

The media: good and bad news

I would like to respond to the Media page article 'Who's your favourite TV psychotherapist?' (July 2011). As a trained journalist/broadcaster, clinical psychologist and former TV psychologist for 15 years or so, I feel my unique position in the worlds of media and therapy might offer some insight into these seemingly disparate realms.

First, there is endless confusion about the distinctions between the different types of therapists and both the public and broadcasters often erroneously assume that psychiatry, psychology, counselling, and indeed colour visual therapy, are all the same. In other words, they fail to take into account different levels and degrees of training and all therapists are considered the same. Second, frankly, they don't really care. The point of filling airtime is just that. All they are really interested in is a bum on a seat who doesn't freeze up while on camera. The content of what is said is instantly forgotten the moment they move on to the next story. Third, it helps a lot

if the person is 'televsual', especially for females, which is why a bevy of young beauties, irrespective of qualifications, often grace the sofas.

That's the bad news. The good news is there is a strong public appetite for



psychological analysis, ranging from the body language of politicians to explaining personal tragedy and cruelty, to even the seemingly frivolous antics of the *Big Brother* house, because they affect us all. The trick is to protect the practitioner term 'psychologist', as many people claim the title without the

qualifications, to understand that the media has its own agenda and that comments might be edited to give a different perspective than the one intended, and not to overstep the mark by giving a definitive opinion without all the facts or insider knowledge. This is easily done by saying 'I have not met X, so I can only speak in general terms about (depression, phobias, eating disorders, etc.).

Although the two agendas might at times be in conflict, in the main, I have found most broadcasters want experts who are both skilled and communicable.

Kristina Downing-Orr

London

I found the article 'Who's your favourite TV psychotherapist?' a very interesting read. Whilst I found it useful on some levels, it was unclear and even unhelpful, on others.

I suspect most psychologists who engage with the media (a least Chartered Psychologists) are well aware of the inherent 'dangers' associated with such work. It is important to highlight that media work still has some grey areas – areas in which there are no absolute right or wrong ways to conduct oneself (professionally speaking). One of those areas I believe to be, as the article puts it, 'non-expert commentary'. When journalists/press/media ask psychologists about their views on subjects 'outside their professional competence areas', psychologists should be able and indeed encouraged, to give their views and opinions. It is unrealistic (and arguably bad for psychology and the wider understanding of psychology) to expect, or be allowed, only to comment on those areas of professional competence. Are psychologists not also members of the general public and of a wider society? Yes

Displaced retaliation against rudeness

I enjoyed the article 'How rudeness takes its toll' by Christine Porath and Amir Erez (July 2011). I think it should be compulsory reading for anyone either already in or considering a career in management. However, I do have some questions about how one of the findings was interpreted by the authors.

One of the experiments described (Experiment 2) involved a stranger that the participants encountered on the way to the study who treated the participants 'uncivilly'. The participants' task performance seemed to suffer following this encounter even though 'participants had no reason to harm the

experimenter or to retaliate against him'. It was proposed that 'Using a "third party" perpetrator shows that "retaliation" and the "desire to strike back" explanations cannot solely explain the strong effect of rudeness on cognitive performance.'

First of all, even though the stranger was the

perpetrator of the rude behaviour towards the participants, why couldn't the participants' subsequent thoughts include those concerning retaliation against the stranger, in turn affecting their cognitive performance in the tasks set? To suggest that strangers are immune to such a reaction by the participants

Counselling psychology needs to take its 'proper' place

they are, and therefore they are also entitled to a view – at the very least from a 'freedom of speech' perspective.

I think the article misses the point that the public are interested not only in the 'expert views' of psychologists (i.e. information relating to individuals' areas of competence), but also in what psychologists think in general and on a wide range of contemporary subjects in the news and media.

So long as psychologists are not purporting to be experts on all areas of their discussion, why shouldn't they be allowed to comment? Surely if we were only allowed to speak out/have a view on those areas of our professional competence, programmes such as Radio 4's *All in the Mind* would not be permitted, where Claudia Hammond makes an excellent job of bringing all areas and all disciplines of psychology to the general public. As she presents the programme, she also comments and gives her own views/opinions across each subject, yet she is not an 'expert' in many of these areas. If she were only able to comment on her area of expertise, she would only be able to express opinions in the areas of health and social psychology. Food for thought.

