

# New research standards set to affect psychology publishing practices

The World Medical Association has published a revision to its Declaration of Helsinki that prescribes ethical standards for conducting research with human participants (JAMA: [tinyurl.com/kgY2t3t](http://tinyurl.com/kgY2t3t)). Although the Declaration is aimed principally at medical researchers, it has been influential in psychology since the first edition was published in 1964.

Two additions to the Declaration in particular look set to affect psychology researchers. First, the document now states explicitly: 'Every research study involving human subjects must be registered in a publicly accessible database before recruitment of the first subject'. This is timely because researchers like Chris Chambers,

a Chartered Psychologist at Cardiff University, are campaigning successfully for the widespread adoption of pre-registered journal reports in psychology and the life sciences (see News, July and September).

Advocates of research pre-registration hope that it will reduce the prevalence of questionable research practices, such as so-called *p*-hacking – manipulating methodological design until the desired result is found. Pre-registration should also facilitate the publication of negative results, which might otherwise never see the light of day.

This last point tallies with a second significant revision to the Declaration of Helsinki relating to the dissemination of research findings. 'Researchers have



a duty to make publicly available the results of their research on human subjects and are accountable for the completeness and accuracy of their

## Sick children or sick society? – the Maudsley Debate

Diagnosis rates for childhood mental illness have increased at pace in recent years. So too have the prescription rates for psychotropic drugs, such as Ritalin used to treat ADHD. Are these changes a sign of sick children or of a sick society? This was the question addressed at the 49th Maudsley Debate held at the Institute of Psychiatry in October.



On the panel in front of a packed house were Claire Fox, BPS Fellow Simon Baron-Cohen, Stephen Scott, Ken McLaughlin and Chartered Psychologist Barbara Sahakian. Held as

a satellite event of the Battle of Ideas,

the Maudsley's usual formal debating format was replaced by a round-table discussion chaired by David Bowden of the Institute of Ideas.

Professor Baron-Cohen from Cambridge University defended the importance of mental health diagnoses for children. Many children have had years of bad experience before they arrive in the clinic, he said, and for them it's a relief to hear that there's a name for their problems. A positive development in recent years, he argued, is the idea of neurodiversity – recognising that some children have special needs and may not thrive in conventional environments.

Stephen Scott, Professor of Child Health and Behaviour at the Institute of Psychiatry, also supported the importance of diagnosis. While acknowledging the risk of over-pathologising, he argued that increased recognition of conditions like autism brings greater humanity. In a similar vein, Barbara Sahakian, Professor of Clinical Neuropsychology at the University of Cambridge, drew attention to the importance of early detection of mental disorder. Seventy-five per cent of mental health problems start before the age of 24, she said, and the longer a person goes without help, the worse their outcomes tend to be.

Claire Fox, director and founder of the Institute of Ideas, was more sceptical. She lamented the way that to have your behaviour legitimised today, you have to have it pathologised. Fox also argued that encouraging children to dwell on their feelings and to seek medical help for their problems was undermining their natural resilience. 'Everyone is queuing up for a diagnosis,' she said, 'and it's trivialising serious mental health.'

Scott retorted sarcastically: 'I like your neo-Darwinian approach. Toughen up, get resilient. It's very British. But the kids I see haven't managed to toughen up.' Fox was unabashed. 'My advice to psychiatrists if you want us to be more resilient,' she said to muted applause, 'is to butt out of our lives. We'll be much better off without you.'

Also arguing that it's our society that is sick was Dr Ken McLaughlin, a lecturer in mental health at Manchester Metropolitan University. 'The moral question over how we live our lives and what we consider acceptable behaviour is being recast as a psychiatric one,' he said. **CJ**

**I Watch the entire debate, including contributions from the audience, at [kcl.ac.uk/iop/news/debates/index.aspx](http://kcl.ac.uk/iop/news/debates/index.aspx)**

reports,' the Declaration states, adding: 'Negative and inconclusive as well as positive results must be published or otherwise made publicly available.'

How relevant are these changes to psychology researchers in the UK? This is difficult to gauge at present, but it's worth bearing in mind that many British research institutions specifically state that research must be undertaken in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Many psychology journals also make similar demands. For example, the submission guidelines for the Wiley journal *Clinical Psychologist* state that researchers must indicate whether their work 'conforms to the provisions' of the Declaration.

