

## 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.

## An adequate explanation of religion

**M**ICHAEL Argyle claims that the best psychology can hope for is to study the causes, correlates and effects of religion, although it may be unable to explain it ('State of the art: Religion', January 2002). I find, however, that psychology already has an adequate explanation of religion.

The concept of God and the practice of religion involve a mixture of behaviours, thoughts and feelings that have strong effects throughout the body. As a result they can be accounted for by Thorndike's law of effect, which states that organisms tend to repeat and

learn responses that lead to tension reduction and the completion of motivated activity (see for example Gross, 1992). Thus, psychologists know that people usually learn to do things that provide satisfaction by relieving tension. A person may learn to believe in God because that belief reduces inner tensions, for example by giving a feeling of being protected from harm.

According to psychological theory, beliefs are learned because they are 'rewarding'. Beliefs can also produce a feeling of having more control over things, which can bolster self-confidence and thereby

psychologists already have an excellent explanation for religion. Argyle's view that certain religious practices such as human sacrifice still cannot be adequately explained by psychology may reflect a strong belief that humans are inherently rational and good. Unfortunately, psychologists and psychiatrists often find that such a belief may be incorrect.

**Donald F. Smith**  
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### References

- Gross, R.D. (Ed.) (1992). *Psychology, The science of mind and behaviour*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Newberg, A., Alavi, A., Baime, M., Pourdehnad, M., Santanna, J. & d'Aquili, E. (2001). The measurement of regional cerebral blood flow during the complex cognitive task of meditation: A preliminary SPECT study. *Psychiatry Research, 106*(2), 113–122.

### Belief reduces inner tensions?

reduce anxiety caused by the uncertainties of life. Although we do not yet know precisely how a belief in God is represented in the brain, neuroscientists have studied religious experiences such as the loss of sense of self that can occur during meditation (Newberg *et al.*, 2001). Today it is evident that such experiences have pronounced psychobiological effects.

So, in my opinion,

### Spirit of the transpersonal

**O**N reading Michael Argyle's article 'State of the art: Religion' (January 2002), I was struck by the way in which it talks about religion, and assumes that it is talking about spirituality as well. However, it seems worth pointing out that these two things are by no means the same.

Of course, there are many different definitions of spirituality; however, in psychology we have preferred to use a more clearly defined term, the 'transpersonal', instead of spirituality, because it is better stated and more widely researched. For example, there is a well-refereed journal in the field, the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. It is for this reason that the BPS Section dealing with these matters, the Transpersonal Psychology Section, is so named.

And this means that we can escape from the straitjacket in which Argyle seems intent on confining us, where we can only talk about spirituality by talking about religion.

He ends his article with a paragraph in which he says: 'Perhaps the best psychology can hope for is to study the causes, correlates and effects of religion, but may not be able to explain it.' If that is so, perhaps it may be more profitable to study the transpersonal, in order to come to terms with it.

All anyone who is genuinely interested in these matters has to do is join the Transpersonal Psychology Section, go to its conferences and read its *Review*. Perhaps even Michael Argyle might like to try it.

**John Rowan**  
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*Editor's note: This letter has been edited.*

### Compliance or understanding?

**R**OSEMARIE McCabe and Ethel Quayle ('Knowing your own mind', January 2002) describe the potential consequences, for people with a diagnosis of psychosis, of professionals judging their level of insight. The psychiatric view of insight is perhaps symptomatic of the 'we know best' attitude commonly found in the assessment and treatment of people with a diagnosis of psychosis.

Psychiatrists tend to hold the three-dimensional view of insight as described by David (1990): insight is the recognition that you have a

mental illness, you are treatment compliant and you relabel unusual mental events such as delusions as pathological. That is, people are insightful if they accept the traditional medical model of psychosis. Indeed they are expected to say it with knowledge and conviction; if 'the patient merely regurgitates overheard explanations arising out of different theoretical perspectives' this is labelled pseudo-insight.

However, if insight is removed from its restrictive medical definition to a psychological interpretation of the concept, it can become the

## LEONARD HOLDSTOCK (1926–2001)

**L** EONARD (Len) Holdstock died suddenly at Christmas 2001. He was 75. He was a long-term member of the Society, although never an office holder, and one of the more unusual characters.

