Healthcare Awards recognise and reward projects and professionals that lead innovative healthcare practice and make a real difference to patients' lives. They seek to celebrate patient empowerment with the healthcare professional in an enabling, facilitating role.**

**'To See Ourselves As Others See Us' is a resource that was developed by Morag Place, Joan Murphy and Alex Gillespie as part of an ESRC-funded research project into the impact of aphasia on close relationships. It is designed to facilitate discussion between people who have difficulty communicating and their families, allowing individuals to reflect on any aspect of their lives and to compare their views. The package includes a Talking Mats book, a mat, a set of communication symbols, a booklet and a DVD showing the Talking Mats framework being used as a tool for comparing perspectives.**

**Morag Place said 'We are thrilled to win this award. Without this tool, people who have difficulty communicating are at risk of having their views either overlooked or assumed. Clients who have already used the resource comment that it is a non-threatening way to discuss sensitive issues which might otherwise result in conflict.'**

**Society member and University of East London (UEL) academic Dr Jonathan Passmore has won the 2010 Association for Coaching 'Influencing' award for his contribution to the coaching profession.**

**The Chief Executive of the Association for Coaching, Katherine Tulpa, said: 'Dr Passmore has made a significant contribution through his writing and research to the development of our understanding of coaching and in sharing best practice.'**

**Dr Passmore said: 'I'm delighted to win this award. UEL is building itself an international reputation with its work in coaching in organisations, education and driving.'**

# Politics and progress

Long-term, psychology-based interventions are facing tough times as political parties campaign and tighten purse strings. New reports on the government's Dangerous and Severe Personality Disorder (DSPD) and Sure Start programmes look set to fuel the debate over 'value for money'. But does the desire for a 'fast win', particularly around election time, risk derailing slow but steady scientific progress?

By March 2010, the government intended to have 3500 Sure Start Children's Centres in place, catering for every community in England. That month saw the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee warn that rushing to judgement on the worth of the Centres would be catastrophic and could jeopardise one of the most innovative and ambitious initiatives of the last two decades. Barry Sheerman MP, Committee Chair, said: 'Children's Centres are designed to address some of the most

entrenched aspects of disadvantage, but the majority have been in place for less than four years. Evaluations of their impact will therefore only be meaningful over the long term. Yielding to short-term financial pressure by reducing the number of Centres or pruning the range of services offered would be a mistake.'

In the committee's report, psychologist Professor Edward Melhuish, Executive Director for the National Evaluation of Sure Start, speaks about the challenges of multimodal intervention and how Sure Start is tackling tough issues 'in a manner rather different from almost any other intervention undertaken in the Western world'. He also cautions that it is clear from the research that only high-quality provision produces an effect. 'If you are to fulfil the full ambitions of the Sure Start programme, there has to be more money. You cannot roll out 3500 Children's Centres across the whole

## Sure Start programmes – 'value for money'?

country at the level of funding that is currently being planned.'

As for the DSPD programme, a new report from the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health criticises it for costing 'some £60 million a year to detain just 350 people at a time despite a lack of clear evidence about its effectiveness in either improving health or reducing risk'. The evidence, says the report, suggests that it is now time for the DSPD programme to be phased out. 'Reinvesting the DSPD Programme's operational costs of £60 million per year in mainstream prison-

## AVOIDING THE NEXT GLOBAL CRISIS

The vagaries of human judgement played a central role in the events that led to the deepest global crisis for decades. Surely psychology can illuminate why things went so wrong and help provide guidance on how to stop such mistakes being repeated? To help find out, on 16 March the British Psychological Society and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) jointly held a free, public seminar on Behavioural Economics at the House of Commons.

Theresa Marteau, Professor of Health Psychology at Kings College, London, opened proceedings by providing an audacious 15-minute overview of the history of 20th century psychology. She explained how humans have two modes of thought – one is reflective and goal-driven, the other is automatic and impulsive. She said this helps explain our financial behaviour. Because of our limited mental resources, it is

often the latter, 'cognitive-lite', system that underlies the decisions we make. This means our decisions are easily influenced by context and environmental factors. Governments seeking to change our behaviour waste billions on information campaigns that target the reflective system, Marteau said. Instead they should focus on manipulating contextual factors – altering decision defaults, restricting options and using incentives.