'While the Declaration is primarily for medical research, it has been widely adopted as a benchmark and is one of the key documents used as reference for the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct and has major implications for psychological research,' says Chair of the BPS Ethics Committee Chartered Psychologist Dr Tony

Wainwright at the University of Exeter. On the new requirement that all research with human subjects is pre-registered, he added: 'Ben Goldacre and colleagues from [www.alltrials.net](http://www.alltrials.net) will be pleased as they have been campaigning for this for some time. It remains to be seen how these important ethical principles will be translated into practice.'

In related news, the editor-in-chief of *Psychological Science*, the flagship journal of the Association for Psychological Science, has announced a raft of significant changes to the publication's submission guidelines for 2014. These are intended to reduce research malpractice and to boost the transparency and replicability of psychological science. The changes include new disclosure statements for excluded data, sample sizes and other aspects of research design; a lifting of the word-count limit for methods and results sections; and public badges of acknowledgement for authors who share their data or materials online, or who preregister their design. CJ

## New NICE guidelines

NICE – the UK government's independent health advisory body – has renewed its call for all young people who self-harm to be given a full psychosocial assessment each time they harm themselves. Their plea followed the release in October of new statistics for England by the Health and Social Care Information Centre. These showed that in the 12 months to June this year, 13,400 girls aged 15 to 19 received hospital treatment for self-harm. The same period saw 4000 boys of the same age treated for self-harm.

NICE refers health professionals to its recently published quality standard on self-harm that's aimed at improving the care of children and adults who harm themselves ([tinyurl.com/pj49mz3](http://tinyurl.com/pj49mz3)). This guidance includes the recommendation to conduct a psychosocial assessment following each case of self-harm. This is to establish the underlying reasons for the act and to help foster a relationship between the patient and healthcare professional. The guidance also states that the healthcare professional should discuss the likely benefits of psychological therapy with the patient.

In other news from NICE, the organisation published guidance in



October on managing obesity in children and young people ([tinyurl.com/o3lxcjl](http://tinyurl.com/o3lxcjl)). This included the recommendation that weight management programmes should be designed by multidisciplinary teams that include a professional, such as a clinical or health psychologist, to provide expertise on mental well-being; and a behaviour change expert, such as a sports psychologist. The guidance also calls on the providers of weight-management programmes to check whether a young person is distressed by their weight, and/or whether their weight is a consequence of stressful circumstances. CJ

## TEACHING FELLOWSHIPS

Two psychologists are among the 55 recipients of National Teaching Fellowships awarded by the Higher Education Academy this year. Chartered Psychologist and BPS Associate Fellow Professor Rachel Mulvey at the University of East London, and Dr Sherria Hoskins, head of psychology at the University of Portsmouth, will each receive up to £10,000 to support their further professional development in teaching.

## AUTISM RATES

The 1990s witnessed an eight-fold increase in the rates of autism diagnosis in this country, but that trend has now plateaued according to a new analysis (BMJ Open: [tinyurl.com/ptw3amb](http://tinyurl.com/ptw3amb)). Using data collected at GPs surgeries across the UK, Brent Taylor and his colleagues found that the prevalence of autism remained stable between 2004 and 2010 (3.8/1000 for boys and 0.8/1000 for girls). Incidence rates in the same period also showed stability (1.2/1000 for boys and 0.2/1000 for girls).

## THERAPY CRITICISED

The NHS All Wales Veterans Health and Wellbeing Service has asked a local charity in Porthcawl called Healing the Wounds to stop using neurolinguistic programming (NLP) therapy to treat traumatised war veterans. 'Some have been made very unwell as a result of going there and have needed a lot of support from NHS and veterans' charities,' Dr Neil Kitchiner, principal clinician with the All Wales Veterans Health and Wellbeing Service, told the BBC's *Week In Week Out* programme. NLP therapy is not an empirically supported treatment for trauma.

## OOPS!

A UCL public engagement project called Errordiary is using Twitter to learn more about the mistakes people make and strategies for avoiding them, especially in relation to medical care. Until 6 January small cash prizes are on offer for a selection of random or popular errors and strategies that are posted via Twitter or the project's website. There are separate prize draws for members of the public, medical professionals and diabetes patients; see [www.errordiary.org](http://www.errordiary.org) to take part.

# Stories of psychology and the arts

'Psychology and the arts' was the theme of this year's public symposium organised by the BPS History of Psychology Centre. Introducing the event, convener Dr Alan Collins (University of Lancaster) acknowledged this may seem an odd choice of topic, what with psychology increasingly turning to the neurosciences. However, he argued, psychology's cultural links with the arts are just as important.

