



Please send news items to psychologist@bps.org.uk. We also welcome lively, informative and evidence-based analysis of current events (up to 1500 words). Contact the editor first on jonsut@bps.org.uk. Send reviews of research published in peer-reviewed journals (up to 400 words) to Dr Tom Stafford on tom@jidiollect.org.uk. Staff journalist: Dr Christian Jarrett (chrber@bps.org.uk).

Promoting good practice in NHS research

A GUIDE for good practice in research within the NHS has been published by the BPS in response to concerns about the negative effect that new NHS research governance procedures might be having on applications for psychological research.

According to the Group of Trainers in Clinical Psychology (GTiCP), psychology trainees in particular face many hurdles when dealing with the new procedures. The group also points to a decrease in ethics committee applications, which suggests that

the same difficulties are encountered by qualified and experienced researchers.

The *Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care* was first published in March 2001, with a second edition coming out in April this year (see tinyurl.com/btm98). The framework is intended to ensure 'high scientific, ethical and financial standards, transparent decision-making processes, clear allocation of responsibilities and robust monitoring arrangements'. Despite these laudable aims, the procedures have been criticised for leading to an enormous increase in bureaucracy.

Dr Myra Cooper, a member of GTiCP, said that clinical psychology trainers have been 'extremely concerned about trainees who find the process aversive – and resolve never to do any research again'. The new practice guidance the group has produced is intended for NHS managers, local research ethics committee members and psychological researchers. It reflects some of the many issues that researchers have

been struggling with recently, and makes recommendations for dealing with them. These include recommendations for ethics committees, research and development departments, clinical audit departments and NHS trusts, as well as for researchers trying to engage with these bodies.

Dr Cooper said: 'The guide makes it very clear that it does not aim to devalue new developments – all of them have important and desirable goals – but to suggest a way forward that will enable trainers and the NHS to maximise the contribution that student, and more experienced, researchers can make to the NHS agenda.' And addressing researchers and potential researchers, she added: 'Do make sure you obtain a copy, and when you have read it, don't file it, but pass it on to your NHS manager, R&D and ethics committee colleagues.'

PDH

□ Good Practice Guidelines for the Conduct of Psychological Research Within the NHS can be downloaded from the BPS website (www.bps.org.uk).

DEADLINE

We welcome news items from members for possible publication; deadline for the August issue is **1 July**

WEBSITES

82.219.38.131/ukcp.org.uk/find.asp

The UK Council for Psychotherapy's new 'Find a therapist' page

www.thehideout.org.uk

National domestic violence website for children and young people

If you come across a website that you think would be of interest to our readers, let us know on psychologist@bps.org.uk.

ROYAL ASSENT

The Mental Capacity Bill received Royal Assent in April shortly before the dissolution of Parliament. The Mental Capacity Act 2005, which covers England and Wales, will provide a legal framework for those unable to make their own financial, social-care or medical decisions because their mental capacity is limited, for example by mental illness, dementia or learning disabilities.

□ For more information see tinyurl.com/817dv.

Drugs mess with the whole family

DRUG addiction doesn't harm only the user, it devastates their family too. That's the message from a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report by Marina Barnard at Glasgow University.

From her interviews with dozens of young drug addicts, their parents and younger siblings, Barnard reports that families are changed for ever by the drug problem: shame descends, parents clash and siblings are sidelined. While treatment is focused on the individual, 'distress, confusion, anger, impotence and dysfunction' are suffered by the family, the report says.

Interviews with 10 practitioners working in addiction revealed they tread a fine line between wanting to involve the family therapeutically, while also being conscious of causing them further harm. The report also confirmed that the siblings of problematic drug users are at increased risk of drug abuse themselves, although why some are enticed into drugs while others are put off remains unclear.