Stephen Lea, Professor of Psychology at the University of Exeter, recommended that the country's debt could be reduced by targeting three psychological factors: materialism, the money illusion and myopia. Materialism is the belief that having more things will make you happier, yet Lea said people who believe this tend to be less happy than most. The money illusion is the tendency for people to feel twice as rich when inflation doubles the money they have in their pocket,

when the reality is that they are no better off. Myopia, Lea explained, is 'our comprehensive incompetence at thinking long-term'. Psychology is a necessity for understanding economic behaviour, Lea concluded, not an optional extra.

Last up, David de Meza, Professor of Management at LSE, highlighted the role that unrealistic optimism has played in the global financial crisis. Most people overestimate their financial abilities, for example in relation to trading stocks. In fact, people with some financial knowledge are more likely to fall victim to scams than those without. One study highlighted by De Meza analysed all the trades made by 37,000 people from 1991 to 1997, finding that the more trades people made, the more money they tended to lose. Men were particularly prone to overconfidence, making 45 per cent more trades than women [Professor Marteau later joked that perhaps future economic

crises could be averted by placing pessimistic women in positions of financial responsibility]. De Meza believes the findings he reviewed suggest that the financial crisis was caused by unrealistic optimism, not bankers exploiting the promise of government bail outs.

Unfortunately, the event was tinged with sadness: POST chairman Ashok Kumar MP died on 15 March and psychologist Peter Cooper, chief executive of CRAM International, who was due to speak at the seminar, died in February. It was also regrettable that Vince Cable, Liberal Democrat Shadow Chancellor, had to withdraw from his role as Chair, due to commitments in the House. CJ

**I See also the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology podcast [<http://bit.ly/ch4ITU>] and publication [<http://bit.ly/bJUFKn>] on the science of short-term thinking and delaying gratification.**

based personality disorder interventions would have a substantial impact on the 70 per cent of prisoners who have a form of personality disorder.'

The DSPD programme's own website admits that it 'is still relatively new, and so far few people have completed treatment. Hence a full evaluation of the effects of treatment is some way into the future.' But would radical changes now risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater? Writing in *The Guardian*, psychologist Kevin Howells (University of Nottingham), said: 'Over the past five years a skilled workforce has been recruited, and expertise has begun to accumulate. Now is not the time to undo a forward-looking project, rather it is timely to improve it, iron out some wrinkles, and reinforce the commitment to therapy – to the likely benefit of the broader community and the patients themselves.'

Psychiatrist Peter Tyrer, who has an article 'The successes and failures of the DSPD experiment' in press with *Medicine, Science and Law*, told us: 'There is a well-known mantra in medicine "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence", and so Kevin's views are in tune with this. My view is that the DSPD programme with all its expensive bells and whistles is premature. There is no reason why we should not try and do more for people with severe personality disorder but as we have very limited evidence of efficacy of any treatment for personality disorder in general it seems the wrong way round to put almost all our resources into DSPD – almost certainly the most difficult of the

personality disorder nuts to crack – particularly as the deprivation of liberty linked to the programme appears to be the prime mover.'

Others working on the ground appear to feel long-term psychological interventions need time to evolve. Dr Vikki Baker is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist seconded to Resettle, a pilot project funded nationally as a partnership between Criminal Justice and Health as part of the DSPD provision. The service is an innovative, multi-agency, community-based project working with personality disordered offenders on release from prison, and it has just received a commendation from the Butler Trust (an independent charity set up to celebrate, support and share good practice in UK correctional settings). Dr Baker told us that 'Resettle is a relatively new service: it became operational in May 2008. The NICE guidance on DSPD is fairly recent, and engagement with this population can be a real challenge. Given this, developing, testing and evaluating long-term interventions and cross-agency and multimodal approaches is a learning process which needs to continue for some time to come.'

Maintaining momentum in long-term interventions is also an issue. Referring to Sure Start, Professor Melhuish commented that 'there doesn't seem to be the drive that there was in the early years to do something revolutionary, or to do something that really affects the lives of people in an important way'. In times of political and economic uncertainty, this is perhaps the challenge for psychologists working in long-term social programmes: to learn lessons, adapt and survive. JS

## Mind survey

The mental health charity Mind has published new survey results which they argue show the urgent need for counselling and psychotherapy to be independently regulated. The UK government's favoured option is for these professions to be regulated by the Health Professions Council – the same body that recently assumed responsibility for regulating practitioner psychologists – but terms have yet to be agreed.

Mind's survey of 181 service users carried out

between November 2009 and February 2010 found that one in five people were not satisfied with the service they received from their counsellor or psychotherapist, whilst 85 per cent wanted these professions regulated. Of those respondents who had made a formal complaint, 73 per cent were unsatisfied, with a third finding the process confusing and 65 per cent stating that the complaints procedure had not been independent.

