

## Free from the shackles

Lance Workman talks to **Alex Haslam**, about glass cliffs, **Zimbardo**, higher education and more

**You are professor of social and organisational psychology at Exeter University – it's an interesting mix. How did these two areas come together?**

I started off as a social psychologist interested in group processes, and for a range of reasons I moved into applications of social psychology and organisational settings. This occurred partly to fulfil teaching commitments, but then I discovered that there were a lot of topics in organisational psychology that were covered effectively in social psychology but typically had been approached in organisational psychology from a rather different perspective. I realised there was a lot of opportunity for synergy... I think both the organisational theory and practice have been enhanced by social psychological theory, and by the same token my work as a social psychologist has been enhanced by reflecting on the organisational implications of those ideas. So it is a very productive marriage of disciplines, and it's surprising that there aren't a lot more people working on that particular nexus.

**Looking at the social psychology part, you're interested in what leads to stereotypes and prejudices becoming shared – how is it that groups come to form the same stereotypes and hold the same prejudices?**

I've always believed that if stereotypes were only ever personal beliefs – something that individuals held – then they wouldn't be powerful. It's the fact that stereotypes are shared within a community, society or group and that people act on the basis of those stereotypes that makes those stereotypes potent. So the first point is that one of the key things you need to understand about social stereotypes is why they are shared and what the consequences of that are for behaviour. Now, having come to be shared, I think stereotypes are often a critical aspect of the norms that groups form about themselves but also about their relations with other groups. Often,

typically, stereotypes 'sharedness' goes along with or follows the contours of shared social identity. What you tend to find is the extent that people define themselves as members of a common group in a particular context motivates them to develop shared beliefs, both about themselves as a group and about how they interact with other groups. So I think that points to the critical importance of social identity processes for these stereotyping dynamics. For me that's one of the really indispensable contributions of social identity work to the stereotyping field in general.

**On the organisational side you conducted research on women in management roles with Michelle Ryan, and you uncovered some surprising findings in relation to company performances.**

Nearly 10 years ago now some journalists made the observation that the UK companies that were doing very badly on the stock market tended to have women on their board of directors, and their argument was that women are therefore bad for companies. So if companies have all male boards this is good and they will do well on the stock market, and that's actually true. However, it might be that poor organisational performance leads to women being appointed to boards. Michelle and I spent the last five years essentially testing between those two ideas. We found much more evidence for the second process – when organisations are doing badly, they are much more likely to appoint women to senior positions. But the interesting thing, in the case of the stock market data, is that there is evidence that when women are appointed to boards this does have a poor impact on stock market performance because people say, 'oh well because a woman's in charge there must be a problem!' What we've been able to show

is that while it may have a bad impact on stock market performance, it doesn't actually have any impact on the objective performance – the book value of a company. So, yes, people have stereotypic responses to women's appointments – they greet them with scepticism – but our research suggests that's completely unwarranted because, if anything, women have a positive impact on objective company performance.

**It also supports the notion that performance in the stock market is partly psychological, doesn't it?**

Yes, that's absolutely right. I think economic psychologists have recognised that for a long time, but what we are also saying here is that how a company performs and how it's *perceived* to perform are completely different. Things like the stock market and a whole range of economic processes are driven by perceptions rather than by realities.

**I have to mention the prison experiment that you ran with Stephen Reicher in 2002 that formed a BBC series. How did that come about?**

Steve and I had been working in the area of group processes for a long time. Then in 2001, when I had only recently come to the UK from Australia, we were contacted by researchers from the BBC who were interested in revisiting the Stanford Prison Experiment. They asked us if we would be interested in doing it and our answer was 'yes, potentially, but we'd want to give the study a twist and use it as a catalyst for taking the field forward'. That was really the critical thing – we didn't want to replicate – we wanted to expand.

"I worry that history is repeating itself"

**Your findings were quite different to Philip Zimbardo's, and the theoretical framework was quite different from his.**

Yes, Zimbardo is an advocate of a role approach to group behaviour – the idea that people conform blindly to roles which are prescribed by situational and other elements within a context. But our view was informed much more by a social identity tradition – a European tradition in social psychology, which argues that people don't conform blindly to roles. On the contrary they will act in terms of group memberships once they have internalised those group memberships as part of an identity that is meaningful to them. This means that it's a much more actively engaged process, rather than a passive one. So we had a completely

different theoretical perspective on the phenomenon to Zimbardo.