As a young (and notably active) man Len Holdstock fell victim to polio, which left him after a long illness completely paralysed from the waist down. He determined from the start to remain independent both physically and financially, and did so. He 'walked', hauling his deadweight legs on crutches, and had a variety of jobs, including such unlikely ones as scrap metal merchant. At Birkbeck College he added an honours degree in psychology and a PhD to two other first degrees, and joined West Ham College of Technology (now the University of East London) in 1968. Too robust and hard-edged to be a popular all-round teacher, he was endlessly helpful to individual

students who were on his own wavelength of rigorous experiment, and continued to be so long after retiring in 1987. Dedicated to a scientific psychology, he pursued ideas tenaciously to their conclusion. He read and thought more than he wrote, and wrote more than he published, due to a quest for perfection plus an intolerance of editorial demands. In retirement he produced more, often in collaboration, usually refusing to appear as first author even when he had done the bulk of the work. He was a regular book reviewer.

As time went on he bore increasing physical troubles stoically, if not patiently; his intellect remained unimpaired. He pursued his other great love, of engineering and construction. His friends saw with pleasure his last years transformed by Jenny, who arrived as a carer and became his wife.

We remember Len with admiration

and affection. He was an extraordinary person, too complex to encompass in a short note, but perhaps some classic lines convey an essence:

*Though much is taken, much abides;  
and though  
We are not now that strength which in  
the old days  
Moved heaven and earth; that which  
we are, we are;  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but  
strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to  
yield.*

Tennyson, *Ulysses*

**John Radford  
Ernie Govier**  
School of Psychology  
University of East London

basis for engagement and development of a mutually agreed formulation of the person's difficulties – insight as self-understanding, recognition of abilities and problems.

McCabe and Quayle describe findings to support the 'ignorance is bliss' argument and question the use of insight-oriented treatment. The development of cognitive-behavioural approaches to psychosis that aim to help people to monitor and evaluate themselves, improve coping skills and increase self-efficacy do not aim to increase insight as medically defined but do develop insight as psychologically understood.

The helpfulness of such approaches might largely be a function of the therapeutic relationship: feeling listened to and understood rather than criticised and judged. Hopefully, as psychologists, we talk with and listen to people with a diagnosis of psychosis rather than teach them the medical 'professional vocabulary'.

**Emma Williams**  
*The Oxford Clinic  
Littlemore Mental Health  
Centre  
Littlemore  
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**Reference**  
David, A.S. (1990). Insight and psychosis.  
*British Journal of Psychiatry*, 156,  
797–808.

## Realpolitik, not psychology

**I** 'D like to think that psychologists have a useful role to play in preventing terrorism (Andrew Silke, 'Action plan: Terrorism', November 2001). But frankly, recommendations such as 'Address the genuine grievances of minorities and other disaffected groups' hardly inspires confidence.

It appears superficial, even to a layperson. Surely the intransigence seen in many struggles can be boiled down to a conflict over how 'genuine grievances' is defined.

Indeed, Silke is not particularly convincing in his overall argument for the creation of a European centre

## Too old at 26

**'T**AKING Action For Equality' is, apparently, the defiant motto of the Institute of Child Health, UCL. This declaration of guiding principles was proudly displayed on notices for PhD studentships carried in a recent *BPS Appointments Memorandum* (609, January 2002). Equality for what or for whom isn't made clear, but it doesn't appear to extend to the prospective

PhD candidate qualified in all respects other than being 'normally...not more than 25 years of age on 1 October 2002'. Is there a fair and valid reason for this discrimination, and is this held in agreement with MRC or the Child Health Research Appeal Trust, as the two charities supporting the advertised PhD studentships?

**Name and address supplied**

modelled on the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism in America. After all, he claims the British succeeded in changing a stagnant mindset and circular hostilities without such a centre. Meanwhile September 11th and its repercussions represent the total failure of the American organisation to fulfil its titular function.

Silke fails to address some of the broader dilemmas at the heart of this issue. Realistically, American and other foreign

REUTERS/POPPER/OTO

**To jaw-jaw is better than to war-war**

pressure on British governments led to changes in attitude towards the IRA. And

in the current war America is more likely to find a way to the table through international pressure that threatens her own long-term interests, such as from moderate Jordan, populous Indonesia and oil-rich Saudi Arabia, than through access to psychological insight.

