

# You had to be there

Alex Haslam (University of Queensland) opens our Annual Conference coverage with his report on a keynote by Robin Dunbar

Technology is often presented as a solution to the woes of the human condition. E-mail, for example, was initially promoted as a tool that would facilitate a host of cumbersome working practices and free up time for things that we really wanted to do. Reality, though, is less glamorous. Indeed, it sometimes seems that the main thing e-mail has freed us up to do is more e-mails. At a more specific level, the NHS National Programme for IT was initially sold as a project that would revolutionise health delivery and save both time and money by streamlining the management of medical records and associated processes across institutions, services and professions. Ten years and £13 billion later (enough to pay the salaries of 30,000 clinical psychologists for a decade), the project was scrapped without a single patient ever having benefited from it.

In such ways, our capacity to be seduced – but ultimately betrayed – by technological development seems to be as limitless as the budgets that such developments demand.

Turning, then, to new social media like Facebook and Twitter, a critical question is whether their promise to create a new super-connected and super-socialised citizenry is equally far-fetched.

Do they really offer anything different? And, if they do, is this something we really need or can actually use? These were questions that Robin Dunbar – Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology at the University of Oxford – addressed in his recent keynote address to the British Psychological Society's Annual

Conference in Harrogate in April.

Despite the fact that many of the speaker's lectures are available online (e.g. on Oxford's Creative Commons website), the auditorium was packed to the proverbial rafters. This itself bears testimony to the fact that in the age of the digital classroom, there is still

something significant to be gained from face-to-face experience. Moreover, having been there, this is something to which I can attest. Indeed, in itself, the ability to say 'I was there' is no trivial thing. For those at the BPS meeting it affirms one's place in the world as a high identifier with contemporary psychological science just as surely as having seen Derek Stark's screaming 40-yard goal in Dundee United's 2-0 victory over AS Roma in the 1984 European Cup semi-final marks one out as a committed and credible Tangerines fan.

Moreover, having watched the Roma match replayed on YouTube and listened to Dunbar again on Podcast, I can confirm that technology does violence to social reality. At Tannadice, Stark's shot screamed into the net like a guided missile,



The Society's Annual Conference in Harrogate in April was attended by more than 500 delegates

## Opening the box

Robin Dunbar returns the favour, with his report on Alex Haslam's keynote

Every discipline has its icons, and for social psychology these are surely the classic studies of conformity and aggression carried out by Stanley Milgram at Yale in 1961 and Philip Zimbardo at Stanford exactly a decade later. Taking a leaf from Hannah Arendt's analysis of the Eichman Nazi warcrimes trial that same year, the grand conclusion from both these studies was that humans are not intrinsically evil, just mindless conformists. Alex Haslam takes a different view.

One starting point for this claim was Haslam's own investigations, with Steve Reicher (University of St Andrews), in the Milgram archives. What caught their attention was Box 44 – the original handwritten comments made by Milgram's subjects after the experiment. Among the most common was gratitude for having been allowed to take part in an important, ground-breaking scientific experiment – ordinary folk making their

contribution to science, something they viewed as worthwhile. (Oh, the days when scientists were held in such high esteem!) In essence, Haslam's argument is that most of these people were far from being distressed by their experiences (as some have claimed) but rather were delighted to take part, felt honoured by the opportunity and were therefore committed to the grand project (science) that the experiment represented. They would have

done whatever Milgram asked because they believed in him: this was 'engaged' (or identified) followership, not mindless conformity. Milgram himself had contributed to the effect: it was clear from the notes that he had 'bigged up' the experiment and their value in it.

Both Milgram and Zimbardo were skilled salesmen, and this in part explains why their experiments succeeded. Herein, mused Haslam, may be

on YouTube it looks altogether more ordinary. And although Dunbar's lecture was up there with very best, the same is true of conference keynotes. Moreover, it is one thing to hear the applause of others, quite another to be part of its collective authorship.

Technology, then, is a good supplement but a poor substitute for the real thing. And much the same, it turns out, is true of Facebook friends. In its infancy Mark Zuckerberg's creation was promoted as having the capacity to do for friendship networks what jet engines did for aeroplanes – with possibilities limited only by the scope of the user's imagination. In the case of Facebook, this means that one could potentially have up to 5000 friends. But in reality, unless they are using them for something other than friendship (e.g. as a client base or fanclub) the number of friends that people actually have appears stubbornly constrained to an average of around 150.

For Dunbar, 150 is an integer that has particular resonance, since it is the number that bears his name. Why? Well because, as his research has shown, this is a recurring number when it comes to modern social groups (equating 'modern' with the emergence of the human neocortex approximately a quarter of a million years ago). It is, for example, the size of a band of hunter-gatherers, the size of effective organisational units (as discovered by Gore-Tex), and the number of people that typically read the Christmas cards we send.

Dunbar's key point is that for all its promises, the value of technology is always constrained by human socio-

biology – in this case, the number of people with whom we can interact meaningfully. Biology (the size of the neocortex) places limits on the number of people whose names we can remember, whose activities we can work into our diaries, whose allegiances we can monitor. Or, looked at another way, it was the need to sustain large social networks (and, in the animal kingdom, 150 defines the upper extreme of a continuum) that required us to develop brains that could support this.

Going back to one of the examples with which we started, the significance of this analysis is that it points to the problems that are likely to arise when we put a technological cart before the social psychological horse. The reason the NHS IT project failed was that its architects imagined foolishly that social behaviour would necessarily follow where computer science led. Likewise, it seems naive to believe that Facebook or any similar product can, in and of itself, be a panacea for problems associated with a lack of human connectedness.

This is not to say that such technologies are worthless. Indeed, Dunbar presents plenty of evidence that speaks to their utility and value – something with which 40 million Facebook users would no doubt agree. The critical thing, though, is that our appreciation of their worth and our ambitions for their application must be tied to an appropriate understanding of the nature of human society. Indeed, empirical work that explores the impact of new technologies affirms that, far from making such understanding redundant, it is now more important than ever.

an answer as to why young graduate students so often find their experiments not working properly: unlike Milgram and Zimbardo, they lack the 'identity entrepreneurship' to talk up their project and persuade their subjects to engage enthusiastically.

Towards the end of his lecture, Haslam turned back to Arendt's assessment of Eichmann, a view that had played a seminal role in Milgram's own thinking. In fact, Haslam makes a case for

their having been 'identified followers'. Himmler's 'Posnan Speech', delivered in 1943 to his SS extermination squads in Poland, illustrates this. Like Milgram, Himmler played up the big story – the contribution the squads were making to the greater good. Yes, it was dirty work and hard to do, and, yes, none of them liked doing it... *but* by giving the squads a purpose in the grand scheme of things, he was able to turn ordinary men into engaged followers,

enthusiastically and creatively doing what was necessary.

The key insight is that it makes nonsense of the 'they-made-me-do-it-guv' defence. Eichmann and his ilk were not forced to do what they did. They weren't even given orders by the Führer (as Eichmann claimed in his defence). Theirs was a willing and committed engagement with the grand plan. Hitler didn't need to tell them what the plan was: their whole being was committed to second guessing what the

## THE WAY THEY MOVE

The vulnerability of child and adult witnesses to leading questions is well documented. But what about the way the interviewer moves their hands? Elizabeth Kirk at the University of Hertfordshire presented her research that involved the questioning of 30 two- to four-year-olds and 26 seven- to nine-year-olds about the events in a 90-second video.