Caroline Cotterell

Hindon
Wiltshire

seems a strange proposition.

Also, with regard to the participants having 'no reason to harm the experimenter or to retaliate against him', this is probably true but what about the Freudian concept of psychology? The stranger was not present during the experiment and so the experimenter (who in this case was not rude) may indeed make a far less threatening and immediately available substitute to displace any aggression against.

Richard M. Williams

Cheltenham

As a relatively recent psychology graduate I have joined the BPS as a graduate member and joined the Division of Counselling Psychology while I continue working towards chartered status in that profession. Since I joined, I have become thoroughly disheartened to note the extent to which counselling psychology is treated as the poor relation within applied psychology. Examples are many and varied. Last month saw the publication of a new applied psychology textbook, *Applied Psychology* (ed. Davey, G., 2011), published by BPS Blackwell, hailed by reviewing professors as providing 'a thorough overview of psychology in practice' (tinyurl.com/656z82h) it features chapters on clinical, health, forensic, educational, occupational, and sport and exercise psychology (each an area of applied psychology recognised with a Division within BPS), but not counselling psychology (also recognised with a BPS Division). Sadly, I am already aware enough of the standing of the discipline not to find this surprising.

A friend and colleague who is a Chartered Clinical Psychologist looked at me with an expression of horror when I told her than I planned to continue my psychology studies in the field of

counselling psychology, effectively telling me that counselling psychologists are not 'proper' psychologists – a view that I have heard expressed by numerous others. Of course we know that the state only values clinical psychology as this is the only subdiscipline that has any funding attached to training, despite all branches of applied psychology requiring training to doctoral level.

Wanting to make use of the resources from the BPS I logged onto EBSCOhost, to look for journals that I could use in my studies, only to find that of more than 500 journals available, only nine (slightly less than 2 per cent) appear to be directly relevant to counselling psychology and none of the journals I needed to complete my current assignment were available. This shows again how little importance is placed on counselling psychology.

I still believe that counselling

psychology is worthwhile and important, and the low regard in which it is held does not prevent me from continuing my training, but I would like to see more recognition of the subdiscipline within the BPS and within the wider world of psychology. I would also like to understand why there is this perception that counselling psychology is somehow not 'proper' psychology as this may help us to address the problem.

Catherine Coe

Exeter

Response from Carole Allan, Chair of the Professional Practice Board:

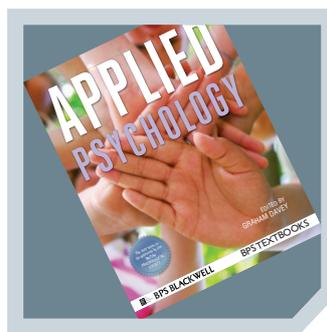
Graham Davey's *Applied Psychology* textbook focused initially on the areas most commonly taught at undergraduate level. As such, the six fields that are covered in detail in the book are those that are most frequently found as core

or popular elective modules on degree courses. It is, however, being extended to give broader coverage, and counselling psychology will be prominent among the new material being added.

The Division of Counselling Psychology and its members play a full, active and highly valued part in the wider life of the

Society. It is the Society's third largest Division with 3024 members of which 1511 are Chartered Psychologists. DCoP members are significant contributors to the work of the Professional Practice Board (PPB), the Standing Committee for Psychologists in Health and Social Care and a range of PPB working parties, and they share their expertise, knowledge and experiences when assisting the Society respond to public consultations. Barbara Douglas (a past Chair of DCoP) has just recently been elected as the Chair of Representative Council, an influential and important position in terms of the Society.

This is a brief overview of the wide range of activities undertaken by counselling psychologists. I am sure the Division of Counselling Psychology will go on to achieve even greater influence in the future.



What does it mean to be professional?

At the recent European Congress of Psychology I went to a session on 'Quality and Standards of Professional Psychology' – which is, indeed, an important topic. But I cringed at what was going on and exited.

