

Psychologists speak out against cuts

By the time you read this, the coalition government will have announced the results of its comprehensive spending review, setting departmental budgets for several years to come. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which is responsible for science funding, has been warned, like other departments, to expect cuts of up to 25 per cent.

UK scientists, including psychologists, have reacted with alarm to the prospect of severe funding cuts, especially at a time when other countries, including the USA, China, Sweden and Germany, are increasing their science funding. Dr Emily Holmes, a Senior Research Fellow at Oxford University and member of the British Psychological Society's Research Board, was on the advisory group for a Royal Society report published earlier this year that called on UK science to be protected from cuts. She told us the planned cuts pose not an imaginary but a real threat to the future of UK science.

'Psychological science in its many

forms will be affected,' Holmes said. 'We need to speak out against the planned cuts. Also, we all need to help politicians understand how vital basic science is to human health, wealth and happiness.

Psychology has so many examples to draw on, such as the huge inroads CBT (grounded in cognitive science) has made in improving mental health. There is no avoiding the fact that if these cuts occur, the continued success of psychology in the UK is under threat.'

In a speech in September, the Business Secretary Vince Cable described the UK situation. 'We have to operate in a financially constrained environment,' he said, adding that he recognised the value of science and innovation to the UK's economic growth. The government currently invests £6

billion a year in science and research, he claimed.

'The question I have to address,' he said, 'is can we achieve more with less?'

... My preference is to ration research funding by excellence. We back researchers and research teams of international quality regardless of where they are and what they do, and screen out mediocrity.' He also called for stronger links to be forged between research and business, to help exploit the economic potential in science.

In another speech given in September, the Science and Universities Minister David Willetts echoed Cable's comments about the valuable contribution made by science to the economy, but he also warned: 'Yes, cuts are coming. And – yes – sadly there will be some pain. But if we are smart and courageous and work together we can emerge with a stronger and better sector.'

Responding to these announcements, Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, Professor of

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS 'OVER-IDENTIFIED'

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) caused controversy in September when it published a report claiming that schools were over-identifying special educational needs. It said that over one fifth of all school children in England are now classified as having a special educational need (SEN) – this includes a large majority who are assessed and supported by their school and a minority who receive external assessment and more specialist support.

Ofsted's claims will be of interest to educational psychologists who are involved in the assessment and support of children with

special educational needs, especially in more severe cases. Ofsted said that schools were guilty of using the SEN term too widely, when really they should place more effort on raising overall teaching standards. They also claimed that too much attention was given to the identification and statementing process (which unlocks extra specialist resources for children in need), whilst assessment of the quality of support and outcomes was neglected.

Dr Harriet Martin, Chair of the Society's Division of Educational and Child Psychology told us the news headlines prompted by Ofsted's report reinforced the 'generally unhelpful' view that

a child with special educational needs always has an inherent problem. Martin explained that the difficulties some children have in learning in school are in fact best understood from an interactionist perspective.

'The child's own strengths and difficulties, the quality of the teaching and the level and appropriateness of support all contribute to the success or otherwise of the child in school,' she said. 'The Ofsted review rightly identified that professionals need to continue to develop their knowledge and understanding across the board – e.g. improving the quality of assessment, ensuring additional support is effective and focusing on outcomes for children and young people. This includes developing the quality of teaching. It is likely to be more productive to focus on how this development of knowledge and understanding can be achieved rather than blame schools for mis-diagnosis.'

Martin added that 'the headlines also distracted people's attention from much of

Cognitive Neuroscience at UCL, told us she fears the UK is going to suffer a brain drain of scientific talent to other countries. 'The level of cuts being discussed in the UK, together with increased science budgets in other countries including in Europe, North America, China and India, will inevitably lead to some of the UK's best scientists taking up job offers in other countries,' she said. 'This would destabilise the scientific community, and the UK would risk losing its reputation as a world-leader in science. It would be very difficult to recover from this. So the proposed cuts could seriously damage UK science and innovation in the long term.'