Kirk found that 93 per cent of the children were susceptible to being misled by an interviewer's gestures – for example, stroking their chin at the same time as asking if a (clean-shaven) man in the video had had a beard. On average the children incorporated around 2.5 out of eight misleading gestures into their narratives. Age and superior language ability offered no protection. Among older children only, a greater tendency to mirror the interviewer's gestures was associated with more vulnerability to misleading gestures. 'These findings have serious implications for how we interview child witnesses,' Kirk said.

A related line of research was presented by Daniel Gurney, also based at the University of Hertfordshire. Sixty adults were presented with a staged crime captured on CCTV and then asked 20 questions about what had happened. If the interviewer nodded as the participants answered, the participants tended to say they were more confident in their answers. In contrast, a shake of the interviewer's head was associated with reduced confidence. Debriefed afterwards, it was those participants who said they'd noticed the nods and shakes who'd shown the strongest signs of being influenced.

A member of the audience asked about the subtlety of the gestures – would police interviewers really nod and shake their heads in this way? 'We spend a lot of time performing these gestures in the most natural way possible, rehearsing them,' Gurney said. **CJ**

# Emotional closeness across the net

As use of social media like Facebook and Twitter has exploded, there's been an accompanying cacophony of speculation about the impact of these new media on our relationships. This symposium on the 'perils and pleasures' of social media was a chance at last to hear about some actual data on this controversial issue.

Jens Binder of Nottingham Trent University began by describing his new 'fictitious friends' paradigm. Student participants read six-month-long exchanges between two friends conducted via virtual media (such as Facebook) or traditional media (such as the phone and face-to-face).

Virtual exchanges were rated as less enjoyable, even though the content was just as positive as in the exchanges by traditional media. The students' own technology use also made a difference. Binder said low-tech users were 'blown away' by friendship exchanges that relied on virtual media, rating them very positively, but were less impressed by more traditional interaction patterns. The reverse was found for high-tech users who responded less positively to virtual media use.

A similar study involving female non-students recruited online found that



friendships relying on virtual media were rated more negatively, but only when it was a close friendship.

Next we heard from Sam Roberts (University of Chester), who has been looking at the question of whether Facebook has the potential to increase the size and/or intensity of our social networks – in other words, to overcome 'Dunbar's number' (the idea that time and cognitive restraints limit the number of people we can maintain in a social network). Two studies comparing Facebook users vs. non-users found no differences in their social network size or emotional closeness to contacts, even when focusing only on 'active' users as opposed to passive browsers.

Most compelling was Roberts' diary study in which, for two weeks, 41 people kept track of their interactions with five friends, including how they felt after each contact and how much they laughed. People reported laughing more and feeling happier after face-to-face contact, including via the video-call platform Skype, compared with after text-based or phone contact. Roberts said this shows the importance of non-verbal cues.

What of the idea of media multiplexity? This states that relationships improve as more media channels are used for communication. Bernie Hogan at Oxford University put this to the test, analysing data from 24,242 husbands and wives from across Western Europe. He found that emotional closeness between couples increased the more types of media communication they used (ranging from interaction in virtual worlds to blogs, Facebook and more), but only up to a point. Beyond five forms of media, emotional closeness stalled or actually went into decline. Hogan speculated that perhaps excessive multimedia contact reflects couples' attempts to save their relationship, or maybe it's a sign of stalking behaviour as people lose trust in their partners. Hogan also shared an irony – his study had been sponsored by the dating website eHarmony, he said, and yet he found overall lower levels of closeness between spouses who first met online.

Lastly, we heard from Monica Whitty at the University of Leicester about the hundreds of thousands of people who have been ripped off by online dating scammers. The fraudster uses a fake photo and profile and close daily internet contact to 'groom' their victim. At first, a small gift is requested, and this progresses to a request for an airfare to visit the victim. 'Crisis' occurs when they fail to show up, by which time real-life personal relationships have often been displaced.

Whitty has conducted in-depth interviews with 20 victims of these scams. Often the image they have formed in their head of their new 'partner' is so strong that they find it difficult to correct even when the truth is known. Some victims even continue to cherish supposed 'photos' of the person who scammed them. Whitty said the key for prevention was breaking up the relationships before the requests for money start. CJ

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: KEEPING A ROOF OVER PSYCHOLOGISTS' HEADS

**In his Presidential Address, Peter Banister addressed 'ignorance about how the Society is governed and how it works', and reminded us of the successes of the Society in notably challenging times. The shift to HCPC regulation went 'smoothly', with approval also gained for the BPS qualifications. Membership numbers increased in anticipation of the HCPC move, and have remained at a steady level. Financial stability has been achieved – with the BPS literally keeping the roof over psychologists' heads despite persistent thieving**

**of the lead from the roof of the HQ building in Leicester!**

**Banister also pointed to other ways the BPS is growing and evolving to meet the needs of its diverse membership and to improve public impact. These included the Learning Centre and online shop; myCPD and e-learning provision; 100+ conferences and events a year; an increased public policy emphasis; the international impact of the Research Digest and the availability of *The Psychologist* in several formats; and an expansion**

**in electronic resources for members, such as EBSCO and Wiley Blackwell journal access, and the new PsychSource portal.**

**Banister described the Society's web and social media developments as 'a good effort': although he said 'I do not personally find it as useful as it might be', it has been a developing avenue for increasing public awareness and information sharing about both the BPS and psychology in general. On that note, do feel free to share your thoughts on the successes and challenges of the BPS on Twitter via @psychmag. AJ**

# The lives of asylum seekers

This symposium, convened by Simon Goodman of Coventry University, explored the experiences of people who have fled their home countries to escape conflict, persecution or violence. Four papers were presented that analysed asylum seekers' accounts of their life in the UK using a qualitative, predominantly discursive approach. Helen Liebling (Coventry University) argued that safety was of fundamental concern for asylum seekers. Although the UK was generally considered a 'safe haven', they are frequently the target of hostility and racism from the community, and harsh sometimes inhumane treatment from the Home Office. The greatest fear for asylum seekers, however, is to be forcibly returned to their country of origin to face persecution or even death. Liebling disclosed that symptoms of trauma are common, which are exacerbated by loneliness, disorientation and feelings of being trapped and controlled by punitive Home Office procedures. Support received from friends and refugee centres in the UK is particularly valued, as many asylum seekers are destitute and homeless.

Steve Kirkwood (University of Edinburgh) considered asylum seekers' constructions of racism and the consequences for social relations. Reflecting Liebling's findings described above, most participants had experienced antagonistic behaviour, ranging from name-calling to serious assault. Such experiences were downplayed or even excused, however, as participants were reluctant to acknowledge that widespread and ingrained racism exists in the UK. A range of alternative motivations for such behaviour, such as boredom and ignorance, was expressed. Kirkwood argued that attributing antagonistic behaviour to racism is problematic for asylum seekers; they are reliant on the host country for protection and may appear ungrateful if they criticise its citizens. He also proposed that it is functional for asylum seekers to make unstable attributions for what are clearly racist acts, as this engenders optimism for their future integration into UK society.

