



## MEDIA

'Media' is the page of the Society's Press Committee. This section of *The Psychologist* aims to promote and discuss psychology in the media. If you would like to comment on a recent newspaper article, TV programme or radio broadcast involving psychology, if you have tips for others based on recent experiences, or if you know of a forthcoming programme or broadcast, please contact the 'Media' page coordinating editor, Harriet Gross (Chair, Press Committee), on H.Gross@lboro.ac.uk.

# Trawling for tasty morsels

I'VE edited *The Psychologist* for several years now and regularly have to trawl the ocean of cuttings the Society's press office receives. But I still have no idea why the press seek psychological input on some stories and not others.

Take psychometrics. Loads of coverage, most of it very dull. Sports psychology: a piece every time a football manager uses the word 'psychology' (including some interesting insights from Northumbria University's Sandy Wolfson in a recent *Independent* piece on football obsession). But then the government announces their vision for public health (see p.4), the airwaves and newspapers are full of comment and analysis, and I don't see a single quote from a psychologist despite the clear implications. Answers on a postcard please. Now let's turn to areas where psychologists *have* been in action.

### Psychologists interrogated

It was good to see two Society members get full authored articles in a *New Scientist* special on interrogation. Ian Robbins (St George's Hospital, London), wrote about the importance of working through the resultant trauma in great detail: 'Left to their own devices, victims normally try to avoid such thoughts, and then they avoid anything that triggers them... before long this avoidance has caused them to shift their whole life.' Gisli Gudjonsson (Institute of Psychiatry) wrote on confessions, pointing out that the erroneous belief that no innocent person will ever confess leads to pressure, deception, persuasion and manipulation.

### Monkeys rarely ape

*The Scotsman* reported a study by Victoria Horner and Andrew Whiten (St Andrews) into imitation in chimps and toddlers. The chimps were shown how to get food out of a box using a stick, and copied the actions. Then the experiment was repeated with a see-through box showing a false ceiling blocking the stick, and the chimps didn't bother. The children, on the other hand, typically copied all the actions, including the irrelevant ones performed on the transparent box. Whiten kindly says that perhaps the children are more tuned to the

JEFF FOOT/NATUREPL.COM

### Eye contact may be important for language acquisition

psychology of the individual and assume that someone repeating an action really intends it, so it's worth copying.

At the Riken Brain Science Institute (see [tinyurl.com/47a2v](http://tinyurl.com/47a2v)), Atsushi Iriki has been investigating imitation and joint attention in monkeys, as the key building blocks for his plan to communicate vocally with them (*The Guardian*). He's excited about mirror neurons, which fire not only when they perform an action but also when they see something else perform the same action. Humans and monkeys both have them, so why are humans natural mimics while monkeys hardly ever imitate? Iriki suspects that 'monkey brains are unaware of the mirror neurons' potential', and that a likely evolutionary trigger for that

realisation in humans was child-rearing practices: namely eye contact. Picking up on their language problems, Giacomo Rizzolatti (University of Parma) speculates that 'perhaps autistic children have the mirror system but cannot use it'.

### Superman not to the rescue

And finally, according to Sarah Grogan in an *Observer* magazine article on men's attitudes towards illness, 'men are trained to be stoical and John Wayne-like'. Maybe a better role model than Superman... according to research by Leif Nelson (New York University) and Michael Norton (MIT) reported in *New Scientist*, students asked to list his characteristics later volunteered less of their time for a community programme than those who were asked to think about superheroes in general. Nelson says that asking people to compare themselves to an exceptional individual makes them realise their shortcomings, whereas thinking about a general category encourages people to identify the strengths they have in common.

I leave you with a tenuous link of super proportions... can I ask all psychologists to think of superheroes in general, in the hope that they will be encouraged to get out there and prove their strengths?

Jon Sutton

## IS IT ALL IN THE MIND?

**A**LL in the Mind, the popular BBC Radio 4 series hosted by Raj Persaud, returned recently to look at topics as diverse as biological clocks, living and working in confined spaces (capsule environments) and problems facing black people with mental health problems.

As a neuropsychologist, my attention was drawn to an interview with Peter Halligan of Cardiff University on the subject of malingering. Listeners learnt that while personal gain and financial compensation represent the key motivators behind malingering, research on the incidence of whiplash neck injuries indicates that the level of complaint is determined not by the incidence of road accidents but by the availability of insurance. While this may not be surprising news, it is clear that psychologists need to develop more sophisticated methods to detect individuals who may not be acting in good faith.

Halligan reported on a recent neuroimaging study that recorded brain activation from individuals assigned to one of two experimental conditions. In the first, participants were instructed to pretend that they had a paralysed limb; in the second, participants were hypnotised into believing that they actually had a paralysed limb. Results showed differing patterns of brain activation in response to these experimental conditions. You can listen again on the Radio 4 website ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)) or read the original study published in 2003 in *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry* 8(4), 295-312.

Stuart Anderson