At the time of writing the Science is Vital campaign has received support from over 11,000 signatories, with a march planned for 9 October (see <http://scienceisvital.org.uk>). Dr Gerry Mulhern, President of the British Psychological Society, said: 'We stand full square behind the campaign and hope that it will not only persuade government to re-think its proposed cuts to science, but will unite all scientific disciplines in relation to the fundamental need to enhance the UK science base.' CJ

the review's content, most of which is sensible, although not necessarily surprising to psychologists and other professionals who work in the field of special educational needs.'

Martin emphasised that educational psychologists have a key role to play 'supporting school staff to develop their assessment, monitoring and evaluation techniques and their understanding of evidence-based strategies and provision, including high-quality teaching for all'.

'Focusing on the diagnostic element of assessment is a retrograde step and will not help us improve outcomes for children and young people very much,' Martin told us. 'Although improving teaching standards for all is clearly important, it is only part of the continuing development in our education system which will improve the chances of success for those who struggle to learn and achieve their potential.' CJ

I The Ofsted report *The Special Educational Needs and Disability Review* is at <http://tiny.cc/gvuji>

Intensive care diaries

The sedation, delirium and sleep deprivation experienced by intensive care patients make them particularly vulnerable to one of the key risk factors for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – failing to fully process a traumatic experience. Indeed, patients usually have only fragmentary, delusional memories for what happened to them. According to one estimate, one in ten patients in intensive care for more than 48 hours go on to develop PTSD. A new study suggests that an effective way to help reduce this risk could be via the use of a daily text and photo diary kept by the patient's nurse and family.

Christina Jones at the University of Liverpool and her colleagues recruited hundreds of intensive care patients across six European hospitals. Only those who were in intensive care for more than 72 hours and on a ventilator for more than 24 hours were eligible. This left 352 patients who participated and therefore had daily hand-written diaries plus photos of their intensive care stay kept for them by a nurse and their families. The patients were then randomly allocated to receive the diary one month after discharge (on receipt of the diary, a doctor or nurse explained its contents but didn't instruct the patient in how to use it) or to act as controls. PTSD symptoms were recorded both at this one-month stage and two months later, at which point the controls also received their diary.

The key finding was that just 5 per cent of patients in the diary group went on to develop PTSD between one and three months after their discharge compared with 13 per cent of patients in the control group. Patients' comments about the diaries were also overwhelmingly positive – 49 per cent said the text was most helpful, 36 per cent said the text and photo combination, and 15 per cent highlighted the benefit of the photographs.

'Diaries are not without cost,' the researchers acknowledged in their report published in *Critical Care*

(tinyurl.com/24ms28f), 'there has to be a commitment from the staff to write something in the diary every day and take photographs when important changes happen. In addition an experienced nurse is needed to go through the diary with the patient to ensure that they understand its contents, but this is not significantly more than might have been provided by an

unstructured discussion in the past. Compared with providing formal therapy to all patients struggling to cope with their experiences, diaries are likely to be highly cost-effective.'

In related news, two new studies by Dr Alex Mitchell, a consultant psycho-oncologist at Leicestershire Partnership Trust, suggest that nurses in the front line of patient care often struggle to detect depression in patients (*International Journal of Nursing Studies*: tinyurl.com/39e3du9; and *Psycho-Oncology*: tinyurl.com/248smnq). 'Most nursing staff receive little training in mental health and report low experience in this area. It may be unrealistic to expect nurses to remember complex criteria for detection of depression or to apply lengthy screening tools,' Mitchell said. His team are currently developing short, simple methods for identifying mood problems (free at www.psychoncology.info). CJ

VETERAN SERVICES

The government has announced plans to provide extra mental health nurses and a counselling helpline dedicated to caring for combat veterans experiencing mental health difficulties.

The news comes on the heels of a report by Dr Andrew Murrison MP, 'Fighting Fit – A Mental Health Plan For Servicemen and Veterans' (see tinyurl.com/38owrjx), which makes several recommendations including the incorporation of a structured mental health systems inquiry into existing medical examinations performed whilst serving, and the trial of an online early intervention service for serving personnel and veterans.

For more on veterans' mental health, see p.940

CAM'S DEN

A new interactive emotional well-being website for children, Cam's Den, has been launched by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust with support from the British Psychological Society's public engagement grant scheme.