Maria Clare (University of Warwick) investigated how women refugees from Africa talk about emotion to construct an empowered and resilient identity. Analysis of participants' accounts revealed two interconnecting themes: 'rejecting pity' and 'being strong' in the face of trauma

and adversity. Clare argued that seeing themselves as resilient, allows participants to position themselves as responsible and capable mothers who are in control of their life and able to work towards building a better future for themselves and their children.

Nonetheless, she indicated that a discourse of strength can be problematic, as it can mask vulnerabilities and reduce opportunities for support to be offered and accepted.

In the final paper, Shani Burke (Coventry University) investigated how refugees manage talk about returning to their countries of origin. As was highlighted in earlier presentations, participants contrasted the safety of the UK with the danger of their home country. Although participants frequently faced

hostility and punitive treatment and did not feel they were living a good life in the UK, they were prepared to sacrifice happiness for safety.

The research findings presented in this symposium were in stark contrast to mainstream media representations whereby a horde of 'bogus' asylum seekers come to the UK for financial gain. Although the UK is considered a safe haven, refugees continue to face many privations here and their long-term safety is far from guaranteed. Nonetheless, despite their negative experiences, refugees do not want to be pitied or seen as sponging on society. Participants' accounts revealed a genuine fondness for British people and British culture and a genuine wish to contribute to society. **OK**



## Who'd be a referee?

Constant stick from crowds, players, managers and the media. How do referees cope? Well, new research from Melissa Anderson (Northumbria University) suggests they are protected by an illusory belief that they are better than their peers. Anderson compared 11 Premier League referees with a larger sample of county-level officials. The refs rated themselves on positive characteristics such as how well prepared, confident and decisive they were, and negative ones such as their levels of anxiety and apprehension. Both groups saw themselves as superior to their colleagues, with no significant difference between elite and county refs (although age and years of experience correlated positively with superiority).

Turning to football managers, Andrew Manley (Leeds Metropolitan University) found that the impact of coach reputation was diluted by a footballer's 'need for cognition'. In other words, if a player was motivated to think, they were more likely to consider other sources of information when assessing a coach, rather than simply going on their trophy cabinet.

The trainer-exerciser relationship has parallels with the coach-athlete relationship, and Paul Davis (Northumbria University) investigated it in the context of 'bootcamps' and zumba classes. Feedback from trainers that was perceived to provide encouragement, improve technique and correct bad form was positively associated with closeness, commitment and complementarity. Perhaps surprisingly, instructors' use of criticism did not influence perceptions of relationship quality.

Lastly in this symposium, John Batten (University of Winchester) presented an ambitious field study into student-athletes' perceptions and behavioural responses toward a sport psychology consultant. When engaged in a standard imagery session with a consultant they had been told was inexperienced, student-athletes fixed their gaze on the consultant more so than if they thought they were experienced. Batten argued that they were engaged in a more rigorous and systematic data-driven strategy as they questioned the consultant's reputation. **JS**

# A violent version of the Mexican wave?

What can psychology teach us about the 2011 English riots?

For more than a hundred years, social psychologists have tried to understand the reasons why crowds engage in antisocial activities. Various explanations have been provided: deindividuation theory maintains that people indulge in 'mindless' violence because their personal identity is subsumed into that of the mob, whereas convergence theory holds that crowd behaviour is a product of a 'coming together' of individuals who are predisposed to criminality.

In this incisive and very well-received talk, Clifford Stott (University of Leeds) considered the utility of these 'classic' psychological explanations in explaining why a peaceful protest escalated to serious rioting in several cities and towns across England in late summer, 2011. He argued that such explanations are flawed as they imply that antisocial behaviours by crowds would occur randomly, whereas analysis of the circumstances surrounding the riots has identified specific patterns.

Stott highlighted a determination amongst mainstream commentators to pathologise the riots and those that were involved in them, whereby the events were popularly constructed as a 'violent version of a Mexican wave' performed by 'flaming morons' and 'feral rats'. He also observed a general reluctance amongst these commentators to see the riots as a

rational, collective response to oppression by the state. It is important to note that in the months prior to the riots, police in Hackney and Tottenham (a key area for rioting) performed 6894 stop and search procedures, mainly on young black men, but 6807 of them resulted in no further action. By rejecting the notion that the



riots were a rational response to such treatment and a reaction to the cuts, Stott argued that these commentaries raised important questions about the marginalisation of psychological theory where it contrasts with the government's ideological stance.

Stott argued that in order to improve

the management of future crowd situations and discourage the generation and escalation of violence, we must reject simplistic explanations that focus on mob pathology. It is vital to identify the circumstances that led to and fuelled the riots through an identity-based theory of crowd behaviour that acknowledges its

inherent complexity. In an analysis that drew on YouTube and Google Maps, Stott highlighted the role of the police, who typically acted against crowds as a whole rather than problematic individuals, thus engendering psychological unity and empowerment in such groups to resist police action. He concluded by emphasising the need for a science-based analysis of antisocial behaviour by crowds that embraces rather than marginalises psychological explanations, and the development of community-based interventions that work towards solutions rather than apportioning blame. The success of such interventions has been demonstrated, as Stott was involved in training police in conflict resolution techniques that proved to be successful in last year's London Olympics. **JK**

## MAGICIANS, MESMERISTS AND MEDIUMS

'You need people like me', argued Peter Lamont (University of Edinburgh), an expert in historical and conceptual issues in psychology. Psychologists are ahistorical, he said, neglecting centuries of data. In this talk, the focus was the feats magicians, mesmerists and mediums have performed, and what they can teach us about extraordinary beliefs.

Using plenty of nifty sleight of hand himself, Lamont demonstrated how tricksters direct the audience towards the 'effect' and away from the 'method' by harnessing our natural psychology: exploiting



naturally interesting stuff, using eyes, voice and body language, and reducing or diverting suspicion. I was struck by the difference between magicians and psychics: the latter group

are more likely to struggle, and sometimes fail, giving the impression that they are not in control of their 'powers' in order to make it all more plausible.

When it comes to measuring paranormal belief, Lamont again turns to history. As he points out, traditional questionnaires can appear flawed in the cold light of day. Witches do exist, some people do have the ability to predict the future, mind reading is possible to an extent. To Lamont, we can shed more light on what is 'paranormal', what is believed in, through historical

examples such as the Davenport brothers' spirit cabinet. As psychologists and historians we can then witness a kind of 'tug of war' around beliefs, where the exact same evidence used by sceptics becomes evidence of the nature of the phenomena for believers. Psychology itself is a product of thought and behaviour, Lamont argued, it's reflexive. Even the modern sceptical movement is an expression of certain beliefs about the paranormal, and it is only the turn to history that can help us understand how people continue to come to the conclusions that they do. **JS**



## Contemporary masculinities

This symposium, convened by Peter Branney from Leeds Metropolitan University, explored how representations of masculinity are lived out in and through the body. A total of four papers were presented, followed by an open discussion through a pecha kucha (a presentational method showing 20 images for 20 seconds each to initiate intensive discussion) led by the artist John D. Edwards.

