



TO THE EDITOR...

Letters should be marked clearly 'Letter for publication in *The Psychologist*' and addressed to the editor at the Society office in Leicester. Please send by e-mail if possible: psychologist@bps.org.uk (include a postal address). Letters over 500 words are less likely

to be published. The editor reserves the right to edit, shorten or publish extracts from letters. If major editing is necessary, this will be indicated. Space does not permit the publication of every letter received. Letters to the editor are not normally acknowledged.

Homophobia, homosexuality and evolution

JOHN Jacob Lyons's speculation that 'the much less homophobic zeitgeist of the past 40 years' should result in 'lower rates of homosexuality in future years' epitomises the consensual view of the evolutionary aetiology of homosexuality (Letters, 'A paradoxical effect of homophobia?', October 2003).

Lyons's argument rests upon the idea that there exists a gene for 'homosexuality'. Despite the general acceptance of such an idea, no studies have yet found evidence of this assertion even when studying fruit flies' isosexuality (i.e. sexual intercourse amongst same-sex animals) (Pattatucci & Hamer, 1995). The sole sexual disposition that seems genetically transmissible is a general propensity for sexual pleasure. However, such predisposition does not instantiate the type of partner that one is supposed to have pleasure with. Partner choices are much more likely to be socially prescribed.

Cross-cultural research has largely demonstrated the ubiquity of homosexuality in preliterate cultures. However, those anthropological studies highlight the temporary nature of homosexuality in those societies, where homosexual relationships are by and large experienced during adolescence, partly because boys are segregated from girls at that stage and partly as an integrative part of rites of passage (Schlegel, 1995). Yet, homosexual behaviours rarely continue in adulthood and thus do not constitute an identity as such. In a similar vein, cross-

species studies yield comparable findings. Isosexuality is common practice among chimpanzees, rhesus monkeys and, particularly, bonobos. Yet isosexuality serves certain social functions, such as reconciliation, and can be regarded as a consolidator of social cohesion (de Waal, 1995). Thus, homosexuality as a *behaviour* is common in both our closest genetic relatives and in other human cultures. However, homosexuality as an *identity* is a unique feature not

just of humanity but of the 'civilised' world.

Therefore, if one assumes that genes do not directly instantiate sexual orientation but simply transmit a general wiring towards sexual gratification, one reaches a conclusion diametrically opposed to the one advanced by Lyons. Indeed, the current social permissiveness and the sexual license offered by the 1960s could be speculated to prompt increasingly more individuals to express this all-purpose predisposition for sexual pleasure by 'unorthodox' means. Hence, more individuals would not hesitate to

experiment sexual intercourse with same-sex partners. As a result, the gay population could be imagined to grow, prosper and multiply and attain unprecedented high rates in the next 40 years. Yet, this is more of a rhetorical counterpoint, and no data to my knowledge can substantiate such a hypothesis or even refute it.

Additionally, one caveat should be pronounced in reaching this conclusion: Psychologists are not yet futurologists. Great scepticism

should therefore be given to scientific extrapolations related to an issue as sensitive as sexual orientation. This is a complex multidisciplinary issue and would certainly benefit from being dealt with in a special issue of *The Psychologist* rather than in the letters section.

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sexual culture (pp.154–176). London: University of Chicago Press.

Schlegel, A. (1995). The cultural management of adolescent sexuality. In P.R. Abramson & S.D. Pinkerton (Eds.) *Sexual nature sexual culture* (pp.177–194). London: University of Chicago Press.

LYONS'S knowledge of both Darwin and genetics seems a little fuzzy. Is he implying that a 'predisposition to homosexuality' is inherited? If so, how, and upon what evidence? Do we have homosexuals claiming direct descent from a line of homosexuals – 'My father/mother was a homosexual, and so was my grandfather/grandmother'? Somehow I think not, unless homophobia and embarrassment preclude such a declaration.

We need firstly to clearly define what we mean by 'homosexual'. Do we mean those who engage in sexual practices deemed 'homosexual' by the wider society or those who are physically repelled by the opposite sex? We need to distinguish between primary homosexuals (those 'born that way' whose primary sexual orientation is towards those who share the same sexual anatomy) and 'secondary homosexuals' whose sexual preferences derive from social processes and other factors. Masters and Johnson (1985) gave a figure of one in 100,000 for male primary homosexuality, and one in 300,000 for female, and although some increase may have taken place since, their figures are roughly in line with expected random genetic mutation. The current 'one in

ten' figure for homosexuality (male, presumably) is open to some dispute and no doubt includes large numbers who have had heterosexual experiences and fathered children. Indeed we should also note the number of homosexual women who have had offspring.