Barnard writes that more

research is needed before clear recommendations for how to help the families of young drug addicts can be given. But a starting point is to give greater recognition and funding to the self-help family support groups that most parents reported finding useful. Research to 'assess the remit and capacities of a range of such groups in different geographical localities in terms of their funding, their membership, their longevity and most importantly, what past and present members consider to be of value, or not, to them and their families' would be a first step, the report says. Opportunities for family members to enjoy short breaks away from the troubled home environment could also be therapeutic. 'Respite for families offers a low-key but probably highly valued intervention...to escape the sometimes intolerable stresses brought on by a family member's drug use,' Barnard writes. *CJ*

□ *The report Drugs in the Family can be downloaded in full, for free, from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website at www.jrf.org.uk.*

Brain scans see what you don't know you know

THE idea that your brain contains information that 'you' cannot access is, of course, not new – Freud wrote about that years ago; nor is it an unfamiliar phenomenon in our everyday lives – how often do we struggle to find a word that we know is in there somewhere? But what is new, is the demonstration by scientists that they can use a scan to read off information from your brain that you are unable to access yourself.

Using functional imaging, John-Dylan Haynes and Geraint Rees at University College London first showed that some parts of the brain involved in early visual processing are activated more than others, depending on the particular angular orientation (e.g. / or \) of the visual pattern being looked at. That some brain cells are organised according to sensitivity to different orientations is well known from the direct recording of individual neurons in monkeys, but this is the first time it has been shown in humans using brain scanning.

Next, Haynes and Rees presented participants with 'invisible' visual patterns. The patterns were invisible because they were presented so briefly, and because each one was followed by a visual mask – a second stimulus that interferes with processing of the first. This meant that when asked, a participant couldn't say what orientation a pattern had – they could only guess. But although a pattern was invisible to a participant, its orientation still left a signature trace of activity in their brain. This meant the researchers could discern the orientation of the pattern by observing the distribution of activity in the

participant's brain (in their early visual cortex, called 'V1'). So the researchers could read information in a participant's brain that was inaccessible to the participant. 'Human V1 can represent information about the orientation of visual stimuli that cannot be used by participants to make a simple behavioural discrimination,' the authors concluded.

In a separate, complementary study published in the same May issue of *Nature Neuroscience*, Yukiyasu Kamitani and Frank Tong used a similar technique to discern which of two possible orientations a participant chose to 'see' in an ambiguous visual pattern (a stimulus formed of two overlapping gratings called a plaid). 'By analysing ensemble activity from human cortex, we were able to extract information about the person's subjective mental state under conditions of ambiguity,' they reported. Their approach could be extended to 'studying the neural basis of many types of mental content', they concluded, 'including a person's awareness, attentional focus, memory, motor intention and volitional choice' – research that might one day lead to non-invasive ways of using thoughts to control machines. *CJ*

CORRECTION

In last month's 'News analysis' piece on voting decisions there were a couple of errors. 'Himmelweit and his colleagues' should have read 'Himmelweit and her colleagues'; and the author of the piece, Peter Bull, who is not a professor, was described as such. Both of these errors were editorial and were not the fault of the author. We apologise.

ANIMAL ETHICS

THE debate about research involving animals has often been presented in a polarised manner, differentiating crudely between 'those opposed' and 'those in favour'. Recognising that there is a wide range of positions in between and that people differ in their views on the use of animals in different areas, such as medical research or toxicity testing, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics has published a report – *The Ethics of Research Involving Animals* – that seeks to clarify the debate and help people think through the ethical issues.

□ See www.nuffieldbioethics.org.

ROYAL SOCIETY SUMMER SCIENCE EXHIBITION 2005

THE exhibition takes place on 4–7 July at the Royal Society in London. Among the 24 competitively selected science and technology exhibits is 'Don't panic' – an investigation into the psychological responses to disasters.

□ See www.royalsoc.ac.uk for details. Admission is free.

WILEY ACQUIRES WHURR

WHURR Publishers, the London-based independent publisher of professional books and journals in psychology, education and the health sciences has been taken over by John Wiley & Sons Ltd, an international company based in Chichester.

