

Michael Argyle

PROFESSOR Michael Argyle was arguably the most internationally respected British social psychologist. He did more than any other individual in the UK to define the scope of social psychology, and to gain the nascent discipline's acceptance in academic departments and among the general public. He was the founder and chair of the Social Psychology Section of the BPS, and served as social psychology editor of the *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* from 1961 to 1967. His own work has lasting value both in itself and as an example of what can be achieved by eclectic empiricism and thoughtful engagement with topics of significance in everyday life.

Born in Nottingham in 1925, he was educated at Nottingham High School and Cambridge. He first attended Cambridge in 1943 on an RAF science course, obtaining a distinction, and subsequently read Part I in moral sciences at Emmanuel College. He graduated in 1950 with first class honours in psychology. After marriage to Girton classics student Sonia Kemp, and a further two years as a research student in Cambridge, he became the first social psychology lecturer at the University of Oxford. He remained at Oxford until his retirement, becoming a Fellow of Wolfson College at its foundation (1966), Reader in Psychology (1969) and Vice-Regent of Wolfson (1989). After his retirement in 1992 he became Emeritus Professor at Oxford Brookes University. He was visiting professor at many universities in the USA, Canada and Australasia and received a number of honorary doctorates.

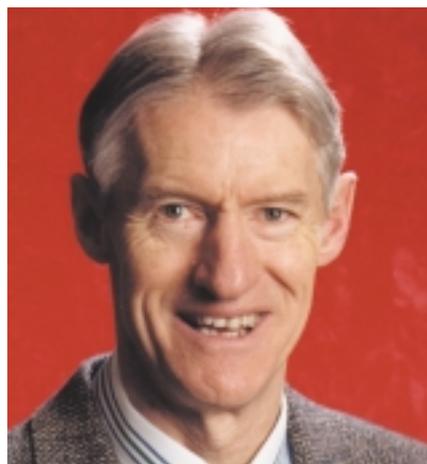
His research group at Oxford attracted distinguished academic visitors from all over the world. It was a welcoming and lively group, reflecting Michael's own generous and ebullient personality.

He was entirely serious about work. But he loved to hear and tell funny stories, and adored parties filled with laughter. As well as enthusiastic academic support, he also provided warm social support for his many graduate students. This combination made them the envy of other doctoral students in the Oxford psychology department. He continued to play a similar supportive role for PhD students at Oxford Brookes.

Michael was highly organised. The research group's week was planned around

ROGER LAMB and MARY SISSONS JOSHI pay tribute to social psychologist Michael Argyle, who died on 6 September.

an informal coffee-time meeting on Monday, a research report and discussion session on Wednesday, and a formal seminar at 4.15 on Friday. So full was Michael's schedule that he could sometimes be seen to nod off gently during the more protracted of these Friday afternoons. His own days were thoroughly structured: cycling in from north Oxford to be at his desk before 8.30, a day of lectures, meetings, tutorials and supervision, punctuated by departmental morning coffee and lunch in college; then home at 4.30 for bedtime with his four



children, and an evening of socialising or writing. In this way he wrote 44 books, 170 journal articles, many other occasional pieces, and also managed to supervise over 50 DPhil students. Among his books the *Social Psychology of Religion* (1975), with Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, is a citation classic, while his Penguin *Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour* (1967, now in its fourth edition) is probably the UK's best-selling psychology book, with sales approaching half a million.

Michael himself was profoundly religious. From his student days onwards he was interested in world religions and became more and more involved in the activities of the Anglican community in Oxford as he grew older. At his funeral it was remarked that his research on the psychology of religion had never

undermined his own faith. It is equally true that his faith never interfered with the objectivity of his research in the psychology of religion. In addition to his work on religion he produced important research on relationships, leisure and happiness. His most important work was, however, in the fields of social skills and nonverbal communication. In his experiments in these areas he provided new insights into human social interaction, and in so doing he also created a form of social psychology which owed little to American models.

During the 1950s and 1960s philosophers, linguists, anthropologists and psychologists began to broaden and deepen our understanding of language and communication. Michael and his contemporaries investigated the interaction of verbal and nonverbal aspects of conversation, revealing how they may be mutually supportive or antagonistic. Michael's research went further to show how different channels of nonverbal communication also had complex relations with each other. His 1965 paper with Janet Dean, *Eye Contact, Distance and Affiliation* is one of the most widely cited papers in social psychology. In this paper Argyle and Dean outlined an equilibrium model of relationships in which people set out to establish a certain degree of friendliness or coolness towards each other. To maintain their preferred level, people utilise various nonverbal signals as well as speech. If intimacy increases beyond the preferred level in one channel of communication, individuals attempt to reduce it in another.

It was soon apparent that individuals differ in their capacity to make use of the various channels of communication successfully. Given this insight, Michael invented the concept of social skill. In his view social skills are similar to manual or other motor skills. They can therefore be taught through modelling or other demonstration, and learnt through practice and feedback. He created training programmes for people who were shy or suffering from minor mental problems,

since he believed that their lack of social skills might be exacerbating their condition. He and his research team used such training with troubled adolescents to help them to control their antisocial behaviour and with violent offenders to help them to manage their own anger and aggression. The social-skills approach is now commonplace in everyday life, for example in the training of staff in service industries, and in provision of courses for those involved in interviewing, whether as interviewers or interviewees. It has important applications in police training and in the education of healthcare professionals. The Royal College of General Practitioners appointed one of Michael's graduate students to the first-ever post to improve British doctors' communication skills.

In his sixties Michael moved on to the study of happiness. He believed that psychologists had spent too much time investigating the causes of depression and insufficient time researching happiness. His work made clear that removing the causes of unhappiness is not in itself sufficient to promote happiness. For example, while

lack of money can create misery, financial security or affluence are insufficient to create positive well-being. Michael's work demonstrated the primacy of the social in people's satisfaction with their work and their leisure. While achievement or intense involvement with an activity could provide pleasure, for most people this was significantly increased if they could share those activities with other people.

Michael was continuing with this research at the time of his death, extending it to include the impact of personality factors and religion on happiness. His enthusiasm never faded and he continued to show that he had the capacity to carry out worthwhile research. His humour and desire to communicate simply with a wide audience is shown by the way in which he presented his often complex investigations of happiness to the media.

Physically energetic and active, he was for years an enthusiastic and excellent Scottish dancer. He would rather mischievously explain dancing's appeal by suggesting that it epitomised basic factors in human happiness: a skilled activity shared by aficionados, involving vigorous

exercise, social interaction, and close bodily contact with the opposite sex.

Michael himself was an extravert and happy person, whose declaration in later life that he had never known a day's depression seemed entirely credible. But his private life was not without sadness. His first wife Sonia, to whom he had been happily married for many years, died in 1999 after a long period of illness throughout which Michael gave her dedicated support. At the end of 2000 he married Gillian Thompson, and found to his surprise and delight that he was again able to share his favourite activities with someone he loved.

At the time of his death Michael was 77 years old. His achievements were numerous. But so apparent were his energy, enthusiasm and spectacular joy in living that his death seems premature. His family, friends and colleagues had expected to enjoy his inspirational presence for many more years.

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