



RESEARCH IN BRIEF

Contributions wanted

If you read a paper published in a peer-reviewed journal (or at proof stage) and think it would be of relevance and interest to our wide audience, send a lively and informative review (up to 400 words) to Tom Stafford on tom@idiolect.org.uk.

Called to quit

Telephone counselling helps young people to stop smoking. **SHARON McEWEN**

THE benefits of smoking cessation are most pronounced for younger smokers, and now a study from Vance Rubius (American Cancer Society) and colleagues suggests that 'telephone counselling can significantly improve cessation rates among young adults who seek assistance'.

To explore the effectiveness of telephone counselling, Rubius and colleagues recruited a sample of over 3500 smokers who called the American Cancer

Society for information on smoking cessation. Callers were asked to provide general demographic information and details of their smoking behaviour. All callers were sent information relating to smoking cessation and half were randomly selected to engage in approximately five sessions of telephone counselling.

The authors defined current smoking as 'any smoking in the past 48 hours'. The results revealed that smoking cessation at three- and six-month follow-up was higher

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among those who received telephone counselling, regardless of age. Similarly, estimates of prolonged abstinence were highest amongst participants who had received telephone counselling.

Interestingly, further enquiry revealed that while telephone counselling, demographic variables and smoking behaviour were associated with smoking cessation for callers over 25 years old, telephone counselling was the only significant predictor of abstinence at the three-month follow-up for those aged 18–25.

As cessation was based on self-report, the authors admit the results have to be treated with caution. Rubius *et al.* suggest they may have underestimated smoking cessation in the younger group, because participants in this group proved the most difficult to contact at follow-up. In addition, they accept they may have underestimated the cessation rates of those not receiving telephone counselling, since participants in this group may have quit at a later date than proposed. Hence, their prolonged abstinence may be higher in the long term.

Because this study suggests that telephone counselling can enhance smoking cessation in younger adults, the American Cancer Society is 'exploring ways to increase younger smokers' participation in telephone counselling through colleges and universities, trade schools, and youth-oriented media campaigns'.

Rubius, V., McAlister, A.L., Geiger, A., Huang, P. & Todd, R. (2004) Telephone counselling increases cessation rates among young adult smokers. *Health Psychology*, 23(5), 539–541.

■ Sharon McEwen is an assistant psychologist at the State Hospital, Carstairs.

Virtually painless?

Can virtual reality reduce the perception of pain? **LEIGH-ANNE LYNCH**

CHILDREN with cancer have to undergo many distressing medical procedures during their treatment. According to a study by Gershon and colleagues, the use of virtual reality may be a feasible means of distraction during such procedures.

Fifty-nine children and young people (aged between 7 and 19) who were undergoing a relatively mild medical intervention for varying forms of cancer were randomly assigned to one of two experimental groups or a control group. The groups involved were: virtual reality, non-virtual reality, and a treatment as usual without distraction group. The virtual reality group used a head-mounted device whilst the non-virtual reality group had no head-mounted device, but played the same computer program on a monitor. In the computer program the individual took on the persona of a gorilla and interacted with the other gorillas in the habitat. The object of the game was to establish positive relationships with those in the habitat.

An assessment of pain and anxiety was obtained from the child, their parent and nurses using a self-report measure and a behavioural observation scale.

A physiological measure of arousal was obtained by monitoring the individual's pulse before, during and after the procedure.

The study found that compared with the non-virtual reality and control group, reductions in pain and anxiety were found with those who used the virtual reality intervention; this was shown by reduced pulse rates and reports of pain by nurses. The authors note that the study has a limited sample size and that the technology could be expensive. They propose further research could be carried out to test the effectiveness of virtual reality during more distressing medical procedures for cancer, such as bone marrow aspirations or lumbar punctures. The authors say: 'The ability to focus an individual on an imaginary world and potentially lower the distress associated with invasive medical procedures suggests that this technology has potential use in medical psychology.'

Gershon, J., Zimand, E., Pickering, M., Rothbaum, B.A. & Hodges, L. (2004). A pilot and feasibility study of virtual reality as a distraction for children with cancer. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 43(10), 1243–1249.

■ Leigh-Anne Lynch is an assistant psychologist in Glasgow.

Classifying adolescent abusers

CEDRIC GINESTET on research into the personality types of adolescent sexual abusers.

CLASSIFYING people is second nature for many psychologists. Yet the urge to classify is often confronted by the deficiencies of the classification systems currently in use in psychiatry and clinical psychology. Nevertheless, such systems are important in so far as they allow the treatment of specific psychopathologies. It is with this objective in mind that Graeme Richardson and colleagues from the Northern Forensic Mental Health Service for Young People classified young sexual abusers on the basis of their personality type.

