

When psychology came to my rescue

To mark the 200th e-mail issue of the Society's Research Digest service, its editor **Christian Jarrett** invited leading psychologists to share their stories

Derogation of competitors

Once I attended a large party with a date. We separated and each began talking to different people. I was introduced to a stunningly attractive woman, and it was instant sexual chemistry. As we continued our animated conversation, an older woman approached, looked at the two of us, and said, 'You are such a perfectly matched couple.' I insisted that were not a couple at all, and in fact had just met. She refused to believe me. I saw my date approaching just in time to overhear the older woman's comments.

My date said that she was ready to leave the party. As we left, she casually mentioned, 'Did you notice that her thighs were heavy?' Well, I hadn't. But

I was in the midst of writing up a publication on 'derogation of competitors', the ways in which people use verbal tactics to denigrate same-sex rivals to make them less desirable. The research gave me insight into the tactical arsenal people use to compete for mates – not just tactics of attraction, but also disparagement of rivals.

Men worldwide place a premium on physical appearance in mates. And my research showed that women, far more than men, are especially observant about the most minor physical imperfections in other women, and in mate competition point them out in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

What is strange is why verbal input

would have any influence at all on a man's perceptions of a woman's attractiveness. A woman's attractiveness should be something that men can gauge perfectly well with their own eyes. But in fact verbal input matters. The next time I ran into the attractive woman, I found myself looking at her thighs. And indeed, they were a tad heavy. She still looked good, but my perceptions of her attractiveness lowered a bit.

I think there are two reasons for this. One is that pointed-out imperfections amplify their perceptual salience in men's minds, making them loom larger. The second is that men have evolved to desire attractive women not merely because cues to attractiveness signal fertility. Men also want attractive mates because they raise their social status. So other people's perceptions of a mate's attractiveness are important.

Perhaps none of this puts men and women in an admirable light in the mating arena. Derogation reveals one of the dark sides of mate competition, and men may seem superficial for putting such importance on attractiveness. But armed with research findings on derogation of competitors, I was able to understand more deeply the psychology of mate competition that goes on all around us.

David M. Buss is Professor of Psychology at the University of Texas

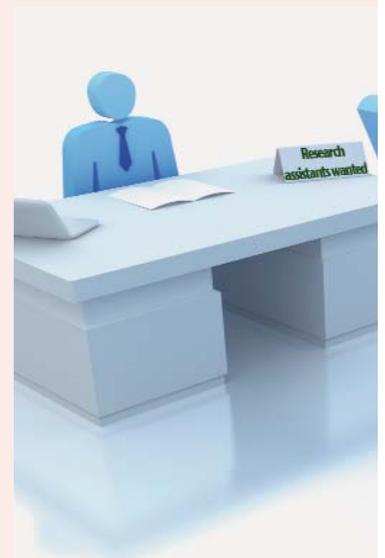
Coping with demented parents

When my mother began a vendetta against next door's dustbins and conceived a hatred of seagulls, we thought it was just Mum at her worst and even found it quite funny, but when she began getting

lost and demanding to move to a cottage in the middle of a field, we realised she had no idea she needed looking after. A few awful years later and she was hurling abuse, and furniture, at my poor dear father, who had no idea what day it was, let alone why she was attacking him. Stories from Paul Broks and Oliver Sacks came to mind, and the psychology of illusions and the mystery of consciousness. Above all, knowing about the brain came to my rescue. With every step of their awful journey I was reminded that we are all no more and no less than brains functioning in bodies in a world full of other such creatures. No one is a spirit or soul. The self is not some entity; some inner spark of selfhood that gets born and lives a life until death. A self is just one of the brain's many constructions – ephemeral and fleeting, here for a while, then gone, ever springing up again in a slightly new guise. And in the case of dementia ever less coherently.

I learned about myself as I learned to let them go.