I have a long-standing interest in the goals of education, the role of the universities, professional competence, and the tendency for the apparently laudable objective of generating standards to protect the public to result in the opposite; and, more specifically, in the case of psychology, to result in studies that, because of the limited range of outcomes that it is possible to assess with the tools currently available, are seriously misleading and often deeply unethical while presented as contributing to 'evidence-based practice'. I feel, therefore, that I cannot let the matter pass without sharing a few remarks.

To contextualise these remarks, I should perhaps first mention that I was already seething with anger arising from the fact that, while the official theme of the conference was to 'understand and enhance diversity', hardly any of the speakers said anything at all directly or indirectly relating to this topic – and those who did spoke only of ethnic diversity, without even coming to terms with many important issues arising from that. So far as I am aware, no one spoke about the huge diversity of talents, values, action-guiding beliefs, and motivations that are available in every classroom and the fact that these cannot be recognised, registered, nurtured or utilised using psychological assessment procedures that meet current test 'standards'. No one spoke about how these diverse talents can be harnessed to create emergent cultures of intelligence or enterprise or societies offering diverse patterns of life satisfaction and different chances of surviving into the future. No one spoke about the apparently abhorrent human predisposition to denigrate, even eliminate, values and life styles that differ from one's own and how such predispositions can be capitalised upon on the one hand and held in check on the other.

And so to the symposium: So far as I could see there was no discussion of the huge variety of roles and activities carried out by professional psychologists, no discussion of what is meant by *professional* conduct (as distinct from the routine execution of prescribed duties), no discussion of the role of the

universities in promoting the development of diverse, generic, motivationally based, high-level competencies, and no acknowledgement – let alone recognition of the significance – of the tendency of the majority university students from any academic discipline to enter employment in areas *outside* their discipline of study.

At least while I was there (and in the accompanying booklet) there was no discussion of the paucity of ways of giving students credit for having developed these diverse high-level competencies, no

discussion of the ways in which universities can nurture them and give lecturers credit for having done so, and no discussion of ways of differentiating institutions in these terms so that students can make informed choices between them. This despite the fact that 'everyone knows' that the institution attended is more important than the courses taken.

Yet these are all topics to which one might have expected psychologists of all people to have paid attention.

John Raven
Edinburgh

Little Albert will always be 'Little'

Like many psychologists I was first introduced to Little Albert as part of my A-level psychology course. The idea of a small child being conditioned to fear a harmless animal and the accompanying ominous 'clang' announcing the animal's presence was quite disturbing and has certainly resonated ever since.

When I came to do my degree in psychology I was reintroduced to Little Albert and re-reading the story eight years later certainly did not lessen its effect. So it was with great interest that I read the recent article 'Finding Little Albert' (May 2011). I had often wondered what had become of the lad. Did his mother know what was happening? Did he proceed through life with this fear of white rats or was he able to overcome it with some sort of therapy? And most importantly, did he know what significance he has had on psychology of learning?

I was saddened to read that his true identity has never been definitively proven, and that the most likely candidate passed away at the tender age of six, he never knew about his impact on the field of learning.

If Little Albert was really Little Douglas and if he had lived a full life, what impact would that have had on psychology? I found myself considering the following questions: If Little Albert had lived would he have eventually 'outgrown' his fear through experience? As the conditioning occurred at such a young age, might he have repressed the memories of the conditioning process and, with Watson's use of a pseudonym, might he have ever even realised that the event had occurred? Could he have lived



to adulthood and had children, none of whom would have realised how significant their father had been, could they even, here's a thought, have studied him themselves without ever knowing it. Had Little Albert lived longer, might Watson and Rayner have been able to track him down and conclude their research with follow-ups? This could have had implications, not only for learning, but also for phobias. I also wondered whether his poor health may have had anything to do with the ease with which his fear was conditioned: would a stronger child with a healthy brain have developed the fear as easily?

The article provoked so many questions in me, questions that we will never now know the answers to, but this does not diminish the strength of Watson and Rayner's work, the Little Albert study will always be a fine example of conditioning, and one that for all the wrong reasons, people remember.

