

Hot from the Annual Conference

CONFERENCES are one of the main ways that the BPS fulfils some of its core objectives as a learned society and a charity – ‘to promote the advancement and diffusion of a knowledge of psychology pure and applied’. It’s also the occasion for the AGM, when officers and Trustees report to members.

Slightly strangely, but deeply symbolically, there is no handover of the presidential baton or formal inauguration. We are essentially a modest and unceremonious society. By tradition, the new President takes over at the end of the conference, and the old one moves into the sweeping-up role of Vice President in silence. So I have had no chance yet to parade in my emperor’s new clothes. That’s fine by me.

But you really should know that Graham Davey has been an excellent President – unbelievably conscientious and systematic, fair in chairing meetings, resolving problems, and working for lasting solutions, and a good lad too (even if he supports the wrong football team). His specialist research topic recently has been worry, which must have given him a core of stability in a demanding and often crisis-laden role. It’s definitely scary at times being President.

My own main claim to fame is basic ordinariness. I was a mediocre assistant foreman in making and finishing steel tubes; a run-of-the-mill researcher (in the days when you had to hire the university’s mainframe computer for half an hour to run a score of cross-tabulations); an average lecturer in a newish university; and quite lucky to end up as a professor emeritus, distinguished by being relatively undistinctive. I also worked part-time as a consultant, relishing the challenge of real-world problems, but usually with a huge respect for the skills and knowledge and commitment of the ongoing workpeople and their managers.

There are few duties for a President Elect at an annual conference – giving out a couple of BPS awards and introducing the distinguished lecturers. So I enjoyed the conference in Bournemouth mainly as an innocent civilian.

So what does an ordinary member get out of a conference? Updated knowledge is the most obvious boon. The second part of the phrase about our objectives is ‘and

we should see a system in place for psychologists by late 2004 or early 2005.)

I even learned from people presenting posters – having the author standing by to explain things takes me rapidly into fields I know nothing about, like women’s attitudes to different breast cancer treatments. The effect of multiple parallel sessions is usually the opposite for me – I go to what I know and enjoy.

The bookstalls and BPS

stands are also treasure troves, and I enjoyed asking the Student Members Group about their energetic activities.

Of course, there are old friends and new faces too. Two sets of twins under one year must have changed the lives of their respective parents (and made me kick over my glass of wine). It is taking twin studies to a high point to grow your own, but twins are commoner than most people think. Three days gives plenty of spare time to get to know many people better. A great group of BPS staff seemed to know everything and help everybody, with infinite patience and efficiency.

I was taken on a trip to Poole Harbour, to thrill at the kite-flying surfboarders. It’s a beautiful coastline. We had a high pressure zone, with sunny rainless days, but the sea didn’t look very warm.

On the last night Donny Osmond was giving a concert in the conference building, but apart from the cheers of his fans as he arrived we were completely soundproofed from him.

Next year the Annual Conference is planned for London, which will give more members a chance to join in economically. Bournemouth was quietly brilliant.

Zander Wedderburn

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TONY DALE

especially to promote the efficiency and usefulness of Members of the Society by setting up a high standard of professional education and knowledge’.

It is decades since I read seriously about memory, or social psychology, or intelligence and inspection time, and wonderful to hear experts thinking about the leading edges. Hearing from the chief executive of the Health Professions Council, Marc Seale, filled in gaps in my knowledge about how statutory regulation is likely to work. (Go to the www.hpc-uk.org website to catch up on the current picture for the 12 professions already on board. The best current prediction is that

NEW-STYLE DOCTORATE

STAFFORDSHIRE University has become the first in the UK to offer a professional doctorate in health psychology. Students who complete the doctorate, recently accredited by the BPS, automatically become Chartered Health Psychologists.

SCHIZOPHRENIA AWARDS

THE UK Lilly Schizophrenia Reintegration Awards, now in their fifth year, recognise and reward outstanding achievement in helping people with schizophrenia to overcome the barriers to reintegrating into society. Any individual or team involved in developing and implementing activities and clinical practice designed to achieve these aims is eligible to enter. Closing date is 22 August 2003.

□ For details telephone the Eli Lilly Awards Secretariat (01256 315354).