These deep historical ties between psychology and the arts were brought to life by the day's five speakers. The first, Dr Greg Tate from the University of Surrey, described how 19th-century poet John Keats's deliberations over whether to pursue medicine or verse reflected the philosophical wrangles of the time over the relative merits of, and differences between, thought and feeling.

Although Keats studied medicine, he famously pursued poetry rather than becoming a doctor. 'O for a life of sensation rather than of thoughts!' he wrote to a friend. However, it would be a mistake to think he ever gave

up on reason. Indeed, Tate referenced lines from Keats's 1819 poem 'Ode to Psyche' illustrating his vacillation between mysticism and rationality; between the 'untrodden region' of his mind and 'the wreath'd trellis of [his] working brain'.

Staying in the 19th century, the next speaker Alexandra Lewis, a literary scholar at the University of Aberdeen, reflected on Charlotte Brontë's 1853 novel *Villette*. Brontë had an interest in medicine and psychology, said Lewis, and in *Villette* she explores the effects of trauma on the mind and body of the main character. Doing so she anticipates by more than a century the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder that wasn't defined formally until 1980.

After poetry and literature came James Kennaway (University of Newcastle) with

an amusing history of people's beliefs in the mind control powers of music. This took in 18th-century fears over the seductive power of music used by mesmerists; Jean-Martin Charcot's use of tuning forks to induce hypnotic trance states in his patients; and

words: 'The only black magic we ever had was the chocolates.'

These paranoid beliefs never disappear, they just change with the times. The latest version, said Kennaway, is the idea of i-dosing – listening to binaural beats to achieve a trance-like state. Googling the term takes you to a *Daily Mail* story: 'i-dosing: How teenagers are getting "digitally high" from music they download ...' accompanied by pictures of head-phonned adolescents contorted in trances. The reality according to Kennaway is that music is only of very little help to hypnotic suggestion.

'People aren't passive when they listen to music,' he said, 'and claims about loss of control are hard to take seriously.'

Next, Nick Lambert, from nearby Birkbeck, University of London, showed us the ways that humans, for millennia, have sought to immerse themselves in images, from the panoramic cave paintings of Lascaux to the modern IMAX movie theatres that are closer to what Lambert calls a 'full-



Dr Alan Collins introduced the symposium

20th-century panic in America over the supposed use of music-based brainwashing techniques by communists. These fears later switched their focus to Satanism and the popular belief that heavy metal songs contain subliminal content and secret messages when played backwards. The truth? In Ozzy Osbourne's

## Art and the brain

Donna Lloyd (University of Leeds) went to the Manchester Science Festival in October to find what neuroscience can tell us about art

Is headline-grabbing media coverage on the neuroscientific understanding of art (so called 'neuroaesthetics') another example of 'neuromania', the current desire to explain all human endeavours through patterns of brain activity? Can understanding the workings of the brain ever hope to explain the magic of music or the power of great literature? In this lively debate a panel of scientists, critics and authors shared their views.

For Philip Davis, Professor of English at Liverpool University and editor of *The Literary Agenda*, reading serious literature makes words come alive in a biological, real way. With Rhiannon Corcoran, Professor of Psychology at Liverpool, they used fMRI to scan the brains of participants whilst they read Shakespeare or modern paraphrases of the text. Reading the original increased brain activity for words not seen in modern English (such as

'madded') and for pronouns used as nouns (as in this line from *Twelfth Night* 'Lady, you are the cruell'st she alive').

As explained by Rhiannon Corcoran, these poetic 'aha' moments play with our expectancies and produce prediction error signals from which the brain updates beliefs about the world. They also activate brain reward centres and may be the reason why we find literature so satisfying.

George Szirtes, poet, translator and lecturer in creative writing at UEA used Emily Dickinson's poem 'My Life Closed Twice Before Its Close' to demonstrate how we are forced to become interested in the person in the poem by physically re-enacting the emotional experience. But can neuroscience tell us anything more about that experience? This question was addressed by Raymond Tallis, humanist philosopher and author. He presented examples of neuroscientific studies on music, art

dome experience'. Other ancient precedents include Maeshowe, the neolithic dome-shaped burial mound located in Orkney, and the Pantheon in Rome.

