

## Opening minds

**Kairen Cullen** on how coverage of psychologists' involvement in the Paralympics expresses the essence of the profession

In 2002, as vice chair of the Professional Practice Board, I signed the Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education's Charter for Inclusion on behalf of the BPS. In November of that year the Society produced a position paper on inclusive education that acknowledged and attempted to define the need for inclusive education as part of a changing society, and the contribution of applied psychology.

Ten years later the work to develop a more inclusive society has gathered momentum, and the success of the Paralympics is a prime example of this progress. The sale of 2.7 million tickets and an audience of 5.9 million viewers for the closing ceremony are impressive statistics. Psychologists played a key part, and their work with the press and media was an important aspect of this. As Lord Coe said at the closing ceremony: 'Our minds were opened to what people can do.'

His words expressed the essence of what psychology, in its purest sense, is all about. I'm reminded of the BPS logo that features a kneeling Psyche holding a lamp, offering the illumination of our understanding of minds, behaviour and people in general in order to change things for the better.

Professor Jan Burns from Canterbury Christ Church University, Head of Eligibility for the International Sports Federation for Persons with Intellectual Disability (INAS – [www.inas.org](http://www.inas.org)) and recipient of a BPS Public Engagement Award in 2011, spoke to me live from the Paralympics. She described how she and her team created and administered a clear, rigorous and comprehensive classification system for athletes with intellectual disability and summed it all up as 'really successful' and that her 'very positive' contacts with the world's press and media were crucial to this. When asked about the extent of the coverage, she likened it to the 'snowball effect' that can happen in good research. The BPS Public Engagement Award enabled the production of a video helping the public understand the classification rules for athletes with intellectual disabilities taking part in the London 2012 Paralympics ([tinyurl.com/d5zqyz8](http://tinyurl.com/d5zqyz8)). This video has stimulated much interest and resulted in extensive press and media take up, including Radio 4's *All in the Mind* programme and articles in *The Times*, *Time Magazine*, the *Wall Street Journal* and *Nature*, to name but a few.

Professor Burns met a number of challenges in the press and media

coverage of her work. Major themes included the frequently very low levels of knowledge and understanding of intellectual disability, research and professional psychology practice and the statistical basis for many of the assessment instruments. Let's hope this coverage will educate more people about psychology and disability, and in so doing benefit the many practitioner and research psychologists who have to deal with the same challenges in their daily practice.

Many of my educational psychologist colleagues have worked long and hard in supporting inclusive educational practice, one of whom is Keith Venables, who, for over a decade, has organised the 'EPs for Inclusion' group, an open discussion forum interested in supporting inclusive practice. In the September edition of *Debate*, the newsletter for the Division of Educational and Child Psychology, he writes: 'EPs try and make sure all children and young people experience success...we're not neutral, we're not bystanders, we're involved, we're skilled and we care' (p.16).

Not surprisingly, the coverage of psychologists' involvement in the Paralympics has not stated explicitly the ethical and values basis of such work. But members will be well aware that the Society's Code of Conduct stresses, amongst other things, the dignity and worth of all persons, the responsibilities to others and to the Society

and the importance of accuracy, clarity, fairness, honesty and integrity in their interactions with all persons. Jan Burns' and other psychologists' work clearly exemplifies all of the above and has illuminated, via the massive press and media engagement, just how much psychology can support the development of a more inclusive world. The measure of how civilised and humane our society is might justifiably be found in examining the experience of its most vulnerable members, and so I hope that the work of psychologists in the field of inclusion will continue to attract a lot of media attention. After all, there is always a choice as to not just how but where one shines the light to help, as Lord Coe said, lift 'the cloud of limitation'.

I *The Society will be part of a joint seminar on new government position paper 'Support and Aspiration: Opportunity or Threat' on Monday 8 October, at the Society's London office. £20.00 – e-mail [psychinclusion@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:psychinclusion@yahoo.co.uk).*



### MEDIA PRIME CUTS

Beyond a joke: the truth about why we laugh, from psychologist Robert Provine <http://t.co/qw8Xj0yX>

Storm psychology: why do some people stay behind? <http://t.co/ii4smETp>

Discrimination as a factor in post-disaster mental health <http://t.co/0fV1OXiy>

The growing phenomenon of 'conspicuous giving' <http://t.co/wb1hHV5N>

'There is no doubt that we need a new approach to the study of intelligence' – James Flynn <http://t.co/11r5VvYl>

Death by IQ: US inmates condemned by flawed tests <http://t.co/oJPWu2p3>

Why are we overconfident? <http://t.co/E15Lgt7V>

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The Media page aims to promote and discuss psychology in the media. If you would like to contribute, please contact the Associate Editor for the 'Media' page, Lucy

Maddox, on [maddox.lucy@gmail.com](mailto:maddox.lucy@gmail.com). To share examples of psychology in the news and media, connect with *The Psychologist* on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/psychmag](https://twitter.com/psychmag).

# The joy of serendipity

It is perhaps a brave journalist who opens an article with the passage: 'It is pretty easy to go unnoticed as I follow my target along the busy high road, but when she turns into a residential side street, I start to worry. I slow down a bit, hang back and follow the woman from a safer distance.' I'm certainly not sure it would strike the right note if I were to do that myself. But so began a fascinating article in *New Scientist* in August, written by Catherine de Lange.