The Trust's clinical staff worked with children, parents, teachers, web designers and animators to address a gap in mental health and well-being education for primary school children, promote the development of coping skills and combat mental health stigma by raising awareness about what actually happens in a therapy session and how common emotional difficulties are.

Clinical Psychologist and Project Lead Dr Sally Hodges said: 'We are proud of the fact that this project has been led by children in Camden who have helped us develop the content at every step of the way, which we think makes the site unique. Children were especially helpful in developing our understanding of what kinds of issues primary school children are preoccupied with and how best to get information across to them.' JS
I See www.camden.co.uk

Scourge of the 'halfalogue'

The overheard mobile phone conversation is a scourge of modern times. Why is it so irritating? According to a team of psychologists led by Lauren Emberson at Cornell University, at least one reason has to do with the relative unpredictability of what they call a 'halfalogue' – hearing just one side of a conversation. This unpredictability, they explain, makes the overheard phone call more attentionally demanding and therefore distracting (*Psychological Science*: tinyurl.com/27ogcyj).

Twenty-four undergrads performed two attention tasks while simultaneously listening to: a conversation between two people; a monologue, in which one person recalled both sides of a conversation; or a halfalogue, in which they heard just one side of a conversation. A silent condition acted as a baseline.

Only the halfalogue was found to impair performance on the two tasks – one of which involved using a computer mouse to track a moving on-screen target; the other was a choice reaction time task in which participants had to respond as fast as possible to four letters whilst ignoring any others.

Emberson and her colleagues say halfalogues are more unpredictable than full conversations because we're unable to use the unheard conversational partner's utterances to

predict what the overheard conversant is going to say next. To test this claim, a second study was similar to the first but this time the halfalogue, dialogue and monologue speech was low-pass filtered, rendering the content incomprehensible (it sounded like speech under water) whilst retaining the acoustic 'on/off' properties. Under these conditions, the

halfalogue was no longer distracting.

Emberson told us she hopes the results will encourage a reconsideration of mobile phone etiquette. 'Having conducted this study, I have certainly changed my own cell phone use to avoid talking on phones in situations where others are working and listening (e.g. in the laboratory) or in the presence of a captive audience (e.g. on public transport),' she said.

'The other implication of our study that might have an effect on cell phone use is the idea that paying attention to an overheard cell phone conversation is reflexive or beyond our control,' Emberson added. 'When talking on a cell phone, one can often have a feeling of privacy, that no one is listening in. However, our results show that likely everyone is listening in to the point where their attention is disrupted in other tasks. If people know that their phone conversations are being heard, perhaps this will also act as a deterrent to talking on a cell phone in public.' CJ

Awards for psychologists

Professor Vincent Walsh of the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience is among the recipients of this year's round of prestigious Royal Society Wolfson Research Merit Awards. Jointly funded by the Wolfson Foundation and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, these awards are appointed by the Royal Society and are intended to attract or retain outstanding scientists working in the UK. Walsh is a pioneer in the use of transcranial magnetic stimulation as a cognitive neuroscience tool, whereby stimulation is used to excite neurons or to induce temporary 'virtual lesions'.

'It's particularly rewarding to be encouraged to step into new conceptual areas,' Walsh said. 'Science funding and scientists reviewing are

conservative forces usually rewarding one for doing more of the same. The Royal Society has the flexibility to encourage risk taking and I'll be doing all I can to extend my work into adult plasticity.'

Congratulations are also due to the psychologists Professor Graham Towl at the University of Durham, Professor Michael West at Aston Business School, Professor Halla Beloff at the University of Derby, and Professor Joe Elliott at Durham University, all of whom were conferred the award of Academician by the Academy of Social Sciences in August. This award recognises those who have made a distinguished and significant contribution to UK social science and its promotion. CJ

Treating insomnia

There is dearth of psychological help available for people in the UK with insomnia. That's according to a consensus statement on evidence-based treatments for insomnia and related conditions published by the British Association for Psychopharmacology in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* (tinyurl.com/2vb23p7).

The statement says that CBT-based psychological treatments are as effective as pharmacological treatments in the short-term and, unlike drug treatments, continue to be effective even after active treatment has ended. Other studies have shown increased effectiveness when CBT and pharmacotherapy approaches are combined. Yet the statement warns: 'Provision of psychological treatments for

insomnia in the UK is an issue, as there are few trained therapists and insomnia is not a priority for psychologists in the National Health Service.'