Sue Blackmore is a psychologist and writer researching consciousness, memes, and anomalous experiences, and a Visiting Professor at the University of Plymouth



My inner CBT therapist

Imagine you are about to give the 'best-(wo)man's' speech at your friend's wedding: vast audience, huge hall, microphone, lights, wine, flowers, expectant faces... but words fail you. Worse than that, I was consumed with an overwhelming feeling of nausea. I'd just found out I was pregnant and not told the world yet. I could see myself about to vomit at the photographer and over the bridal couple... looming speeches, it'll be fine.' But reassuring words alone didn't help. More nausea. 'OK! Stop the internal focus' – my inner CBT therapist suddenly kicked in. 'This isn't real – this is just an image of vomiting.' The inspirational CBT work on mental imagery and social anxiety (David Clark, Ann Hackmann, Colette Hirsch and others) zoomed in. 'Focus outwards! Look at the audience.' OK, deploy 'cognitive science' – 'external perception will compete for resources with internal images. Focus on the flowers.' Oh, and a bit of image restructuring – 'Mentally photoshop that



My confession

Here's a confession. I've been a professional psychologist for 30 years, clinician and academic, but I can't think of a single instance when I've made personal use of my psychological expertise. Even in the darkest times, especially in the darkest times, I never turn to scientific psychology for illumination. I write these words within a few days of the first anniversary of my wife's death, so there have been some very dark days of late. All through, my knowledge of clinical psychology has seemed irrelevant, or if not irrelevant then certainly peripheral to my deepest needs and concerns. This, I know, will sound smug, or disingenuous, or wilfully contrarian. But it's true. I am by natural inclination a Stoic. I don't mean in the loose sense of 'grimly determined' or 'long-suffering', and especially not 'stiff upper-lipped'. I mean Stoic in the tradition of that broad church of Greek and Roman philosophers – Epictetus and Seneca among them – for whom the question 'How best to live?' was the most important of all. Their collective wisdom boils down to this: negative emotions are a bad thing; banish them through thought and deed. These are the roots of CBT, of course, the difference being that the Stoics offer an overarching philosophy of life, not just a bag of psychological tricks. There's a world of difference.

Paul Broks is a neuropsychologist based at Plymouth University

image of myself, I'm not looking nauseous at all, just moved by emotion at the happy couple.' Here we go... External reality started to win. I was smiling and dinner was staying down. 'Good evening everyone...'

Emily Holmes is Professor in Clinical Psychology and Wellcome Trust Clinical Fellow at the Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford

Seeing what we want to believe

I sometimes find myself investigating ostensibly paranormal phenomena in the role of 'rent-a-sceptic'. I was recently invited to investigate apparently ghostly goings-on in a house in Leicester for ITV's *This Morning*. Don, a paranormal investigator, claimed that he could communicate with the spirits involved. *The Sun* newspaper had posted on its website a recording of Don apparently coaxing spirits into lowering the room temperature. As Don politely asked the spirits to

lower the temperature, the digital display of his handheld thermometer appeared to show that the spirits were obliging. Armed with my knowledge of unconscious muscular activity and a tip-off from an ex-ghost-hunter, I was able to quickly solve this apparent mystery. The tip-off was that the investigator was misusing his equipment. He thought he was measuring ambient temperature but he was actually measuring the temperature of whatever the handheld device was pointing at – in this case, the wall. Heat rises, so the top of the wall was warmer than the bottom, as I was able to personally confirm. By unwittingly changing the angle of the device, thanks to unconscious muscular activity, Don was unintentionally producing the evidence of 'paranormal activity' that he was so keen to find!

Chris French is Professor of Psychology and Head of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London

(Anti)complementarity

It was a gray fall day in Duluth, and icy wind whipped off of Lake Michigan, funneling down the road my fiancée and

Forming a synergistic team

For many years I have hired research assistants. In the past, without realising it, I always was looking for someone like me, with the same strengths, mode of communication and the like. This tendency continued even after I arrived at my theory of multiple intelligences. But about 15 years ago, I realised that it was pointless to try to duplicate myself – one of me sufficed. Now, drawing on the practical implications of 'multiple intelligences theory' I think much more about individuals' different strengths and profiles and how to put together an effective and synergistic team. That said, I still depend on complete trustworthiness and sense of responsibility – those remain non-negotiable.