Branney began the symposium by considering how conceptions of masculinity can be embodied in the penis, and how this sense of masculinity is affected by penile cancer. Although penis cancer is rare, accounting for less than 1 per cent of new cancer cases, it has the potential to cause significant trauma. This is not only through the cancer in and of itself, but also through the potential surgical removal of penile tissue. Losing part, or indeed all, of the penis left some males in this study feeling 'less of a man', although others recognised that there was more to being a man than possession of a penis. One of the key messages to emerge for this talk was that the support of a partner could be very important for feeling secure. Some of the interviewees indicated that they had even altered their sexual techniques following surgery, which had the positive effect of 'spicing up' their relationships.

Kate Hunt, from the MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit in Glasgow, considered men's reactions to being diagnosed with breast cancer. One of the first challenges faced is for men to reconcile having an archetypal female cancer in a male body. Male breasts are seldom the subject of discussion, unless linked to obesity, and many males do not realise that they can be diagnosed with breast cancer. Some men had elicited shock or

disbelief from others and had to show their scar from breast removal surgery to convince others that they actually had breast cancer. This led to men having a dual status as both 'a man' and 'a breast cancer patient', statuses which had hitherto been regarded as mutually exclusive. This presents challenges to men in (re)forming their identity and sense of their own body.

Brendan Gough, from Leeds Metropolitan University, looked at the effectiveness of the 'Motivate' scheme in Nottingham to help men manage their weight. Male obesity is on the rise, but men tend to downplay the level of their own obesity. Similar to women, males on the 'Motivate' scheme rejected the idea of 'normalised' (BMI-based) ideal weights. Men also tended to use humour when discussing the issue of their own weight. Clothes acted as a barometer for their problems; if the men being interviewed could fit into certain clothes, or brands of clothes, they would feel better about their weight.

The final presentation in the symposium came from Paul Flowers, from Glasgow Caledonian University, looking at the rise in commodification of the aesthetic and function of the penis. There is a growth industry in marketing penis enhancements to men. Adverts for such techniques tend to link penis size to confidence, attractiveness and heterosexuality (there are very few, if any adverts aimed at gay men). These adverts try to establish their credentials through a strong biomedical theme, making their products and techniques appear more scientific and professional. The websites encourage men to view the penis as the centre of their lives and actively encourage comparisons with other men; constructing penile pathologies and concomitant vulnerabilities for many men. **MS**

# Revisiting the classics

Where other sciences have their cardinal theories, the foundations of social psychology rest on a series of controversial, classic studies that have shaped the course of the discipline. This symposium revisited three – ‘interrogating’ them, in the words of co-convenor Professor Alex Haslam (University of Queensland), and moving our understanding forward.

Joanne Smith (University of Exeter) began, summarising Richard LaPiere’s 1930s ‘hospitality study’ in which he travelled across the US with a young Chinese couple. Despite this being a time of intense prejudice towards people of their ethnicity, the couple were denied board at only one out of 251 establishments. Yet when LaPiere contacted these same hotels and restaurants six months later, 92 per cent said they would refuse entry to Chinese people. To LaPiere, this showed there exists a profound disconnect between people’s stated attitudes and their actual behaviours.

Smith highlighted some of the shortcomings of LaPiere’s study – for example, he measured behaviour first, then attitudes, and he neglected to account for the influence of face-to-face social norms. Nonetheless, the research was hugely influential, inspiring others to identify the factors that affect whether there is a mismatch in attitudes and behaviour or not – including Icek Ajzen’s theories of reasoned action and planned behaviour. In more recent years psychologists have come to distinguish between explicit and implicit attitudes and their relationship with actual behaviour.

LaPiere was disappointed by the impact of his study, but, Smith said, ‘his key message – that we should not take anything about attitudes or behaviour, or their relationship, for granted – endures and continues to shape the field today’.

Next, Haslam was on fighting form as he accused post-war social psychology of



espousing a ‘conformity bias’ – the idea that we are somehow naturally inclined to obey and conform to group demands, as supposedly evidenced by the classic studies of Zimbardo, Asch and Milgram. Haslam took particular aim at Zimbardo’s

# Promoting equality

On hearing he was a joint winner of the Society’s Award for Promoting Equality of Opportunity, Martin Milton (Surrey University) said he felt ‘excitement, humility, but then real anger’. Titled ‘From Stonewall to the consulting room: Power, equality and sexual difference’, Milton’s talk explained why.

Milton said that attitudes to sexuality

have changed, and that sexual minorities are now treated better, experience less discrimination, less physical threat and increased occupational freedom. ‘I/we /the field have achieved something. But are we at risk of starting to get complacent?’

It’s not that long ago, pointed out Milton, that our own profession was divided on the topic, with homophobic comments and letters sent to the proposers of the then Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section of the Society. The profession was also complicit in how sexualities were treated in DSM. ‘My anger is telling me “don’t think we’ve cracked it”,’ Milton said.

Thankfully, Milton believes the anger has brought passion and energy to right some wrongs. Although critical of the Society for being ‘overly conservative’ in the past over what it could and could not do in terms of campaigning as a charity, Milton praised developments such as the guidelines for working therapeutically with sexual and gender minority clients, and the position statement on therapies



Mark Burton

attempting to change sexual orientation. ‘We didn’t miss that boat’, he concluded. ‘We have an amazing role in helping society move towards equality of opportunity.’

The other winner, Mark Burton (Manchester Metropolitan University), followed on with a stirring and thought-provoking summary of an ethical orientation that has evolved over the course of his career. We face a perfect storm of ecological, economic and social crises, he warned. To talk of ‘the promotion of equality of opportunity’



Martin Milton

claims that 'people cannot help but conform to the toxic requirements of toxic environments' – the so-called Lucifer effect – an idea that he's invoked to explain real-life instances of cruelty, such as at Abu Ghraib.

But Haslam pointed out that Zimbardo neglects to mention how much of an active role he played in the events of the Stanford Prison Experiment. Assuming the role of 'prison superintendent' Zimbardo issued dark instructions to his student guards, telling them: 'their [the prisoners'] life is totally controlled by us'. This fact, Haslam argued, 'is 'massively inconsistent' with Zimbardo's story that the prisoners received no training, that their behavioural script was 'their sole source of guidance'. 'No it wasn't,' said Haslam, exasperated, 'You fucking told them what to do.'

In contrast to the conformity model, social identity theory states that subordinated groups can resist

oppression, as long as they achieve a shared oppositional identity, as was shown to happen during Haslam and Steve Reicher's BBC Prison Study. Zimbardo has rejected this notion of prisoner uprisings as having 'no external validity'. But it clearly does: Haslam highlighted several real-life examples of prisoner resistance, including at The Maze, in Northern Ireland and Robben Island, South Africa. The model of conformity purportedly supported by the classic studies is 'dangerously flawed', Haslam concluded, 'appearing to explain why the social world is inherently toxic, rather than explaining how this toxicity is brought about by certain forms of leadership and identity – and hence how toxicity can be resisted and overcome'.