So Little Albert, Little Douglas, or whoever he may have been, we raise a glass to psychology's long-lost boy.

Kirsty Plank
Reading

obituary

Miller Mair (1937–2011)

Professor J.M.M. Mair, known universally by his middle name Miller, was a pivotal figure in the development of psychotherapeutic theory and practice in British clinical psychology in the second half of the last century. He was still elaborating and deepening his and our understanding of the field when he died suddenly and unexpectedly on 9 June.

During the sixties and seventies the assault on rigid authority characteristic of the times took the form in clinical psychology of a reaction against the dominance of conventional psychiatry and a challenge to the dour hegemony of behaviourism in psychology generally. A particularly important strand of this movement was the liberating, humanising and yet still scientifically viable influence of personal construct psychology (PCP). PCP was introduced into British clinical psychology principally by Don Bannister, closely aided and abetted by Fay Fransella, Phillida Salmon and Miller himself. Miller and Don collaborated and became very close friends, co-authoring *The Evaluation of Personal Constructs* in 1968.

Clinical psychologists at that time were not trained in and indeed largely not expected to practise psychotherapy, and it was Miller's energy and initiative which, in order to address this lack, set up the Psychology and Psychotherapy Association in 1973. Now withered away, this organisation was important to many of us in offering a framework in which to talk, think and write about theory, practice and training in psychotherapy.

While respect for PCP and its creator George Kelly always lay at the heart of his approach, Miller was not restricted by their authority, not squeezed into a 'school', but embellished and elaborated the therapeutic possibilities he sensed within them. He loved and was fascinated by language and the avenues for therapeutic communication it offered, and he used it himself to wonderful effect in his writing and the many talks he gave. His 1989 book *Between Psychology and Psychotherapy* was subtitled 'a poetics of experience', and this theme recurs throughout his extensive written and spoken work. He saw therapist and client as reaching towards understanding through conversation and metaphor, through engaging with the 'community of selves' of which they were personally constituted, and through striving to 'tell stories' that would illuminate the conditions of their lives (not convenient postmodernist 'narratives', but means of expression that grope, like poetry, toward revealing truths that can be reached in no other way). Anyone who heard Miller speak is unlikely to forget the quietly burning intensity of his delivery, the deep seriousness of his quest for a therapeutic psychology without dishonesty or professional self-aggrandisement.

Miller was unfailingly courteous and respectful to colleagues (however much he may sometimes have disagreed with their views), and he was part of a wide range of organisations within the field of therapeutic psychology. He was a regular contributor at conferences within the personal construct world – he organised the first International Symposium on Personal Construct ideas in London in 1968, and he delivered the keynote address and received a lifetime achievement award at the 14th biennial conference of the Constructivist Psychology Network as recently as July 2010. In between these times he travelled worldwide in response to invitations to speak and teach. He was Chair of the British Psychological Society's Psychotherapy Section 1988–9. After retiring from the NHS in 1997, where he had been Director of Psychological Services and Research in Dumfries and Galloway, he was for a further 10

FORUM BEYOND BOUNDARIES

Dr Ricardo de la Espriella's office is surprisingly quiet. Buried deep within San Ignacio University Hospital, the growl of the chaotic Bogotá traffic is perceptibly absent. Despite the street-level pandemonium, the capital city of Colombia remains an oasis of relative calm in a troubled country. The five-decade-old conflict has been pushed back from the urban fringes and persists, unabated, in the rural areas where it continues to devastate the country's diverse

cultural landscape. Dr de la Espriella has long promoted an understanding of how psychological distress is filtered through cultural norms. 'There are difficulties in recognising post-traumatic stress in certain populations, which is why cultural psychiatry is so important' he stresses, highlighting the

surprising variation in response to suffering. In this case, however, he is

not talking about the culture of ethnic or racial groups, but the micro-culture of illegal paramilitary organisations.

