

Conference Report:

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The BPS Annual Conference 2004. Imperial College in London,
April 15-17 2004, organised by the BPS in parallel with The Division of Clinical
Psychology Conference and The Student Members Group Conference

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Abstract: In this article I will review four papers presented at the British Psychological Society Annual Conference held this year in London held over a 3 day period. The Conference included a variety of scientific presentations and discussions through symposia, roundtable discussions, single papers and poster sessions.

Although numerous papers took an experimental approach, few applied any type of qualitative methodology. The topics covered within the different psychological disciplines spanned from early childhood through old age; I have chosen four papers that covered a life course perspective and took into consideration clinical issues as well. The first paper discusses a grounded theory approach used to analyse a play therapy session between therapist and child. The second review reports some recent findings in the way the brains of people on the autistic spectrum disorder might function. The third paper discusses positive psychology and how such an emerging movement has influenced new research in the field. The last paper reviewed will discuss the issue of the ageing process, and I will present some arguments related to the useful application of qualitative methodologies within this area of research. In conclusion, I will highlight some personal reflections on the Conference and the need for a greater balance between qualitative and quantitative methodologies to be used in collaboration rather than as antagonists.

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1. Introduction

In this report I review the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Annual Conference held in London and hosted at the Imperial College, across three different buildings: Sherfield, Huxley and Chemical Engineering between 15-17 April 2004. The Conference provided an opportunity to bring together the wider membership of the BPS with several invited speakers from the continent. Participants came from various professional domains: psychologists, researchers,

academics, and beginning professionals, for a total of 950 people in attendance. It was organised in association with the Division of Clinical Psychology and the Student Member Group (SMG) affiliate to the Society, which had a separate 1-day presentation (Saturday). It was a great opportunity for sharing knowledge and expertise in professional practice, research and teaching. Many eminent speakers were invited to represent the four themes of the Conference: positive psychology, perception, creativity, and innovation. There were a total of 238 presentations between invited symposia, round tables, discussions, lectures and single papers. Topics spanned from cognitive science, neurobiology, clinical neuropsychology, computer sciences, social, sport and health psychology. An exhibit hall with a variety of publishers, software companies and other BPS services were also presented as well as over 140 poster sessions taking place over two afternoons. The body of knowledge that was shared at the Conference was immeasurable. The broad themes discussed at the Conference embraced learning, personality, psychosocial factors influencing the way we function, which are implicated in academic work performance, well-being, mental health, and positive therapy. Psychological development, which is a characteristic of all transitions in all individuals, was acknowledged and recognised by psychological theorists of many orientations who have brought into the Conference a common interest that engages and successfully negotiates arising challenges resulting in improved understanding, adaptation, increased competence, and efficacy in addressing the role played by psychology throughout the lifespan. This report outlines only few selected presentations, giving a critical summary of the event, which I hope will expose psychology to a wider audience. [1]

The Conference set out to discuss a variety of issues and themes, spanning from clinical, positive, health, cognitive, sport and educational psychology, through a variety of modes. Unfortunately, the way the Conference was organised, I only had the opportunity to attend a small section of the interesting and inspiring talks presented simultaneously across the different sites at the Imperial College. What I have tried to achieve with this paper is to give a flavour of the depth of some of the issues discussed, presenting a critical review from a life course perspective, focusing on four papers which represent four particular, different stages of an adult life: the child, the adult who sees the world in a different way, the adult through development in a life course and the older-adult. There were many scientific presentations that described the use of experimental designs, and little in terms of qualitative methods, but I have tried to choose a balance between the two perspectives. [2]

2. The Role of Play: Transitions in Non-Directive Play Therapy

Angela NAYLOR presented the first paper I will report on as part of a symposium on "Transitions", organised by academics from Edge Hill University, London and London Metropolitan University. The paper explored transitions that take place in non-directive play therapy through an analysis that spanned a course of 12 individual therapy sessions; each lasting one-hour and carried out by a qualified play therapist. Each session was video and audiotaped, which provided a rich set of raw data. A qualitative approach with a grounded theory analysis was utilised

for this case study; using NUDIST QSR software package, open and axial coding allowed for identification of categories and sub-categories. [3]

