



## 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](mailto: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.

## Think-tanks, or think *tanks*

**A**RE many heads any better than one? The received wisdom concerning group decision making is that by working together on a problem we will arrive at a better solution than if we ponder the problem alone. Why else would we have invented juries, think-tanks or brainstorming sessions? Given this wisdom, one would expect that the current rounds of meetings and discussions between many 'heads' (of state, government, UN, etc.) might have solved the crisis in the Gulf. Or at least found a life-preserving compromise. Not, perhaps, if the groups involved were showing symptoms of groupthink.

Groupthink, defined by Irving L. Janis in his 1972 book *Victims of Groupthink* as 'a collective pattern of defensive avoidance', manifests itself in groups that are highly cohesive, insular and have directed leadership. Through the detailed analysis of a number of historical fiascos (the Bay of Pigs, President Johnson's decision to escalate war in Vietnam, President Truman's decision to do the same in North Korea) and a comparison with major decisions that were successful (the implementation of the Marshall plan after WWII), Janis identified the key symptoms of groupthink:

- the illusion of invulnerability creating excessive optimism and encouraging extreme risk taking;

- collective efforts to rationalise in order to discount warnings that might lead members to reconsider their assumptions;
- an unquestioned belief in the inherent morality of the group, inclining members to ignore the ethical or moral

POPPERFOTO/STRINGER/REUTERS

consequences of decisions;

- stereotyped views of rivals and enemies as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate;
- direct pressure on any members that express strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes;
- self-censorship of doubts or counterarguments that a member might have in order to create an illusion of unanimity within the group; and
- the emergence of self-appointed 'mindguards' who protect the group from adverse information that might shatter shared complacency about the

effectiveness and morality of the group's decision.

Even a cursory glance at these symptoms reveals frightening parallels with both sides of the current crisis. By blanketing themselves with teams of advisers in which the few potential 'doves' are either too intimidated to offer a dissenting voice, or are simply resigned to the inevitability of war, both Hussein and Bush are making crucial decisions in an environment that promotes the development of groupthink.

Once groupthink has taken grip, the quality of decision making takes an ominous plunge. Janis identified such defects as the incomplete survey of possible alternatives, a selective bias in processing the information at hand, and a failure to work out contingency plans. Again, the prescience of his analysis is impressive. No longer just a post-hoc explanation of past disasters, it provides a model with which to predict our elite groups' future transgressions. At the time of writing it may just be heads of state and government who are the victims, but if war results many more heads may be lost to groupthink.

**Ben Newell**

**David Lagnado**

*University College London*

### Reference

Janis, I.L. (1972). *Victims of groupthink*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

## What should we see in black and white?

**W**HY is it 'the sad truth...that there are always some of us that are not whiter than white' (Letters, February 2003)? As other articles in that edition showed, at least two other psychologists are not whiter than white, were these the people being referred to? OK I accept I am taking the quote out of context. But hey, language has power or it is meaningless, isn't it?

As we have learned to reduce sexism in writing, can we not also learn to modify some of our statements which can so easily be changed. For example, 'purer than pure' has the same meaning as 'whiter than white' and the use of 'bleak' to replace 'black' when the connotation is negative is, I believe, fairly easily achievable. I am not trying to be politically correct

or a strict member of the thought police, however only a little care and attention to how we linguistically promote inclusion can go a long way to providing helpful exemplars. Perhaps the editor could take note?

**Jim Wood**

*School of Psychology  
Washington Singer  
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University of Exeter*

**The editor, Jon Sutton, replies:** *The Society's recently published style guide (see [www.bps.org.uk/documents/styleguide.pdf](http://www.bps.org.uk/documents/styleguide.pdf)) refers to race but makes no mention of phrases such as 'whiter than white' or 'the future looks black'. Nor can I find any published guidelines on such issues from, for example, the Commission for Racial Equality. What do other readers think?*

## Reflections on cognitive psychology

**W**HERE oh where is the fabled iconoclasm of youth? Christian Beresford Jarrett (Letters, February 2003) has swallowed the party line whole. Many times, over the years, I have asked cognitive psychologists why they thought the questions they were trying to answer were worth asking, since they appeared to me to be insignificant sequelae of published studies that were themselves testing insignificant hypotheses. The answer I got (if any answer was vouchsafed) was 'I'm collecting data, aren't I? What more do you want?' This appeal to 19th century empiricism is not echoed in any other science. Early in the 20th century even philosophers began to take note of the actual practice of scientists, but by then of course psychologists had ceased to read philosophy.