The authors of the consensus statement, including the psychologists Chris Alford at the University of the West of England, Colin Espie at the University of Glasgow, and Chris Idzikowski at the Edinburgh Sleep Centre, propose a stepped-care approach to delivering psychological insomnia treatments, from self-help administered CBT for moderate problems all the way up to the involvement of specialised professionals for more severe cases. 'This would enable this relatively scarce resource to be applied in a cost-effective way to achieve best clinical care,' they said. **CJ**

An effin' rollercoaster

Psychology has a habit of doing well at the Ig Nobel awards – designed to recognise research that makes you laugh, then think – and this year was no different. At a glittering ceremony at Harvard University, the psychologists Richard Stephens, John Atkins and Andrew Kingston from Keele University walked away with the Peace Prize for their research showing the analgesic benefits of swearing (*NeuroReport*: tinyurl.com/mlobq9). Meanwhile, the psychologists Simon Rietveld of the University of Amsterdam, and Ilja van Beest of Tilburg University earned the Medicine Prize for their research showing that asthmatic symptoms can be alleviated by the emotional effects of a rollercoaster (*Behaviour Research and Therapy*: tinyurl.com/26sgzdu).

'As psychologists doing research with people we are ethically bound to disseminate findings widely, and the prize certainly has drummed up plenty of publicity,' Stephens told us, adding that there is real substance to the swearing research. 'Having shown that swearing can help people better tolerate pain we are now attempting to find out how. Our working hypothesis is that, by swearing, people provoke an emotional reaction in themselves in the form of a low-level fight or flight response. Watch this space, as they say!'

As for the Medicine Prize, van Beest said he and Rietveld felt honoured that the prize will draw attention to people who suffer from asthma. Their research showed that positive and negative emotion could lead people with asthma to under- or over-report their breathlessness, respectively. 'In practical terms,' van Beest told us 'this implies that people who suffer from asthma may use too much medication when they feel bad, but too little medication when they feel good. We think that this latter finding in combination with the fact that we used a rollercoaster to induce positive and negative emotions struck a chord with the judges.' **CJ**



Takes your breath away – or gives relief from asthma?

FUNDING NEWS

Through Youth in Focus the Big Lottery Fund has funding available for **projects in England that support vulnerable young people** under three themes: young carers, young people leaving care and young people leaving youth offenders' institutions. Grants of £500,000 to £1m are available for projects lasting three to five years. Groups can apply to Youth in Focus if they are a partnership led by a voluntary and community sector organisation. The closing date for applications is 30 November 2010. | tinyurl.com/345w4t4

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Public Health Research Programme is seeking applications for briefs assessing effectiveness in the areas of **Community Farms, Gardens and Allotments – improving health and well-being; Emotional and social wellbeing of primary school children; Promoting mental health and wellbeing in the workplace; and Interventions for preventing uptake of smoking in school aged children**. Closing date is 8 December 2010. | tinyurl.com/38vv8h6

The Leverhulme Trust has launched Research Programme Grants for 2011 under the themes; | **intergenerational**: explores the extent to which it is possible or desirable to take the interests of future generations into account when responding to current concerns. | **resilience**: examines the capability and capacity of social and physical systems to withstand and respond to challenges resulting from environmental change, contrasting demographics, conflicting cultural models and economic uncertainty. | **science and politics**: focuses on the ethical and social-economic issues linking society, scientific enquiry and political direction. Closing date is 12 January 2011. | <http://bit.ly/cHqMkR>

Nuffic are offering **Huygens Scholarships** to provide outstanding foreign students in all disciplines the **opportunity to study at a Dutch University** in the final phase of their bachelor's studies or during their master's studies. Applicants should be nearing completion of their studies or have just graduated, be no older than 35 years of age and be in the top 10 per cent of students in their programme. Applications must be received by 1 February 2011. | <http://bit.ly/aGALau>

info

For more, see www.bps.org.uk/funds
Funding bodies should e-mail news to Elizabeth Beech on elibee@bps.org.uk for possible inclusion

Women on the glass cliff

The majority of major corporations and countries are headed by men. When women are appointed to leadership positions, it tends to be when an organisation is in crisis – a phenomenon known as the glass cliff. Recent examples include: the appointment of Lynn Elsenhans as CEO of the oil company Sunoco in 2008, just after their shares had halved in value; and the election of Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir as prime minister of Iceland, just after her country's economy had been crippled by the global recession.