It would seem that neither homosexuality nor homophobia is greatly involved in population fecundity, as 'normal' heterosexual activity more than makes up any lack of reproductive enthusiasm on the part of homosexual males and females. As there are far fewer female than male primary homosexuals, a high ratio of male homosexuals has little impact. Even if outnumbered (by homosexuals) the heterosexual male is certainly capable of impregnating sufficient heterosexual females to maintain population levels.

Even societies that engage in high levels of male homosexual activity, a

sustainable level of human reproduction still occurs. Cline (1936) describes a homosexual society of the Siwa Oasis in the Libyan Desert (where the bride-price of a boy exceeded a girl's by 150 per cent) but obviously they still managed to reproduce.

When applying Darwinian theory to human society we ought to bear in mind that as a 'domesticated species' many of the rules of evolutionary fitness do not apply. However, in deference to Darwin's 'natural selection', and John Jacob Lyons's hypothesis, it may be worth noting the increasing birth-rate in homophobic societies and the declining birth-rate in ours.

Jake J.M. Glanville
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WRITE TO THE PSYCHOLOGIST

Our main function is to serve as a forum for discussion and debate, so it is vital we continue to receive your views on the articles and letters we publish, and on any topic relevant to psychologists. There are also special types of contribution we would like to encourage:

Looking back: Were you there when Eysenck did battle with the *British Journal of Medical Psychology*? Do you remember the great Burt controversy? What was Bartlett like as a person? We believe the history of psychology is important, and we want to hear your personal recollections for our letters pages. Send your contributions, of less than 500 words, to psychologist@bps.org.uk, marked 'Looking back'. And don't forget that we welcome longer articles on the personalities and contributions of eminent psychologists, dead or alive. See Dianne Berry's article on Broadbent, available via our searchable archive at www.bps.org.uk/publications/thepsychologist.cfm, for an example.

Question time: If you have a brief and burning question on any aspect of psychology, send it to us marked 'Question time'. See October for an unanswered question.

Counterpoint: If you read an article in *The Psychologist* that you fundamentally disagree with, then the letters page is your first port of call: summarise your argument in under 500 words. But if you feel you have a substantial amount of conflicting evidence to cite and numerous points to make that simply cannot be contained within a letter, you can submit a 'Counterpoint' article of up to 1500 words – but we need to receive it within a month of the publication of the original article.

INFORMATION

■ I AM a psychology graduate with extensive research experience in a variety of healthcare settings. I am keen to pursue a career in clinical psychology and seek **voluntary clinical work in the Manchester area from February 2004** onwards. I would be interested in working with any client group. Any offers or advice gratefully received.

Clare Cassells
E-mail: clarecassells@yahoo.co.uk;
tel: 0793 117 2229

■ I AM a psychology graduate (class 1) with an MSc in cognitive neuropsychology. I have experience working with adults in a neuropsychological rehabilitative environment and research and clinical experience of working with children. I am keen to pursue a career in clinical psychology and am looking for **voluntary work experience in the London area**. I am particularly interested in working in clinical neuropsychology settings, but

I would work with any client group to broaden my experience. Any offers or advice gratefully received.

Gráinne McLoughlin
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■ I AM a student with the Open University approaching my last year of study towards a degree in psychology. I am looking for **voluntary work experience in clinical psychology in the Bristol/Bath/Oxford area**. My time is very flexible and I would be grateful for offers of any type of work.

Jessica Rondelli
E-mail: daznjess@msn.com; tel: 0778 651 4920

■ I HAVE recently been appointed to a **split post** in the Mersey Care NHS Trust. Half of the post is based at the Early Onset Dementia Service (Mossley

Hill Hospital) and half at the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Service (Rathbone Hospital). I would appreciate hearing from anyone working in similar split posts.

Jayne Brooks
Psychology Department
Early Onset Dementia Service
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Tel: 0151 250 6186; e-mail: jayne.brooks@nhs.net

■ CLINICAL psychologist specialising in **somatics, body-oriented psychotherapy and pain applications** would like to hear from others with similar interests and expertise.

Laura Steckler
NHS Borders Psychological Services
12/14 Roxburgh Street
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Selkirkshire TD1 1PF
Tel: 01896 668821; e-mail: laura.steckler@borders.scot.nhs.uk

■ WE are offering a **placement in a forensic psychology**

setting in East Sussex. An opportunity to assist with assessment and report writing in relation to child protection and criminal issues. Supervision by a Chartered Psychologist. Some research opportunity is also available.

Joanna Beazley Richards
Wealden Institute
2 Quarry View
Whitehill Road
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East Sussex TN6 1JT
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■ I AM looking for a psychology student or graduate volunteer who would be willing to assist in a **research project on dissociative disorders in East Grinstead** from January 2004.