There are more links here with psychology – Wilhelm Wundt, the godfather of experimental psychology wrote that 'the half-darkness of caves is more appropriate than most interiors to arouse an after-image fantasy'. Contemporary psychologist Stephen Kosslyn at Stanford University, meanwhile, has likened the mind to a screen in his theories of mental imagery. Lambert also highlighted the intriguing observations of cognitive archaeologist David Lewis-Williams regarding the commonality of cave art around the world. It's controversial, but Lewis-Williams suggests the same geometric shapes are found repeatedly because they somehow originate within the visual system (i.e. are seen in the mind's eye), perhaps following the use of hallucinogenic substances.

Rounding off the day was psychologist Nicholas Wade with tales of rivalry and ingenuity among the scientists, mostly physicists, who with their various inventions – known as

'philosophical toys' at the time – made great strides in our understanding of visual perception. Among these men was John Ayrton Paris, the inventor of the thaumatrope, a toy that shows two images in such quick succession that they appear to combine. Also known as the 'wonder turner' the device demonstrated the principal of visual persistence – the fact that, in Wade's words: 'things occurring in physical succession could be visually simultaneous.'

Other important characters and their inventions included Charles Wheatstone and the kaleidoscope; David Brewster with a version of the stereoscope; and Joseph Plateau and the phenakistoscope – another device that created the illusion of movement. Rivalry and ill feeling was intense among these pioneers, especially between Wheatstone and Brewster. And yet Wade finished his talk with a photograph depicting Wheatstone, Brewster, Michael Faraday and others posing together as friends. 'I'd like to finish on the topic of harmony,' Wade said. But then we heard the photo is a fake. 'This shows the power and perfidy of photography,' Wade said with a smile. CJ

## FUNDING NEWS

The **Psoriasis Association** has funding for research in the UK into the causes, treatment and care of psoriasis, including psychosocial aspects of the condition and factors affecting quality of life.

| PhD Studentship Grants to fund PhD studentships that have clear relevance to the aims of the Psoriasis Association.

| Small Project Grants of up to £10,000 for UK-based researchers to investigate any aspect of psoriasis relevant to the aims of the Association.

Closing date: 13 December 2013.

[tinyurl.com/n8rxco6](http://tinyurl.com/n8rxco6)

The **ESRC Transformative Research Call** aims to encourage novel developments in social science enquiry, and support research activity that entails an element of risk. The research put forward should be for genuinely transformative ideas at the frontiers of the social sciences that challenge current thinking. Proposals should be pre-selected by eligible research organisations; full details of the eligibility criteria are available. Up to £250,000 is available per grant. Closing date for submissions: 15 January 2014.

[tinyurl.com/mr6kkdo](http://tinyurl.com/mr6kkdo)

The NHS NIHR has the following open for applications:

### 13/119 Autism spectrum disorders

Proposals for studies to examine the clinical efficacy of the interventions used in the diagnosis or treatment of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and related diagnoses.

### 13/120 Non-respiratory sleep disorders

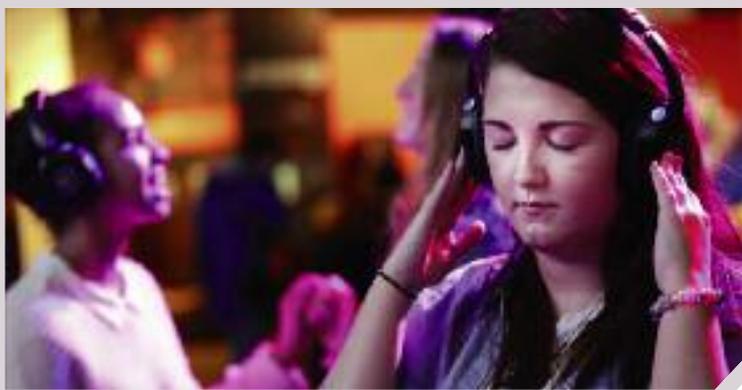
Proposals are sought for studies into interventions to prevent or treat disorders of sleep. The studies should have the potential to generate new knowledge which could be used in the future clinical care of patients. Deadline for applications: 3 February 2014.

[tinyurl.com/pd5kjwz](http://tinyurl.com/pd5kjwz)

info

For more, see [www.bps.org.uk/funds](http://www.bps.org.uk/funds)

Funding bodies should e-mail news to Elizabeth Beech on [elibee@bps.org.uk](mailto:elibee@bps.org.uk) for possible inclusion



The same brain areas that respond to music that gives you 'shivers down the spine' also activate to other rewarding stimuli

and literature to demonstrate their lack of functional specificity: the same brain areas that respond to music that gives you 'shivers down the spine' also activate to other rewarding stimuli, such as

food, sex, drugs (and presumably rock 'n' roll). What's missing in brain-imaging studies is the person and how we interpret music or art based on our own experience.