NOT SO TERRIBLE

THE NSPCC has launched a new public education initiative to foster understanding of 'the terrible twos'. The NSPCC argues that toddlers are just trying to make sense of the world – testing, exploring and learning about their environment and the people in it. This can lead to tantrums, separation anxiety, resentment of control and other behaviours that can seem irritating, obstinate, or plain naughty to an adult, but, in fact, are quite normal.

NSPCC Parenting Adviser Eileen Hayes said: 'Toddlers test everything and sometimes they test your patience. Understanding the way your baby and toddler develops is the best way to achieve better and safer parenting.'

□ The advice booklet can be ordered by e-mailing infounit@nspcc.org.uk.

DEADLINE

We welcome news items from members for possible publication; deadline for the July issue is **30 May**

Time for autism rethink?

IS there no such thing as autism? Preliminary results from the Twins' Early Development Study, presented by Angelica Ronald (Institute of Psychiatry) at the Society's Annual Conference in Bournemouth, suggest that we should perhaps be diagnosing social and non-social autism instead.

Ronald told *The Psychologist*: 'We explored the extent to which social and non-social impairments are correlated with each other, both throughout the population and at the problem extreme, and how much of their covariation is explained by shared genes or environmental influences. A diagnosed sample would not be helpful to answer this question because children will have gained their diagnosis on the basis that they showed both social and non-social symptoms.'

'Through our analyses of over 2000 pairs of seven-year-old twins, assessed by both their parents and teachers on social and non-social autistic-

like traits, we found only modest correlations between these sets of behaviours. Using behavioural genetic model fitting we showed that both social and non-social behaviours as measured by parents and teachers showed high heritability on their own. But these genetic factors influencing each set of behaviours alone were not overlapping: different genetic factors were affecting the social and nonsocial symptoms.'

'The findings suggest that the two major components of autism – social and non-social – are genetically unrelated. The most obvious implication is for molecular genetic studies. 'Genes for autism' may be a misnomer if the two components are not investigated separately.'

David Potter, Head of Policy and Information at the National Autistic Society, said: 'The NAS will be very interested to see the full report when it is available. Judging from the news report this could well be a very interesting piece of the jigsaw puzzle that is autism. It's

likely that clusters of genes are involved in autism spectrum conditions, rather than single genes. If this new research leads to a yet more detailed analysis of the genome, it's possible that gene clusters would be found for other areas, such as the sensory and motor problems experienced by individuals with autism and Asperger's syndrome. These pieces of the puzzle, if confirmed, would fit in with clinical findings that people with autism spectrum disorders are all different.'

Meanwhile in March, the National Autism Plan for Children (NAP-C) was published. The comprehensive new guidelines for professionals who work with children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) recommend that every local area should have a trained professional with ASD expertise to advise on interventions, as part of a multi-agency assessment. See www.nas.org.uk/profess/niasa.html.

Positively outrageous

RESEARCH into the life-enhancing consequences of trauma described in a recent article in *The Psychologist* has been cited by the medical correspondent of *The Sunday Times* as 'a new blow to Britain's counselling industry'. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) reacted angrily, calling the *Sunday Times* report 'outrageous'.

In March *The Psychologist* carried an article ('Trauma and personal growth') that referred to research with survivors of the *Herald of Free Enterprise* disaster, in which 43 per cent of survivors thought their view of life had changed for the better. This was the basis for the conclusion drawn by *The Sunday Times*, which the BACP says is 'unfounded and unsustainable'.

The BACP points out that they are well aware of the phenomenon that has become known as

post-traumatic growth and that the potential for such growth is something that client-centred counselling taps into. They also argue that the research figures do not support the implications of the *Sunday Times* article – that tragedy is somehow a boon: a larger proportion of survivors (46 per cent) said that their view of life had changed for the worse.

Alex Linley, one of the authors of the original *Psychologist* article, agrees: 'To suggest that post-traumatic growth is a "blow to Britain's counselling industry" is misleading in the way it suggests that trauma is good for everyone. Clearly this is not the case, and many people suffer greatly following a traumatic experience. However, the fact that some people can identify positive outcomes through their suffering is a testament to the human spirit, and is something that counsellors and therapists can draw from in their work.'