I specifically allowed that there might be useful practical consequences of these

investigations of which I was unaware. I know of none; but if there are any affecting sufferers from memory loss, I should be glad to know of them. I may shortly be in a condition to benefit myself.

I also allowed that many self-styled 'cognitive scientists' had thought about the issues, read what modern philosophers have to say on the subject and acted accordingly. There was, I thought, hope for the future of the subject; though if Jarrett is typical of the new generation, my hopes may have been misplaced.

I have heard of the waterfall illusion, though I never succeeded in experiencing it myself. Reflections in still water (or in a mirror) are not 2-D representations, and I have never before seen it suggested that they were. What real-world visual illusions (if there are any), illusions arising from 2-D representations (Müller-Lyer, Poggendorff, Titchener, etc.) and mirror images have in

common is that they never pose survival contingencies that could have affected the evolution either of the behavioural visual system that we share with lower animals (which is not misled) or of the human (conscious) visual system. The latter is sometimes misled, but never with any consequences for survival; the conscious system has evolved only so far as was necessary – my argument stands.

I am taken to task for not having read two articles that appeared in the same month as my own, in a journal I had not previously heard of. If I can lay my hands on it, I will read them. Maybe I shall be as impressed as Jarrett – maybe not.

**Norman Wetherick**

69/1 York Place  
Edinburgh

**T**HE February issue carries a letter from Christian Beresford Jarrett of the Department of

Optometry(!) and Neuroscience at UMIST. This letter includes the astonishing assertion that reflections in water are two-dimensional. This is not the case. Reflections in water (or any other substance) are three-dimensional.

When light from an object is reflected from a plane surface and subsequently enters the eye, the eye-brain combination 'sees' a three-dimensional object that is not there, the illusion is referred to as a virtual image. The image is, as we tell our third-formers (and they verify), as far behind the reflecting surface as the object is in front of it, both image and object lying on a line normal to the reflecting surface. This applies to each part of the reflection of a three-dimensional object, hence the three-dimensional image.

**Kit Bunker**

Chengelo School  
Mkushi  
Zambia



### Positively miserable

**I** DON'T want to rain on anyone's parade. However, the March edition of *The Psychologist* was clearly not to my taste (dour, Scots, Calvinist). Have any of the contributors to this special issue on positive psychology considered that some people actually enjoy feeling miserable? This is the only explanation I have for supporting Dundee United (please substitute any other hopeless cause you may have squandered half your life pursuing).

**Martin Gemmell**

Psychological Services (West)  
City of Edinburgh Council

## Understanding drug addiction

**I** AM currently undergoing a practical training period in a rehabilitatory environment for drug addicts, and I felt addressed by the article written by Gossop and Mitcheson ('Action plan: Illegal drug problems and their treatment', February 2003).

I would like to underline the importance of the incorporation of different sorts of professionals as mentioned in the article. In the therapy setting in which I work, the clients are taken care of by a team of psychotherapists, a social worker, a doctor and general practitioners. This method of working together is the reason for the successful long-term rehabilitation of most of the clients. The methods are taken from the cognitive-behavioural point of view, underlined by additional aspects, such as aid in finding

a job and apartment, sorting out financial situations and regaining physical health. I have learned that although each aspect of the therapy offered is of great importance, together they build a cohesive and variable whole.

However, I have also noticed that the work in such a therapy setting can only be as good as its environment. Therefore, I would like to add two recommendations which I feel are important in the work with drug addiction.

Firstly, I recommend enhancing the understanding of drug addiction as a chronic illness in general. The ICD-10 holds a whole section on psychological and behavioural disorders related to intoxication and the misuse of illegal substances. This understanding is important not only for the addicts themselves, but also for

their family, friends and society in general.

Secondly, I have learned the importance of anonymous support groups for drug users. These groups are supervised by former drug users who have managed to rebuild a clean life. These are the true specialists concerning drug-related problems, since they know firsthand how the drug user feels. The drug user is understood and accepted in these groups. I believe that this shows how important changes in the general opinion of society are concerning drug users, and that these should be addressed by professionals and governments.