Politicians are certainly already aware of Silke's main

points, but the 'ignorance, misconception and prejudice' behind the unprecedented approval of the bombing of Afghanistan is unlikely to change without the spin-doctors' self-interested collusion.

**Jean Nicol-Maveyraud**  
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Switzerland

## Rummage through your attics

**E**LSEWHERE in this issue (p.146) James Good reports on the impending move of the Society's archives to its London office. This is an opportune moment therefore to remind members that we are always interested in receiving archival material, and will in future be developing the collection in a more systematic fashion. While we necessarily have to be selective, we are especially interested in the following:

- (a) material related to the Society itself, especially the various subsystems;
- (b) correspondence, manuscripts, unpublished lectures, etc. by, or related to, eminent psychologists (of any nationality);
- (c) material related to the teaching and application of psychology (e.g. early examination papers, psychologists' reports);
- (d) material related to important research. This all

of course includes visual, audiotape, videotape and even gramophone record formats as well as paper!

Regarding equipment and non-paper-and-pencil tests, we can advise on their disposal even if do not wish to acquire them for ourselves.

The Centre for the History of Psychology at Staffordshire University is also looking for books to expand its own library.

If you do have anything you feel might be of interest, contact me on *g.d.richards@staffs.ac.uk* or at the address below, but please do not donate without discussing the material with us first.

**Graham Richards**  
Honorary BPS Archivist  
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Tel: 01782 294578;  
01892 535595 (home)

## More online abstracts

**W**RITE regarding the correspondence about access to online databases (October and December 2001). Whilst working in a commercial clinical research environment I have been involved in conducting literature searches using the internet. Although I did have access to the fee-paying sites of MEDLINE and the like, there was a very useful free database that I used

frequently. PUBMED (*www.ncbi.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi*) is a database giving access to article abstracts, it is aimed mainly at the medical field but covers the area of psychology quite well and may be of some use.

**Duncan Stewart**  
SMG BPS Internet Officer  
14 Maid Marian Avenue  
Selston  
Nottingham

## INFORMATION

■ **SOUTH** West Assistant Psychologists meets every three months for a full day, which involves invited speakers and an opportunity to meet other psychologists in the South West area. Bristol, Cornwall and Devon also have regional meetings independent of the SWAP days, including social get-togethers.

Although we try, we are aware that we do not manage to contact everyone who might be interested in attending these meetings.

Any psychology graduate who is working (or trying to find work) as an assistant psychologist, research assistant, psychology technician, behaviour therapist, etc. is more than **welcome to attend these meetings**. Please contact me for further information, preferably by e-mail.

**Caroline Haigh**  
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■ **I** HAVE been approached by a surgeon who is looking for **someone to speak at a conference** in Bristol in May 2002. The subject matter is **'bereavement counselling following death during surgery'** – for surgical personnel. Do you know of anyone who has information on this specific subject and is willing to speak about it at the conference? I would appreciate if you could please contact me.

**Jason Kay**  
Principal Clinical Psychologist  
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■ **WE** are interested in establishing an **informal network of psychologists working in psychiatric intensive care units (PICUs)**

or similar units (low secure units). Please contact either of us for further information.

**Aaron O'Connell**  
Clinical Psychologist  
E-mail: *Aaron.O'Connell@cichs-tr.nthames.nhs.uk*  
**Marc Goldstein**  
Clinical Psychologist  
Pathways PICU  
Goodmayes Hospital  
Barley Lane  
Goodmayes  
Essex

