Obituary: Professor Michael Argyle

Michael Argyle, who died aged 77 on September 6th, was one of the handful of British psychologists to have gained an international reputation. He was a pioneer in the scientific study of social behaviour. His research on interviews and conversations established that nonverbal rather than verbal communication dictate the impressions people make on others. So much is the primacy of “body language” now taken for granted that it is easy to forget that it required Argyle’s research and that of others in the 1960s to demonstrate how it works.

The painstaking examination of the functions and interplay of gaze, gesture, posture, touch, proximity and facial expression was a significant part of the revolutionary growth in our scientific understanding of human communication which was at its zenith in the 1960s and involved disciplines such as philosophy and linguistics as well as psychology. Argyle and his team at the University of Oxford revealed that nonverbal communication is a complex system in which elements can be mutually supportive or antagonistic. The multi-channel nature of everyday human communication leads to potential confusion and ambiguity, but Argyle’s work showed that people can automatically adjust their communication in one channel to compensate if they notice that communication via another channel is being misinterpreted.

Argyle’s work established that people differ in their ability to utilise the various channels of communication successfully. From this insight Argyle invented the idea of social skills, arguing that they are not very different from motor skills such as riding a bicycle. In consequence he believed that these skills could be taught and learnt through demonstration, practice and video feedback. He created a programme of training for those who were shy or suffering from minor mental disorder whose lack of social skills might increase their problems. Members of his research team applied such training to help troubled adolescents control their own anti-social behaviour and violent offenders manage their own anger. One of his doctoral students was appointed by the Royal College of General Practitioners to institute a training programme to improve doctors’ listening and communication skills. The social skills approach is now pervasive in modern life, for example in the training of health care professionals and the police, and in courses for those involved in selection procedures whether as interviewers or interviewees.

By the late 1970s Argyle and his team were moving beyond the study of specific gestures and two-person conversations to study longer and more complex sequences of social behaviour, such as family interaction. They employed the techniques that were being so
successfully applied to the study of animal behaviour and are now familiar to us all through TV wildlife programmes. In the human case, this sometimes involved placing hidden cameras in the homes of volunteers. Argyle was much amused that one of his team from that period became a psychological consultant on Big Brother!

In the last part of his academic career, from the mid-1980s, Argyle embarked on the study of happiness. He felt that psychologists concentrated too much on the causes of unhappiness and depression and he thought that research on happiness was equally necessary. Argyle found that removing the causes of unhappiness did not in itself lead to happiness. What emerged repeatedly from his research was that happiness depends principally on wholehearted involvement in an activity and the possibility of sharing this activity with others. In this work, Argyle anticipated many of the ideas about social capital and trust which are so popular with economists today.

Michael Argyle was born in Nottingham in 1925. He attended Nottingham High School and graduated with First Class Honours in Experimental Psychology from Emmanuel College, Cambridge. In 1952, he became a lecturer in Psychology at the University of Oxford. He worked in the Oxford psychology department for 40 years becoming a Reader in 1969. He was a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford from its foundation in 1966 and was an active member of the college community.

Michael Argyle was an immensely hard-working and productive academic. He authored or edited 44 books, wrote well over 300 articles and supervised over 50 doctoral students. He did as much, if not more, than any other individual in the UK to define the topics of social psychology and to gain the nascent discipline's acceptance in academic departments and among the wider public. He was the founder and Chair of the Social Psychology section of the British Psychological Society. He made social psychology at Oxford a magnet for distinguished researchers from all over the world, and he visited many departments in North America, Europe and Australasia, where he made lasting professional friendships. After his retirement from the University of Oxford, he became an Emeritus Professor at Oxford Brookes University and was active there in continuing his research and supervising graduate students. Recently he was proud to have been invited to Harvard to advocate the value of social psychology for policy makers in government.

Michael Argyle had great generosity of spirit. This was apparent in his concern for his graduate students. By organising social events in the department and in his own home, and demanding participation in seminars and conferences, he created a happy and productive group with a sense of community which was the envy of other DPhil students in the Oxford psychology department. Michael presided over his group in an energetic and avuncular fashion. He was a mischievous and humorous person who loved nothing better than having fun. He adored telling jokes and hearing new ones and would often laugh until he cried. He liked to arrive at parties wearing ludicrously coloured ties, and many will remember his revolving and flashing bow tie. Michael was a devoted father. Despite his dedication to work, Michael always returned home in the late afternoon to have fun playing board games and charades with his children, Miranda, Nicholas, Rosalind and Opheilia. He also passed on to them his love of 20th century art and his abiding interest in the transcendental.

While at Cambridge Michael fell passionately in love with a fellow student, Sonia Kemp, whom he married in 1949. Both were forthright characters, and their frequent dinner parties were marked by lively repartee. Michael declared in the last year of his life that he had never known a day's depression. His was indeed consistently ebullient and energetic, but a good
friend of the couple has commented that without Sonia's understanding he would not have been able to rise above the many frustrations he encountered in his efforts to establish social psychology as a respectable academic discipline. Sonia died in 1999 after a long and difficult period of illness during which he gave her complete support. In 2000, Michael married Gillian Thompson. They were delighted to have found each other and together engaged in Michael's lifelong hobbies such as Scottish dancing and swimming. They also shared a love of contemporary literature and an enthusiastic involvement in church life. They were very happy.

Michael was deeply religious. From his undergraduate days at Emmanuel College, Cambridge onwards he was fascinated by religious and philosophical questions and read widely about many of the world's religions. He was an active member of the Anglican community in Oxford, and also researched the psychology of religion from the 1950s onwards. His faith did not undermine the objectivity of his scientific enquiry into religion. Nor did his scientific analysis of religion undermine his own faith. His religious commitment informed his view of human nature as essentially benevolent and cooperative. He embodied these virtues himself, and tried to live his life as if others embodied them too.

John Michael Argyle, social psychologist.
Born Nottingham 11 August 1925.
Married 1949 Sonia Kemp (died 1999; one son, three daughters), 2000 Gillian Thompson.

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