Exploring variations in phenomena and comparing each category and its subcategories led to the identification of seven major themes, which can be briefly highlighted as: 1) Exploration: embodiment play (Feeling Materials: sand, clay, paint crayon), 2) Exploration: role-play, 3) Relationship with therapist, 4) Testing Feelings: aggression, 5) Testing Feelings: attachment / nurturing issues, 6) Testing Feelings: resolution/positive outcome, and 7) Elements of Personality: being in control. The findings take into account the important relationship between child and play therapist in non-directive play and how this process has therapeutic value in its patterns of change throughout, leading and highlighting an initial model of transition/change within the normal social and cognitive development of the child. We also see how such interventions can be used successfully within delayed acquisitions of competencies on the part of the child or even where there has been abuse or neglect. CORSARO (1985) defines or refers to play as an activity that is not performed for an end result but purely for the pleasure one gets from it. Although many attempts have been made to define play, we are still lacking of an adequate definition of play per se (SMITH, TAKHVAR, GORE & VOLLSEDT 1986). Despite having overlapping criteria, we acknowledge and appreciate (I hope!) that play is indeed an indispensable ingredient of the school environment and possibly has also therapeutic and clinical values, as this first reviewed paper has suggested. [4]

What a qualitative approach through a grounded theory analysis has allowed and facilitated here is a deeper understanding of the dynamics occurring between therapist and child, without contaminating the environment in which the interaction took place. The nuances, which have emerged from the analysis, have highlighted the potentiality of a qualitative approach to analysis and how such methodologies can enrich our understanding. Some of the audience's responses were purely inquisitive as to how such discovery could inform directly our practices. Such questions were answered with competence, highlighting that such findings demonstrate how more complex and meaningful the activity of play seems to be and the type of educational value it has in the course of a child development. [5]

3. Autism: An Extreme of Male Brain

Simon BARON-COHEN, Professor at the University of Cambridge in the Departments of Experimental Psychology and Psychiatry, as well as being the co-director of ARC (Autism Research Centre) within the School of Clinical Medicine in the Dept. of Psychiatry at Cambridge University, was the invited speaker by the SMG who held their conference on Saturday 17 April 2004. It was an inspirational presentation. Nevertheless, BARON-COHEN was challenged by the audience on topics such as the current debate about the triple jab measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) and the implications of his latest research. In his presentation he gave a detailed explanation of the different functions of the human brain (female/male) identifying and comparing their characteristics with a typical brain on the

Autistic Spectrum (ASD). Empathising (E) and Systemising (S) were the two dimensions that assist what he defines as the "E-S Model", based on a series of empirical evidence based on experiments carried out over a fixed period of time. Empathy seems to be a quality that helps individuals to socialise, communicate and understand other people's intentions, the so called "Theory of Mind", which are clustered as being the typical Triad of Impairment in people on the ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). Systemising is a quality that enables individuals to explore complicated systems, understand of mathematical reasoning and more specific subsets of abilities that are linked to what BARON-COHEN defines as the so called "Triad of Strengths", characteristic of people on the ASD and identified as being typical characteristics of the male population who are on the Spectrum. [6]

The findings of BARON-COHEN's experiments suggest that in measuring an Empathy Quotient (EQ) females scored significantly higher than their male counterparts when presented with a series of photographic impressions of human eyes and were asked to identify the emotions/feelings portrayed by the photographs. Individuals with a diagnosed AS (Asperger Syndrome) scored significantly lower. Other findings in a test called "The Faux Pas Test" aimed at measuring social sensitivity. Three groups comprised of a group boys, a group of girls, and a matched group with AS, matched by chronological age and IQ, were asked to recognise within a script the "un-social" behaviour acted out by one character. Again findings demonstrate a significant difference between boys/girls (girls scored higher than boys) suggesting that empathy plays a role in what we consider social scripts and social skills. [7]

The results of a battery of experiments aimed at measuring the Systemising Quotient (SQ) in boys, girls and people with AS, suggested that males scored significantly higher and people with AS scoring even higher, demonstrating that their reading ability and recognition of a target in an embedded figure or through an Intuitive Physic Test could be qualities specific to the male brain. [8]

The model presented by BARON-COHEN, demonstrates that individuals with ASD score high on the systemising dimensions and score extremely low on the empathising dimension, which partly explains the typical male brain preoccupied with statistical information, systems and the way things work. In contrast, the female brain has interest in social relationships and solutions, emotional responses and motivation. The functional difference between male/female brains may partly explain the higher percentage of males within the overall population of those with ASD. Further investigations within biological science and genetics are needed to establish whether early detection at an embryonic level may assist interventions at a very early stage, although such discoveries will imply much more profound ethical and moral issues. [9]

The audience's reaction to BARON-COHEN's talk was mixed, possibly due to the majority of people present being students; students tend to be less inhibited to challenge and ask probing and sometimes controversial questions. The MMR issue was brought to light, considering the wide expertise of BARON-COHEN, and the answer was very clear. In BARON-COHEN's opinion there are no links

between the MMR and Autism. To the extent that besides being now a quiet "old" finding, the scientific journal, which published the report, has been asked by the very scientists who carried out the study, to withdraw their statement! [10]