To conclude, I would like to say that the focus needs to be on the awareness of many different factors concerning drug addiction. The fact that the individual needs to be valued as a whole person, and not reduced to the basis of their drug habit, has to be acknowledged. This is important not only for the therapy itself, but also for understanding the various



facets of drug addiction in society. Bringing new aspects into the consciousness of society and offering knowledge and understanding to a larger community must be investigated. Letting go of prejudices and taboos concerning drug addiction will make it easier for addicts to talk about their problems and look for help before they fall deeper into this vicious circle.

**Jessica Seifert**  
*Paulsborner Straße 23  
 Berlin*

## Forensic careers

I HAVE been interested to read the correspondence on forensic psychology and how to access it.

I would refer those interested in pursuing a career in any area of applied psychology, but particularly in applied forensic psychology, to look at the website

[www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk](http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk).

In HM Prison Service there is a direct promotion route from psychological assistant to

trainee forensic psychologist posts. Also, in some cases, subject to appropriate qualifications and agreement with, and capacity amongst, local Chartered Forensic Psychologists, it is possible to begin work towards chartership as a psychological assistant.

**Graham Towl**  
*Head of Psychology  
 National Probation Service  
 and HM Prison Service*

## Peace psychology

I AM writing in response to Catherine Dooley (Letters, March 2003) regarding interest in setting up a Peace Psychology Section within the BPS.

Such a section I believe could provide a central focus for those of us working in the field of conflict resolution, negotiation, decision making, psychology of protest movements, to name but a few. In addition, it would provide an excellent opportunity for bridge

building and networking between university-based and applied branches of the profession. Examples of the latter could include youth/community workers; prison psychologists, occupational psychologists, as well as clinicians and therapists, all of whom could find such a section a constructive focus for debating and developing their working practice.

Peace studies is an accepted

## SAM SILVER (1969-2002)

I RECEIVED news of Sam's passing away on returning from the United States on 5 January. I was particularly sad because we had not had much contact for a while. As happens in life, after a lengthy association and friendship working together for SCPEO (Standing Committee for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities), we had drifted off to other projects and other work in our lives. The news brought back memories of the things we had done together. Back in 1995 to 1999 we had undertaken various projects in an effort to raise awareness of disability matters, to develop some guidance and generate discussion in the BPS over issues of disability, discrimination and disaffection.

I am now grateful for the opportunity to put in words a very modest tribute to Sam's generous spirit and cheeky sense of humour when confronting issues, attitudes and environments that were, to say the least, very taxing. She was so bright and full of humour and humorous references to the

challenging 'able-bod' world that she found herself in. We attended a BPS London Conference with a brief to observe and comment on the experience from the point of view of a member who is disabled. The way in which she 'powered' around the conference using her wheelchair to sweep aside doors whose handles were unreachable from a sitting position was both exhilarating and eye-opening. The good-natured observations about being able to purchase a cup of coffee but then having nowhere to sit and drink it, or the impossibility of getting a wheelchair into the book display, had me hopping with frustration. She simply ploughed on in her wheeled chariot and dealt with it all unperturbed with engaging banter and a steadfast disposition. This cheery and somewhat cheeky outlook, though, masked a more serious side to Sam.

She took the personal problems that a disabled psychologist might encounter, and

by joining SCPEO and in the ensuing work we did she lifted these problems from her own personal domain and brought them firmly to the table of more public awareness. She questioned the everyday reality and regenerated it in the important issues of accessibility, and civil and human rights that should be of concern to us all. She contributed to the Edinburgh Conference in 1996 with a selection of extracts from Helen Keller that, in effect, seriously questioned the assumptions that others (including psychologists) make about disability and disabled people.

I am proud to have known Sam Silver and to have shared some wonderful energising experiences with her. I am sure colleagues who knew her would wish to join in thinking of her family at this time. Sam's spirit is a loss to us all.

**John Cornwall**  
*24 Upper Dane Road  
 Margate*

academic discipline in this country and a creation of a Peace Psychology Section within the BPS would enable psychologists to engage with discussions going on within that field.

I for one support this initiative and hope that many others do likewise.

**Miriam Moss**

191 Stainbeck Lane  
Meanwood  
Leeds

**Editor's note:** *The Society's Rule 40* ([www.bps.org.uk/about/rules4.cfm](http://www.bps.org.uk/about/rules4.cfm)) states that the first step to forming a new Section is to get the support of at least 20 Fellows, Associate Fellows or Chartered Psychologists. The proposal must then be made in writing to Council (the Trustees) for approval, after which members at large are invited to say whether they would join the proposed new Section.

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 or 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. We hope this format will build on the role of *The Psychologist* as a forum for discussion and debate.

