

Judgement day for academics

WRITE this in the week of judgement – RAE judgement, that is. (RAE stands for Research Assessment Exercise, aka Really Awful Experience, or Ridiculous Amount of Effort). There has been an enormous shift upwards in quality across all disciplines, but the result is that most universities and many departments have stayed in about the same relative position, and probably will not be terribly much better or worse off as a result (RAE grades translate into money).

So why do we do it? Is it worth it? I certainly think there must be a debate about whether it is worth doing it this way again – in my view we need a lighter touch for the assessment of research, just as we needed a lighter touch for the assessment of teaching quality. But until now, at least, I think the RAE has had a largely beneficial effect on research, mainly through encouraging better management of the process (e.g. ensuring that research results are published, rather than sitting in a filing cabinet). But it is also true that exercises of this kind change behaviour – and while some of the changes provoked have been good for research, others haven't.

On the positive side, more psychology from British researchers is being published in leading international journals; this means that our research will have a greater impact on the international research agenda in the future. The RAE psychology panel does not use simple rankings of journals as proxy for quality, nor are journals edited from overseas necessarily rated more highly than those with British in the title. Nonetheless, the more people choose to target some of their work to outlets that American researchers read, the better it will be for our science in the longer run.

Research is also being better managed and organised at departmental level. New colleagues are rarely left to sink or swim, but are carefully mentored by more established colleagues. There is a gradual realisation that even though many researchers choose to work as individuals,

the collective and collaborative efforts of groupings of like-minded researchers add value to the efforts of individuals.

Moreover, the request for what is in effect just one decent publication per year per researcher on the whole does value quality over quantity. In this respect the exercise has improved considerably since 1992, when the rules requested two nominated papers plus a publication count (not list). This encouraged salami-style publication strategies (where a chunk of work is sliced into as many pieces as possible) to the

Five-star departments

Bangor	Newcastle
Birmingham	Oxford
Bristol	Reading
Cambridge	St Andrews
Cardiff	UCL
Glasgow	York

For the full table see www.rae.ac.uk/results

detriment of the research process. No publication counts are currently requested, and I think this is an enormous improvement.

But there are some negative consequences. One of these is the effect that the RAE has had to deter book writing. A mythology has been created that since popular books and textbooks do not 'count' for the RAE, people should not produce them. Nonsense! Strong researchers have always disseminated their work widely, directly influencing the curriculum in schools and universities.

My own first exposure to psychology as a subject was via Fitts and Posner's (1967) introductory text *Human Performance*. To this day Mike Posner has continued to produce books for a broad range of audiences. Don Norman produced (to my mind) the two best-ever textbooks in cognitive psychology: *Memory and*

Attention, which brilliantly wove together extracts of key journal articles in a clear narrative, and *Human Information Processing* (Lindsay & Norman), which was simply ground-breaking. These would have turned me on to the subject if Posner had not done so already. From this side of the Atlantic, what about Richard Gregory's *Eye and Brain* (once rendered 'Iron Brain' by one of my students in an essay), or Alan Baddeley's *Your Memory – A User's Guide*.

Although the books I have mentioned pre-date recent RAEs, many leading researchers in the UK have continued to write textbooks and popular books throughout the past 10 years; but it saddens me when I meet colleagues who have been actively discouraged from book-writing.

A point often raised about the RAE is that it discourages applied work. I do not entirely agree with this. In the 2001 RAE the psychology panel was supplemented by a subpanel of user representatives comprising professionals from various industrial and service areas where psychological knowledge is applied. Their advice and observations were extremely interesting, influential, and encouraging. Nonetheless working with this subpanel, and my experiences with users of my own applied research, has highlighted the need for additional forms of dissemination if we are to ensure that high-quality research impacts appropriately on professional practice. I think this Society has a potential role to play in developing research digests targeted to different groups, and in encouraging researchers to ensure that work reaches user groups, as well as students. This is a project that I hope to be able to champion once my presidential term concludes.

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BRAZIL TREK FOR MIND

THE leading mental health charity Mind is offering the adventurous a unique experience – the chance to trek through some of Brazil's most remote parts in August this year. Participants will pay a £299 registration fee, which includes all travel, accommodation, meals and guides, and will be expected to raise a minimum level of sponsorship.

□ To find out more about the trek call 0870 012 9001 or e-mail brazil@mind.org.uk.