While working on a project to rehabilitate ex-members of illegal armed groups, he noticed a striking absence of post-traumatic stress disorder in his patients, despite them having experienced extreme violence both as combatants and civilians. Many had taken part in massacres and selective assassinations, and many had lost companions to equally brutal treatment. There were high levels of substance abuse, aggression and social problems, but virtually none showed signs of anxiety. Intrigued, de la Espriella decided to investigate more closely and carefully interviewed the ex-paramilitary patients again, using the Clinician Administered PTSD Scale, which asks specific and detailed questions about post-trauma symptoms. After this more detailed examination, more than half could be diagnosed with the disorder.

The reason for why none of these symptoms presented in day-to-day life seemed to lie in paramilitary subculture. While aggression and drug abuse are tolerated, anxiety is taboo to the point where members showing signs of anxiety can be killed by their compatriots for being 'weak'. This brutal emotional environment shapes the men to neither show nor spontaneously report any form of fear or nervousness. De la Espriella reported his findings in the *Colombian Journal of Psychiatry* where he discusses the difficulties in treating people who have been involved in violence and killing. His work also raises the uncomfortable question of who we consider to be a victim of conflict. Can we extend compassion to those who commit the atrocities or do we allow those who swim in the tides of war to drown in its powerful currents?

Vaughan Bell is a psychologist working in Colombia. Share your views on this and similar cross-cultural, interdisciplinary or otherwise 'boundary related' issues – e-mail psychologist@bps.org.uk.

years Resident Fellow at the Kinharvie Institute at Glasgow. In 2001 he was appointed Honorary Visiting Professor of Psychology at City University, London.

Miller grew up and was educated in Aberdeenshire and studied psychology at Aberdeen University before moving to London to train as a clinical psychologist at the Maudsley. After qualifying in 1960 he went to the Middlesex Hospital Medical School, receiving his PhD from the University of London in 1964, and soon becoming Senior Lecturer. He moved to the Crichton Royal Hospital at Dumfries in the mid-seventies to



take up the post he remained in until his retirement.

From 1971/2 Miller was awarded a Fellowship at the Netherlands Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, which gave him a much-appreciated opportunity to reflect upon and organise his ideas about the state of psychology and psychotherapy, an opportunity he worked hard to recreate in Dumfries and Galloway for young clinical psychologists who felt the need to break free from the confines of the orthodox, narrowly behavioural approach of the discipline. For a number of years (until 1994) the 'Crichton Course' provided a haven for recently qualified psychologists to develop their thinking and practice in a context that was both stimulating and challenging, aiming at their personal as well as their intellectual development.

Beneath his quiet, almost restrained manner, Miller was a sociable, warmly good-humoured man whose friends are to be found all over the globe. He turned being a host as well as being a guest into a kind of gentle art-form whereby he really took account of whom he was with, of what were their concerns and their likes. Following his retirement from full-time work and

with the companionship of his wife Ingrid, he nurtured talents that he had not before had time to indulge: for example, painting and strikingly creative gardening were added to his lifelong absorption in writing. But his was no slippers-and-pottering retirement. He was until the moment of his death deeply involved in the issues of therapeutic psychology that had concerned him throughout, still elaborating a 'way of knowing' in psychology other than the superficial and the pseudo-scientific, still in conversation with the many people he knew who were seriously concerned with what it is to be a person. All of them people who, like his family, will profoundly miss him.

Miller is survived by Ingrid, by his first wife Katharine, their children Andrew, Imogen and Frances, and five grandchildren. His elder brother Alistair also survives him.

David Smail

King's Heath, Birmingham

Editor's note: For an unedited version of this obituary, see the 'Obituaries and recollections' thread at www.psychforum.org.uk.

obituary

Kevin Kingsland (1947–2011)

Kevin Kingsland will be greatly missed by his family, friends, colleagues and the thousands of students and clients whose lives he profoundly touched.

Kevin served on the BPS Publications and Communications Board and helped in the redevelopment of the Society's website. He was a member of the Divisions of Occupational and Counselling Psychology, and founding member and former Chairman of the Association of Business Psychologists. Kevin served as chairman and director in the public, private and voluntary sectors. He was a magistrate, lecturer and visiting professor in the UK and overseas universities.