Last up, Mark Levine (University of Exeter) re-examined the story of Kitty Genovese and the bystander effect. He challenged the idea that 38 witnesses did nothing to help (in fact, none saw her actual murder), but he acknowledged the bystander effect itself is 'one of the most reliable, robust' phenomena in social psychology. This is the simple notion that people's sense of social responsibility is diluted by the presence of others. Unfortunately, said Levine, recognition

of the effect had for many years failed to translate into practical insights for how to overcome it, in part because it was assumed the group only ever inhibits helping behaviour.

Over the last decade, that's changed, as Levine and others have examined the social identity factors influencing when and why the presence of others can actually encourage rather than inhibit individual action. For instance, in a 2005 study Levine and his colleagues showed that Manchester United fans were likely to help a fallen Liverpool fan when their shared identity as 'football fans' had been primed. Another paper published in 2009 showed that bystander women were actually more likely to say they'd intervene to help a female attack victim when they were in a group with other women, as opposed to when they were on their own.

'It is only by unpacking the psychological relationships between bystanders, victims and perpetrators and how social identity processes might contribute to groups being harnessed for the power of good,' concluded Levine 'that we will be able to increase the likelihood of future Kitty Genoveses receiving help.' CJ

at this point risks being something of a diversion, Burton argued: it neglects (in)equality of circumstances. It is ameliorative, not transformative: the wider transformational, liberatory agenda is silenced. Burton's answer is community psychology, which he says offers a corrective to the psychologisation that can occur in psychology and in society.

Burton referred to recent events such as the Mid-Staffordshire NHS scandal, where 'staff acted so callously, leaving their hearts at the door of the hospital'. But care scandals are not new, he pointed out. So where did it all go wrong? Interestingly, Burton points to the colonisation of the Americas as a point at which other humans were redefined as subhuman, the outsider, the lower order. From then on, new coloniality did not require a colony any more – this sad situation is now integral to the modern world. We must work for the replacement of the present systems of domination, calling on liberation psychology in order to take the perspective of the oppressed. JS

## A LIFESPAN PERSPECTIVE ON ATTACHMENT

When we think of 'attachment style' the first thing that comes to mind is usually the relationship between infants and caregivers. The symposium convened by Andrea Oskis (University of West London) reminded us that Bowlby's theory of attachment is in fact a lifespan perspective, in which childhood experiences play an important role in shaping our relationships and emotional well-being in adulthood.

We know that insecure attachment stems from adverse experiences in childhood, but two talks showed that different types of mistreatment actually have differential impact. In a high-risk community sample of women, Antonia Bifulco (Kingston University) found that severe lack of care in childhood, through neglect, antipathy or role reversal, was related to insecure anxious styles of attachment, whereas severe abuse was related to insecure angry dismissive styles. Further, insecure attachment mediated the relationship between childhood experiences and new onset of depression and anxiety.

Vittoria Ardino (London School of Economics) considered the relationship

between childhood trauma, attachment style, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in forensic populations. Specific aspects of early childhood neglect and abuse in a sample of prisoners highlighted different pathways to PTSD, with maternal physical abuse particularly associated with risk of reoffending.

The other talks in the symposium looked at attachment style in adolescence. Insecure attachment style has previously been linked to dysregulated patterns of cortisol secretion in adult women but Oskis presented evidence that this link is also present in adolescent females. However, Catherine Jacobs (Kingston University) showed that change in attachment style during adolescence is possible. Her action research in partnership with St Christopher's highlighted the very high incidence of insecure attachment styles amongst young people in residential care. Following a social learning intervention with rewards for prosocial behaviour though, all but one of 58 young people aged 11 to 16 years showed some form of improvement in their attachment style. AJ

# Working memory and education

Whenever we need to hold multiple items of information in mind for further processing or imminent retrieval, it's our working memory that we depend on. In her keynote, Professor Susan Gathercole, Director of the Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit at Cambridge, described her lab's research showing how this mental capability varies between children, and the implications this has for their performance at school.

Research with more than 400 children aged 7 to 10 with poor working memory has found that they tend to make poor academic progress, they have difficulty following instructions and keeping place when writing and copying, and they struggle with classroom tasks that require both processing and storage of information, of which there are many.

Teachers often describe children with poor working memory as 'being in a world of their own' or 'always daydreaming'. Gathercole, a former winner of the Society's Spearman Medal and Presidents' Award, believes it's not the case that the children have chosen not to listen – it's that they can't help it. Their difficulties are similar to those reported in children diagnosed with the inattentional

form of ADHD, and Gathercole confirmed there is a large degree of overlap between the populations.

So, having identified the importance of working memory ability for children, what can be done to help those who struggle? In the first instance, there are practical steps that can be taken in relation to teaching style, including –

– being prepared to re-show information, keeping a close eye on pupils with poor working memory, teaching children strategies to compensate for their memory weakness, and conducting classes in a way that minimises the load on working memory. Gathercole has produced a free classroom guide for teachers which outlines these ideas in more detail (contact her directly).

Even more appealing would be if there were some way to improve children's working memory ability. This is the precise claim of many online brain training products, and Gathercole has been at the forefront of research testing one of these, known commercially as Cogmed. The programme involves playful but challenging games that place demands on children's working memory and that grow progressively more difficult as their performance improves. There have been

promising results. A 2009 study that Gathercole conducted with Joni Holmes and Darren Dunning found that 35 minutes training a day for 20 days or more (over five to seven weeks) led to significant, sustained improvements in working memory. There was also a small knock-on benefit for maths performance, but this hasn't been replicated.

And therein lies the crux of an ongoing controversy in this field. Although working memory training programmes improve working memory performance, many studies have now shown that these benefits don't generalise to learning performance or other aspects of daily life. Indeed, just days before Gathercole's keynote, the *New Yorker* ran an article by the Pulitzer-winning writer Gareth Cook with the stark headline: 'Brain games are bogus' (see also the recent meta-analysis covered on our Research Digest: [tinyurl.com/arnxjqz](http://tinyurl.com/arnxjqz)).

Acknowledging this transfer issue, Gathercole said the important point now is what to do about it. 'Is it the case that we've only done half the job?' she asked. Borrowing from the field of brain injury rehabilitation, Gathercole and her colleagues are now working on new training programmes, including the use of virtual school environments, that engender a flexibility in children, encouraging them to transfer their working memory gains to real-life tasks. Will it work? Watch this space! **CB**



The affable Peter Thompson (University of York) accepted his Award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology Education with modesty, humour and double entendre ('Hard things can be fun'). 'It's an award which I thoroughly do not deserve', he said, before going on to demonstrate ably why he does.

As the late Tom Troscianko wrote in his award nomination, Thompson demonstrates that good teaching can inspire good research. His famous 'Thatcher illusion', demonstrated for the audience in timely fashion two days after her death, began as a demonstration for electronics students, of high spatial frequencies in human perception. 'I went to the Tory party office in York', Thompson said, 'and did it on the living room floor in 10 minutes.' It has now been cited more times than there are words in the paper he wrote, Thompson noted: 'a good goal for any writing'.