Howard Gardner is Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at Harvard University

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I trundled along. Ahead on the sidewalk, a large dark figure appeared, angrily stalking towards us. Thoughts of escape evaporated as the absence of side streets or other exits became apparent. I recall the looming local's intensifying scowl and the smell of alcohol on his breath just before he rammed into my shoulder, knocking me back several steps. For a split-second, instinctual questions hung in the air – should we fight or flee?

Then, I did something unexpected. Stepping forward expansively, I smiled and boomed 'How's it going? – it's been a long time!' The would-be assailant rocked back on one foot, his face registering confusion (or even the hint of a grin?). He paused – long enough for me to spot an open pharmacy two doors down on the left. Edging past, I grabbed my partner and hustled towards the lighted store. 'Wish there was time to talk, but we've got to go!' Once inside, we heaved a sigh of relief.

Only upon reflection could I consciously piece together what had happened. Before taking the mantle of countercultural psychedelic guru, Tim Leary actually did research. Based on hours of recordings of group therapy, he came up with the notion of an interpersonal circle defined by independent dimensions of affiliation and dominance. His successors showed that people prefer interactions that are dimensionally complementary: whereas affiliation similarly begets affiliation,

dominance complementarily begets submission. By corollary, people are confused by anticomplementary responses. In my case, responding in an outgoing way to a hostile opening was anticomplementary (i.e. a dominant affiliative response to dominant nonaffiliation). My assailant lacked an obvious script for dealing with this anticomplementarity, and I benefited from his momentary confusion. On that freezing day in Duluth, anticomplementarity literally saved my hide.

| Brian Knutson is an associate professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Stanford University

Prestige-enhancing memory distortions

I'm a psychologist and I do experiments. Well, actually, these days I help design experiments with graduate students, and the actual experimentation is carried out by a mini-army of student researchers. Typically, if a publication results from these efforts, the graduate student most involved in the project becomes first author, and I typically occupy the last spot in the author line. Others whose contributions warrant it are given intermediate spots. A near-crisis emerged some years back when two graduate students (I'll call them Mary and Jim) were each insisting that they deserved

to be first author. They both had worthy reasons (albeit different ones, of course) for why they were deserving of the coveted first position. I was wracked with indecision about how to resolve this dilemma. Someone was going to be unhappy and stew over the injustice of my decision. I could see no good way out of this dilemma.

Over the next few days I spoke to Mary and Jim privately. One thing I told them about was the psychological research on prestige-enhancing memory distortions. People remember their grades as better than they were. People remember that they voted in elections that they did not vote in. People remember that their children walked and talked at an earlier age than they really did. These are some prime examples of how we distort our memories in ways that allow us to feel better about ourselves, and perhaps allow us to live a happier life. But another finding is that people overestimate their personal contribution to a joint effort. If you ask people who have contributed to joint effort to provide a percentage that is their contribution, the total might add to 150 per cent. Recognising this human tendency allows one to adjust the estimate of one's own contribution and feel less frustrated with our partners (whether these are life partners contributing to the housework, or work partners contributing to a research effort, or any collection of two or more who work for a common goal). I talked with Mary and Jim, individually, about this phenomenon.

Within a few days, I heard back from the students. Mary came in to my office first and said that she had decided that Jim could be first author. I felt some relief. Then, the next day, Jim came in and said that he had decided that Mary could be first author. At this point, I actually started to cry. It brought to mind the O. Henry sentimental story about a married couple enduring severe economic difficulties that made it hard for them to buy Christmas gifts for one another. She sold her beautiful hair to buy a chain for his prized watch. Not knowing this, he sold his watch to buy combs for her lovely hair. These mutually sacrificial gifts were compared to the Magi of biblical times – wonderfully wise men who brought gifts to a new-born King. Mary and Jim were my Magi.

| Elizabeth F. Loftus is Distinguished Professor of Social Ecology, and Professor of Law, and Cognitive Science at University of California, Irvine

Nerdy but nice

I was a high-school nerd. Worse yet, a girl nerd. I did learn quickly to hide my A grades and not talk too much in class. At the high-school reunion, my classmates thought it was obvious I would become a professor (they could have saved me much agony, had they only told me sooner!). As a student at Harvard, I learned to tell strangers that I went to school 'outside Boston'. Then I had a respite from having to hide my academic self, as my first jobs did not excite much public envy. Moving to Princeton changed all that (now I work 'outside New York'), so maybe it's not surprising that I came to work on how status divides us. Now, our lab's research brings home the idea that status/competence is only one of two universal social dimensions, but that interdependence/warmth is the other. It's OK to be respected or even envious for status (in an aspirational, you-can-do-it-too way), if you also communicate that you also appreciate the cooperative side of the relationship. If I am on your side, and we are in this together, then my success is good for our tribe.



