The 30th Annual PsyPAG Conference

This year's Psychology Postgraduate Affairs Group (PsyPAG) conference, held in Glasgow in July, not only attracted more delegates than ever before – over 200 – but also more presenters. The full and varied programme of symposia and posters was a real testament to the breadth and range of postgraduate psychology in the UK.

The first day was filled with highlights. Professor Daryl O'Connor spoke on behalf of the Society's Research Board, and our first keynote speaker, Professor Richard Wiseman, grabbed the audience's attention by opening with a magic trick.

On Wednesday Glasgow City Council provided a Civic Reception at Glasgow City Chambers for a truly memorable evening. Addresses by The Lord Provost of Glasgow, Sadie Doherty, and BPS President Professor Jamie Hacker Hughes really added to the sense of occasion.

The sessions on Thursday and Friday were just as successful as the first day and we were pleased to welcome Dr Rachael Jack and Professor Padraic Monaghan to the conference as keynotes. The conference dinner on the Thursday evening was also a massive success, with many of the delegates trying ceilidh dancing for the first time.

Overall, this event was a fantastic demonstration of everything PsyPAG has to offer. The environment at the conference was enthusiastic and supportive and the social events provided postgraduate students the opportunity to network and relax. Throughout the conference there was a sense of pride in the achievements of PsyPAG over the last 30 years. The Twitter hashtag #PsyPAG2015 attracted a huge volume of attention – almost 1000 tweets during the conference alone.

It was a real privilege to host the 30th Anniversary PsyPAG Conference, and we hope to build on this success in the coming years.

Niamh Friel, Jason Bohan, Stephanie Boyle, Ben Dunn, Gemma Learmonth, Kieran O'Shea and Yulia Revina (Members of PsyPAG organising committee)

Takete or maluma?

Professor Padraic Monaghan (Lancaster University) opened his keynote speech on sound symbolism with this interesting question. If we are shown a spiky shape or a more rounded shape, we are more likely to give the latter the title of *maluma*. Why is this and how much meaning can we retrieve from the sounds within words?

During his brilliant talk Monaghan spoke about the aspects of meaning held within phonoaesthemes, clusters of letters which present a certain meaning, for example the 'gl' in words relating to light, such as *glimmer*, *glisten* and *gleam*, as well as the 'sn' in nose-related words, *snout*, *sniff*, *sneeze*, and, yes, *snot*.

These parts of language do not always express the same meanings – the sound symbolism relationship is not perfect. However even in other languages we may not understand, we can often tell which words mean whether something is large or small, for example the word 'big' in Finnish is *suuri*, in Polish *duza*, and Japanese *oogata* – Monaghan said there is a sound correspondence in languages which can sometimes express size.

Sound symbolism may also be more prevalent in other languages. He pointed to the example of ideophones in Japanese: there are thousands of words in the language which express very particular types of movement, for example 'buruburu' which expresses trembling or shaking. Monaghan also said some researchers have suggested sound symbolism makes learning a language easier, or even that it makes language acquisition possible in the first place.

However within linguistics there is a largely anti sound-symbolism feeling. Many argue that there are many long words for small things, small words for big things, and the relationship between sound and meaning is an arbitrary one.

Monaghan and his team have looked at all monosyllabic English words, finding a small but significant effect suggesting that some of the monosyllabic words had sounds that related to their meaning. They also looked into whether there is a sound–meaning link across 69 different languages, finding that there was sound symbolism in all other languages tested (apart from Georgian), but no more than seen in English.

So does sound symbolism make language-learning easier? While previous experiments have been forced-choice between two novel words to name a given object, Monaghan required participants to learn new sound-symbolic names for different objects. They were good at using sound-symbolism to categorise objects (rounded or spiky shapes) but could not use the information for better learning of the more fine-tuned individual words (e.g. to define between two spiky shapes).

Monaghan suggested, if sound symbolism could help us to learn basic categories for objects then it could well be useful in acquiring language in the first place. He looked at the age of acquisition of certain words and the amount of sound finding that the earlier words we acquire are more sound symbolic than we would expect by chance. Monaghan concluded that sound symbolism is prevalent, it has only a small effect, but can be helpful in learning categories of objects, and in some of the earliest words we learn. **ER**

Facing up to expression

Are facial expressions truly universal? This fascinating question, and many others, have been tackled by Dr Rachael Jack (University of Glasgow) and her team using some unique technology.

In the past it was believed that the six facial expressions of happiness, surprise, sadness, fear, disgust and anger could be recognised across the world. However, it emerged in the late 1960s that while Westerners have a high level of accuracy distinguishing these, people from East Asian cultures often confuse fear with confusion and disgust with anger.