Testing times ahead

AS Education Secretary Charles Clarke prepares to publish plans on the new access regulator for higher education, speculation grows that psychometric testing will play a part in selection.

Several national newspapers, including *The Observer* and *The Independent*, reported on the plans. There has also been interest in some medical schools to incorporate psychometric testing into the selection procedure, in order to widen access to medicine. Whilst this is still at an early phase, some medical schools hope to use the information to eventually offer places at lower grade entry points or to select for suitability for the career of medic. In a study recently published in the *British Medical Journal* (22 February 2003) Eamonn Ferguson, Reader in Health Psychology at the University of Nottingham, evaluated Goldberg's Big Five personality factors (emotional stability, extraversion, intellect, agreeableness and conscientiousness), personal statements and references in relation to performance during the medical degree. Conscientiousness was the only personality variable to predict pre-clinical performance. However, as Chris McManus (University College London) pointed out in a commentary on the article, conscientiousness is often cited as a predictor of job performance but may be more related to jobs requiring repetitive organised tasks and not necessarily the role of creative clinician.

General Practitioner (Prisca Middlemiss, 10 February 2003) also reported on a study of 510 applicants to Scottish medical schools, who

voluntarily participated in psychometric tests. Had the tests been used as the basis for selection, around a quarter would have been rejected as not suitable for a career in medicine. The tests, measuring personality traits such as aloofness, narcissism, self-esteem and empathy are to be evaluated to determine if they can be used to predict future medical performance. The personal qualities assessment (PQA) questionnaire used in the study is also to be used by Durham Medical School later this year.

Jan Bogg (Editor of the Society's Psychological Testing Centre Online) said: 'Without doubt attributes such as empathy are important for a doctor. To some extent, communication-skills training facilitates the learning of empathetic appropriate responses in patient interactions. But can personality variables such as narcissism be considered stable at 18? Is it appropriate on the basis of this limited information to potentially deny applicants the opportunity to study to become a doctor and develop their person skills as they mature? What has been reported is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of projects, initiatives, psychometric tests being considered, implemented or discarded. It is important that we do not reinvent the wheel several times in an attempt to find the 'golden fleece' of student selection. Gender and ethnicity issues in selection must also be addressed to ensure that regardless of the psychometric tool used, no one group is disadvantaged over another.' □ *To contribute to discussion on this topic visit the Society's Psychological Testing Centre at www.psychtesting.org.uk.*

WEBSITES

www.psyclick.org.uk

A resource for prospective clinical psychologists.

www.bps.org.uk/documents/styleguide.pdf

The Society's new style guide for publications.

www.caledoniayouth.org

Sexual health service for young people in Scotland.

www.endoflifeissues.org.uk

Information, research and debate around end-of-life decision making among healthcare professionals.

If you come across a website that you think would be of interest to our readers, let us know on psychologist@bps.org.uk.

WANTED: SUB-EDITORS FOR THE PTC

The Society's Psychological Testing Centre Online is looking for three sub-editors for its new website (www.psychtesting.org.uk), launched in January 2003. One sub-editor is required for each of the following specialist areas of the site: work, education, and clinical/health. Responsibilities will include

- soliciting, editing and drafting content for the relevant parts of the test takers and test users areas on the site;
- ensuring appropriate guidance information and related documents are on the site;
- suggesting relevant links to the site;
- making a contribution to the strategy of the site;
- working with other sub-editors, Society staff and the editor; and
- answering enquires from the public and members of the Society as necessary.

The commitment required is approximately 12 days a year. This will mainly be taken up with the responsibilities of sub-editor although it may also include attendance at meetings. The appointment will be for one year renewable yearly up to a maximum of three years. The sub-editors will be financially compensated for their time (current rate is £250 per day).

Informal enquiries can be made to Louise Rigby, Manager of the PTC, on 0116 252 9524 or lourig@bps.org.uk. If you are interested in applying, please contact Alex Minshall (0116 252 9530 or alemin@bps.org.uk) for a statement of interest form and a copy of the proposed contract. Closing date for statements of interest is 31 May 2003.