

In from the cold

SOME may well argue that a conference spread over two days can hardly be called gigantic. But let me assure you this was a real breakthrough: for the first time the Student Members Group Conference, alongside the Society's Centenary Conference, went beyond its usual one day, with seven invited speakers and many more student presentations.

Ann Phillips (Middlesex University) had the hard task of being one of the first presenters. Her research (carried out while on work placement at HM Prison Service headquarters) indicates that anger and poor emotional control can account for the majority of crimes committed on the spur of the moment with no advance planning. Even crimes that are planned weeks and months in advance may become more serious or violent in their execution through poor emotional control, particularly when something does not go according to plan.

Taking a cognitive stand, Lara Webber and Adam Broadhead (University of Durham) examined how people reason from simple bar graphs and which factors affect their reasoning. It emerged that visual factors and labelling influenced how easy it was to derive a conclusion from the graphs, suggesting that people tend to use visual strategies in graphical reasoning.

If you never before considered understanding neuropsychology through the movies, Professor Sergio Della Sala (University of Aberdeen) provided an original and convincing account of how these can come together. He used nearly a hundred slides to illustrate the myths, truths and concepts of neuropsychological science. In the film *Phenomenon* John Travolta develops amazing intelligence after seemingly being struck by light from another planet, illustrating a common Hollywood 'mind myth' that we only use 10 per cent of our brain capacity. If this were the case, we would expect nine out of ten people with a stroke to show no symptoms. Unfortunately, Della Sala argued, that hasn't quite proved to be true by neuropsychology. The demented grandma in *Mars Attacks!*, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito in studies of identical twins – never before neuropsychology has been so much fun.

Bringing a good dose of Scottish humour into the scientific atmosphere of the conference, Bryan Bennett (Glasgow

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Caledonian University) demonstrated that people with good mental health (as measured by GHQ-28) tend to laugh more at humorous stimuli than those with a low level of mental health. Despite the topic and prompting from the audience, the presenter himself did not laugh.

Looking beyond the constraints of the human mind and our egos, Ingrid Slack (Open University) concentrated on those experiences that constitute the subject matter of transpersonal psychology. In her engaging talk she outlined the meaning, relevance and practices of this direction in psychology, which is concerned with



Student Members Group stall at the Centenary Conference

unlimited potential, personal and spiritual growth, developing a deeper and more enduring self, and studying techniques such as meditation that help to encompass these objectives.

In his presentation entitled 'Counselling psychology – The person who came in from the cold' Stephen Munt (Roehampton Institute) examined history and the present development of counselling psychology as a profession, striving to bring back the subjective experience of being alive to psychology.

Examining the problems of identity construction in retirement, Irina Roncaglia (University of Surrey) concentrated on ballet dancers as a unique occupational group, characterised by extreme self-containment, early career start and early retirement. Her phenomenological inquiry highlighted that retirement from ballet is associated with identity confusion, depression and low confidence. It is important to encourage outside interests and social support, as well as to provide

counselling help in order to enhance the coping skills of those retiring from ballet and elite sports.

Jonathan Hill (an independent occupational psychologist) delivered his groundbreaking research into how well people know their strengths. It appears that a substantial minority have difficulty in identifying their strengths, while the majority describe their strengths in terms of situational and occupational characteristics, failing to account for more abstract and transferable strengths. Yet the science of positive psychology emphasises the importance and benefits of knowing and developing our strengths, contradictory to a traditional commonsense approach that we should spend more time fixing our weaknesses.

Many other themes explored by the presenters are definitely worth looking up in the proceedings; for example: age differences in the comprehension of poetic language with a view to shedding light on mental deficits in dementia (Lindy Newton, University of Leicester); examining the concept of complexity in relation to psychology (Kevin Kingsland, TSR International); and the application of psychology within emergency humanitarian assistance in the contexts of war and natural disaster (Alastair Ager, Edinburgh University).

Although I am no longer a student, I know that the next time I pick up a BPS Annual Conference programme I will not skim through the SMG talks but will treat these in exactly the same manner as I would any other BPS conference presentation. I have an enormous respect for all those students putting their thoughts, souls and hopes into what is often their first experience of publicly sharing their ideas with others – and for all those professional invited speakers who can clearly see where the future is.

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Articles, cartoons and other contributions for the 'Students' page are most welcome.

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