Dr Jack and her team hoped to find out why this might be, starting investigations using eye tracking technology. While Westerners fixated across the whole of a face when distinguishing facial expressions, East Asians tended to focus more on the upper half of the face, particularly the eyes. Jack also gave some interesting anecdotal evidence, that in texts and online Westerners use the smiley face :) where the mouth is varied to suit the expression, however in East Asian smiley faces such as: ^.^ – the eyes are varied to illustrate expression and the mouth is altered very little.

In her later work, Jack used a unique computer platform to present participants with 3D images of faces showing randomised facial expressions. These images were created using the Facial Action Coding System, which identifies the 40 specific muscles used in making facial expressions. Specially trained people who are able to move all of these 40 muscles individually were scanned and recorded, therefore allowing the team to generate images of faces with random combinations of each of these movements.

In this later experiment a set of three action movements were randomly selected and combined together and presented as one face; the participant then had to select an emotion category for that face. Dr Jack found that East Asians tend to use the eyes more to signal emotion; for example, in the East Asian results the stimuli most correlated with anger and disgust looked very different in the eyes, when compared with the Caucasian stimuli where the two emotions look similar in the eyes yet the mouths are very different.

Jack has also used these stimuli to investigate the face as a social tool, asking how much information people glean from facial movements as opposed to the natural morphology of the face. She used the stimuli described above to model the dynamic facial expressions that indicate dominance, attractiveness and trustworthiness. Dynamics emerge as more important: if a person who is rated as looking untrustworthy pulls a trustworthy face, they are then rated as being as trustworthy as the most trustworthy face. **ER**

Magic and dreams

Many psychologists will know Professor Richard Wiseman from his regular mentions in the media – he is the UK's only Professor in the Public Understanding of Psychology, based at the University of Hertfordshire. But you may not know that Wiseman began his working life as a magician, before going on to take his degree and PhD in psychology, ultimately pursuing an academic career in the field.

Wiseman spoke of his early career experiences, one of which was coming up with the best idea for an experiment that could be done live on TV. Wiseman won the opportunity to test a hypothesis related to the psychology of lying, attracting a 41,474-strong group of participants. This was a time before reality TV was commonplace and before Big Data became ubiquitous. The study, showing that it is easier to tell if someone is lying if you disregard the visual cues and just close your eyes, was published in *Nature*.

More recent work demonstrated the impact of so-called 'change blindness', which reveals that in certain contexts, despite thinking you are looking carefully at visual cues, having your eyes wide open generally doesn't help you to see what is going on right in front of you. This fact is visually expressed in his colour changing card trick (tinyurl.com/9rsejv).

Finally, Professor Wiseman talked about one of his most recent projects, Dream On, which invites us to be part of the world's largest dream experiment (see tinyurl.com/owpf2eh). It was launched at the 2012 Edinburgh International Science Festival and over 13 million dream reports have already been submitted.

Dr Renée Bleau (University of Glasgow)

Men rate women as more attractive when they appeared on a 'short-term' dating site (such as Tinder) in comparison with the same picture on a 'long-term' site (like e-Harmony). The reverse pattern is found in women. Jack Livingston Woodward (University of Glasgow) pondered whether his findings were proof of an evolutionary theory of mating – men may hope to reproduce more often with more diverse mates, while women may look for more nurturing partners with more resources.

Queen Margaret University student Hope Christie compared participants' reactions to real footage of the aftermath of road accidents, a scary game and Stanley Kubrick movie *The Shining*. She found, although fictional, the game and film caused physiological responses and emotional reactions, but the road traffic footage, also used in prior experiments into trauma, left participants more interested than scared. All caused some intrusive thoughts but these faded quickly; Hope concluded these types of stimuli might not be best for looking into trauma.

Could the energy drinks children consume be linked to their behaviour and achievement at school? Gareth Richards (Cardiff University) looked into surveys of more than 2000 children involved in the Cornish Academies Project. High amounts of caffeinated soft drinks and chewing gum were related to low attendance, low achievement in English and maths, and higher levels of detention.

Stephanie Powell (University of Sheffield) found that if children are shown a high number of different ways to play with a novel object they, in turn, develop a higher number of their own novel uses or ways of playing with the toy rather than being restricted to imitating the original actions.

Natalie Bowling (Goldsmiths University of London) showed participants a scale of computer-generated images; on one end a doll's face, morphing across the scale into a human face. She found that female stimuli were seen as less animate than males and happy faces were more quickly rated as animate than neutral ones. Male faces were rated as more alive, more likely to have a mind and more likely to feel pain.

Harriet Smith (Nottingham Trent University) said evolutionary psychology would suggest we might be able to learn about a person's age, height, weight and even attractiveness from their voice. She found that people could match faces to voices, better than chance, even if the face was a static image.