## DEADLINE

Deadline for letters for possible publication in the June issue is 2 May

## INFORMATION

■ I AM studying for a graduate diploma in psychology at the University of Westminster and have a BA in philosophy and an MA in applied ethics. I am keen to pursue a career in forensic psychology. I am therefore looking for a **voluntary work placement in a forensic setting in the London area** for one day a week.

**Paul Summers**

22 Barlings Road  
Harpenden  
Herts AL5 2AN  
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■ WE are clinical psychologists working in a friendly multidisciplinary team with people with learning disabilities in East London. We have **opportunities for undergraduate or graduate psychologists who would be interested in volunteering** to be involved in research around people with learning disabilities and challenging needs.

**Deborah Chinn**

Tower Hamlets Services for People with Learning Disabilities  
E-mail: Deborah.Chinn@thpct.nhs.uk

■ I AM a recent Durham graduate (2:1) looking for a **voluntary clinical work placement in Nottinghamshire or Lincolnshire**. I have experience in child and adult services and as a research assistant, and welcome the opportunity to learn more in a clinical environment.

**Samantha Hardingham**

Tel: 01636 821724; e-mail: s\_hardingham@hotmail.com

■ I AM a second-year undergraduate studying experimental psychology. I am

seeking **voluntary work experience for summer 2003, in the London area or the north Lincolnshire area**. Any opportunities gratefully received!

**Pamela Jacobsen**

Magdalen College  
Oxford OX1 4AU  
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■ A MENTAL health community project in South London has **opportunities for volunteers with a psychology background**.

Our project has a range of adult and youth work, but in particular help is needed with evaluation of youth mental health/peer support projects. We can offer travel expenses, a supportive environment and valuable experiences for students/graduates pursuing careers in mental health/psychology. Please send CV or contact me for more details.

**Sarah Fielding**

Wiseton Road Community Project  
10a Wiseton Road  
London SW17 7EE  
Tel: 020 8672 5108

■ I AM a third-year PsychD counselling psychology trainee at the University of Surrey. I am in the midst of my third-year **research project, which looks at adults with child refugee experiences**.

**I am looking for participants for my study**. The participants should have been aged 2–17 years when they came to this country, and be over 18 today. The participants should also have been refugees rather than immigrants (i.e. fleeing from war, persecution or risk of persecution). The study only involves filling out an

anonymous questionnaire, which takes no longer than 20 minutes. If you have these experiences or if you know someone who does, please contact me if you would be interested to take part.

**Agatha Strak**

Department of Psychology  
University of Surrey  
Tel: 01483 689176; e-mail: agatha\_strak@hotmail.com

■ WE are looking for a **volunteer (with test giving experience in school-age children)** to help with training a team of assessors in the application of standardised neuropsychological assessment procedures at a **child health research unit on the coast of Kenya**. The assessments are adaptations of various assessments of executive functions and motor coordination that we are developing for use with our population. Members of the team to be trained have backgrounds largely in education, with little psychological experience. The language of testing is not English, so the person would need to be flexibly minded, and will deal largely with the vital non-verbal aspects of test administration. We can cover expenses (travel, bed and board). We are looking for somebody who could come for one or two months a.s.a.p. (exact dates flexible). I look forward to hearing from anybody interested. We can supply more details as necessary.

**Penny Holding**

E-mail: pholding@killfi.mimcom.net

■ I AM undertaking a PhD at the University of Hertfordshire examining the effectiveness of a lifestyle development training

programme for **people with bipolar affective disorder**. The programme will combine client needs and past clinical research, be evaluated by a client focus group and then client-facilitated.

I would appreciate hearing from **professionals working in this area and clients who might be interested in participating in the focus group** or facilitating the programme. I would especially welcome interest from professionals who themselves have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

Confidentiality is assured in all correspondence.

**Heather Straughan**

E-mail: h.j.straughan@herts.ac.uk

■ MY MSc in criminal justice research is examining **how expert witness feel they have been treated within the Northern Ireland criminal justice system**, and how they feel it should change. Several professional bodies are participating in this study and I am particularly keen to hear from **any psychologist who has experience in this area**. Please contact me if willing to participate.

**Grainne Jones**

E-mail: grainnejones@hotmail.com

■ I AM a psychology graduate (2:1) seeking **voluntary clinical work experience in the Greater Manchester area**. I have experience working with dissociative identity disorder, autism and learning disabilities.

**Catherine Keen**

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