Paul Farmer, Mind's

chief executive, said: 'Whilst regulation won't end abuse, it will provide a mechanism to ensure a basic standard for therapists, provide a unified and unbiased channel for grievances and ensure that anyone struck off is legally barred from practising under the title of counsellor or psychotherapist again. We would urge the next government to treat regulation as a priority in order to protect patients who are already in a vulnerable place.' CJ

## FUNDING NEWS

The **Lifelong Health and Wellbeing (LLHW)** is a major cross-funding council initiative supporting multidisciplinary research addressing factors that influence healthy ageing and well-being in later life. Two types of funding will be available: LLHW Research Grants of between £300k up to £2.5m over three to five years; and Pilot Studies for a maximum of two years. High-quality, innovative multidisciplinary applications are particularly welcome in the following areas:

- Mental health and well-being, including quality of life, preserving cognitive function and exploiting mental capital
- Resilience for successful ageing: from cell to society, including life course influences, markers for ageing and processes of ageing
- Age-related conditions and interventions to promote independence in later life.

The call for applications for the third phase of the funding programme will be made in May <http://bit.ly/93AtGu0>

The Japan Society for the Promotion of Science London offers postdoctoral Fellowships for Foreign Researchers. These fund short-term visits (1–12 months) for young **pre- and postdoctoral researchers to conduct cooperative research with Japanese universities and institutions**. Psychologists can apply within the social sciences subject area. The closing date is 1 June 2010.

[www.jsps.org/funding/fellow\\_short.html](http://www.jsps.org/funding/fellow_short.html)

The Harold Wingate Foundation provides grants to charitable organisations. Grants are offered to support research on **education and social exclusion**. The level of funding available is usually between £10,000 and £3000. Closing dates in 2010 are 11 June, 10 September and 10 December.

[www.wingatefoundation.org.uk/overview.php](http://www.wingatefoundation.org.uk/overview.php)

The **BUPA Foundation** has a Seed Corn Fund to nurture new research ideas. Healthcare professionals involved in research and university-based researchers with an interest in health or social care are invited to apply. The Foundation gives a high priority to applications from young and new researchers who have not previously been funded. Areas of research interest of particular relevance to psychology are health information and communication, health at work, and the mental health of older people. The closing date is 31 July 2010.

<http://bit.ly/csVamx>

info

For more, see [www.bps.org.uk/funds](http://www.bps.org.uk/funds)  
Funding bodies should e-mail news to Elizabeth Beech on [elibee@bps.org.uk](mailto:elibee@bps.org.uk) for possible inclusion

# Child's play! The developmental roots of 'psychology is easy'

The widespread misconception that psychology is easy and mere common sense has its roots in the biased way that children work out whether a topic is challenging or not.

Frank Keil and colleagues asked children aged between five and thirteen, and adults, to rate the difficulty of questions from physics (e.g. How does a spinning top stay upright?), chemistry, biology, psychology (e.g. Why is it hard to understand two people talking at once?) and economics. The questions had been carefully chosen from earlier pilot work in which they'd all been rated as equally difficult by adults.

Consistent with the pilot work, the adults in the study proper rated the questions from the different disciplines as equally difficult. However, children from age 7 to 13 rated psychology as easier than the natural sciences – physics, chemistry and biology, which they rated as equally difficult.

Young children can't possibly have the depth of understanding to know which scientific questions are more difficult. Instead they must resort to some kind of mental short-cut to make their verdict. Keil's team think that children's feelings of control over their own psychological faculties – memories, emotions and so forth – and the superficial familiarity of those kinds of concepts, are likely to lead them to believe psychological concepts are easier to understand.

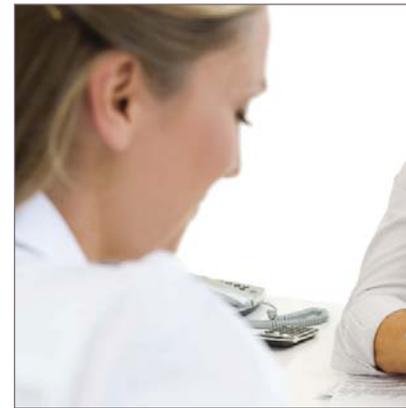


The February issue of *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* reports that children rate questions from physics as harder than psychology

questions on their own, compared with questions in the other sciences, and kids and adults estimated that more people knew the answers to the psychology questions. Remember these were psychology questions that adults had already rated as just as difficult and complex as questions in the other sciences. 'Such biases [towards seeing psychology as easy] may be observed when tasks do not so directly ask about difficulty of understanding and instead use measures such as ease of learning on one's own,' the researchers said.