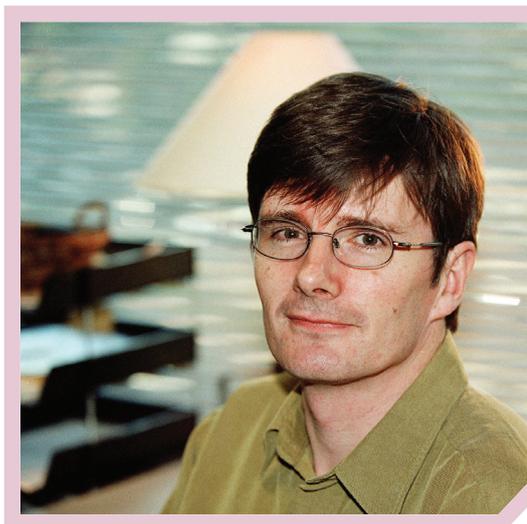
Also when we studied his prison experiment it became clear that a lot of Zimbardo's findings were not only inconsistent with his own account, but also seemed to be predicated upon processes of identification that he had actually cultivated as a function of the way in which he designed and ran the study. He had acted as prison superintendent and he had given his guards clear instructions about how to behave. He had made them feel that they were part of an identity that they shared with him so that he effectively was the leader of this group and he cultivated identification on the part of those potential followers, the guards, who were going to enact his wishes. Now that's not part of his formal account, but actually it is pretty consistent with our analysis of how these things happen. So what we wanted to do is ask what's going on here? Is tyranny a consequence of blind conformity to role, or is it a product of active identification with a leader and the model of social relations they put forward? Wanting to answer this question led us to construct a study which used the same paradigm as the Stanford study but enabled us to test between those different alternative perspectives. I think that we succeeded in doing this. I also think that the data our study generated confirmed that the social identity account provides a much more plausible explanation of what is actually going on both in Zimbardo's original study and in the world at large.

**I gather Zimbardo was not very happy with what you found. Why do you think he was so unhappy – was it just a different theoretical perspective?**

I think he was unhappy with everything – not just what we found! It's a fascinating question and I think there are many different answers to it. One fundamental thing is that for 30 years his view had gone unchallenged. Even though there are gaping problems in his story, I think he thought it would never be challenged and I think that he was surprised that anybody had the temerity to challenge it. For us it wasn't a personal thing – it was a scientific issue, but I think he took it personally.

**You've worked in Britain and Australia – do you see any major differences in how psychology is taught between universities in these two countries?**

Well, in Britain the typical department might have 100–200 students in its first year. In Australia the typical size might be 400–500. That means that you approach the process of syllabus construction and the logistics of teaching in very different ways. Interestingly when I first came to Exeter in 2001 we had an intake of about 80 psychology students – but now we have around 250 students. So in a way, my experience in Australia gave me a sense of what the future was going to look like and how we'd have to change



delivery methods. In a sense it was quite good preparation, since most UK institutions have at least doubled if not trebled in the last 10 years.

**Classes of 400 to 500 in Australia that must change the way you teach?**

Lecturing to 500 people is more like a form of theatre. You're conscious of the fact that you've not only got to have personal conversations with the students – you've got to put on a performance. When I had a class of 500 I was very concerned to do the preparation for the lectures right because you just didn't want 500 people looking really bored or really uninterested! In a way, I think one of the things I got out of that was the idea that psychology has a big audience out there, and perhaps when you're teaching to 50 or 60 people you lose sense of how many students are doing psychology. Also when you teach this huge group of people you have to make your material appealing and stimulating and make it work for that diverse audience.

**Am I right that you did your PhD in Australia and then stayed there for**

**quite a lengthy period?**

I was there for 15 years. I went to Australia in 1986 to do my PhD with John Turner at Macquarie. I took a long time to complete – five years. Nowadays if you took five years to do your PhD people would think you had some kind of delinquency! But I think the great thing about that was that I really came out of my PhD with a good grounding in psychology and with an agenda for things I wanted to look at in the rest of my career. I worry that today PhD students have rather less space just to grow into the subject matter – it's a bit more of a hothouse. I think you can grow tomatoes in a greenhouse faster with a lot of heat and light on them but they don't always taste the best or last very long on the shelf. I worry about a system that puts people in hothouses.

**Do you think it was a good move to return to the UK when you did?**

That's a difficult question. I'm very apprehensive about the future in the UK. The reason we came to the UK, interestingly, was because at the time our government in Australia was wreaking havoc on higher education, pressing forward with an agenda of cuts, retrenchments and downsizing. It was withdrawing funding and producing all manner of draconian policies, notwithstanding the fact that the sector was incredibly good at delivering real benefits for Australia and for the world. I think it was tragic what that government did, and I worry that history is repeating itself with Britain in the same kind of place. But I also think the reality is that the market for academics and academic ideas is a global one. I could never imagine a future in which what's going on in Britain wouldn't be important to me, but the market is fluid and even if you stay in the same institution – five years later it can look like a very different institution.

**Finally, returning to the prison experiment – this is now included as one of core studies for the OCR A-level syllabus. How do you feel about that?**

In terms of real impact I think you want your ideas to be communicated to your scientific colleagues and your peers, but if you can change the syllabus then you can get those ideas across to people who are entering the discipline. For me there was nothing more important. I love going into schools and talking to students about psychology, about our research. The fact this work has given us the opportunity to do that makes it all worthwhile. Corny I know, but true.