PAPCAR SUMMER LECTURE

PAPCAR (Psychology Applied to Peace, Conflict and Reconciliation) is holding a Summer Lecture on Wednesday 22 June 2005 at University College London, 5.15pm–7pm. Dr John Sloboda of Keele University and Director of the Oxford Research Unit will be asking 'Why does the British public remain so vulnerable to pro-war state propaganda?'

□ Numbers are limited. To book a place, contact Joe Buckman at UCL (j.buckman@ucl.ac.uk).

More pilot, less auto

AIRCRAFT
manufacturer Airbus has advised pilots of its A340-type jets not to depend so heavily on onboard monitoring computers, raising psychological considerations about human-machine interaction.

The advice follows a serious incident in February this year when an Airbus A340-642 Virgin Atlantic flight to Heathrow from Hong Kong was diverted to Amsterdam after malfunction of a computer controlling fuel supply to the engines. Nobody was injured, but the malfunction initially misled the crew into fearing a fuel leak and loss of all engines. The incident occurred weeks after publication of a Civil Aviation Authority report that concluded 'dependency on automatics leads crews to accept what the aircraft is doing without proper monitoring' (tinyurl.com/94ehk). Moreover, overdependence on

automatic systems is being blamed for the fact that 'controlled flight into terrain' – in which the plane is flown into

Stewart. He said: 'Modern systems have automated so much that the pilots are only needed for a tiny part of the flight and for emergencies. A similar problem exists on the TGV where there is so little for the drivers to do that they get regular mental tests presented which they have to solve correctly within a time limit to prove they are still awake and paying attention.'

'The solution has to involve cutting back on the automation so that there is more meaningful work for the pilots to do. However, this will be difficult to apply now that the pilots know that they are really not needed for most of the time. If the system was being designed afresh then it would make sense to design a sensible mix of human and automated tasks to make sure human skill was being exercised appropriately.'

'It's not an easy problem to solve,' Stewart added. *CJ*

the ground because of misleading readings – has now overtaken mechanical failure as the leading cause of passenger deaths.

We spoke to BPS member and managing director of System Concepts, Tom

Getting away with it?

FEW UK psychology departments have systematic means of detecting student cheating; and when students are caught, the severity of punishment varies hugely between departments. That's according to a survey of 27 psychology departments by George Dunbar of Warwick University, supported by the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network.

Nearly a third of departments reported that cheating had increased in the last five years, yet issuing student guidance was the only consistent preventive measure

implemented by most departments. Half of all incidents of copying were said to involve the internet, yet only two departments used plagiarism detection software, and only three used search engines systematically. Those departments who did use systematic detection methods reported higher incidences of internet-related cheating. This suggests such cheating might be going undetected in other departments, although Dunbar cautions it could be that departments with more cheating have introduced better detection methods. More positively, and contrary to media reports, only

two departments reported instances of students buying essays from internet 'essay mills'.

Most departments tended to increase the severity of punishment for student cheating in the final year. Fabricating data tended to be particularly frowned upon – three departments disallowed students from graduating with honours if they fabricated data in their final-year project. Yet punishments were wildly inconsistent between departments: '...a plagiarised paragraph in a final year essay could produce a penalty ranging from a mark of zero

to a warning only, depending on where the student studied', the report says.