NAS 40TH ANNIVERSARY

THE National Autism Society celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. At an event held at BAFTA in London on 17 January and hosted by Jane Asher, President of the NAS, the organisation unveiled its Anniversary Campaign to increase awareness of the complex needs of people with autism and to help raise its target of £4 million in voluntary income.

NATIONAL HONOURS

IN the New Year Honours list two psychologists were made Officers of the Order of the British Empire (OBE): Professor Margaret Boden (Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at the University of Sussex) for services to cognitive science; and Professor Martin Jarvis (Imperial Cancer Research Fund Health Behaviour Unit, University College London) for services to smoking research.

BOOK DISCOUNTS FOR SOCIETY MEMBERS

As previously reported in *The Psychologist*, the Society has embarked on a new publishing partnership with Blackwell Publishing. BPS books are now published under the new imprint BPS Blackwell. Society members now benefit from specially reduced prices over the whole range of Blackwell's psychology list. All members will be offered a 20 per cent discount when placing their orders directly with Blackwell Publishing.

A BPS Blackwell website with discount ordering facility is currently being built. To order books at a discount in the interim, please e-mail Lindsey Howarth at Lhowarth@blackwellpublishers.co.uk with your membership number. For book details please visit the Blackwell website at www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk.

Defining review of autism

THE Medical Research Council has published a major review of autism research, revealing that the prevalence of the disorder is higher than had been thought but finding no association with the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccination.

The review, commissioned by the Department of Health last March, was published in January. Three groups of scientists examined the research evidence and assessed the strength of knowledge based on research in epidemiology and case definition; physiology and infection; and psychology and behaviour. The report found that autism was more prevalent than had previously been thought: around six in 1000 young children have a disorder in the autism spectrum. Most of the apparent increase was considered by the reviewers to have resulted from changes in case definition, as well as

from increased awareness of the condition.

The review was chaired by Professor Eve Johnstone, who is also chair of the Council's neurosciences and mental health research board. She said: 'The participation in this review of people with autism, their carers, and people with experience of support groups has enriched both the process and its outputs. Further partnerships which give lay organisations access to scientific expertise and give scientists access to lay perspectives can only be of benefit.'

For the future, the report recommends building on the existing strengths of research into autism by improving co-ordination between different research disciplines and improving research training in service settings. It also called for more research on the definition of autism spectrum disorders (especially in adults),

and further work on understanding the psychological differences between people with autism spectrum disorders and others, to help design effective services.

Simon Baron-Cohen, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the Autism Research Centre, Cambridge University, said: 'The MRC review of autism research is a very welcome document. The MRC has had a high profile in funding autism research in the UK over several decades, and this has led to the UK frequently leading the field in terms of cognitive theories of this condition. It is hoped that this new review will signal a continuing commitment by the MRC to better understand the causes of this important spectrum of conditions, and how support can best be delivered.'

□ To download the report, go to www.mrc.ac.uk.

Self-esteem takes a bashing

DESPITE the widespread view that low self-esteem is a risk factor for a broad range of psychological and behavioural problems, neither public discussion nor the huge market for self-help manuals and educational

programmes has been informed by hard evidence. A recent review of the research on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by Professor Nicholas Emler (London School of Economics) aimed to fill this gap.

The report concluded that relatively low self-esteem is not a risk factor for delinquency, violence towards others, substance abuse, educational under-attainment or racism – relatively low self-esteem is a risk factor for suicide and depression, teenage pregnancy, and victimisation by others. In each case, however, this risk factor is one of several and probably interacts with others. Low self-esteem in an absolute sense is actually rare: most of the comparative

research contrasts the consequences of very high self-esteem with more moderate levels.

Professor Emler said: 'One question that intrigues me is why relatively low self-esteem increases the probability of teenage pregnancy, especially given that risk taking is associated with high self-esteem. Another is the indication that childhood self-esteem predicts longer-term unemployment and earnings in the twenties, but only among males. It is to be hoped that future research will be up to the task of providing unambiguous answers – not something that could be said of much of the self-esteem research published to date.'

□ For more information see www.jrf.org.uk.

Positive thinking

ILONA BONIWELL and ALEX LINLEY attended October's Positive Psychology Summit in Washington, DC.