Keil's team said their findings have real-life implications, for example in the court-room. 'If psychological phenomena are seen as usually quite easy to understand and largely self-evident and if such judgements are inaccurate and underestimate the need for experts,' they warned, 'cases might well be decided in ways that unfairly exclude valuable expert insights.'

In fact, the researchers pointed out that such situations have already occurred. In the US trial of former presidential assistant I. Lewis 'Scooter' Libby, for example, the judge disallowed the use of psychology experts on memory, on the basis that the jury could rely on their common sense understanding of memory. This is particularly ironic given that prior psychology research has shown that jurors and judges have a woefully poor understanding of how memory actually works.



## How to give advice

In the May issue of *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*

Information, information, information. That's the message from one of the first studies to look at people's preferences for different forms of advice. Reeshad Dalal and Silvia Bonaccio presented students with fictional decision-making scenarios, such as choosing which job to apply for. The students were offered various permutations of advice and asked to say how satisfied they'd be if a friend had given them that advice. The different kinds of advice were: which option to go for; which option not to go for; info on how to make the decision (e.g. use a points allocation system); information on one or more of the options; and sympathy about the difficulty of making a decision. Whilst all forms of advice were positively received, the students' consistent preference was for information about one or more of the options.

A second study spiced things up by introducing more varied decision-making scenarios: where to locate a new store; how to lay off excess staff; and how to invest some inheritance. A fresh batch of students were asked to imagine they'd solicited the advice from an expert, rather than a friend, to see if this made any difference to their responses. Information again came out as the most preferred form of advice. However, this time round, specific advice on which option to go for was also particularly well received,



especially in the investment scenario.

The researchers said past research on advice giving has tended to focus purely on advice in the form of 'I recommend option X', so this study makes a novel contribution. 'Across the situational and dispositional variables we examined, decision-makers appeared to want their advisors to provide information about the alternatives,' the researchers said. Advice that says 'go for option X' can also be well-received but only in specific circumstances, such as when advice has been explicitly solicited from an expert.

When it comes to lessons for real life, Dalal and Bonaccio said more research was needed to see how their results generalise, but in the meantime they advised: 'Individuals who are advising decision-makers should at the very least be careful to provide information along with their recommendations.'

## Scary messages can backfire

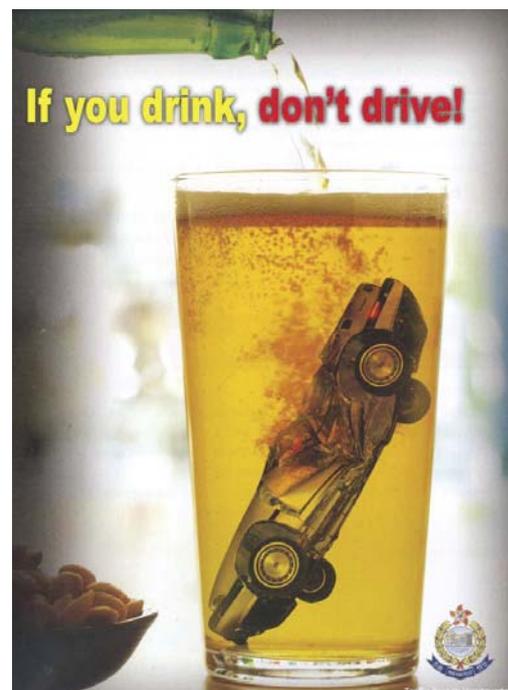
In the February issue of the *Journal of Research in Personality*

Using scare tactics for anti drink-driving and other health issues makes intuitive sense. The campaigners want to grab your attention and demonstrate the seriousness of the consequences if their message is not heeded. However, a new study makes the surprising finding that for a portion of the population, scare tactics can backfire, actually undermining a message's efficacy.

Steffen Nestler and Boris Egloff had 297 participants, 229 of them female, average age 35, read one of two versions of a fictional news report from a professional medical journal. The report referred to a study showing links between caffeine consumption and a fictional gastro-intestinal disease 'Xyelineritis'. One version was extra-scary, highlighting a link between Xyelineritis and

cancer and saying that the participant's age group was particularly vulnerable. The other version was lower-key and lacked these two details. Both versions of the article concluded by recommending that readers reduce their caffeine consumption.