The researchers administered the Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory (MACI), which tests for the presence of DSM-IV Axis II personality disorders, to a sample of 112 sexually abusive adolescents. They unveiled the heterogeneous nature of that sample, identifying five personality prototypes, including antisocial, submissive, dysthymic/inhibited, dysthymic/negativistic and normal personality. Interestingly, three of these prototypes display some levels of affective disorders.

Unfortunately, while this taxonomy of sexual abusers paralleled similar research with adult offenders, personality was related neither to the sex nor to the age of their victims. Consequently, the authors concluded that the treatment of young sexual offenders necessitates tailored therapeutic interventions based on the personality characteristics of the offenders rather than on the offenders' predilection for a certain type of victim.

This study epitomises the recurrent difficulties encountered by taxonomists in psychology. The failure of personality characteristics to predict types of offences can either be accounted for by the actual absence of relation between psychological profiles and behaviour, or by the erroneous nature of the classification.

Using personality characteristics as indicators of class membership may well be an ineffective strategy. Personality syndromes are the diagnostic categories of

the DSM-IV that have yielded the feeblest empirical support. Inter-rater reliability in assessing personality disorders is generally low, with kappa values ranging from poor (.35) to fair (.50) (Perry, 1992). Moreover, there is little evidence that personality disorders exclude each other, as

many patients receive multiple personality disorder diagnoses (Widiger & Rogers, 1989).

Valid and reliable diagnoses constitute the cornerstone of clinical practice. Yet, the validity of many diagnoses remains difficult to establish. Richardson *et al.* have opened a research avenue that will allow better

understanding of the underlying psychopathological conditions of sexual offenders. The use of other clinical interviews measuring Axis I disorders could complement these advances and help to sketch which psychiatric morbidity is linked with sexual abuse.

Richardson, G., Kelly, T.P., Graham, F. & Bhate, S.R. (2004). A personality-based taxonomy of sexually abusive adolescents derived from the Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory (MACI). *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 43, 285–298.

References

- Perry, C. (1992). Problems and considerations in the valid assessment of personality disorders. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 49, 1645–1653.
- Widiger, T.A. & Rogers, J. H. (1989). Prevalence and comorbidity of personality disorders. *Psychiatric Annals*, 19, 132–136.

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PAUL BALDESARE/PHOTOFUSION (MODEL POSED)

Here's a sample from the Society's free Research Digest, from the editor

CHRISTIAN JARRETT. To sign up e-mail subscribe-rd@lists.bps.org.uk.

CONSCIOUSNESS – ALL OR NOTHING?

IS it possible to be slightly conscious of something, or, instead, is it that either we are conscious of something or we're not? Claire Sergent and Stanislas Dehaene (INSERM, France) used the 'attentional blink' phenomenon to address this question.

The attentional blink refers to the way that after consciously attending to one stimulus, there then follows a brief period during which our ability to consciously perceive a second stimulus is diminished.

Ten French participants were presented with sequences of four random consonants (e.g. 'CVGR', 'PCJG',...). An initial target, either 'XOOX', or 'OXXO', of distinct colour, was embedded randomly in some of these sequences. A second target, presented between 86ms and 688ms later, was a four-letter French number (e.g. 'DEUX', 'CINQ').

Participants had to identify the central letters of the first target, and then had to indicate on a sliding scale of 21 increments from 'not seen'

to 'maximal visibility', how clearly they had seen the second target.

Consistent with the attentional blink, the sooner the second target appeared after the first, the less likely participants were to report having seen it. Crucially, they only ever reported either wholly seeing the target, or completely not seeing it, despite the incremental grading scale. It's not that the participants were unable to use the sliding scale properly – they did so in a control task.

The results suggest that 'the attentional blink consists of a stochastic all-or-none loss of conscious access to the second target', the experimenters concluded.

Sergent, C. & Dehaene, S. (2004). Is consciousness a gradual phenomenon? *Psychological Science*, 15, 720–728.

Weblinks:

Journal: www.blackwellpublishing.com/journals/psci

Author: tinyurl.com/5b63p

INSERM's cognitive neuroimaging unit: www.unicog.org

Even more brief

JON SUTTON samples the latest *BPS journals*.