Haraldur Erlendsson
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Are exam boards failing?

I HAVE taught psychology to A-level students since 1993 and have watched, with increasing concern, changes in both the syllabus and the marking of students' work.

The debacle of changes made by Curriculum 2000 is well documented, but little has been written about specific subjects – apart from this year's 'revelation' that psychology is a 'soft' subject! As those of us within these subjects know, the ill-informed media coverage continues to place great pressure on teachers in defending the rigour of their subject.

Very little is heard about psychology at pre-degree level in the pages of *The Psychologist*. Given the increasing numbers of 16- to 19-year-old students who study psychology at A-level, it is perhaps time that the BPS – perhaps via the Association for the Teaching of Psychology

(ATP) – gave more consideration to issues at the level of pre-degree.

Whilst I know that important work is going on at this level, I would bring to the attention of the BPS my concerns about the internal mechanisms of the exam boards themselves. This summer, one exam board appears to have changed the way scripts are marked after student work had been submitted. We are still waiting for clarification of the 'new marking scheme', but the board concerned seems reluctant to give information. Upon checking the website – where we are told that the specification on view is the definitive version and supersedes any printed copy – the mark scheme remains the older version.

I can only come to one conclusion – the exam boards

JESS HUARD (REPORT DIGITAL)

are applying methods to 'massage the statistics' in order to fit an acceptable distribution of final scores. I consider changes made after a student has submitted work and before publication of results highly unethical. I also consider the use of and changes to the statistical formula to convert raw scores to a 'uniform mark score' unethical.

A-level exam boards are extremely clever in responding to criticism and can turn a valid critique based on evidence, into

an explanation that vindicates their actions. Teachers in schools and FE colleges are in an isolated position within their institution and within their subject. Whilst I recognise the importance of the ATP, I would still argue that teachers of the A-level specifications are failing to find a forum to challenge the few people who dominate subject leadership within the exam boards.

Gill Doble
Truro College

Peter Morris, Chair of the Psychology Education Board, replies: *It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the specific workings and policies of the A-level examination boards. However, I can assure Gill Doble and other members of the Society that the Psychology Education Board (PEB) takes A-level psychology very seriously. The PEB has observers from ATP and the A-level boards, and a*

PUTTING THE CLIENT AT THE CENTRE

I SHOULD like to respond to Martin Seager's critique (Letters, August 2003) of Stephen Joseph's eloquent summary of person-centred therapy (June 2003).

First, Seager sees person-centred therapy as 'self contradictory' because the therapist does not offer solutions for the client. When a client arrives they often do expect to be told what to do, handing over responsibility to the therapist. But usually, as they feel the benefit of being deeply heard, they realise how different this is from the usual form of consultation, and even in a first session can allow themselves to be real for the first time in their life.

Secondly, I wholeheartedly agree that clients of mental health services 'feel lost and confused'. They certainly do often, in my experience, 'lack a clear sense of identity and self'. I endeavour to help them find this lost self by valuing what they say, showing respect for who they are, and validating their experience. Gradually (although this can often be rapid) as they are taken seriously, they begin to take themselves more seriously, instead of dismissing their feelings as unimportant,

trivial or silly. This leads them to look inside themselves for what feels right in any situation – giving them an internal locus of control and evaluation, rather than having to look to other 'experts' for advice. They become stronger, more able to challenge situations and people to whom they have deferred in the past as they begin to trust themselves.

'Interventive expertise' in this context is superfluous, in my opinion. Who am I to presume to know what would be best for the client? Only they know what they are capable of, only they know their full history, and they have to feel confident to take the consequences of whatever they decide to do without the need to refer back to an expert at every step.

Thirdly, Seager says 'unconditional positive regard is impossible' and 'people with severe mental health problems...are often unlikeable almost by definition'. Well, therein lies some of the magic of person-centred therapy! I may not actually like this person in front of me, at least not at first. But once I put aside my judgements, and meet the hurt/angry/frightened person

inside, then they feel safe enough to explore what has led them to become unlikeable.

Finally, Seager assumes that because the person-centred therapist does not prescribe answers, this means they do nothing. In fact, keeping the balance of the core conditions, being aware of what is going on inside, and sharing it appropriately is exhausting and challenging. Person-centred therapy does not consist solely of being empathic and respectful, but requires me to be congruent as well, rather than hiding behind the cloak of professional expertise, of which Seager is so proud.

'Demonstrating professional expertise in the use of negative and positive countertransference' may be one way of working with wounded people. Indeed, far be it from me to suggest otherwise, but I object to Seager desecrating other orientations of which he understands very little.