Real-life examples are supported by lab studies in which male and female participants show a bias for selecting female candidates to take charge of fictitious organisations in crisis. Further investigation has ruled out possible explanations for the glass cliff – it's not due to malicious sexism or to women favouring such roles.

Now a brand new study suggests the phenomenon occurs firstly, because a crisis shifts people's stereotyped view of what makes for an ideal leader, and secondly, because men generally don't fit that stereotype. '...it may not be so important for the glass cliff that women are stereotypically seen as possessing more of the attributes that matter in times of crisis,' the researchers wrote, 'but rather that men are seen as lacking these attributes...'

Susanne Bruckmüller and Nyla Branscombe first established when the glass cliff is most likely to occur. They presented 119 male and female participants with different versions of newspaper articles about an organic food company. Participants were more likely to select a fictitious female candidate to take over the company if it was described as being in crisis, and its previous three leaders had all been male. For participants who read that the previous managers had all been female, the glass cliff disappeared – they were just as likely to select a fictitious male candidate to take over the crisis-stricken firm as they were to select a female.

This finding suggests the glass cliff has to do with people believing that a change from the status quo (from male leaders to a female) is what's needed in a crisis. However, this explanation breaks down because the reverse pattern wasn't found. Participants didn't show a bias for a male candidate to take over a crisis-stricken company that had had a run of three previous female leaders.

A second study explored the role of gender and leadership stereotypes and involved 122 male and female participants reading about a supermarket chain described either as thriving or in crisis. Next the participants rated their impression of two briefly described, fictitious managerial candidates, one male, one female, using

attributes previously identified as being stereotypically male (e.g. competitive) or stereotypically female (e.g. strong communication skills). Finally, the participants rated the suitability of each candidate and stated which of them they'd hire.

In a successful context, the male candidate was judged to be more suitable for the role and was more likely to be selected – a replication of the bias seen in real life. More intriguing was that a crisis context led participants to attribute fewer stereotypically female attributes to the male candidate and to judge him as less suitable for the managerial role. Meanwhile, the crisis context didn't alter the qualities attributed to the female candidate, nor the perception of her suitability. Crucially, however, she was more likely to be selected in the crisis situation – you might say almost by default, given that the male candidate was now seen as being less suitable and having fewer appropriate attributes.

'Our findings indicate that women find themselves in precarious leadership positions not because they are singled out for them, but because men no longer seem to fit,' Bruckmüller and Branscombe explained. 'There is, of course, a double irony here. When women get to enjoy the spoils of leadership (a) it is not because they are seen to deserve them, but because men no longer do, and (b) this only occurs when, and because, there are fewer spoils to enjoy.'

Freud was right – we are attracted to our relatives

In the September issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*

Freud said there'd be no need for incest to be such a powerful cultural taboo if people weren't sexually attracted to their relatives in the first place. Given that in-breeding is associated with increased mortality, he argued that the incest taboo had emerged as way to keep our dangerous incestuous desires in check. Evolutionary psychologists take a strikingly different view. Inspired by Edward Westermarck, the Finnish sociologist and anthropologist, they argue that we've evolved automatic psychological processes that lead us to find our relatives sexually aversive, not attractive, thus decreasing the likelihood of in-breeding occurring. Who's right – Freud or Westermarck?

Chris Fraley and Michael Marks asked 74 students to rate the sexual attractiveness of 100 strangers' faces. Crucially, for half the students, each face was preceded by a subliminal presentation of a family member. For the remaining control students, the subliminal presentation was of someone else's family member, i.e. a non-relative.

Westermarckian theory predicts that the non-conscious presentation of a relative will trigger the automatic system that makes relatives seem sexually unattractive, with the knock-on effect that the strangers' faces would be rated as less attractive. Contrary to

In the September issue of the *British Journal of Social Psychology*

this prediction, the students who were subliminally presented with a family member actually rated the strangers' faces as more attractive than did the control students.

