

Argyle, (John) Michael (1925–2002), *social psychologist*

by Andrew M. Colman

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Argyle, (John) Michael (1925–2002), social psychologist, was born on 11 August 1925 at 2 First Avenue, Sherwood Rise, Nottingham, the only child of George Edgar Argyle, a schoolmaster, and his wife, Phyllis, *née* Hawkins-Ambler, both of whom died when he was eleven years old. He was educated at Nottingham High School for Boys, after which he completed an RAF science course with distinction at Cambridge University in 1943 and served in the RAF (1943–7), training as a navigator in Canada. After the war he read part one in moral sciences at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and graduated in 1950 with first-class honours in experimental psychology. On 24 June 1949, while still an undergraduate, he married Sonia Kemp (1922–1999), a former classics student at Girton College, and daughter of Marshall Dennis Kemp, of Nottingham. They had three daughters, Miranda, Rosalind, and Ophelia, and a son, Nicholas.

After two years of postgraduate study in Cambridge, Argyle was appointed in 1952 as the first ever lecturer in social psychology at Oxford University. He became a fellow of Wolfson College at its foundation in 1966 and a reader in psychology in 1969. A pioneer of social psychology in the United Kingdom and one of its most influential practitioners in Europe, Argyle was joint founder and first social psychology editor (1961–7) of the *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, the earliest academic journal in Britain dedicated partly to social psychology. He also chaired the social psychology section of the British Psychological Society from 1964 to 1967 and again from 1972 to 1974. His research group in Oxford was visited by many of the world's most distinguished social psychologists. He was awarded honorary doctorates by the University of Oxford in 1979 and the universities of Adelaide and Brussels in 1982, a distinguished career contribution award by the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships in 1990, and an honorary fellowship by the British Psychological Society in 1992.

Argyle's publications included 44 books, 170 journal articles, and numerous miscellaneous items. His book *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour*, first published in 1967 and revised for three later editions, was an international best-seller, with sales approaching half a million. His research article 'Eye-contact, distance, and affiliation', co-written with his undergraduate student Janet Dean (later Janet Dean Fodor) and published in *Sociometry* in 1965, became a citation classic. His most influential research focused on non-verbal communication and social skills. By his own account his interest in psychology could be traced back to concern, when he was at school, about a friend whose shyness and deficient social skills caused him difficulties and made him unhappy. Argyle came to the view that social interaction could be interpreted as a set of social skills, and that it may therefore be possible to train those skills as manual skills are trained. This led him to set up a highly successful social skills training programme at the Littlemore Hospital in Oxford during the 1970s for psychiatric patients who could not cope adequately with people or social situations. He also made significant contributions to other areas of research, including the psychology of religion, interpersonal relationships, and psychological aspects of happiness. Over his long

career he supervised more than fifty doctoral research students, many of whom went on to become distinguished psychologists.

Unusually for a social psychologist, Argyle was profoundly religious, and in his later years he played an increasingly active role in Anglican community affairs in Oxford. He was an extrovert and a sublimely happy man who inspired affection in students and colleagues alike. He was a witty and charismatic lecturer and an inspiring conversationalist, entirely lacking in self-importance. He loved social activities and was especially enthusiastic about Scottish country dancing, although to his mild regret he never managed to find convincing evidence of Scottish ancestry in his family tree.

Following his retirement in 1992, Argyle was appointed emeritus professor at Oxford Brookes University. His first wife, Sonia, died in 1999, after a long illness, and on 29 December 2000 he married Gillian Wade Thompson (*b.* 1945/6), an Oxford schoolteacher, and daughter of John Wade Thompson. Towards the end of his life he discovered that he had a slow-growing brain tumour. Despite occasional blackouts he was determined to continue leading a full and active life, but one of his blackouts led to a swimming accident from which he never fully recovered. He died in the Churchill Hospital, Oxford, on 6 September 2002 of pneumonia, empyema, and pneumothorax. He was survived by his second wife, Gillian, and the four children of his first marriage.

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Sources

R. Lamb and M. Sissons Joshi, 'Michael Argyle', *The Psychologist*, 15 (2002), 624–5 · *Daily Telegraph* (12 Sept 2002) · *The Times* (13 Sept 2002) · *The Independent* (30 Sept 2002) · *The Guardian* (3 Oct 2002) · N. Sheehy, A. Chapman, and W. A. Conroy, eds., *Biographical dictionary of psychology* (1997) · P. Robinson, 'In memoriam: Michael Argyle', *Social Psychological Review*, 5 (2003), 3–6 · personal knowledge (2006) · private information (2006) · b. cert. · m. certs. · d. cert.

Likenesses

obituary photographs

Wealth at death

£549,833: probate, 15 May 2003, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*