Students prefer the reflective, logical and serial approach of the 'analytic' research supervisor to the more open-minded, enthusiastic methods of the 'intuitive' type. What's more, it's the analytic approach that gets the results. (*BJEP*, December)

You may think that conflict will play a large part in relationship satisfaction, but in fact this association is completely mediated by how supportive the couple are to each other. Teaching couples to be more supportive, rather than how to avoid or deal with conflict, may be the path to domestic bliss. (*PAPTRAP*, December)

Grounded theory analysis of interviews with 10 women who self-wound suggests that there are two distinct pathways to self-wounding. The 'spring' is associated with a feeling of becoming increasingly 'wound up'; the 'switch' is associated with a sudden and often overwhelming desire to cut. (*PAPTRAP*, December)

In a vignette study, male workers who missed work to care for their sick child received lower overall performance ratings and lower reward recommendations than a male worker who did not experience this family-work conflict. But the same experience had no effect on ratings and recommendations given to a female worker. Perhaps a reason why so many men choose not to take their paternity leave. (*JOOP*, December)

Schoolchildren have positive attitudes towards the victims of bullying and tend not to blame them for what has happened. However, girls blame male victims more than female victims, and the reverse applies when boys provide their judgements. (*BJEP*, December)

Interest in the largely discredited 'Mozart effect', the idea that playing classical music to young children can boost their IQ, was so great in the US that some states passed laws making classical music compulsory in state-funded daycare. Now a new analysis shows that states with lower teacher salaries, national test scores and per pupil funding show more media interest in the Mozart effect. The authors suggest that collective anxieties about childhood education in such states may have created a desire for an easy solution, and that this supports the idea that scientific legends propagate in the same way as rumours and myths. (*BJSP*, December)

Does 'team' work?

JON SUTTON reports on a target article and peer commentaries.

LET'S brainstorm' is a common rallying call in offices across the land, despite plenty of research showing that it doesn't work – interacting groups actually generate far fewer or, at best, the same number of ideas as the combined efforts of several people working alone. In a recent target article, Natalie Allen (University of Western Ontario) and Tracy Hecht (University of Manitoba) investigated the 'romance of teams', asking why teams have an irresistible social appeal given the paucity of empirical evidence for their effectiveness.

Allen and Hecht say that people work in teams for psychological rather than practical reasons; namely, social-emotional and competence-related benefits. Teams fulfil our social need for something that connects us with our workmates, something that imbues the relationship with meaning. They reduce anxiety-provoking uncertainty about how best to behave. They give us the opportunity to deflect failure from ourselves, and we seem to think they have improved our performance even if they haven't. If teams make people happy and they think they work, what's the problem?

Allen and Hecht argue that the ubiquity of teams makes organisations lazy: they don't consider the organisational context the team is working in, or the suitability of that approach. People are forced to represent their department on teams that have little relevance to them, just so the firm can seem inclusive. Saying you're 'a team player' takes on undue importance, and people are made scapegoats. And importantly for the organisations, all this costs money.

Urging more research into when teams are effective, Allen and Hecht say 'the promise of teams may well be real. It would be most unfortunate, however, if that promise went unfulfilled simply because our belief in teams was based on infatuation rather than reality.'

In the first peer commentary, James Meindl (who coined the phrase 'romance of leadership' back in 1985 and who died before this response was published) suggests that the romanticised view will get stronger for a while, but as new evidence accumulates that performance benefits are

not being obtained, the illusion becomes more difficult to maintain, and the romance will decline. He comments that 'the very existence of the publication by Allen and Hecht may provide us with a signal that our romance with teams may have already reached its passionate crescendo and that the honeymoon will soon be over'.

Michael West and colleagues from Aston University are not so sure, arguing that Allen and Hecht's review is marred by selectivity and misinterpretations. Teams are here to stay – from erecting Stonehenge to performing a heart bypass – and we'd be better off researching how we can work most effectively in teams, or else risk being dismissed as 'ivory tower academics'.

Distinguishing between group research, typically involving artificial lab situations, and the more field-based team research, Paulus (University of Texas) and Van der Zee (University of Groningen) say that it's a bit too early to conclude that there is no productivity gain in organising work in teams. We need to ignite the romantic flame between these two sets of research traditions, although the major roadblock to a happy marriage is... (you guessed it) lack of research funding from government and big business.

Unconvinced by Allen and Hecht's argument that teams persist because of psychological factors, John Cordery (University of Western Australia) points to several more practical reasons. He also cautions that 'we may be failing to see team-performance effects because it is not real teams we are evaluating or because the teams under investigation vary on performance-relevant aspects of team design'.

Responding to the commentaries, Allen and Hecht reiterate the need for organisations to be judicious in their use of teams – to diagnose the disease before prescribing the treatment. 'It is not impossible', they comment, 'that researchers themselves have been too dazzled by the idea of teamwork to take this question as seriously as they might.'

Allen, N.J. & Hecht, T.D. (2004). The 'romance of teams': Toward an understanding of its psychological underpinnings and implications. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 77, 439–461.