Susan Fiske as high school senior

| Susan T. Fiske is Eugene Higgins Professor of Psychology at Princeton

An insurance policy

The truth is that I don't know yet whether psychology has come to my rescue, or at least to what extent, but I think I have been encouraged by my experiences to take out something of an insurance policy. On a train journey home a few months ago, after a conversation with a particularly wonderful memory patient, I was reflecting on the massive impact that amnesia has. I know that I am a psychologist, a musician, a mother, etc., but what I had come to appreciate is that it is not enough to just know this; all the personal specific memories of becoming and being these things are absolutely central to my sense of who I am. Similarly, the relationships I have with my family, friends and colleagues depend crucially on my memories of shared time with those people.

It's tough to watch the struggle people face when these memories are torn from them, but through my research I have learned that even in the most severe cases of memory loss it is often possible to trigger some episodic remembering. Experience and a growing body of evidence, suggests that this is most likely when an individual is cued by something that has been recorded in some way by themselves: a personal diary entry, a photo that they took, even a trivial piece of memorabilia. Even when these things are not powerful enough to provoke a memory, the fact that they were recorded

Storytelling

Over the past five years, I have spent an increasing amount of my time talking to the general public. In doing so, I have learned to change the way I communicate by relying much more on the presentation of ideas, the audience reaction, timing and context. Content is vital but it is the way that you say things that makes all the difference. As a social animal, we are highly attuned to each other and I find audiences respond better when you think beyond the content of what you are saying and think about it as telling a story. The human brain is always seeking structure and meaning. Psychology reminds us that it is the ultimate storyteller. Professional speakers have known this for years and the best ones are naturally and often intuitively skilled. Whether they are aware of exactly what they are doing or not, the best practices tap into well-established principles of social psychology that I now recognise when I get up and talk to a room full of strangers. People want to like you. People want to believe what you are saying. People want that emotional experience. Even when you have read the book or know the story well, audiences still want to hear it said. That's why there will always be the live performance and public lecture.

| Bruce Hood is Director of the Bristol Cognitive Development Centre in the Experimental Psychology Department at the University of Bristol. See p.92 for a 'One on one'.



by that individual means that they are far more valuable to them as a record of the past than anything anyone else could tell them.

So I have begun in my own way to

preserve significant moments in my life. I don't have time to keep a regular diary but I have a book in which I make ad-hoc entries and I also archive little bits of correspondence. I have a little scrapbook for tickets or programmes from concerts and events, a box to put little bits of memorabilia in and of course the usual selection of photos and videos. This is all done on a fairly modest scale and maybe many other people already do this but I certainly didn't and I have begun to feel a sense of security knowing that on whatever scale my memory might one day fail me, I will still have the means to try and piece together an autobiography that comes from me and belongs to me.

| Catherine Loveday is a Principal Lecturer in Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Westminster

Combating ageism

Among other things, I've researched and written about ageing for the past 30 years. My belief is that much of what we attribute to the ageing process can be prevented or reversed and that a major culprit in unsuccessful ageing is our condescending attitude toward older adults.

Of course we mean no harm – especially when we're dealing with beloved family members – but harm we do. They are probably the ones we hurt the most, in fact. Ageism is so deeply ingrained in our beliefs that we think we are simply responding to real, age-related incompetence. Instead, we are letting our mindless expectations create the very incompetence we perceive.