I first met him in 1967, when we studied our first degree in psychology.

Since the 1960s Kevin studied neurophysiology, Japanese and Sanskrit. He was a dedicated scientist-practitioner and entrepreneur.

Travelling extensively around the world, he pioneered interpersonal communication as a key to business and community success in multicultural and organisational contexts.

In 1971 he founded the Centre for Human Communication and the Community Company with his wife. An inherent principle of the Centre was that through deep communication come the most positive of human experiences: cooperation, sharing, harmony, peace, love and creativity. Always compassionate, Kevin embodied these principles. In my time there, my understanding of personality, communication and therapy was transformed.

Kevin's lifelong work was to create 'Spectrum Theory' - a multi-perspective theory of the construction of experienced reality. It embraced the whole person exploring bodywork, consciousness, natural organisation formation and the psychological basis of business. Emerging from action research and hard-nosed, psychological inquiry, it has been tested with thousands of groups for over 40 years. The father of 'action learning', Reg Revans once said: 'I only talk and write about action learning - Kevin manifests it!'

Kevin introduced Vision to the corporate world in the 1970s and believed



that business was a product of the human mind. Spectrum Theory has been successfully applied by psychologists, consultants and academics and forms the basis of my

own therapy practice. In acknowledging Kevin's influence on his work, Professor Ronnie Lessem described him as 'a genius'.

Kevin wrote a number of books exploring the science of yoga and psychology, and interpreted ancient Sanskrit texts, discovering they had anticipated the modern theory of autonomous autopoietic systems. Kevin's latest book, *Wealth and Happiness*, currently in press, draws on his seminal work to provide a holistic account of human psychology, organisations and business. Using fractal theory Kevin demonstrates how organisational processes unfold from individual psychology. He said, 'The organisational environment is in dramatic transition...to survive, organisations must transform but they cannot outpace the development of their systems or personnel.'

Kevin's legacy lives on in his work and with the people whose lives he enriched, inspired and transformed. He was my colleague and friend and I miss him deeply. My sincere sympathies rest with his family and friends. Kevin is survived by his wife, Venika, and son, Kris. His memorial service and tributes can be seen at: www.kevinkingsland.com

David Pike
Birmingham

NOTICEBOARD

I We are looking to speak to **psychologists or psychotherapists who have experience of bullying from others in the profession**. Our interest is at an exploratory level, and contact would be welcomed by telephone, e-mail or face-to-face. Identifying information for all parties will be kept confidential. We welcome your interest, even if you decline to allow the information you share to be used in the paper.

Dr Werner Kierski

020 7535 7745

Jessica Johns-Green

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obituary

Sally Butler (1953–2011)

Sally was an exceptional clinical psychologist who was inspirational in her vision of the development of services for children and young people. In this regard, she was truly ahead of her time. Fifteen years ago, Sally was driving service strategies in early intervention that have only recently become mainstream in government policy.

Sally qualified from the Child Clinical Psychology Course at the University of Stirling. On qualifying she worked for a short time in Norwich, before returning to Scotland to work in Greenock in a service for children with significant mental health problems. In 1996 Sally became a Consultant Clinical Psychologist at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Yorkhill, Glasgow, where she led the Community Psychology Early Intervention Service.

Sally was passionate about helping early in the development of emotional and behavioural difficulties and preventing secondary mental health problems. In this regard, the Early Intervention Service was incredibly innovative and pioneering. During her time leading the service Sally mentored and supported the development and progression of numerous psychologists and the service flourished.

We joined the service in 1997. These were heady, exciting times. Sally encouraged us to boldly go and develop new ways of working. As our mentor, Sally was inspirational during our formative years. She had a real 'can do' attitude, which was infectious. Sally was protective of us but also wanted us to progress and would often give us a well-needed push to do things that we thought were beyond our capabilities.

Sally had a genuine enthusiasm for her work and helped countless children and families. Colleagues held Sally in very high regard and remember her door was always open for advice and support. Others say that they felt more positive about life and work when with Sally and described her as a 'real gem'.