So has he learnt anything about how you engage people's interest? Absolutely not, he said. But he had a message for people who say 'It's so easy for you, because visual perception is really interesting'. 'That's complete rubbish. There are people who can do it and people who can't. And I have no idea which are which.' **JS**

# Epistemic superhighway

Therapy is not just about the 'what' but the 'how' of learning, opening the person's mind via the establishment of trust. That was the key message from Professor Peter Fonagy (University College London) in his opening keynote, meshing themes of the conference such as the atypical mind, education and attachment.

Fonagy took the audience through some successes of the Children and Young Persons' Improving Access to Psychological Therapies initiative, an 'ambitious

plan to transform services from something already good to something great' by introducing evidence-based organisation of care.

At the heart of it all, in Fonagy's view, is communication: humans are predisposed to 'teach' and 'learn' new and relevant cultural information from each other. Infants display species-specific sensitivity to, and preference for, cues which mark that a piece of cultural knowledge is about to be transmitted. This opens an 'epistemic superhighway', with

ostensive cues (e.g. 'hello baby') triggering epistemic trust. Influential communicators (such as Bill Clinton, and Fonagy's own Hungarian teacher from school!) create the 'illusion' of recognising agentiveness of the listener.

Fonagy sees social adversity – most deeply, trauma – as the destruction of trust in social knowledge of all kinds. The solution, he concludes, is to set up clinical services that focus on partnership and communication. **JS**

# Doctors of the dark side?

Should psychologists help supervise the interrogation of terror suspects, ostensibly to ensure procedures remain safe and legal, or should we refuse collectively to play any part? This is a controversy, documented in our own news pages, that has rocked the profession for several years, especially in the USA, where declassified documents have shown psychologists were involved deeply in the design and practice of morally repugnant interrogation practices used in Afghanistan, in Iraq and at Guantánamo.

On the last day of the conference, delegates were shown an edit of US clinical psychologist Martha Davis's 2011 feature-length documentary *Doctors of the Dark Side*, which uses interviews and dramatic interrogation reconstructions to explore the controversy (see [www.doctorsofthedarkside.com](http://www.doctorsofthedarkside.com)).

We heard, for instance, about the existence in the US security forces of Behavioural Science Consultation Teams (BSCT – pronounced 'biscuit'), whose job it is to identify detainees' weaknesses. We heard how army psychologists like James Mitchell oversaw the waterboarding of detainees, including 83 instances of the practice used repeatedly on one single prisoner. And we heard how Mohammed Jawad, captured in Afghanistan by US authorities when he was just a teenager, had been subjected in prison to the

recommendations of a BSCT psychologist, including an instruction to 'work him harder' and increase his isolation. Released without charge after seven years, his mother apparently no longer recognised him.

And yet the film said complaints made to State Licensing Boards against Mitchell and other psychologists have so far all been dismissed. Often these cases are taken up at a local level because the psychologists are not members of the American Psychological Association, and so can't be disciplined by that organisation. The APA sanctions psychologists' involvement in interrogation so long as strict ethical guidelines are followed – a position that has provoked fierce criticism from many quarters, including Psychologists for Social Responsibility, who believe psychologists should have no involvement whatever.

On the discussion panel after the screening were Karen Kitchener, a former chair of the APA ethics committee, and Frank Margison, chair of the Trustees of Freedom from Torture. Kitchener outlined the five ethical principles she believes should guide all psychologists (including doing no harm). She stated her belief that all five principles had been broken by the interrogation psychologists featured in the film. **CJ**

## BOOK AWARD

The Society's Book Award was given this year, shock horror, for a book that contained not a single new idea. This is because, unusually, this year the award went to a populist book – *The Psychology Book* (DK, 2012). As part of the Big Ideas Simply Explained series, this text manages the seemingly impossible task of condensing all of the big ideas in psychology into a single volume, in a way that is informative and easy to understand. The scale of the challenge faced by the authors was further revealed when it became apparent that the two (of six) contributors giving the award speech, Marcus Weeks and Merrin Lazyan, had not actually met before accepting the award.

This was possible because the book is designed to be read in sections, allowing students, teachers, parents, any interested reader, to dip in and out of different aspects of psychology. Weeks and Lazyan described the difficulty of having to select the most important ideas in the whole discipline and fit them within strictly allocated spaces. The four other authors are Catherine Collin, Nigel Benson, Joannah Ginsburg and Voula Grand.

In the future more popular science books will be recognised by the BPS in this way, with the creation of four awards in different categories: academic monograph; practitioner text; text book; popular science. See [tinyurl.com/bmz6cxq](http://tinyurl.com/bmz6cxq) for details. **AJ**

## KETAMINE

James Moore, from Goldsmiths, University of London, spoke about the effects of ketamine on sensorimotor prediction in sense of agency (SoAg). SoAg refers to the experience of initiating and controlling actions in order to influence events in the outside world. SoAg is associated with a subjective compression of time: actions and their outcomes are bound together in subjective time. This is known as 'intentional binding' and, in healthy adults, depends partly on advance prediction of action outcomes. A disturbed SoAg is often found in schizophrenics, and is thought to be related to aberrant sensorimotor prediction. Ketamine is a well-established drug model of schizophrenia. Participants completed the intentional binding task on ketamine and, in a separate session, using a placebo. Relative to the placebo, ketamine significantly increased the contribution of prediction to intentional binding. This pattern of results closely resembles previous data from patients in the early stages of schizophrenia, rather than those with more established schizophrenic illness. This suggests that ketamine is a useful model of aberrant experiences of agency associated with the earlier, rather than the later, stages of schizophrenia. **MS**

## MALTREATMENT AND PSYCHOSIS

Over the past decade there has been a resurgence of research into the potential links between childhood maltreatment and the development of psychotic symptoms, reported Helen Fisher (Institute of Psychiatry). Accepting the Society's Award for Outstanding Doctoral Research Contributions to Psychology, Fisher began with the worrying statistics that 25 per cent of young people are maltreated by their parents, and 63 per cent victimised by peers. The risk of psychosis – hallucinations, delusions and thought disorders – is much higher if you've experienced such bullying and maltreatment, with physical and emotional abuse by mothers having the strongest association.