To reduce cheating, the report advises that it is important to teach students academic skills, including citation and quotation techniques, and the importance of respecting the work of others. Students should be made clear about the ground

rules: cheating often arises from group work in which the distinction between legitimate collaboration and illicit collusion is sometimes unclear. Academics should also set a good example, discuss cheating and plagiarism with students, help students manage their time (time pressures can provoke the temptation to cheat), design courses and assessment that

reduce the opportunities to gain from cheating, monitor data collection, raise detection levels and punish in a consistent and transparent way. CJ

□ *Survey of psychology departments: tinyurl.com/dyjuh. For JISC guidance on preventing cheating see tinyurl.com/7nkzc. Plagiarism detection service: www.submit.ac.uk.*

IN BRIEF

A sample of the latest BPS journals

In a representative population sample in the Netherlands, the incidence of psychotic experiences was around 100 times higher than the traditional estimate of the incidence of psychotic diagnoses such as schizophrenia. But only 8 per cent of those people still reported such experiences two years later, suggesting that psychotic experiences *per se* may not be pathological, but that aspects of the interaction between the person and the psychotic experience may determine whether somebody becomes a 'case' for treatment. (BJCP, June)

School break supervisors should look out for the children who are spending a lot of time alone in the playground, rather than just concentrating on aggressive behaviour. That's according to a study of playground behaviour and self-perceptions, by Michael Boulton (University College Chester). (BJHP, June)

Children who worked together on a sorting task got better at it – but only those children of lower sorting ability who collaborated with higher sorting ability peers and who were asked to explain the task to them. (BJEP, June)

Also: Control theory and psychopathology; CBT for minor depression in routine practice; discourse analysis and ECT; drawing for psychological assessment; psychotic experiences (PAPTRAP, June). A psychosocial exploration of perjury, plus commentaries; self disclosure; identity politics, Zionism and the 'self-hating Jew'; immigration discourses; students versus locals; job search behaviour; discrimination between dominant and subordinate groups (BJSP, June). JS

□ See www.bpsjournals.co.uk for more information. Members can subscribe for just £18 (£13 for students).

SEEING EVIL

AFTER having a knife held to his throat and then witnessing the shocking attack that left his mother Abigail Witchalls paralysed, just how will 21-month-old Joseph cope? His ordeal echoes other horrific attacks in this country – the murder of Rachel Nickell on Wimbledon Common, witnessed by her two-year-old son, and the case of Josie Russell, who survived the hammer attack that left her mother and sister dead. Can these children ever fully recover?

The *Psychologist* spoke to Peter Norman, Senior Educational Psychologist at Buckinghamshire County Council, who specialises in helping traumatised school children. 'It's important to emphasise that we can't be prescriptive,' Norman said. 'Whether and how Joseph recovers will depend on a whole range of factors – his personality, the family support he receives, the extent of his mother's recovery, and how he processes what happened.'

In very young children, most of the encoding will be non-verbal, 'so even later on it can be extremely difficult for them to talk about how they feel', Norman explained. 'Whereas adults talk things through, young children tend to deal with trauma through play and re-enactment. This can be therapeutic, especially in the presence of a supportive adult on hand in case the child is frightened by their own play.'

Adults can be asked how they are thinking and feeling, but post-traumatic stress in children is characterised by changes to their behaviour. 'They can become withdrawn, subdued...they might become anxious whenever they're apart from their mother or father...or grow attached to a favourite toy or object; they might develop certain fears associated with the incident,' Norman said. 'Perhaps enclosed spaces or knives in the Witchalls case. They may regress, going back to a time when they felt safe. This can manifest in

having to re-learn skills like toileting or how to feed themselves.'

To set against this gloomy picture, there is evidence, as Norman explained, that children under the age of three or four might be insulated against some of the effects of trauma. 'There's a well-known Californian case written about by Leone Terr, involving the kidnapping of 26 schoolchildren in 1976. Terr reported that for the most part the younger children didn't experience intrusive flashbacks, and she proposed they were protected by their tendency to intentionally daydream and to spontaneously re-enact their traumatic experiences in play.'

So what kind of psychological help can families like the Witchalls be given? 'It's important to provide support for the whole family,' Norman explained, 'especially the primary care giver – in this case Joseph's father

– who will be having to cope with so much at once. Whether it would be better to offer immediate specialist help to the child or to wait isn't easy to say. But at some stage, therapists will try and help Joseph express his feelings through play, with puppets perhaps, or through drawing.'