Shirley Jolley
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significant part of the agenda of each meeting is devoted to supporting and developing both A-level psychology and the

successful integration of students who have taken A-level psychology into psychology degree courses.

Fundamentals of dyslexia

RECENT research into the causes of dyslexia is placing increasing emphasis on the presence of phonological encoding deficits and even suggesting that phonological intervention might cure the disorder (e.g. 'How to beat dyslexia' by Usha Goswami in the September edition of *The Psychologist*). The new approach is thanks largely to the efforts of Professor Margaret Snowling, winner of the Society's 2003 Presidents' Award. Her interventions place all their emphasis on 'the sounds of words' when working with children 'at risk of reading failure' (Snowling, 2000).

What is interesting is that diagnostic criteria have been changing to accommodate correlational evidence suggesting a phonological root to dyslexia. Accepted definitions of dyslexia have been dropped, by many influential scientists, as being 'ill-defined' due to expressions such as 'conventional instruction', found in the 1968 World Federation of Neurology definition:

a disorder manifested by difficulty in learning to read despite conventional

instruction, adequate intelligence and socio-cultural opportunity

in favour of the 1994 International Dyslexia Association definition:

a specific language-based disorder of constitutional origin characterised by difficulty in single word decoding, usually reflecting insufficient phonological processing abilities.

It is not only possible, but in fact a frequent occurrence nowadays, that people who have never had problems reading are diagnosed with the severest form of the disorder. At the same time those who experience profound difficulty barely fulfil diagnostic criteria and are classed as suffering from a milder form of dyslexia, or something completely different, or, in some cases, are given a vague generic classification such as 'learning impaired'.

All this means that some children are possibly suffering the embarrassment of unnecessary intervention, whilst those with a problem might receive scant help. Teachers possibly assume that an IQ test has led to classifications like

PETER MCKELLAR (1921–2003)

ALTHOUGH Peter McKellar, who died in Dunedin last summer, was only Head of the Department of Psychology at Sheffield University for a brief period in its history (1955–1959), he had a profound influence on psychology in Great Britain.

Peter came from New Zealand to study for his PhD in London – supervised by Cyril Burt. This was completed in 1949, and he then held academic posts at St Andrews, Aberdeen and Sheffield, before returning to Otago in 1969 to take up the Chair of Psychology. There he energetically re-staffed a depleted department and significantly expanded it. Today, half a dozen or so of his students occupy chairs of psychology – in New Zealand, Canada and Britain – and others hold influential posts.

Peter published five academic textbooks, but he is probably best known for his *Imagination and Thinking* (1957). On my student copy he wrote: 'I hope that this will convince you of how unexpectedly different the other person may turn out to be.' I was a bit surprised – and initially hurt – because I thought he was trying to tell me that I had overvalued him. But, of course, he was giving me a one-sentence summary of his lifelong concern with individual differences and, in particular, with people's ways of thinking. Chapter 4 – 'Some types of individual experiences' – was, and still is, a gem in this respect.

Peter was a prolific author. He continued publishing academic papers until at least the age of eighty. One of the latest that he gave me shortly before he died was on synaesthesia, another aspect of mental imagery close to his heart. And, in that meeting, we spent some considerable time discussing the effects of new technology on literacy and thinking.

All of Peter's colleagues and students have stories about Peter, the human being. Unfortunately, limitations of space prevent me from telling some of mine. But who else would take a decrepit cellar in the basement of their psychology department and personally paint it in a glorious orange in order to create a first-year lab, or lend his car overnight to one of his students – namely me – so that I could drive up on to the Yorkshire moors with my fellow students and a birthday crate of wine?

However, above the stories, I remember Peter best for his kindnesses, his never-failing encouragement, and the sheer intellectual pleasure of being in his company. *Semper floreat.*

James Hartley
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'learning impaired' and that the term is a euphemism denoting low intelligence, when no such test has been employed. Also, although there are no facilities in this country for supplying audio text books to people with reading disabilities, one American charity will help; but only if the student has a current diagnosis of dyslexia.

Some scientists (Rutkowski *et al.*, 2003, for instance) use the DSM-IV definition: *an impairment in the acquisition of literacy skills despite normal intelligence, an absence of physical or psychological problems, and adequate formal education* and their findings suggest that, although most dyslexics demonstrate some difficulty in

phonological processing – the causes remaining unknown – rapid change-processing difficulties appear to be common to all dyslexics. This would be in line with the findings of Stanislas Dehaene (2003) whose research suggests that word-recognition skills are a neurological adaptation to parts of the brain that originally performed different audio and visual functions.

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