



Bleau, R. (2016) A word from the Chair. *Social Psychological Review*, 18(2), pp. 3-4.

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Deposited on: 30 September 2016

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## A word from the Chair

Renée Bleu

The summer of 2016 seems to have been a period when it felt like every time you switched on the news, there was reporting of a terrible atrocity. People being shot in a nightclub (Orlando), mowed down by a lorry driver on a promenade (Nice), and knifed to death in a facility for the disabled (Tokyo); there have been many more incidents than these. Stig Abell the new editor (as of May 2016) of the Times Literary Supplement (TLS) tweeted<sup>1</sup> on the day of the failed coup in Turkey that 'Historically, world is a less violent, gentler place than it has ever been before. We just know people's awful thoughts, impulses more.' Abel seemed to be basing his assertion in evidence presented in the cognitive psychologist, Steven Pinker's book on violence, in which Pinker claims that violence in the human world has been dramatically declining for thousands of years, given that he (Abell) further tweeted a quote from a TLS review of Pinker's 2011 book *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has declined*, reminding us that 'it is true' that violence has diminished in frequency<sup>2</sup>.

Of course Pinker's book has had mixed reviews and so by that ground alone, Abell's assertion of the truth of Pinker's central claim of diminished frequency is not warranted. And even if it were true that 'objectively' violence has reduced in frequency, it cannot be denied that we feel in the wake of such atrocities, the awfulness of these events in which we wonder about the state of our humanity in this world, in 2016. However the main point I want to make is that as academic psychologists I think we might all be agreed that we are very far away from getting to the answers of why people do what they do (in terms of their thoughts and impulses as Abell claims) and the way that our practice is currently set up is likely to impede progress in finding out. Both the REF and the impending TEF seems to have created an environment in which in the end, what matters, doesn't matter. Psychology as a discipline has been gerrymandered for the purposes of the REF and there is no impetus to promote the distinctive nature of psychology. And our professional body, The British Psychological Society, it would appear does not seem to promote the interests of academics in the same way it does that of applied professionals in the field.

In any case, I would wager that social psychology stands a better chance at getting to real answers than cognitive psychology, given its basic premises and its focus on the whole person (and not simply abstracted cognitive processes) in sociocultural interaction. However as we all know, social psychology, in particular has come under attack as a result of the publication of Nosek et al. (Open Science Framework, 2015) in which in the region of 75 per cent of social psychology papers were shown not to replicate, in a project whose aim it was to investigate the replicability of findings in psychology. Albeit that Jahoda (2016) draws our attention to the fact that much of social

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<sup>1</sup> **StigAbell**

@DPJHodges Historically, world is a less violent, gentler place than it has ever been. We just know people's awful thoughts, impulses more. 15/07/02016 17:58

<sup>2</sup> **StigAbell**

From the @TheTLS review of Steven Pinker's book on violence. Easy to forget this today (or any day) but it is true. <https://t.co/593KeBdivp>  
15/07/02016 18:31

psychology ought not to replicate anyway for cultural reasons, and Crandall and Sherman (2016) have highlighted the importance of conceptual replications over exact empirical replications, the onus is on us to do more to engage in more meaningful research, in which we reject the spirit that Reicher (2016) chides we may succumb to if we don't care about the right questions, ending up instead with an attitude of, 'All we care about is the process: Getting significance, getting published' (p21, Reicher, 2016).

How might we do this? For one thing, we should forge ahead with critical, sound theoretical and empirical practices and engage politically in our academic institutions, and for another, we need to be more proactive within The British Psychological Society and insist on our inclusion and representation. I managed to fail dismally in one attempt to have the Social Psychology Section propose one of the key speakers at the legacy event organised by The BPS on the subject of replication set up in response to Nosek et al's Open Science Collaboration endeavours (<http://www.bps.org.uk/news/london-hosts-free-bps-event-discussing-robustnesspsychological-science>), and this despite my claim to some expertise in getting a seat at the table! (Reicher, Haslam & Bleau, 2016). The exclusion of a Social Psychology speaker is regrettable (although permit me to provide this correction: they were all cognitive/biological speakers, along with some policy people, and one PhD student in social psychology, who as it turns out has done an English translation of the Stapel's book *Faking Science: a true story of academic fraud*, available here: <https://errorstatistics.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/fakingscience--20141214.pdf>), the omission allows us to take the moral high-ground perhaps, should I say, in the not yet and perhaps never to become immortal words of Michelle Obama 'when they go low we go high'<sup>3</sup>. Of course, I do not mean this entirely seriously and I am sure Darryl O'Connor meant no deliberate exclusion of social psychology on the platform.

Nevertheless whatever the setbacks we must press on, and I do have one small victory to report in closing this SPR edition's word from the Chair – the new inclusion of two additional elements in the forthcoming QAA revised Psychology Benchmark statements under section 3: Subject knowledge and understanding for Social Psychology – 'self and identity' and 'leadership'. Suffice it to say, this was no mean feat to have these elements judiciously added. Perhaps for the next revision, we will get 'power' in there, for as I myself have tweeted<sup>4</sup> in the context of the Power Debate run jointly between the British Journal of Social Psychology and the SPS blog in the summer of 2016 (see: [www.bps.org.uk/networks-and-communities/member-microsite/social-psychology-section/news/power-social-psychology-social-sections-blog](http://www.bps.org.uk/networks-and-communities/member-microsite/social-psychology-section/news/power-social-psychology-social-sections-blog)), we should consider it 'no mere explanatory concept'.

### **Dr Renée Bleau**

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Social Psychology Section Chair, 2015–2017

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<sup>3</sup> <http://time.com/4421538/democratic-convention-michelle-obama-transcript/>

<sup>4</sup> **reenebleau**

Adding to the debate on #Power and how it should be conceptualised in social psychology #spsblog @socialpsychUK <https://t.co/9QI4IJEIxm>  
19/06/02016 02:55