People often talk about children having immense powers of recovery, but can a child like Joseph really ever recover from such an ordeal? 'If you mean "will it always be with them?" – of course it will,' Norman said. 'But that doesn't mean that with the right support and help they can't go on to have a happy fulfilled life.' CJ

WEBLINKS

The Child Traumatic Stress Clinic at Maudsley Hospital: tinyurl.com/8vhwk
The Trauma Clinic: www.traumaclinic.org.uk/

Happily married

'NO man is an island', unless, it seems, they are cohabiting. A large-scale survey has revealed that married people's life satisfaction is strongly influenced by their spouse's happiness, but that a similar effect is absent among unmarried partners who live together.

Nick Powdthavee of Warwick University presented his analysis of data from the British Household Panel Survey (tinyurl.com/422js) to the Royal Economic Society annual conference in March (www.res.org.uk/). Powdthavee focused on factors – including health, employment status, and partner's life satisfaction – that predicted a person's annual answer to a single item measuring their own life satisfaction. The analysis involved answers from 9704 married people and 3325 cohabiting people recorded between 1996 and 2000. He found that for married people only, their partner's happiness seemed to have a significant effect on their own life satisfaction – for example, on average, a 30 per cent increase in the happiness of someone's spouse the previous year, completely negated the usual negative influence of unemployment on their own life satisfaction.

A report on the work, available from Powdthavee's website (tinyurl.com/3qsq4), concludes: '...this finding may come as a surprise to some economists who are used to the assumption that the idea of risk-sharing between couples also applies to partners in non-marital groups.'

CJ

Dangerous liaisons

A NEW study has sought to uncover what makes some women vulnerable to abusive dating relationships. According to the report's authors, April Few and Karen Rosen at the Department of Human Development at Virginia Tech., violence occurs within 30 per cent of dating relationships, 50 per cent of which remain intact, thus leading to chronic abuse.

The participants (average age 22 years; 21 Caucasians and 7 black Americans) in this study had been in relationships lasting from three months to nine years, and physical and psychological abuse had started within three weeks to two months.

Analysis of 120 hours of interviews pointed to two dimensions of vulnerability – 'relational vulnerability' and 'situational vulnerability', offset by protective factors like high self-esteem. Relational vulnerability refers to things like whether a woman was exposed to family violence in

her childhood, and whether she has developed a 'caretaker identity' that stems from growing up too fast – what the authors call being 'adultified in childhood' – causing them to feel a responsibility to rescue and protect their violent partners. Situational vulnerability refers to current life circumstances, like being lonely after moving away from family, or feeling the need to be in a serious relationship or to lose one's virginity because of the age one has reached. There were also cultural vulnerability factors unique to the black participants. They cited the scarcity of eligible black men, and their concern for protecting the wider perception of black dating relationships in the community. One woman said: 'The public often sees black relationships as dysfunctional; I didn't want to be a statistic.'

The authors said their findings have clinical implications: '...the Vulnerability Conceptual Model may be useful in helping survivors engage in self-reflexive exercises to determine their own relational and situational vulnerabilities.' They recommended 'narrative therapy' that 'provides options for the telling and retelling of preferred stories of people's lives (their solutions) while deconstructing problems through the techniques of externalisation (separating the person from the problem)'.

Their report on the interviews, which appears in the April issue of the Blackwell journal *Family Relations* (tinyurl.com/6mqnz), concludes: 'Identifying women's vulnerabilities can enlighten those who might want to help women become, as one participant put it, "abuse proof".'

CJ

MindArt Project at Cardiff

STAFF and students at Cardiff University's School of Psychology will

be consulted on the design of a permanent work of art to be sited outside the school's main entrance. The artist Peter Randall-Page has been commissioned to develop a design proposal that demonstrates the capacity of the visual arts to communicate the science and practice of psychology.