In a second study, 40 students rated the sexual attractiveness of faces that either had or hadn't been morphed to varying degrees to resemble their own face (a way of simulating genetic relatedness). The students presented with the morphed faces rated them as more sexually attractive than did control students who viewed unaltered faces, and the greater the morphing, the greater the perceived attractiveness. This appears to be consistent with Freud's claim that we really are attracted to our relatives, and it also chimes with past research showing that we tend to marry people who look similar to ourselves – a phenomenon known as homogamy.

For the final study, a group of students once again rated the sexual attractiveness of strangers' faces. This time half the students were told falsely that some of the faces had been morphed to resemble them, as a way to simulate genetic relatedness. The students fed this lie subsequently rated the faces as less attractive than the control students who thought they were simply rating strangers' faces. The finding appears to support Freud's contention that it is the incest taboo that causes us to find people who we think we're related to, less attractive.

Fraley and Marks say their findings are largely in keeping with Freud's writings, whilst

being at odds with Westermarckian evolutionary psychology. However, whereas Freud referred to unconscious desires, Fraley and Marks think our attraction to our relatives could be triggered by a kind of human sexual imprinting, according to which our sexual preferences are shaped by our early experiences, or by mere familiarity, or both. These influences are balanced out, the authors suggest, by the cultural deterrent and the tendency for excessive familiarity to breed indifference or contempt. Indeed, this deterring influence of taboo and habituation could explain the finding that people are less likely to mate with a person with whom they are reared, even if unrelated.

Fraley and Marks call their approach to this topic the evolutionary psychodynamic perspective. 'From this point of view,' the researchers said, 'one reason Oedipus longed for (and eventually married) his mother in the myth of Oedipus Rex is because she was related to him. His desire was possible, however, only because he was unaware of his true relationship to her.'

My drunkenness means you did it deliberately

In the October issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*

With our brains gently soaked in alcohol we're generally more sociable and relaxed – it's a sedative after all. So why do drunk people seem so prone to aggravation and argument?

Laurent Bègue's team recruited 92 men (aged 20 to 46) to take part in what they were told was a taste-testing study. For half the participants, their three drinks contained alcohol – approximately the same amount found in five to six shots of vodka. To control for expectancy effects, half the participants with the alcoholic drinks and half the non-alcohol participants were told the drinks were alcoholic. Next, the participants spent 20 to 30 minutes on filler tasks, in keeping with the cover story that this was a taste-test study, and to allow the alcohol to kick-in. Finally and most importantly, the participants read 50 sentences about various actions (e.g. 'He deleted the e-mail') and gave their verdict on whether the actions were intentional or not.

The intoxicated and sober men alike said that obviously

intentional actions (e.g. 'she looked for her keys') were intentional, and that blatantly unintentional actions (e.g. 'she caught a cold') were unintentional. But when it came to more ambiguous actions, like the e-mail deletion example, the intoxicated men were significantly more likely than the sober men to say the action was intentional. Whether participants were told they'd had alcohol or not made no difference.

Why should alcohol have this effect? Bègue's team think that it takes cognitive effort and control to overcome the intentionality bias and consider alternative explanations. Alcohol's well-known disinhibitory and myopic (the 'narrowing of attention') would undermine these faculties.

'In summary,' the researchers concluded, 'alcohol magnifies the intentionality bias. Napoleon said, "There is no such thing as accident." Our findings suggest that drunk people are more likely to believe Napoleon's statement...'



The material in this section is taken from the Society's **Research Digest** blog at www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog, and is written by its editor **Dr Christian Jarrett**. Visit the blog for full coverage including references and links, additional current reports, an archive, comment and more.



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The blind feeding the blind

Kisane Prutton on the media's particular appetite for psychology

In my capacity as Conference Press Officer for the Division of Occupational Psychology, I had to be rugby tackled to my senses by colleagues at a recent conference programming meeting, when my eyes alighted upon a paper which could only be described as God's gift to the tabloid press: 'The personality of male escorts'. Dynamite! Sadly, the methodology was weak and it had to be rejected. A cold towel to my head later and I realised that I have become trapped in a feeding cycle; the press feed the public's reality-TV-appetite for human interest stories and I feed the press. How did I get into this unhealthy state of co-dependency? I have tried and continue to try to push serious, scientific research, but it seems to fall on deaf ears. Why? I posed this predicament to a number of influential figures in the media and psychology.