So is it better to talk to people about art than look at their brain and does neuroscience tell us anything more? A lively question-and-answer session discussed these and other points including what it means to describe a Wayne Rooney goal as 'sheer poetry'! Many agreed that the neuroscientific understanding of art is of interest, it provides one level of description of our aesthetic responses, but it shouldn't try to explain everything. Neuroscience is after all the study of the nervous system. Neuroaesthetics might tell us more about brain function, but whether it will tell us more about art is still open to debate.

# It's all in the Mind Games

As venues go it doesn't get much more prestigious than the Faraday Theatre at the Royal Institution and it was in this historic place that two BPS-sponsored 'Mind Games' panel discussions took place in October, chaired by Claudia Hammond, presenter of Radio 4's *All in the Mind*.

## Changing the world?

'The trouble is, only senior academics have licence to make things look simple. On the way up, complexity is rewarded,' said Lisa Harker. The NSPCC's head of strategy was taking part in the discussion 'Can psychology change the world and why doesn't it?' at the Royal Institution on 26 September. Her fellow panellists were Professor Tommy Mackay, a former BPS President, and Professor Rupert Brown from the University of Sussex.

Lisa Harker's words encapsulated the strongest theme to emerge in the discussion: researchers and policymakers exist in different worlds. Policymakers are busy people who want clear messages, but psychological science can be complex its practitioners are not used to reporting its findings in simple language.

There were different solutions offered to this dilemma. Tommy Mackay said the successful literacy scheme he implemented in West Dunbartonshire relied upon principles that were already well known, while Rupert Brown suggested we have to live with the fact that psychological research does not always supply simple findings.

A second theme of the evening was that other professions are already better represented in the policymaking world. Lisa Harker said economists have a sense of entitlement when it comes to providing

policy advice, while Claudia Hammond asked if they had stolen our thunder and our research.

The other panel members suggested that economics is increasingly incorporating the insights of psychology, something the economists in the audience agreed with. One said that behavioural science is currently of great interest and neuropsychology soon will be.

Nor was the discussion all gloomy. The Cabinet Office's behavioural insights team (or 'nudge unit') does make use of psychology and a similar unit has just been set up by the White House.

And psychology is needed. As another economist in the audience put it: 'The credit crunch came about because economists did not understand human behaviour.'

## Science of sexism

The following week the atmosphere was expectant as the room filled to capacity for the second of the two panel discussions, 'The science of sexism'. The expert panel included Professor Sophie Scott, UCL Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience; Professor Deborah Cameron, Professor of Language and Communication at Oxford University; and Professor Lynn Segal, Anniversary Professor of Psychology & Gender Studies at Birkbeck University.

Initially the panel tackled the lack of evidence on differences between men's and women's brains and how the development of evolutionary psychology

had affected the modern view of the sexes. Professor Segal explained that science should really be seeking the similarities between the genders rather than constantly looking for differences.

Speaking on the differences between male and female brains Professor Scott argued that it seemed some critical faculties were suspended when researching gender differences in ways that wouldn't happen if the focus was race or ethnicity. In fact, she said, when it comes to our brains, environment, culture and upbringing have much more of an effect than gender.

Professor Deborah Cameron went to

explain how much socialisation influences how both genders develop and that much of society is in thrall to the idea of gender generalisations. Gender myths such as 'women talk and men do' aren't really backed up with any hard evidence, and in some ways science has contributed to reinforcing gender inequality, she went on to say.

The fact that men experience sexism too was discussed in answer to an audience query over the

all-female panel. However, as Claudia pointed out, how often does the Faraday Theatre have an all-female panel and they were selected on their expertise in this area not their gender. A fascinating and lively discussion.

**| Both events available as an audio download on the Royal Institution website (<http://richannel.org/blog/2013/september/claudia-hammond>)**



**Claudia Hammond**  
chaired the discussions

# Cigarette packets are 'advertising'

Psychologists at Surrey University have uncovered evidence that bolsters the case for the introduction of plain packaging for cigarettes. Such a policy has been introduced in Australia, but the UK government has yet to make a decision on its introduction here, despite broad public approval for the move.