As well as leading the Early Intervention Service, Sally was also instrumental in the establishment of mental health services for children who are in care. Sally was involved in the seminal research, published in the *British Medical Journal* in 1999, that uniquely highlighted the mental health needs of children at the point of coming into care.

Sally developed a serious illness in the late 1990s. She returned to work becoming Head of Department at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children for a short period before retiring early due to ill health.

In her retirement, Sally continued her keen interest in the progression of child services. Sally maintained her passion for learning, attending art and language classes. While in times of better health she 'bagged' numerous Scottish Munros, more recently she enjoyed walks in her beloved West End of Glasgow, round the parks and University. Sally loved a lively discussion and debate about politics or the NHS, and could find humour in the most difficult of places.

Sally was warm and compassionate, extremely wise, resolute in her principles and vision, and truly inspiring. We are so glad to have had the wonderful experience of working with her at such a formative time in our careers. More than that, Sally was a great pal with whom we shared much fun. Sally will be sorely missed but has left a rich legacy in the culture of services in Glasgow.

Lisa Cooper

Julia Donaldson

Glasgow

FORUM THE REAL WORLD

A few weeks ago, Julia Becker from Philipps University Marburg, Germany was interviewed on the BBC Radio 4 *PM* programme about her studies of benevolent sexism.

The term *benevolent sexism* was introduced by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske some 15 years ago and is an important concept because it points out that discrimination does not always come with a hostile face. Men can keep women in their place by showing all the kindness and the support that are due to those who cannot fully look after themselves. They can maintain women's dependency as much by smiling as by snarling at them. It is precisely this positive surface that makes benevolent sexism so hard to challenge. However, a body of empirical evidence demonstrates that benevolent sexism is regularly associated with opposition to measures that challenge gender inequality. As long a gentleman opens the door for you why worry that the boardroom door remains resolutely locked?

Dr Becker spoke powerfully and engagingly about the topic. She stressed that the issue was not about holding doors open or giving up one's seat in public places – such consideration and politeness is to be applauded. The problem is the assumption that women in particular need these courtesies simply because they are women and not because of a specific need – because they have a child with them, or heavy shopping bags. That, after all, could be true of men as well. Julia also acknowledged that it can be very hard (if not impossible) to tell if a single instance was an act of generic politeness or benevolent sexism. There was nothing dogmatic or shrill about her claims.

In many years of listening to *PM* – a programme of which we are big fans – we have never heard what happened next. Becker's comments were systematically ridiculed for about 10 minutes. This centred on a mock interview with a flimsily disguised fellow presenter who regularly opened doors and gave up his seat to women. When asked whether he did the same for men he said no. He first explained this by saying it was how he was brought up and backed this up with the original argument that you can never tell if a woman is pregnant – and it would be highly insulting to get up for someone who you thought was pregnant and turns out just to be fat – so it is easiest to get up for all women.

Now here was something truly worthy of ridicule. However, rather than pick him up, the rest of the piece consisted of various testimonials, including from the presenters themselves, of just what a wonderful old-fashioned gentleman this 'interviewee' was.

The ridicule continued on the Friday in the weekly *PM* letters slot. Julia's interview received more letters than any other story. The insulting tone was set when the presenter referred to 'that woman from some university in Germany – I couldn't be bothered to look up which one'. The insults continued in every letter that was read out – all were negative and almost none engaged with the substance of Julia's arguments. She was, they asserted, against politeness. She wanted to make our society brutal and unkind. She was the problem, and those gentlemen she attacked were to be preferred any day.

Glick and Fiske point out that benevolent sexism coexists with hostile sexism. However, as Mary Jackman points out in her classic text *The Velvet Glove*, hostile sexism tends to be reserved for women who challenge their dependent status. The *PM* presenters may have thought that they were demolishing Julia's arguments about the significance of benevolent sexism. But rather than be outraged by their response, perhaps we should thank them for demonstrating so powerfully the timeliness of her work.

Steve Reicher is at the University of St Andrews. Alex Haslam is at the University of Exeter. Share your views on this and other 'real world' psychological issues – e-mail psychologist@bps.org.uk. An archive of columns can be found at www.bbcprisonstudy.org.