'I'm not sure that psychology has succeeded in getting over the idea to programme-makers what psychologists do and don't do,' reflected Claudia Hammond (broadcaster, lecturer and writer in psychology). 'In general, the public like psychology because it is about us and the media knows that. Journalists like to report on research that is counter-intuitive, but some are of the opinion that psychology is the science of the bleeding obvious.'

Richard Wiseman (researcher, writer, and holder of Britain's only Professorship in the Public Understanding of Psychology, University of Hertfordshire) provided an effective counterbalance: 'A journalist's job is to take the interesting bits of what we do and tell the public. There is nothing wrong in that. Unfortunately the public only get to understand a tiny sliver of what we do. Beyond the media, the public tends to associate psychologists with solving problems in a clinical or educational

context, understandably because these are our visible, frontline services. They do not see psychologists as scientists.'

Presumably those who walk the corridors of power in government and industry simply don't realise the calibre of psychological expertise that they could be tapping into. Hammond was wistful: 'Economists and doctors are regularly consulted, but psychologists far less so. I'd like to see a day when boards or commissions regularly appoint psychologists.'

It would appear that the media largely portrays a fraction of what we do, and that portion tends to satisfy human curiosity rather than develop an understanding of our scientific contribution. Should we stop feeding the media if their lightweight coverage is skewing public perceptions of our capability?

Charles Abraham (Professor of Psychology at the University of Sussex, adviser to the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee), thinks otherwise: 'The question is, not what is the media doing wrong but how can psychologists make their research outputs more marketable? Psychologists need to design and market their research so that it adds value to the real world and is seen to be doing so.'

Psychologists working in the area of health behaviour change appear to be leading in this approach. The 2007 NICE guidance on behaviour change, for example, involved four psychologists, including Abraham. Behavioural psychologists are also now working in the emerging area of sustainable energy, but the feeling is that we could do more.

Doing more doesn't mean doing it all by ourselves. Abraham teams up with economists and together they analyse the financial and psychosocial impact of behavioural interventions. He is very enthusiastic about such collaboration: 'A cost-effective intervention pays for itself and so is very attractive to policy makers.' He believes psychologists have a great part to play in the future of the economy. 'For example, if we could develop interventions to reduce the number of obese school children we could help save the NHS millions.' That would certainly make national, headline news.

Interestingly, Hammond pointed out that when the bestselling book *Nudge* came out, (behavioural econometrics in the context of health and well-being) David Cameron had all his MPs read it! It would appear that politicians do have an appetite for psychology, but only when

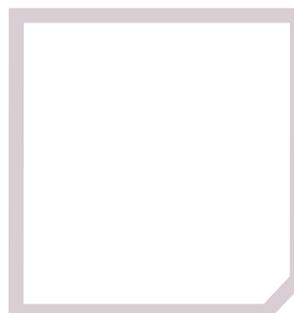
the psychological implications are grounded in terms of their financial value.

We have to remember that not all psychology is about behaviour, and as a science of mental life its implications for policy may be limited. Perhaps this is where psychology and the media's symbiotic relationship currently lies. Feeding human interest with a behind-

the-scenes insight into mental processes provides a quick fix for human curiosity but long-term limits the public's understanding of psychology's potential. Politicians, industrialists and other influential consumers of the media, will not turn to us to solve real-world human problems if they don't equate us with being able to make and quantify an impact on society.

Assuming we should attempt to break this restricted, media/public feeding cycle, what can we do? Abraham: 'Select and design research around behavioural changes that matter to the real world; demonstrate impact.' Hammond: 'See what issues are around in the media and offer expert interviewees and the latest research on the topic. Target the home affairs, financial and social policy correspondents.' Wiseman: 'Use the new media and cut out the middleman; blog, twitter, use Facebook. Film your research and put on YouTube.'

The Society does support members via some of these functions, and developments are afoot: watch this space!



Is demand feeding supply?

contribute

The Media page is coordinated by the Society's Media and Press Committee, with the aim of

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