Michaela Dewe and her colleagues analysed 204 cigarette print advertisements published between the 1950s and 2000s (*Journal of Health Psychology*: [tinyurl.com/njg8yr6](http://tinyurl.com/njg8yr6)). They were particularly interested in the appearance of cigarette packets in these advertisements because tobacco firms claim that branded packaging is a neutral product that makes no difference to consumer behaviour.

From the 1950s to the 1990s, the researchers found an

increase in adverts that displayed a cigarette packet, but not the actual cigarette – a trend that showed a slight reversal in the 2000s. This pattern went hand in hand with a reduction across the decades in the appearance of cigarettes themselves.

The researchers believe this shows the tobacco companies were using the cigarette box as a cue to remind consumers of claims in the adverts about their product's quality, flavour, pleasure and cost. These results 'provide further evidence that the cigarette box is...an advertising vehicle in its own right,' they said. Chartered Psychologist and co-author Professor Jane Ogden added: 'The box cannot be considered a neutral object that has no impact on consumer choices, which provides evidence in support of the call for compulsory plain packaging.' **CJ**

# Educational psychology worries – north and south

Ongoing concerns in Scotland about the lack of educational psychologists have intensified. In October the National Scottish Steering Group for Educational Psychologists published a workforce planning report in which it stated that increased demand, staff retirements, the recent loss of central funding for postgraduate trainees, and other factors together mean that the 'profession is in the midst of a critical period'. The report concludes by calling for an urgent review of psychological services in Scotland ([tinyurl.com/q6wzgd1](http://tinyurl.com/q6wzgd1)).

The Scottish Children's Services Coalition (SCSC) responded by urging the Scottish government to take immediate action. The ratio of educational psychologists to population was poorer in 2012 than in 2001, the SCSC highlighted, and people requiring the services of educational psychologists are subject to a postcode lottery. 'We are sitting on a ticking time-bomb of increased demand,' said an SCSC spokesperson, 'and we cannot allow those who

require psychiatric and psychology services to be left confined to the fringes simply due to a lack of personnel to address this need.'

In Scottish Parliament Portfolio Questions early in October, Labour MSP David Stewart asked the Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages, Dr Alasdair Allan, what action the government was taking to increase the availability of educational psychologists in Scotland. '[I]t is important to point out that 38 students are currently training as educational psychologists and that that meets the demand that has been set out,' Dr Allan replied.

There are also worries about educational psychology services south of the border. In September, the Association of Educational Psychologists published figures showing that councils in England have cut funding for educational psychology by 5 per cent over the last three years. This is at a time when demand for educational psychologists is reported to be increasing. **CJ**

## EYES DON'T HAVE IT

Look at me when I'm speaking to you,' is a common refrain of parents attempting to influence their children. It reflects a deep-rooted cultural belief that eye contact aids persuasion. However, a new study by researchers in Germany and the US found that participants instructed to meet the gaze of a speaker espousing views opposite to their own were actually less likely to be persuaded. 'We suggest that the common efforts to look into the eyes of a persuasion target and demand that this person return gaze may be counterproductive to changing hearts and minds,' concluded Frances Chen and her colleagues in *Psychological Science* ([tinyurl.com/pn5ddg5](http://tinyurl.com/pn5ddg5)). **CJ**



The British Psychological Society

Promoting excellence in psychology

## Call for Nominations President 2015-16

Nominations are sought for the election of Members of the Society to fulfil the roles of:

- President 2015-16, who will be President-Elect in 2014-15 and Vice-President in 2016-17

The Presidency is the highest office within the Society. The role includes representing the Society at national and international functions, and acting as Chair of the Board of Trustees.

Descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of both roles, together with their requirements

and time commitments, are available on request.

### Procedure

A nomination pack, which includes further information and a standard nomination form, is available from Lynn West (e-mail: [lynn.west@bps.org.uk](mailto:lynn.west@bps.org.uk)).

The Board of Trustees has the responsibility to ensure that there is a candidate for this position. In line with previous practice, a Search Committee has been set up to facilitate this process. Those proposing candidates should,

in the first instance, contact the Honorary General Secretary, Professor Pam Maras (e-mail: [pam.maras@bps.org.uk](mailto:pam.maras@bps.org.uk)) for guidance.