The MindArt Project was conceived as a celebration of the School of Psychology's international standing and as a contribution to the 'Cardiff 2005' celebrations. Cardiff

is celebrating 100 years as a city and 50 years as the Welsh capital. The project's leaders, Professors Dylan Jones and Peter Halligan, envisage a new work of art 'that communicates the enthusiasm and commitment to understanding the human mind'.

During a short residency Peter Randall-Page will be able to talk to and observe staff and students to gain an awareness of the school's research and strengths. The concepts developed during this stage will lead to the preparation of a detailed design proposal. PDH

Are job references useless?

VIRTUALLY any job you apply for will involve you providing the names of two or more referees, so that your potential employer can read a firsthand account of what you're like. But your would-be employers could be wasting their time. Research by Dr Mike Aamodt at Radford University in America shows that most job references say more about the person who wrote them than they do about the job applicant.

Aamodt analysed thousands of job references and found there was greater correlation between letters of recommendation written by the same referee for two different people, than there was between two letters about the same applicant written by different referees. What's more, Aamodt found referees' evaluations tend to be ridiculously positive. Analysing hundreds of university applications, he found that referees had rated 96 per cent of candidates as above average in their ability, compared with just 0.23 per cent rated as below average.

JOHN HARRIS (REPORT DIGITAL)

It's understandable why referees don't want to be negative about someone who has asked them for a reference, but the question is – are these procedures serving any useful purpose for recruiters?

Dr Rob Yeung of business consultancy Talentspace says he isn't surprised by these findings. 'The main problem is that candidates are free to choose whoever they like to

write the letters. So even if a candidate was fired from their last job, they can probably find a sympathetic colleague from that company who will word something positive for them. One way that letters of reference could be made more useful is to always approach the person's last boss or human resources. Perhaps their usefulness could also be improved by giving referees

a standard format with which to reply – for example five-point Likert scales on key skills such as communication, team work, work attitude, and so on – which might remove some of the confusion generated by carefully worded references.'

BPS member Dr David Pendleton believes it is important that organisations have some way of finding out about candidates from those who know them. 'But there seems to be a game that is played,' he said, 'which might be called: "Guess What I Am Not Saying". You see, people have become nervous in many organisations: they are afraid of being sued for saying something defamatory so they say the absolute minimum that is factual. Even though there is room for misuse, I prefer to have a conversation with a referee so that I can ask him or her to comment on specific issues.'

Mike Aamodt's findings on job references were presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychology held in Los Angeles in April. CJ

Taking cognitive research a step forward

SCIENTISTS in Germany, Italy and Switzerland are developing a high-tech platform that will allow people to walk around unrestricted in a virtual-reality environment for the first time. If successful the 'Cyberwalk' project will revolutionise psychological research into spatial cognition and perception.

'Sensory processing and motor actions are inseparably linked and need to be studied in a closed action/perception loop. Cyberwalk will be a new and powerful tool that allows us to study this linkage in optima forma,' Dr Marc Ernst of the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics told *The Psychologist*. 'The system will allow

natural and omnidirectional walking through any desired environment (by means of immersive environments or virtual and augmented reality) and as such is unique in the world.'

The moving platform, nicknamed 'CyberCarpet', is planned to be five metres wide and made of thousands of small, loosely pivoted spheres – similar to oversized ball bearings – that will be able to rotate in any direction. The CyberCarpet will be fully integrated with a head-mounted display supplying visual and auditory input, thus allowing participants to roam freely in a virtual world of the experimenter's making. Dr

Ernst hopes that among its applications, the technology will allow psychologists to make great advances in 'the study of the representation of spatial environments, and the multitude of cognitive tasks that depend on this representation, such as the identification of landmarks and objects, guiding actions, navigation, and in directing spatial attention and awareness'.

The project is a joint endeavour of scientists at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics in Tübingen, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich and the University of Rome. CJ

□ *More details on the project website: www.cyberwalk-project.org/*