Before gauging the participants' reaction to the article and its advice, the researchers tested them on a measure of 'cognitive avoidance'. People who score highly on this personality dimension respond to threats with avoidance tactics such as distracting themselves, denying the threat or persuading themselves that they aren't vulnerable.



The key finding is that participants who scored high on cognitive avoidance actually rated the threat from Xyelineritis as less severe after reading the scary version of the report compared with the low-key version. Moreover, after reading the scary version, they were less impressed by the advice to reduce caffeine consumption and less likely to say that they planned to reduce their caffeine intake.

On the other hand, highly cognitive avoidant participants were more responsive to the low-key report than were the low cognitive avoidant participants. In other words, for people who are cognitively avoidant, scary health messages can actually backfire.

'Practically, our results suggest that instead of giving all individuals the same threat communications, messages should be given that are concordant with their individual characteristics,' Nestler and Egloff said. 'Thus, the present findings are in line with the growing literature on tailoring intentions to individual characteristics, and they highlight the role of individual differences when scary messages are used.'



The material in this section is taken from the Society's **Research Digest** blog at [www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog](http://www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog), and is written by its editor **Dr Christian Jarrett**. Visit the blog for full coverage including references and links, additional current reports, an archive, comment and more.

We are delighted to announce that [www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog](http://www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog) has just been voted 'Best blog - Psychology' in the international Research Blogging Awards 2010. See [www.tinyurl.com/digestwin](http://www.tinyurl.com/digestwin) and p.407 for more.



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# At the eye of the storm

Cary L. Cooper gives some personal reflections

In February a story broke in the mainstream media about the allegation that several people from 10 Downing Street had called a bullying helpline for advice. This revelation appeared only a few weeks after a political journalist had published a book alleging that there was a more than robust management style present in No. 10 – followed by the Labour leadership strongly denying these allegations. The head of the bullying helpline then revealed to the media that a number of people working in No. 10 had called the confidential service, seeking support and advice. Although she did not reveal the names of the alleged callers, she did reveal the employer, in this case No. 10 itself.

As one of the Patrons of this bullying helpline, I was contacted by the media about it. The minute I heard what had happened on the Sunday night from a BBC correspondent, I contacted the director of the helpline to find out what she had told the media. She told me that she had told them that the helpline had received a number of calls from people working in No. 10, emphasising however that no names of the actual callers were revealed. Because of the breach of confidentiality by naming the employer of the callers, I resigned immediately. Other Patrons took a similar decision later in the day.

The Press Association picked up on the story which triggered a media onslaught, with the main TV news networks, radio stations, online news agencies and newspapers calling me over a ten-hour period! Although I was not a Trustee and had no legal responsibility for the helpline, I felt I had a duty to explain my actions to the media, so I tried to

cooperate as much as possible with their requests.

The reason I resigned was quite simple: there is a fundamental and explicit undertaking that a helpline is confidential, and nothing said during such a call should ever be revealed, either about the individual, the employer or about anybody else. This was an issue of principle, and not a politically motivated act.

On the day the story broke, I was lucky to have the total support of the press office at my university, who took me in hand and managed the interviews, which carried on throughout the day, until some other story overtook it. Although I normally can deal with the media on topics in my area of expertise, I found this experience much more stressful because of the political as opposed to the academic context of the story. When a political issue is involved, the news media first report the bare headline facts, but then tend to develop or broaden it in very different ways, nuancing its political implications for example. As it happened, the story did not die on that day but was re-invigorated two days later when the helpline was suspended. However, in this particular

case, the ‘aftershock media quake’ was much more positively focused, with the media becoming interested in some of the critical issues of bullying, like ‘was a helpline needed in the field’, ‘what is the extent of the problem of bullying in the workplace’, ‘how do we make sure that this issue is dealt with by senior management’, etc. On this occasion, therefore, the media moved from the political to the substantive issues, which was more in my comfort zone.

I guess I have learned a number of things from this episode. First, if one is engaged in working with the media to highlight psychological or socially relevant issues, you have to be prepared for negative as well as positive publicity, and potentially for its political fallout as well. Second, if you are a ‘media visible’ academic or practising psychologist, you also have to be prepared, from time to time, to cope with negative personal attributions of your motives: for example, that you are saying that to get personal exposure or celebrity status, or you are using your science for political ends.

This is the downside of any media exposure. However, I believe it is important for the academic community to communicate our science or practitioner-orientated experiences to a wider public, highlighting its relevance to everyday life.