It's not an easy area to study – memory problems in self-report of maltreatment can clearly be compounded by delusions, and half of the association between childhood maltreatment and psychosis can be explained by re-victimisation in adulthood. Thankfully Fisher has been able to make use of the ALSPAC prospective epidemiological study to tease apart how the specific characteristics of abuse exposure are differentially related to psychosis. Fisher suggested a passive gene-environment correlation, in that having a parent with psychosis does increase your chances of being maltreated. Child maltreatment is one of many risk factors for psychosis, Fisher concluded, though most with psychosis have not been abused and most abused do not develop psychosis. **JS**

## INJECTING A FEELING

Facial-feedback theory postulates that the facial expression of an emotion (for example smiling) creates, maintains or strengthens that emotion. Michael Lewis (Cardiff University) argued that injections of botulinum-toxin (botox), commonly used to 'smooth out' facial wrinkles, can influence our emotional experiences. Evidence was provided that paralysis of the frown muscles may temporarily reduce levels of depression and anxiety due to an inability to use these muscles. Moreover, injections of botox into the forehead may increase gullibility, as people are unable to raise their eyebrows to express surprise and scepticism. The clinical implications of this research were highlighted by Lewis, whereby paralyzing the muscles responsible for nose wrinkling (the facial expression of revulsion) has the potential to reduce feelings of disgust in people with OCD, which is a common and distressing feature of the disorder. **GK**



TOM DALE

## Health, thinking and hormones

As part of the student stream, Peter Lovatt (University of Hertfordshire) gave an enthusiastic and engaging overview of his research on the psychology of dance and its many implications for well-being. Several different strands of research were covered, which were well illustrated by Lovatt's energetic dance routines and reinforced by audience participation. The impact of dance on thought processes was highlighted, whereby structured dancing can enhance divergent problem-solving abilities and improvisation can

improve divergent thinking and creativity.

Lovatt also highlighted the health-related benefits of dance, providing evidence that it can reduce symptoms of Parkinson's disease over and above the mere physical effects of exercise. Interestingly, only certain types of dance appear to be beneficial, with 'a tango being more effective than a foxtrot'. Research is currently under way to examine the long-term benefits of dancing for people with neurodegenerative disorders.

Dance also has an important role in the mate-

selection process. Lovatt's research demonstrates that a woman's fertility cycle influences the way that they dance. Women tend to isolate and move their hips more during their fertile periods. Eye-tracking techniques have shown that men's attention is more likely to be focused on women's pelvic area during this time. Also emphasising the role of hormones on dance styles, Lovatt explained that women tend to rate more symmetrical men (who have higher levels of prenatal testosterone exposure) as better dancers. **GK**

## TIME FOR A WIKIASSIGNMENT?

'There are projects to catalogue every cheese on Wikipedia; why not psychological topics?' So argued Martin Poulter, an Associate for Wikimedia UK. A keen Wikipedia editor himself, he was running a workshop to encourage more psychologists to do the same.

Some pages on Wikipedia – for example Asperger's syndrome – receive up to 20,000 views per day, yet are thought to be ripe for improvement. Popular misconceptions, abstract concepts, competing traditions, fragmented terminology and insufficient review papers all mean that this is often the case with psychology. Poulter covered the rewards of contributing: he estimates that his piece on confirmation

bias was seen by 53,000 people in one day and his efforts 'are a factor in the fact that people talk about confirmation bias more now'.

Why not encourage Wikipedia editing as an educational assignment, Poulter said. These are, after all, the same habits we're trying to encourage in degree-level education: critical understanding, active involvement and more. Also, 72 per cent of students in a US survey preferred a 'Wikiassignment' to a conventional assignment. I note that more than 2000 psychological scientists and their students have joined the Association for Psychological Science's Wikipedia Initiative: perhaps it's high time for a UK equivalent. **JS**

# The emotions of ethics

The psychologist gently told his client he was flattered by her feelings, but that it would be unethical for him to pursue the relationship outside of the office. She seemed to understand and left the office to go home, but her car wouldn't start. It was raining hard, so she returned to the office to wait for a tow truck. She was soaking wet, so the psychologist grabbed a towel and started to help her dry off. As he did so she turned and threw herself into his arms. They kissed and ended up having sexual relations on the couch in his office.

So concluded a fact-based scenario from Karen Kitchener (University of Denver) in her keynote (available in full via [tinyurl.com/cd93lyk](http://tinyurl.com/cd93lyk)), in which she argued that in ethical dilemmas people are often thinking with something other than their head. Emotional responses, and the environment in which they find themselves, can have a big impact.

Drawing on the theories of Herb Simon and Daniel Kahneman, alongside fMRI studies in neuro-economics, Kitchener demonstrated that many moral decisions result from affective processes that are non-conscious and automatic.

I was struck by her reference to the research of Mumford and colleagues, finding that with socialisation into the

social and biological sciences ethical decision-making improved or stayed the same; yet ethical decision-making decreased with years spent in the health sciences. Moral decisions were affected by perceptions of the department climate,



**Critical evaluation allows us to reflect on our intuitions, reform them when they are biased and make decisions when intuitions give us no guidance**

and with more exposure to unethical events students' moral decision making declined.

Kitchener postulates that ethical

justification has two levels: the intuitive, which is the seat of our emotional reactions to the situation, our values, the level of our professional identity development, and the facts of the situation itself; and the critical evaluative,

which allows us to reflect on our intuitions, reform them when they are biased and make decisions when intuitions give us no guidance. The moral principles identified by the model differ somewhat from those identified by the Society's own Code of Ethics and Conduct. They include nonmaleficence (do no harm), beneficence (produce good), respect for autonomy, justice and fidelity (be truthful, keep promises).

Kitchener presented a model of how such reasoning develops and a methodology that can be used to study its development. She finished with the implications of the ideas for teaching and learning ethics.

'Students need frank discussions of the ethical environments in which they find themselves,' she said. 'It is difficult and takes courage to be the only one who speaks up about the ethics of a situation. Hopefully, I found ways to give students that courage and that you will too.' JS

# The meaning of nostalgia

As I think back on my time at the BPS Annual Conference this year, I fondly remember the talks, the large quantities of coffee, the time spent with friends and colleagues new and old, the large quantities of wine, and the dancing at the gala dinner. Fortunately, I am aware that becoming nostalgic in this way is not just a way to procrastinate in the face of the looming exam-marking period. According to the winner of the Presidents' Award, Constantine Sedikides (University of Southampton), nostalgia, a sentimental longing for one's past, should not be viewed as a dysfunction or liability but rather as a psychological strength.

When people are asked to think about a nostalgic event and either write about it for a few minutes or note down four key words, their sense of social connectedness increases. People who have become



nostalgic are less attachment avoidant and less insecurely attached. Nostalgia helps to provide meaning in life, mediated by our sense of sociality.

Being nostalgic may also protect you

from death awareness and anxiety. How would you complete the following word: COFF\_\_? Sedikides showed that people who are asked to describe their emotions at the thought of their own death and then answer such a word completion task, respond differently depending on their level of trait nostalgia. High nostalgics are more likely to answer COFFEE, whereas low nostalgics are more likely to answer

COFFIN.