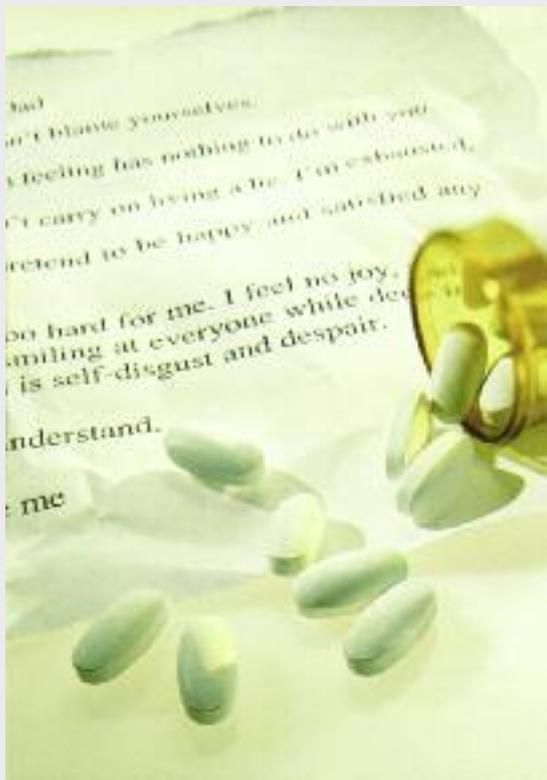
Nominations must reach the Chief Executive's Office at the Society's Leicester office by **5pm on 10 January 2014**. Nominations will only be valid if the standard nomination form, including signatures, is fully completed.

If contested, these positions will be decided by membership ballot prior to the Annual General Meeting 2014.

# A study of suicide notes left by children and young teens

In 2010 more people died by suicide than were killed in war, by murder, or in natural disasters. In Norway, the location of a heart-rending new study of suicide notes left by children and young teens, suicide is the second leading cause of death for this age group. We need urgently to do more to understand why so many young people are taking their own lives.

The researchers Anne Freuchen and Berit Grøholt predicted that, given their immaturity, the young authors of suicide notes would show signs of confusion. Also, because diagnoses of mental illness are lower in children and young teens, the researchers predicted that the notes would show fewer signs of inner pain compared with notes left by older teens and adults.



In *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*

In all, Freuchen and Grøholt had access to 23 suicide notes left by 18 youths (average age 14; five girls) who took their own lives between 1993 and 2004. They also interviewed the children's parents and referred to police reports. For comparison, the researchers also interviewed the parents of 24 youths who died by suicide during the same period but did not leave a note.

Analysing the notes revealed 10 themes, each of which was present in three or more of the notes: they were addressed to someone (most often parents); the author gave reasons for the suicide; they declared their love; expressed a settlement with themselves (e.g. 'it's better for me to be dead'); expressed a settlement with someone else (e.g. 'I do this for you, dad'); asked for forgiveness; expressed good wishes (e.g. 'good luck in the future'); expressed aggression (e.g. 'you bastards'); over half included instructions (e.g. 'give Peter Playstation 2'); and just under half expressed inner pain.

Contrary to their predictions, Freuchen and Grøholt said that 'the notes are coherent and do not reveal confusion or overwhelming emotions. The children and young adolescents emphasise their consciousness of what they are about to do and they take full responsibility.'

According to the parental interviews, the children and teens who left the notes had not sought help with the issues that led to their

suicide. At the same time, they had communicated their thoughts about suicide more often than those who didn't leave notes. One has to wonder why this did not trigger more effective preventive action. Similarly, three of the notes took the form of school essays, and yet none of them were acted upon by school authorities.

The fact that many of the notes conveyed declarations of love and gave explanations suggests, the researchers said, that the authors were well aware of the implications of their actions. 'These children and adolescents somehow retain their dignity,' the researchers said. 'They act like decent people do, they bear their pain alone, and even manage to take care of others by leaving detailed instructions with respect to giving away their assets.'

The researchers do not extract many practical lessons from their findings, other than calling for more research into parent-child/teen relationships in the hope of developing preventative strategies. Moreover, they cautioned that it is not possible to generalise or draw conclusions from this small sample. Another methodological limitation is that the suicide notes are from an era that pre-dates the rise of social media (which can be a source of threat, a support, and an outlet), so it's not clear how relevant insights from this study are for young people today.

## Synaesthetic sex

In *Frontiers in Psychology*

For people with synaesthesia, stimulation of one sense – or in some cases just thinking of a particular concept – triggers another kind of sensory experience. The most common form of the condition is for letters to trigger colour perceptions, but there are some truly strange variants, such as people for whom various swimming strokes trigger colours, and others who experience emotional sensations at the touch of different fabrics.