4. Positive Psychology: What Good are Positive Emotions?

Barbara FREDRICKSON, Associate Professor at the University of Michigan was among the invited speakers to present as part of the positive psychology sessions. Research on positive emotions has as its focus their effects on health and well-being. SELIGMAN (2003) is one of the founders of the movement back in the 1980s, which now has representatives across the continent and seems to keep growing and developing. FREDRICKSON developed a new model which aims to describe the actual form and function of positive emotions; one of the key elements of the proposed model is based on the "Broad & Build" theory which serves to expand an individual's thought-action repertoire and sees greater fulfilment in the process of building durable personal resources. [11]

Positive emotions (PE) can serve to broaden other positive actions through an individual's momentary thought-action repertoire during the broadening mindsets, which arise from it: interest develops the urge to explore, contentment develops the urge to savour goals and achievements (and even failures!), joy can develop the urge to play, and love can spark a recurring cycle of each of the above mentioned within close and safe relationships. These positive and broadened mindsets are contrasted with a more narrowed view of the world that sees individuals develop negative emotions that spark specific action tendencies such as fear, flight and fight. PE should assist in decreasing "tension" and the return of cardio-vascular activity to baseline (FREDRICKSON 2003). Whether through play, savouring, integration or explorations, PE promote a discovery of creative actions and social bonds which in turn assist the individual in building a range of physical, social psychological and intellectual resources aimed at optimising health and well-being. [12]

It seems that experimental design and quantitative methodologies have reached even our emotions in a way that they can now be "measurable". I would like to see more of this type of work, without losing sight of the quality of our emotions and how we can measure and analyse them through qualitative methods. That is, the meaning given to the actual experience of joy, contentment, interest and love, and how these support the development of stronger bonds and relationships. [13]

5. Positive Ageing

On the same theme of positive psychology, Felicia HUPPERT, a neuropsychologist from Cambridge University, discussed and reviewed recent data sets and work in progress, aimed at identifying the determinants of positive ageing. The current debate concerning abolishing statutory retirement at the age of 65 in October 2006, and promoting longer working lives with pension states that are not going to be sufficient as people seem to be living longer, highlights at

present the paradox of retirement. What will be the role of older people in society? [14]

From a deficit model, biochemical and behavioural sciences have concentrated and operated on the analysis of diseases and disorders in order to understand effective functioning. However there is growing recognition that the subjective well-being cannot be understood only in terms of "deficiency" or absence of disorders. It is important that a model based on the science of positive ageing across the life-course assist researchers in determining the factors which influence and are associated with subjective psychological well-being and health, through the maintenance of functioning cognitive domains and physical health. In her lecture HUPPERT examined the role of social and biological factors, presenting a series of population-based studies of the ageing process that combine genetics and neurobiology with other psychological and behavioural measures. The ageing process is inevitable, and this was a clear message portrayed by HUPPERT. However, how well we age and the way older people are stereotypically represented in society present complex issues, which need to be recognised. Although there might be a decline in light sensitivity with age, for example, there is no reason why we cannot develop new designs to counterbalance this deficit. HUPPERT discussed, in light of such studies, that the external environment plays an important role; where functional design in the homes and workplaces should enhance rather than hinder the way older people function through their lives. Even in the face of biological decline, how can we understand the quality and provide ways to improve their lives? [15]

HUPPERT argued that more experimental studies are needed in order to change the way people think about the ageing process. Several studies have already demonstrated that cognitive abilities do not diminish but change counterbalancing some of the deficits, which may be present. Neuroimaging studies show that patterns in brain activity differ in older people where qualities such as re-organisation skills and plasticity replace other functions. Representations of old age in the media especially are geared to portray either frail older people or not represent them at all! Why can we not see older models on television? This perspective does not want to dismiss a section of society where old age is associated with diseases or decline, but aims at developing awareness that positive ageing can coexist and requires a multi-faceted approach in order to protect the brain and the body from age related changes. [16]

The reaction to HUPPERT's talk was very positive. However some delegates argued that old age is associated with diseases and illness and trying to give a "positive" label to a process which is essentially a decay of life is unethical. To such comments HUPPERT acknowledged that old age could be associated to diseases and illness, but only for a section of our population. And medical and biochemical sciences are doing a rather good job in trying to reduce these diseases. In contrast we need to strive for a change in our perceptions and attitudes towards old age, in order to live well till the last of our days. [17]

