

Radio — John Morton listens in

ON THE EDGE

IN January the BBC had scheduled a season of programmes on mental health in the UK, 'On the Edge'. I caught both radio and television (with permission of the opposite column).

The most advanced was *All the Rage*, on BBC1. Lots of work with split screen, anonymous experts, victims and perpetrators, all very relaxed. (I noted that the researcher for these programmes was called Mina Panic – but it is pronounced differently.) We had road rage, of course, violence at work and violence modelled by professionals in sport. Anger is as dangerous as nicotine. (One difference is that you can't get secondary smoking effects from the telly, but anger is infectious at a distance.) According to Joe Griffin, director of MindFields College, anger gives a physiological state similar to sexual arousal. Hence its addictive properties. There was emphasis on single cases covered in some depth, not much on cause (though smacking and parental abuse was hinted at) and a bit on anger management.

Single-case treatment was pushed even further in *Black Dog*, also on BBC1. 'Black Dog' was Churchill's name for his own depression, the dark familiar. We followed two 30-year-olds who were given a full biographical treatment. In addition, we heard from their respective therapists, both clinical psychologists. This included snatches from clinical interviews as well as extended summary comments. Most striking were the video diaries, which the two protagonists kept most bravely, often from the depth of their spiritual nights. These sections, especially, nudged my own depressive tendency.

Early in the programme the contribution of biological, psychological and social factors was mentioned but this was never explicitly followed up. Indeed, I felt this programme would be an excellent introductory teaching aid with the student assignment being to pull out what it said about cause.

Radio coverage, mostly on Radio 4, included a lot about stress. *Stressed Out* took us through from hormones to hippocampus to depression and a compromised immune system. It also took us from stress in the womb to being 2 or 3 pounds underweight to an exaggerated reaction to stress later on in life to three times the likelihood of heart attacks or depression.

In a second programme we learnt that stress can be regarded as an infectious disease (though, unlike with anger and depression – see above – I did not catch it) and that it had been 'part of the human condition since caveman days!' There was more on the topic in *Case Notes* where we heard from Gillian Butler from Oxford on how to reduce stress at work. She talked engagingly about 'distant elephants' and 'the salami principle' – beware of faraway things which might be enormous and take things a little at a time.

An exhausting week.

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Churchill called his depression 'Black Dog'

Television — Nick Neave looks on

Mad, bad, and dangerous to know

THE pre-Yuletide telly is not normally noted for its capacity to address important moral or scientific issues. This year, however, a trio of programmes provided a welcome kick in the Xmas puddings to remind us that a real and challenging world does exist out there.

Channel 4 delivered *Psychopath*, a disturbing look at why some people generally make life miserable for the rest of us. The unsettling conclusion was that contrary to popular belief, psychopaths are not just deranged serial killers, but are in fact fairly common (around one in 200 apparently). According to forensic psychologist David Cooke (Glasgow Caledonian University), those not in prison make rather good businessmen, academics and politicians, as they are manipulative, glib, callous, superficial, and are immune from the emotional encumbrances that afflict the rest of us. However, before you try to sign up for a course on developing your psychopathic tendencies to climb the greasy ladder of success, you will be disappointed to hear that such traits appear to be largely innate. Discussing the neuropsychological deficits underlying psychopathy, Adrian Raine (UCLA) and James Blair (UCL) raised interesting moral questions about what could be done in the way of treatment.

BBC2 then delivered *Five Steps to Tyranny*, a truly depressing account of the ease with which everyday folk can be manipulated by authority to produce the harrowing scenes we have witnessed in such places as Rwanda and Kosovo. With telling contributions from Philip Zimbardo (Stanford University) and using examples

drawn from social psychology, the stages in which outgroups, stereotypes, prejudice, and obedience to authority are created were plainly laid out. The disturbing fact was that despite participants stating categorically that they wouldn't be taken in, they all too easily were.

Tyranny of a different form was nicely illustrated in the *Horizon* (BBC2) episode 'The boy who was turned into a girl'. This recounted the sad story of Bruce Reimer, who as a baby had his penis destroyed during a botched circumcision. Following advice from the hugely influential psychologist John Money, the parents agreed to raise the boy as a girl (Brenda). Money subsequently claimed that this 'experiment' was a great success; and for many years, this case was cited as convincing proof of the overpowering role of the environment in creating gender identity, despite contradictory evidence that biological and hormonal processes were of key importance. This case seemed secure until someone actually bothered to trace Bruce/Brenda to find him/her having spent a thoroughly miserable childhood and adolescence, and now living as a man. This sad story illustrated the tyranny that misguided science can hold over the lives of everyday folk. It provides a lesson for us all that we should never fall into the self-tyranny of believing our own pet theory so much that we ignore contradictory evidence.

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