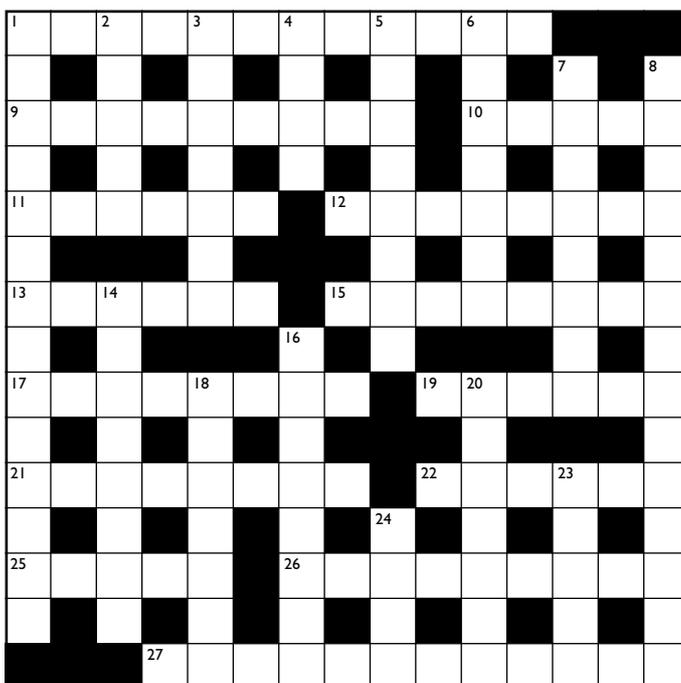
■ **I** GRADUATE this year (expected 2:1 in psychology) and hope to gain an assistant psychologist post either with clients with brain injury or clients with eating disorders. I have research interests in these groups also as well as in mainstream children, so a research assistant post would be equally attractive. In case I am unable to secure an immediate post on graduation, I would be interested to hear from anyone who would like to consider taking me on **full- or part-time on a voluntary basis** or who could offer me advice. I live in the West Midlands but it would also be possible for me to work in central London.  
**Ian Simandl**  
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e-mail: *psychology\_student\_rep@hotmail.com*

■ **I** AM an aspiring trainee clinical psychologist, with experience of working with mental illness and brain injury. I am desperately seeking some **voluntary clinical experience** and am open to any offered opportunities in London and the South East.  
**Vikki Cohen**  
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## DEADLINE

Deadline for letters for possible publication in the May issue is **2 April**

## PRIZE CROSSWORD No.2



### Across

- 1 Applying hair-treatment preparation in area of Pavlov's research (12)
- 9 Share out booze in theoretical explanation (9)
- 10 Hypocrisy and love featuring in part of poem (5)
- 11 At home return telephone set into surface (6)
- 12 Unconscious manifestation of this sickness? (8)
- 13 Looks to fight for flag held within (6)
- 15 Alienate Oriental out-of-towner for the most part (8)
- 17 Compassion shown in correspondence (8)
- 19 Mother sadly returning greeting (6)
- 21 Last explanation in evolutionary biology? (8)
- 22 Work of art seen in university in Texas, say (6)
- 25 Grant entry to make confession (5)
- 26 Oil rig overrun with mob in disturbance (9)
- 27 Physiological stimulus taken in good spirits makes one belligerent (7-5)

### Down

- 1 Doctor involved with crucial ova as with matters of the heart (14)
- 2 South African province of one's birth (5)
- 3 Doing evening work? (7)
- 4 One Muslim at mosque primarily (4)
- 5 Uncalled for, causes irritation to son (8)
- 6 Vague when switching first two in family, sort of (7)
- 7 Fashionable symbol I put on a badge (8)
- 8 Store fitting description of elephant? (4-4,6)
- 14 Former problem, we hear, with the enemy (8)
- 16 Closing shed during confidence trick (8)
- 18 In the morning measure out river as means of checking current (7)
- 20 Against Scottish interjection in ancient city (7)
- 23 Workers use insolence in bloomer (5)
- 24 Potent beer British swallowed (4)

### Solution to Prize Crossword No.1

**Across:** 1 Anorexia, 5 Adhere, 10 Article, 11 Bimodal, 12 Intonation, 13 Mass, 14 Uterus, 17 Mignon, 19 Muscle, 20 Lustre, 23 Noon, 24 Alienation, 28 Egotist, 29 Episode, 30 Laymen, 31 Stands in. **Down:** 1 Ataxia, 2 Octet, 3 Eccentric, 4 Inert, 6 Demo, 7 Endeavour, 8 Enlist, 9 Abnormal, 15 Tautology, 16 Stellate, 18 Gestation, 21 Unwell, 22 Intern, 25 Elect, 26 Icons, 27 File.

**Winner:** Alastair Milne, Glasgow

Send entries to: Prize Crossword, The Psychologist, St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR. Deadline for entries is 28 March 2002. A £25 book token goes to the winner, drawn at random from all correct entries.

Name.....

Address.....

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