6. Reflections & Conclusions

The Conference left me certainly inspired. I also learned much, including that different approaches serve specific ends. An experimental design that aims to identify the biochemical processes that explain why the brain works in a certain way, rather than another, is essential for that specific enquiry; as much as in order to explore the significance of a therapeutic relationship uses a qualitative analysis in order to explore the process of therapeutic transition. [18]

It seems to me that the divide between quantitative and qualitative methods is still somehow quiet wide. DENSCOMBE (1998) suggests that the feature which sets qualitative and quantitative research apart from each other is that the former focuses on words and the latter on numbers as the unit of analysis. I would argue that even when faced with a set of numerical data, interpretations and explanations need to be conveyed in words. Testing hypotheses through objective procedures is not the only way to go about understanding the social world. Conducting scientific investigations is not a matter of simply following mere methods/recipes: it is a process that is guided by assumptions about the nature of knowledge and how we can challenge these assumptions in the quest for "truth". It has, in addition to its antecedents and consequences, an ethical obligation to use research as an empowerment of the people we observe rather than blindly glorifying the forcefulness of numbers. Positivist methods are only one way in which a story can be told. We should strive instead for approaches to research in which one method informs the other, exactly because they serve different purposes, which are not in contrast but complementary. As I mentioned at the beginning of this report, the final aim of any scientific enquiry, and I include qualitative approaches within this definition, is to advance knowledge, to adapt to changes, to increase competence and efficacy in our interventions and practices. Why is it that empirical enquiry, "robust" statistical analysis and quantitative approaches are almost always the preferred path to take in the eyes of scientists, compared to the naturalistic, reflective, experiential, qualitative approaches? Why is it that the empirical material produced by qualitative methods is regarded by many quantitative researchers as impressionistic and unreliable? Answers to the question of "how much" gives us rigid, narrow or little knowledge about the underlying processes occurring in a specific area of research, giving us fragile and superficial meanings which need to be further challenged, reflected upon and explained. [19]

A line of questioning that begins with "why" something is happening (or not) can be answered initially by quantitative methodologies, but (in my view) once that has been established, reasons, causes, mechanisms, processes and meanings need to be explored at a different level. A qualitative researcher is a type of philosopher who makes an attempt to make a universal sense in which human beings are guided by certain conceptual principles. These principles combine ontology, epistemology and methodologies in the development of interpretive paradigms. And all research is interpretive, guided by these principles that assist researchers in the process of understanding how the world is constructed, how it

should be understood, and how it ought to be studied (DENZIN & LINCOLN 1994). [20]

Exploring the quality of life among older people, through narrative, phenomenological approaches, discourse analysis or grounded theory approaches may lead to a better understanding of their needs and the ways they see their lives. In addition we could investigate people's perceptions and attitudes about old age in order to challenge the stereotypical image of "old". If we want to go beyond the positivistic result (or findings) that a greater number of older people who live longer are exposed to greater physical activities and positive emotions, we also ought to understand how and in what ways these positive emotions influence this section of the population and whether this is applicable to all groups of old people. Both findings will add to our knowledge of old-age and give a voice to these people. [21]

Similarly, qualitative methods could better inform how we actually experience positive emotions and their association with greater well-being and health. How is joy experienced by different people and how is that interpreted by others? The ability of a qualitative study to explore the deeper nuances of topics in question should be as important as trying to discover numerical causalities and genetic compounds. Similarly, we could start from a qualitative approach, as in NAYLOR's study, and further the investigation through her explorative findings into looking at whether the therapeutic relationship and the transitional process occurring as the result of such intervention is measurable through experimental design and quantitative investigation. [22]

If we visually compare a topic or problem to a tree, the way this tree is analysed will depend on the different perspectives from which each researcher is coming. The body of knowledge that results from this multifaceted investigation is constructed through a creative process of analysis, which encompasses different theories. Thinking generates knowledge and the way we think, evaluate, measure and interpret results varies from researcher to researcher, but they all contribute (one would hope) to the perception and understanding of that tree. [23]

What I would have found helpful and meaningful, and maybe this is a suggestion for future Conferences, is a forum session(s) where the results/answers given by qualitative and quantitative approaches are compared, and through that comparison new insights created and developed. Processes and meanings such as the social constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between researcher and researched, the situational elements which influence the inquiry are as important as the measurement and the analysis of causality between variables. Let us hope that the future of psychological inquiry, both qualitative and quantitative, is leading to a holistic view of that "tree". [24]

The next BPS Annual Conference will be held in Manchester at UMIST on the 30th March to 2nd April 2005, UK, for details see the BPS website <http://www.bps.org.uk/>. [25]

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