New study on the influence and impact of conspiracy theories

Following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales on Sunday, 31 August 1997 in a car crash in Paris, there was widespread public mourning at the death of this popular figure and in their forthcoming paper ‘The hidden impact of conspiracy theories: Perceived and actual influence of theories surrounding the death of Princess Diana’, Dr Karen Douglas and Dr Robbie Sutton show that people are persuaded by conspiracy theories about Princess Diana’s death even though they do not necessarily know it.

In their study, which is to be published in the Journal of Social Psychology, the authors find that while people accurately judge the extent to which others are influenced by conspiracy theories, they are unaware of the extent to which their own attitudes have changed – a change that may actually serve to perpetuate the theories.

After reading internet-based conspiracy theories about the death of Princess Diana, research participants agreed more strongly with statements such as ‘there was an official campaign by MI6 to assassinate Diana, sanctioned by elements of the establishment’. When asked how much they would have agreed with those statements prior to reading the conspiracy theories, they ‘revised’ their prior attitudes so that they were closer to their current attitudes – this made it appear as though their attitudes had changed less than they actually had. Dr Douglas said: ‘Our research provides a first psychological examination of the impact of conspiracy theories. It also provides a potential explanation for an interesting paradox. Why do conspiracy theories endure when there is no factual support for them, and even when they fly in the face of established facts? Our findings suggest that conspiracy theories may actually have a ‘hidden impact’, meaning that they powerfully influence people’s attitudes whilst people do not know it; outwardly they may deny the extent to which they have been influenced but in truth they tend to endorse the new information and pass it on to others.’

These findings echo previous work by the authors which shows that people are also persuaded by pro-gun, pro-fossil fuel and anti-fossil fuel arguments but without the awareness that their attitudes have changed.

Annual Lecture

The Department of Psychology Annual Lecture is taking place on 22nd February at 6.00p.m. in Grimond Lecture Theatre 1 and will be given by Professor Mike Burton from the Department of Psychology at the University of Glasgow. The title of his lecture will be “Recognising faces: Some peculiar properties of prototypes”. Everyone is welcome to attend.

“...a solution to the problem of automatic face recognition.”

Mike explains, “Familiar and unfamiliar faces are different. We can recognise familiar faces across a large range of viewing conditions, but small changes in unfamiliar faces are devastating for human perceivers and computer-based systems. I will present a theory of face recognition which captures the shift from unfamiliar to familiar face processing, based on simple prototype-formation. I will suggest (rather speculatively) that this theory can form the basis for a unified theory of face perception, representation and learning. I will also demonstrate (rather less speculatively) that the approach offers promise of an engineering solution to the problem of automatic face recognition.”

Mike has been Professor of Psychology at Glasgow since 1994 and the main focus of his research is face recognition. Although mainly theoretical, he also works on automatic face processing and on issues relating to forensic identification.

Psychology Society

The Psychology Society is informal and open to all, providing an opportunity to discuss psychological issues. Throughout the year the society has special guest speakers who discuss their area of expertise, some of whom speak from personal experience. The society meets once a fortnight on Tuesdays at 7:00pm. Details about meetings including the venue appear in the diary section of the society’s website (www.freewebs.com/psychologysociety).

For further information on the Psychology Society or to be added to the mailing list, please contact Danielle Tucker (dt79@kent.ac.uk).
Welcome

Welcome to **Sofia Stathi** who has joined the Department as a Research Associate. She will be working with Drs. Karen Douglas and Robbie Sutton on an ESRC-funded project entitled “Understanding and altering perceptions of personal “invulnerability” to persuasive advertising” which explores personal invulnerability to persuasive advertising and is therefore of very high theoretical and practical interest. Sofia was born in Greece and studied psychology at the University of Crete. Following a visit to Ireland as an Erasmus student, Sofia realised how interesting and exciting living abroad can be and although her degree was clinically-orientated, she developed an interest in social psychology, having observed the intriguing interactions between Irish and English people, as well as other conflicting national identities. Sofia joined the Birmingham Social Psychology team in September 2003 and was supervised by Richard Crisp who is shortly joining Kent himself. Sofia’s research at Birmingham concentrated on contact and social projection in different social and cultural settings like international and British students, English and French nationals and indigenous people and Mestizos in Mexico.

Welcome also to **Mariamne Rose** who will be working as Research Assistant to Dr. Theresa Gannon on a project entitled “What were they thinking? The cognition of women who sexually abuse children”. Prior to joining Kent, Mariamne worked as a Research Assistant with the Prison Health Research Network on three mental health related projects, based at the Institute of Psychiatry, London with fieldwork in HMP Winchester and Belmarsh.

Professor Richard J Crisp

At the beginning of April, **Professor Richard Crisp** will be joining the Department and becoming a member of the Centre for the Study of Group Processes. He did his undergraduate degree in Experimental Psychology at St. Catherine’s College, University of Oxford. After that he went on to study for a PhD in Social Psychology at Cardiff University. In 1999, he took up a Lectureship position at the University of Birmingham and became a Senior Lecturer in 2003, then Reader in 2004.

He has published over 40 academic papers on the self and social categorization, group processes and intergroup relations.

His research examines the basic psychological processes that define how we think about ourselves and others, and he is interested in whether this knowledge can provide the basis for improving the societies in which we live. In particular, he looks at how people think about others along multiple social criteria.

“My research examines the basic psychological processes that define how we think about ourselves and others.”