THE 3rd Positive Psychology Summit brought together over 200 delegates at the Gallup Organization headquarters in Washington, DC. Undaunted by the tragic events of 11 September, those present set themselves the task of focusing on how psychology can contribute to building a better life for us all – one of the many missions of positive psychology.

Shane Lopez (University of Kansas) explored courage, a concept surprisingly neglected in modern research. Attempting to answer the question 'What is courage today?', Lopez argued that the concept of courage is evolving rapidly following the recent terrorist attacks in America, emphasising the moral and social over physical aspects of courage.

Chris Peterson (Universities of Michigan and Pennsylvania) discussed his ongoing project to create a classification of positive strengths and virtues. The Values In Action (VIA) classification identifies 24 strengths in the six broad categories of wisdom, courage, love, justice, temperance and transcendence. Stressing the role of this classification in developing the very language of positive psychology, Peterson outlined the future challenges of creating, refining and validating this system.

The three pillars of positive psychology – subjective well-being, positive character,

and positive communities – were examined by David Myers (Hope College). He presented data demonstrating the American paradox: despite the facts that incomes have increased enormously, that the social safety net is larger and that health and longevity have



Philip Zimbardo

improved, there is more dissatisfaction with marital relationships, doubling and tripling of the divorce and teen suicide rates, a rapid increase in imprisonment, and growing reports of child abuse and neglect. On this basis Myers questioned the ethos of materialism and individualism. He suggested that we challenge media modelling of impulsive sexuality and violence, and argued for the promotion of spirituality and community.

George Vaillant (Harvard University) took issue with the traditional view of the language of psychoanalysis, describing it as negative. He argued that mature defence mechanisms (such as sublimation, humour, and altruism) can serve to enrich and inspire the individual, both within their

own life and in the contribution they make to others. Based on his extensive longitudinal research, Vaillant revealed how mature defence mechanisms are highly correlated with good health and are significant predictors of quality of life at 70 years of age.

President-elect of the APA Philip Zimbardo (Stanford University) presented research on one of the most fundamental processes in psychology – time perspective (whether we focus on the past, the present or future). Zimbardo outlined the differences between future, present and past temporal orientations, each of which has adaptive and maladaptive functions and consequences. Zimbardo concluded with ideas for the development of a cognitive flexibility for time perspective that might allow one to achieve a 'balanced time perspective': a perspective that that acknowledges our past, without being condemned by it, lives for the present, without becoming lost in it, and is guided towards the future, while still savouring the here and now.

Of particular pertinence in the current climate was the 'Post-September 11 discussion' led by Martin Seligman (University of Pennsylvania) and Don Clifton (Gallup Organization). Delegates were invited to discuss the role and contribution of positive psychology to the new challenges that America faced following September 11th. Among the many ideas expressed in the discussion, themes of developing integrity and virtue, the necessity for leaders to make sacrifices, the importance of a balanced time perspective, and the need for mutual support within

communities were raised. Positive psychology can make a positive difference to individuals and to society, and this summit suggested many ways in which we can carry that mission forward.

■ *Ilona Boniwell is a postgraduate at the Open University, and P. Alex Linley is a postgraduate at the University of Warwick.*

Researchers working in positive psychology may like to join the European Positive Psychology Network. Contact Alex Linley on PA.Linley@warwick.ac.uk

Griffiths

Association for Research in Infant and Child Development
4th International Scientific Meeting

Friday 17 May 2002

Royal Institute of Public Health and Hygiene
28 Portland Place,
London W1N 4DE

Chairman: Dr Eugen Strehle

Prof. Lewis Wolpert:

Human Genome Project

Prof. Geoffrey Miller:

Congenital Heart Disease

Dr Philipp Lee:

Maternal Phenylketonuria

Dr Nicole Kotras:

HIV and Neurodevelopment

Dr Mary Rossiter:

Prevention of Child Abuse

Dr John Ivens:

Measuring Happiness in Children

Priv Doz Felix Niggli:

Cancer and Palliative Care

Dr Joanna Blair:

Growth and Short Stature

This topical one-day seminar costs £40 and is worth 6 CME points (half price for students and senior citizens).

For details, please contact

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London NW9 7AW

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WEBLINKS

Information on the first European Positive Psychology conference, Winchester, 28–30 June 2002:

www.wkac.ac.uk/psychology/PositivePsychology

Information on the EPP Summit and to discover your own strengths:

www.positivepsychology.org