At age 89 my father's memory was fragile – he was showing his years. One day we were playing cards and I began to think that I should let him win. I soon realised that, if I saw someone else behaving that way, I'd tell her to stop being so condescending. I might even explain how negative prophecies come to be fulfilled, and I'd go on to explain that much of what we take to be memory loss has other explanations. For instance, as our values change with age, we often don't care about certain things to the degree we used to, and we therefore don't pay much attention to them any more. The 'memory problems' of the elderly are often simply due to the fact that they haven't noted something that they find rather uninteresting. And then, while I was weighing whether to treat him as a child because part of me still felt that he would enjoy winning, he put his cards down and declared that he had gin.

| Ellen Langer is a Professor of Psychology at Harvard

Understanding love

I have always solved my problems through psychology, but usually by creating my own theories rather than by using other people's theories. I was at a point in my life once in which I was in an intimate relationship that seemed not to be working as I once had hoped it would; but I could not quite figure out why. I did some reading on the psychology of love but the

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reading I did somehow did not adequately address the problems I was having. It was at this point that I started to think about the psychology of love. Exactly what is love and what are the elements that lead to success or failure? The result of my deliberations, building on work of others such as Ellen Berscheid, Elaine Hatfield, Zick Rubin, and George Levinger, was the triangular theory of love. According to this theory, love has three components – intimacy, passion and commitment – and different combinations of the components yield different kinds of love. Intimacy alone is liking; passion alone is infatuated love; commitment alone is empty love; intimacy plus passion is romantic love; intimacy plus commitment is companionate love; passion plus commitment is fatuous love; and intimacy, passion, and commitment together constitute consummate or complete love. My colleagues and I later created scales to measure the components of love and published data showing the construct validity of the measurements. The theory, addressed to my own relationship, left me with a clear sense of what was not working. The relationship eventually ended. At this point in my life, I am fortunate to have the best marriage (to Karin Sternberg) one could possibly hope for, and after a long search, have found the consummate love I long sought.

Robert J. Sternberg is Provost and Senior Vice President and Professor of Psychology at Oklahoma State University

For more contributions, including from Simon Baron-Cohen, Vaughan Bell, Scott Lilienfeld, David Myers, Tom Stafford, and *Psychologist* editor Jon Sutton, see the Digest blog at tinyurl.com/psychtorescue. You can also follow the Research Digest on Twitter (@researchdigest) and Facebook (www.facebook.com/researchdigest). If you're not already signed up to the free fortnightly e-mail, why not take the opportunity to do that too? Who knows when the knowledge you gain will come in handy...

To share your own 'Psychology to the rescue' story, e-mail psychologist@bps.org.uk for inclusion in our 'Letters' pages.

The Zeigarnik effect

The Zeigarnik effect recently came to my rescue when my family and I were moving into a new house. After several weeks of packing nearly identical boxes, we realised we packed several important items and needed to find them prior to the moving company arriving. Surprisingly, we were able to identify all the boxes with relative ease and find the items without a detailed inventory. Bluma Zeigarnik was a Russian psychologist who first identified the tendency to remember uncompleted or interrupted tasks better than completed or uninterrupted ones in the late 1920s. Zeigarnik made her discovery after her doctoral supervisor, Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin, noticed that waiters and waitresses at a local café remembered orders only as long as the order was in the process of being served. The custom at the café was that orders were not written down but rather waiters and waitresses kept them in their head and added additional items to them as they were ordered until the bill was paid.



The researchers' subsequent experimental work showed the phenomenon has widespread validity, and it became known as the Zeigarnik effect. The Zeigarnik effect has applications in advertising, teaching, software design and media production (e.g. long-running soap operas, cliffhanging dramas).