This involves investigating the psychological impact of perceiving multiple social identities (e.g., young, woman, British, Asian, Muslim, engineer, man united supporter...). Research in multiple social categorization may help us to develop interventions designed to encourage reduced prejudice and intergroup discrimination and to encourage greater egalitarianism in social attitudes and interactions. There is now growing evidence thinking about the different ways in which we can classify ourselves and others can, under the right conditions, lead to more harmonious intergroup relations. However, there’s a great deal about the psychological processes involved that we don’t know, and we do not know how to best implement multiple classification strategies; that is, how to integrate them into conciliatory and interaction contexts involving members of groups engaged in varying degrees of conflict, or groups who suffer from stigmatization or discrimination. His current work aims to take research on multiple social categorization to this next stage.
European Health

Every year the European Health Psychology Society runs an annual workshop for mid career researchers and invites proposals for the organisation of the workshop. Dr. Katja Rüdell submitted an application in the Autumn and learnt just before Christmas that she had been successful. The website is already up and running and can be found at www.ehps.net/synergy/800/ws2007.html.

The title of the workshop is “Culture, Health and Illness Representations— Developing an International Agenda for Cross-Cultural Health Psychological Research” and it will take place from 13th-15th August 2007 at Hasselt University, Belgium. Please contact Katja for further information (k.rudell@kent.ac.uk).

Recent Publications


Hannie van Hoof wins Faculty teaching prize

Dr Hannie van Hooff has won the 2006/07 Faculty of Social Sciences teaching prize for pioneering work with WebCT online study support. This Prize is awarded annually to academic staff who demonstrate excellence in a particular area of teaching and/or learning support. Hannie shares this year’s prize with Dr Andrea den Boer in the Department of Politics and International relations.

Hannie developed WebCT online study support for module SP604 Biological Psychology (year 2). Students on this module particularly liked the online discussion boards, which enabled them to ask questions and to read replies from other students. They also found it helpful that all module information was presented together in a coherent way and that they could access everything from home. In total, 1444 user sessions were recorded and almost 90% of the students visited WebCT at least once (8 times on average).

Hannie joined the Psychology Department in October 2004. Apart from Biological Psychology, she also teaches the 3rd year module Electrophysiology of Mind and Brain. Her research interests are in the area of memory and attention, which she investigates by measuring electrical brain activity from the scalp.

Many congratulations to Dr Joachim Stoeber who has been awarded £59,000 from the Economic and Social Research Council to conduct research into “Perfectionism and performance in competitive athletes: the role of achievement goals and goal attainment expectancies. The grant will run from 1st May 2007 to 31st December 2008.

It’s been a good couple of months for Joachim as in January he became Chief Editor of Anxiety, Stress and Coping and he has also been invited to the editorial board of the Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment.

Congratulations also go to Dr. Jane Wood who has just been awarded a grant of £12,000 by the Kent and Medway resettlement programme to conduct research to evaluate the programme.

Glittering Prizes

If you are a final year student you may well be in the midst of recruiting participants and collecting data for your research project; if you started early and finished the study phase of your research last term, you may even be some way through the first draft of your completed report. As an incentive for this important part of your degree you might like to know that there is a prize for the best final year project(s) in Psychology, the Janet Miele prize.

The winner of this annual award is chosen by the Department’s Board of Examiners, and receives a cash award of £50 (or a share of this amount if there is more than one winning project). The final year project is arguably the most important piece of work you will undertake as an undergraduate student at Kent, drawing as it does on all the research skills you have acquired throughout the taught component of your degree.

Project Supervision

Are you a psychology student expecting to enter your final year in the next academic session (2007-2008)? Then you should be giving serious thought into finding a supervisor for your project. To see which members of staff still have supervision slots available, and they are going quickly, you should log on to www.kent.ac.uk/psychology/mis/ugprojects. To help guide your search for a supervisor, this page shows the Departmental research group (i.e. social, cognitive, developmental, forensic, health) to which each member of staff belongs together with a link to personal web-pages where individual research interests are described in detail. Several members of staff have already reached their quota for next year so don’t leave things to the last minute. You should note that if you have not found a supervisor by the start of the summer term (Monday 30 April 2007) one will be randomly allocated to you.

Kent Psychologist

This is the second issue of the Department of Psychology’s newsletter for students and staff, reporting on our teaching and research activities and issues that affect you as a psychology student. This issue has been designed by Gary Samson and the content edited by Lianne Allcock, Administrative Assistant in the Department. We welcome contributions from both staff and students for future issues. If you would like to write an article or have any news you’d like to share, please contact Lianne.

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Farewell to Tim Hopthrow

The Department said goodbye to Tim Hopthrow at the end of January. He started at Kent as an Undergraduate student registered on the Psychology with Clinical degree and was taught by such luminaries as Derek Rutter, Toby Lloyd-Jones and Diane Houston.

“I’m looking forward to the challenge of my new position at London Metropolitan University.”

His third year project with Lorne Hulbert looked at group discussion and cooperation in small work teams. Tim found Lorne an inspiration and was delighted when Lorne offered him a job as a research assistant at the end of his third year. He then did an MSc by research replicating and extending the findings of his third year project, whilst working part-time for Dominic Abrams and Lorne Hulbert investigating the effects of alcohol on groups. These projects have formed the basis of his current publications. Tim was then lucky enough to win an ESRC 1+3 studentship to do his PhD with Lorne but following Lorne’s sudden death, Dominic took over his supervision and brought a totally new and challenging perspective to his work. Following his PhD, Tim worked on another research assistant post with Gary Samson and intends to continue their collaboration.

Tim is grateful for the help he has received from Dominic on his CV which has enabled him to get a lectureship in Social Psychology at London Metropolitan University. Tim considers himself lucky to have worked with a number of people such as Georgina, Danny, Roberto and many more that have made his time here happy and fulfilling. He is looking forward to the challenge of his new position but will obviously be sad to leave Kent, after having spent many years here.

However, we can all rest assured that he will be popping in from time to time helping organise the BPS Social Psychology Conference in September and working on several collaborative projects.

We wish him all the best in his future academic career.