It is also important for psychologists who give back to the community by supporting relevant charities, to ensure that the bond of trust with clients, patients and others is not breached, and that confidentiality is maintained at all costs. Henry David Thoreau wrote in 1853: ‘how prompt we are to satisfy the hunger and thirst of our bodies; how slow to satisfy the hunger and thirst of our souls’. This is one of the challenges of psychologists today, to help and support people to satisfy the hunger and thirst of their collective souls. But we can only do this if we can maintain their trust.



Cary L. Cooper CBE is Professor of Organizational Psychology and Health at Lancaster University

contribute

This is the page of the Society's Media and Press Committee, which aims to promote and discuss psychology in the media.

If you would like to comment on a recent newspaper article, TV or radio programme involving psychology, if you have tips for

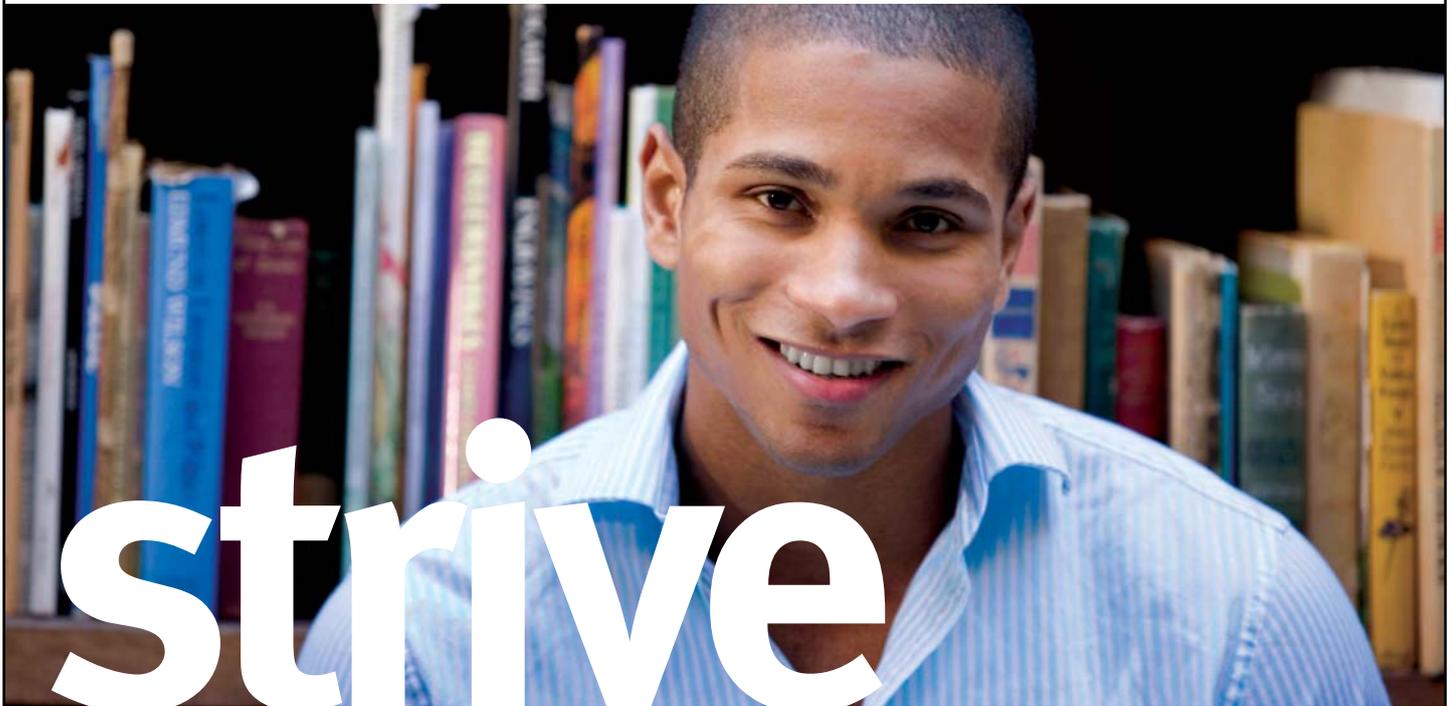
others based on experiences, or if you know of a forthcoming programme or broadcast, please contact the ‘Media’ page

coordinating editor, Fiona Jones (Chair of the Society's Media and Press Committee), on [f.a.jones@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:f.a.jones@leeds.ac.uk)



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