Although there are first-hand accounts in sex research that sound a lot like synaesthesia (e.g. a woman interviewed for a 1970 paper said that orgasm was accompanied by 'fuzzy blackness with red and white muted bursts'), before now psychology has failed to investigate the possibility that, for some people, sexual feelings might be the trigger for synaesthetic sensations, and to ask what the implications are for their sex lives.

For a new study, a team led by Janina Nielsen surveyed 19 synaesthetes (two men) who claimed to have sexual forms of the condition. Their answers were compared to 36 age-matched controls. The researchers also interviewed seven of the sexual synaesthetes. The average age of the participants was mid- to late thirties.

The sexual synaesthetes described different perceptual sensations for different stages of sexual activity from arousal to climax. Initial fantasy and



## Want people to trust you? Try apologising for the rain

*In Social Psychological and Personality Science*

desire triggered the colour orange for one woman. As excitement built for another participant, this went together with colours of increasing intensity. With excitement plateauing, one person described fog transformed into a wall. Orgasm was then described as the wall bursting, 'ringlike structures...in bluish-violet tones'. The final so-called resolution phase was accompanied for another participant with pink and yellow.

There's no objective way of verifying the truth of these descriptions; however, many participants experience more common forms of synaesthesia (e.g. letters to colours), which showed consistency over time when tested – usually taken as mark of authenticity.

The survey showed that the sexual synaesthetes scored higher than control participants for sexual desire and for altered states of consciousness during sex, including 'oceanic boundlessness' (feelings of derealisation and ecstasy) and 'visionary restructuration' (hallucinations). Surprisingly perhaps, the synaesthetes also reported less sexual satisfaction than the controls. Their interview answers suggested this is because their synaesthetic experiences enrich their own sexual sensations but leave them feeling disconnected from their partner. It's all very well if sex triggers your own personal light show, but if you can't share it, well ... it must be kind of isolating.

Nielsen and her team said these results should be treated with caution. This is 'a pilot project' they said, 'providing clues for further investigation'.

If you want people to see you as trustworthy, try apologising for situations outside of your control such as the rain or a transport delay. That's the implication of a new study by researchers at Harvard Business School and Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania.

The most compelling evidence came from Alison Brooks and her colleagues' fourth and final study in which a male actor approached 65 strangers (30 women) at a train station on a rainy day to ask to borrow their mobile phone. Half the time he preceded his request with the apology: 'I'm sorry about the rain!' The rest of the time he just came straight out with his request: 'Can I borrow your cell phone?' The superfluous apology made a big difference. Forty-seven per cent of strangers offered their phone when the actor apologised for the rain, compared with 9 per cent when there was no apology.

The field study followed three laboratory experiments. In the first, 178 students thought they were playing a financial game with a partner in another room. They were told that on some rounds the computer would override their partner's decisions. Later, if their 'partner' (actually the whole thing was pre-programmed) apologised for a computer override the participants tended to rate him or her as more trustworthy and were more generous towards him or her as a result.

In a second experiment, 177 adult participants (average age 28) watched a video of a stranger approaching a flight-

delayed passenger at an airport to ask to borrow his/her mobile phone. The participants were to imagine they were the passenger and to decide how to act. If the stranger was shown apologising for the flight delay before making his request, the participants were more likely to say they'd agree to share their phone with him, as compared with a no-apology control condition, an initial conventional apology ('Hi, I'm sorry to interrupt'), or an initial neutral greeting ('Hi, how are you?').

Another experiment involved 310 adult participants imagining they were heading in the rain to meet a seller of a second-hand iPod. If they were told the seller apologised for the rain first, the participants tended to rate him as more trustworthy, likeable and empathic, as compared with a no-apology condition, an initial traditional acknowledgement ('Hi there, oh it's raining') or a neutral greeting ('Hi there').

How trustworthy are these

results? The accumulated findings from several experiments help build a convincing case, but unfortunately the field study – which had the potential to provide the most persuasive evidence – is seriously flawed. The actor apologised for the rain then asked to borrow a phone, or in the comparison condition he just asked to borrow the phone. There was no proper control condition. This means we don't know if the impact of the apology was specific to making an apology or merely an effect of uttering any kind of ice-breaker.

This is significant because past research shows how mindlessly we often act in social situations. For example, back in the late 1970s, Ellen Langer and her colleagues found that people were just as likely to give way at a photocopier if a queue-jumper uttered the nonsensical excuse 'because I need to make copies' as when he claimed 'because I'm in a rush'.



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