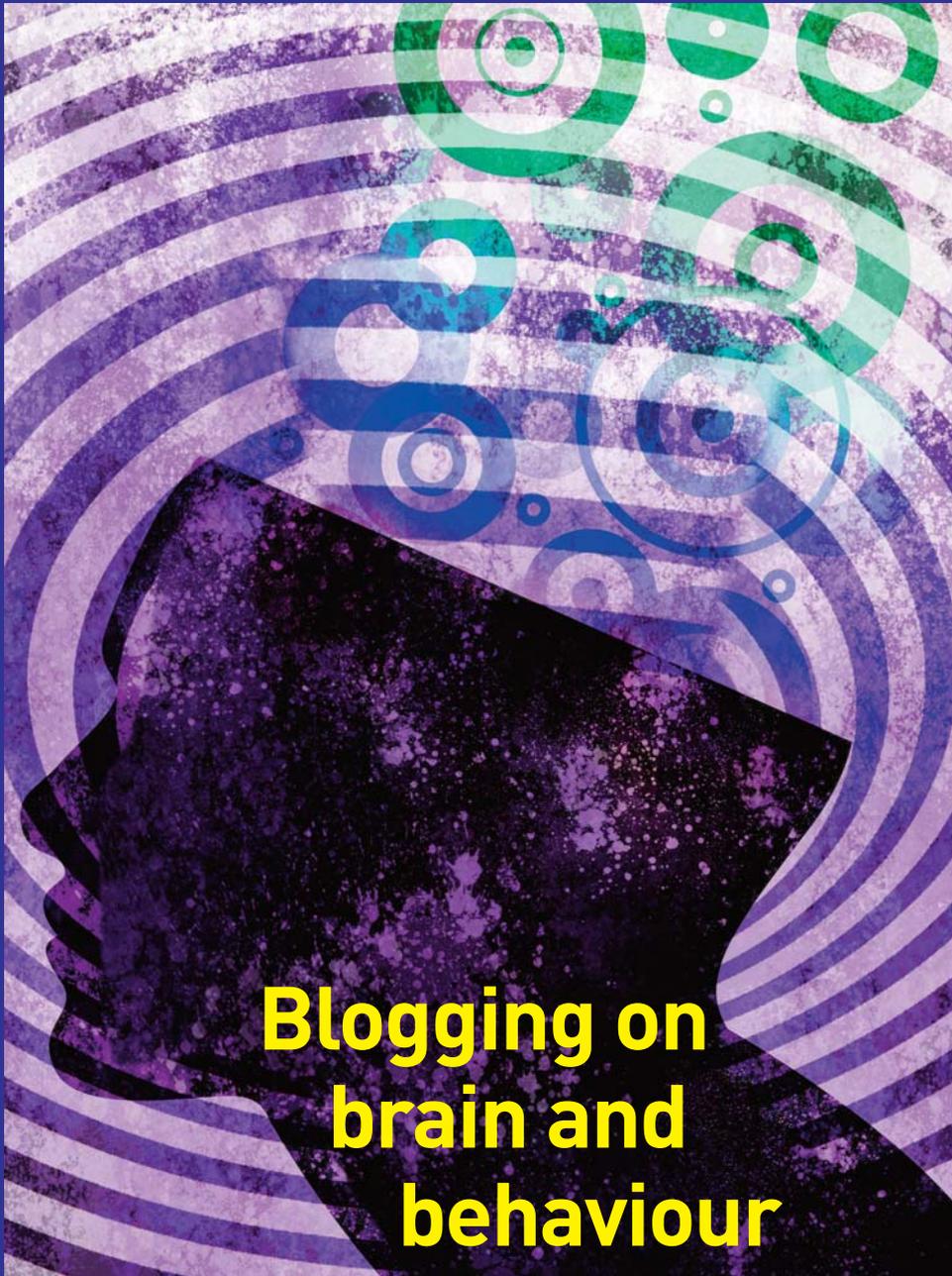
David Lavalley recently moved to Scotland to become Professor and Head of the School of Sport at the University of Stirling

A 'good enough' child-rearing environment

In today's world, young parents, like myself, are constantly bombarded with information about the 'right way' to enrich our children's lives. Books and TV programmes marketing the latest, typically entirely unproven 'right way' have high visibility and prey on people's anxieties about providing the best for their children. This is where good psychology research has come to my rescue. I have been confidently uncompelled to buy various DVDs and books claiming to enhance my child's abilities and development. On the other hand, psychology research has furnished me with good evidence that in a 'good enough' environment (loosely consisting of 'love, feed, clothe, be reasonably consistent and provide opportunities'; i.e. common sense backed up by data), my children are likely to thrive according to their individual abilities and characteristics.



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Ben Goldacre, The Guardian

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