So, far from being a psychological deficit, nostalgia, according to Sedikides, both confers meaning in life and acts as a natural defence against existential threats. AJ

## MALE SUICIDE

Men aged in their 30s to 50s are particularly at risk of suicide because of potential social isolation linked to numerous changes in social roles and the conception of gender. That's according to Clare Wyllie, from Samaritans Policy and Research. Many males don't have a way of expressing or coping with the changes in their lives. Interactions with other males, who could provide social support, are often based on performing specific activities, such as sports, rather than discussing emotional issues. This results in the 'big build', which is an accumulation of mental issues and stress that continues until a breaking point is reached. Suicide prevention for this group must include the development of social connections as a key measure, taking into account the kinds of relationships and interactions men value. **MS**

## PTSD

Laura Freeman and Carolyn Choudhary, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, spoke about the occurrence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and its interrelationship with shame among new referrals to an NHS psychological therapy service. Shame may become a lasting disposition and involve defence strategies such as avoidance, concealment and aggression. These may affect interpersonal relationships and impede the process of therapy. Surprisingly, up to 79 per cent of participants in the study met a diagnosis of PTSD. Total shame scores were also high among the sample and positively related to PTSD scores. Interestingly, characterological shame (as opposed to behavioural shame or body shame) made an independent significant contribution to PTSD. These findings support the conception that shame may be a symptom of PTSD and that screening for PTSD and self-conscious emotion should be considered for patients seeking therapy. **MS**

# Learning about ethics

Ethical practice is at the core of psychological practice, and thus we might expect that teaching about ethics would be at the core of teaching about psychology. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily the case, as highlighted by Kirsten Bartlett (University of York) within the ethics symposium convened by Tony Wainwright (University of Exeter). A survey of postgraduate students found that around 65 per cent had received some formal ethics training at undergraduate level. Around the same level of PhD and master's students reported receiving training during their current courses, though this increased to nearly 100 per cent for clinical doctorate students. Worryingly, this means that some postgraduates will fall into a group who have not received formal teaching in ethical practice at any point in their studies.

The training that was reported was diverse, including structured teaching sessions, training focused on gaining approval for research, and training around specific dilemmas (for clinical students). It was also pragmatic, largely focused around how to gain research approval. A pragmatic approach to ethics teaching may be effective, but Bartlett asked whether this is really sufficient.



The potential consequences of insufficient training and knowledge in ethical practice issues were shown in a separate presentation by Jean Daly (University of Ulster). Daly explored how clinical psychologists, counsellors and psychotherapists respond to clients' disclosures of unprosecuted criminal offences. Only 52.5 per cent respondents felt adequately informed about their legal obligations, and only 56.4 per cent had received training about these. Of greatest concern perhaps was that some participants who were aware of their legal duty still engaged in non-reporting behaviour when faced with hypothetical scenarios. Factors which affected reporting rates were the identity of the client, type of crime, timescale since offence, and level of risk to third party.

Wainwright, Chair of the BPS Ethics Committee, reinforced the need to question the way we currently think about ethics and ethics training in light of moral psychology. Despite the existence of many codes of ethical conduct which psychologists in different organisations may operate within, there is still much unethical conduct. It seems it is a good time to ask whether we want to create pragmatic researchers and practitioners, or moral psychologists. **AJ**

# Mixed experiences of mixed methodology

Attendees of the workshop on mixed methods research, developed by Rachel Shaw (Chair of the Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section, Aston University), Nollaig Frost and Anthony Murphy (both Middlesex University), included undergraduates, practitioners and academics up to senior lecturer level. Although mixed research designs are not new, people were there not only to learn about these approaches but also to learn how to increase others' acceptance of them.

Mixed methods research might mean conducting a qualitative pilot study to

inform a larger-scale quantitative project. It could also mean integrating quantitative and qualitative measures to meet a research aim or understand the effectiveness of an intervention. This mix of quantitative and qualitative methods is usually what mixed methods research brings to mind. However, the workshop showed that it can also mean a mix of qualitative approaches or a mixture of types of data.

One approach covered was pluralism, where multiple qualitative methods are used to answer a complex research question. Looking at data through more than one lens,

rather than being driven by epistemological and ontological assumptions, may enable a greater level of insight into the meanings they contain. This is not about performing multiple analyses until you find one that produces the right result (equally an ever-present concern in statistical analyses, of course). Rather it was argued to be about putting the research question at the core, and accepting that there may be more than one explanation.

Whether psychologists can all accept that using more than one method may be advantageous is another argument altogether. **AJ**

# Protection or exclusion?

Do we have the right to risk harming vulnerable people by including them in research? Equally, do we have the right to deny people the benefits of research by deciding they are vulnerable?

Kate Bullen (Aberystwyth University) raised these challenging questions within the symposium on ethics convened by Tony Wainwright (University of Exeter). The key message was that we must strive to minimise harm but also maximise the benefit when conducting research with vulnerable groups. For example, although working with cancer patients receiving palliative care is emotionally charged (for both patients and researchers), this should be balanced against the way in which taking part in research can help to give meaning at the end of someone's life. And whilst we must use increased sensitivity when working with frail elderly populations, taking into consideration factors such as capacity and ongoing consent, this does not mean that it is right to exclude these older people from research.

An example of the dilemmas involved in conducting research with vulnerable people was separately provided in a talk by



Nadia Wager (University of Bedfordshire). Initially the project to conduct an online survey with survivors of sexual victimisation received an ethics rejection, prompting Wager to research the research process itself. Again, the key point was to minimise costs and enhance benefits. Literature showed that being asked about sexual victimisation was unlikely to bring up forgotten memories, whilst it was found that allowing people open spaces to record their thoughts and experiences maximised personal benefits. When the study actually went ahead, Wager asked participants to complete further questions about the experience of research participation. Survivors of sexual victimisation felt the survey was respectful, but interestingly people who did not have a history of victimisation felt it was not. Some reported experiencing unanticipated distress, and for a small minority this lasted the rest of the day, but participants also reported experiencing personal benefits. At the time of the talk, a follow-up study was planned but was struggling to receive ethics permission.

Both of these talks forced us to recognise that from the very moment we start considering the issue of vulnerability, we are beginning a power dynamic between researcher and participant. Who gets to say who is vulnerable, do you feel you should decide? **AJ**

# Still no simple autism answers

Angelica Ronald (Birkbeck, University of London), winner of the Society's Spearman Medal, considered how far we have come in our understanding of autism since Leo Kanner first described it as a disorder in 1943. We are sure now that genes and environment both play a role. As the etiology of autistic traits does not seem to differ from that of autism, it is also thought that there is a continuum at both the genetic and environmental level of risk.

It has long been known that boys are more at risk of developing autism, but it has recently been recognised that this means girls who develop autism may have a greater burden of risk factors. Therefore,

it is particularly important to include females in studies of autism.

The triad of autistic symptoms identified by Kanner – social difficulties, communication difficulties, and restricted repetitive behaviours and interests – are now thought to be separable. Ronald explained the fractionable autism triad hypothesis, which suggests that these symptoms might actually have separate causes. Each part of the triad is individually highly heritable, but little overlap has been found in their heritability.

However, shared genetic risk factors have been found between autism symptoms and comorbid disorders, such as ADHD. It is thought that further research into comorbidity will

help to shed more light on the causes of autism.

Seventy years on, our understanding of what causes autism has certainly deepened but as Ronald's speech showed, there are no simple answers. **AJ**



Angelica Ronald

## YOUR REPORTERS

- Professor Robin Dunbar**  
(University of Oxford)
- Professor Alex Haslam**  
(University of Queensland)
- Dr Alana James**  
(Royal Holloway, University of London)
- Dr Christian Jarrett**  
(Journalist, The Psychologist)
- Professor Gail Kinman**  
(University of Bedfordshire)
- Dr Mark Sergeant**  
(Nottingham Trent University)
- Dr Jon Sutton**  
(Managing Editor, The Psychologist)