I'll allow her to take up the story. 'Following random strangers to see where I end up is not the way I usually choose to spend my Saturday afternoons, but maybe it should be. With the rise of technologies designed to streamline our lives – from GPS devices to recommendation

services – little need now be left to chance. But an emerging body of research suggests that chance is a vastly underappreciated ingredient in human happiness. Now, new apps called serendipity generators are encouraging us to buck the ultra-efficiency trend by putting some whimsy back into our lives. Can they help us overcome our inherent fear of uncertainty?'

Noting that the rise of these new apps echoes a much earlier protest against the tyranny of modern efficiency, de Lange described how, in the mid-19th century, the order brought about by the revolution in France gave rise to a cultural phenomenon known as *flânerie*. 'Dissatisfied with the urgency and alienation of the modern-day city, Parisian flâneurs hoped to encourage a certain kind of aimlessly enjoyable wandering in city life.'

Modern day flâneurs such as Ben Kirman, a computer scientist at the University of Lincoln, have created apps like Getlostbot, which encourages users to break out of old routines and try different places. 'Download it, and it will silently monitor your Foursquare check-ins. When you become too predictable, always going to the same bar on a Friday night, for example, Getlostbot will send directions to one you've never tried before.'

In search of the appeal behind such apps, de Lange talked to Tim Wilson, a

psychologist at the University of Virginia. 'Most research on uncertainty has tended to focus on the negative aspects,' she writes, 'but over the past decade psychologists have begun to investigate its effect on good experiences. Their findings are building a strong case that the same mechanism that causes uncertainty to intensify bad scenarios could make it

a crucial ingredient in happiness.' De Lange skilfully covers a body of research revealing just how much pleasure can be gained through the power of uncertainty, and suggesting that technologies that introduce an element of chance into our lives could boost our mood in the day-to-day.

I am always heartened by non-psychologists writing so well on our patch, so

I asked de Lange about her experience of writing about psychology in general. She said: 'Often, the psychological research isn't actually tackling the exact thing the article is looking at. So, Tim Wilson's research looks at uncertainty and its effect on our emotions, so he's not researching the apps that I was writing about specifically. The challenge for me is not to extrapolate the research and apply to situations where it isn't relevant. As it turned out, Wilson was very interested to hear about these apps and reckoned that, based on his experiences with uncertainty, there could be something in the idea. I find psychologists tend to be quite open to discussion about how their research might apply beyond the specific situations they investigated in their studies, although of course those extrapolations would usually need to be tested further.'

Is writing about psychology fun? 'I get a lot of pleasure from reading the methodology of psychological studies,' de Lange said. 'The set-ups are often very clever and fun. I couldn't include all the studies I read about for this article, but there was a great one that Wilson and his team did where people had to go up to complete strangers and give them a gift, then walk away. It must have been a lot of fun to devise and carry out.'

Perhaps that's the message: if it's fun to do, it's likely to be interesting to write about and – like de Lange's article – a pleasure to read. JS



Not the way I usually choose

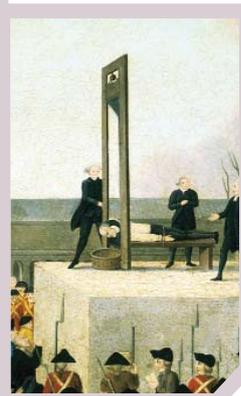
## MEDIA CURIOSITY

Is it possible to retain consciousness following decapitation? If, like me, you have a morbid fascination with such questions, you may have heard stories about crude experiments with guillotined criminals in the French Revolution. But are such tales mere urban legend?

Lindsey Fitzharris, a medical historian and Wellcome Trust Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London, blogs under the name 'the surgeon's apprentice: a website dedicated to the horrors of pre-anaesthetic surgery'. She set out to investigate, and her quest makes for fascinating reading (see <http://t.co/oEBJtGU>).

The search takes in some gruesome work from Dr Séguret and Jean Baptiste Vincent Laborde, plus a letter from a condemned murderer beseeching his

brother to 'be present at my execution and insist that my head be given to you. Call me with your voice and my eyes will reply to you.'



But surviving the final cut as the most convincing of the anecdotes was the execution of Henri Languille in 1905, attended

by Dr Gabriel

Beaurieux. Shortly after the blade severed Languille's head, Beaurieux noted:

'[T]he eyelids and lips of the guillotined man worked in irregularly rhythmic contractions for about five or six seconds. [After several seconds], the spasmodic movements ceased...It was then that I called in a strong, sharp voice: "Languille!" I saw the eyelids slowly lift up, without any spasmodic contractions – I insist advisedly on this peculiarity – but with an even movement, quite distinct and normal, such as happens in everyday life, with people awakened or torn from their thoughts.'

Fascinated, Beaurieux called out the victim's name again, and once more, Languille's 'eyelids lifted and undeniably living eyes fixed themselves on mine with perhaps even more penetration than the first time'. On the third attempt, there was no response. JS