



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.

Avoiding the icy slap of ridicule

I WAS hoping for some nice positive stories to cheer your hearts, but sadly the headline that jumped out at me was 'Psychology courses fail to reform criminals', from *The Times*. The story was the apparent failure of £150 million worth of cognitive skills programmes designed to encourage criminals to think about their victims. In the same paper the headline 'Daft science cashing in on the bleeding obvious' was the damning verdict, introducing the 'Top ten silly studies of the year'. Rather worryingly, half of the sample were psychology-related, and two were taken directly from BPS conferences.

The paper asked why is it that research indicating that alcohol facilitates aggression, that homelessness cuts life expectancy, or that bullies target those who look different, could ever attract funding in the first place? The story highlighted the unease that psychologists are perhaps just a load of educated gossips whiling away their hours coming up with research that simply confirms what we all knew already.

It is fairly apparent that the press have a kind of yin/yang view of psychology and its practitioners. On the one hand, they adore the fact that we essentially deal with people and their amusing little behaviours, and can always be relied upon to pass on some quirky and fascinating nugget of information to enhance their coverage of a particular story. On the other hand, the press like nothing better than pointing out and ridiculing the pompous and self-important, and (as is often the case with scientists from other disciplines) psychologists can be easy targets. *The Sun* for example rarely refers to 'scientists', or

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'experts' but simply describes everyone connected with research as a 'boffin', thereby implicitly labelling them as a rather strange and absent-minded figure, lacking social graces, tinkering away in their shed/ivory tower. If you manage to make it to the top of your field then the paper will grudgingly accord you the accolade of 'top boffin'.

At first I felt myself giggling along at the research studies cited, then I remembered how some of my own research had been dealt with over the years.

Unless you are one of the lucky ones whose research findings are presented clearly and accurately with little 'spin', then most of our research efforts will have been hyped up to the *n*th degree, or reduced to an overly simplistic level. Both have happened to me, and I feel that the poor people cited in the article are undoubtedly thinking along the same lines. What perhaps set out as a challenging and provocative piece of research addressing numerous factors has perhaps been summarised down to such a basic level that any depth and originality has been lost.

Being or becoming media-savvy does none of us any harm. As the media proliferates at an alarming rate, more and more of us will come into its tantalising charm with promises of a quick ego massage, which could all too easily result in the icy slap of ridicule. We should all expect the knock of the media on our doors, and prepare accordingly.

Nick Neave

TIP OF THE MONTH

Think visual – in newspapers a picture really does say a thousand words. If you are trying to encourage the media to cover your research, try to think of opportunities for photographs that are a bit out of the ordinary. A head-and-shoulders portrait won't run in most papers, a picture of a researcher caught in mid-experimental action might.

☐ Next media training day – Monday 24 May 2004. Contact Dawn Schubert for details on dawsch@bps.org.uk or tel: 0116 252 9581.

JANUARY saw the fourth in the BBC TV *Child of Our Time* series, which follows the development of 25 children, looking at all aspects of their progress and experience. The programmes are clearly designed to both entertain and inform, through the use of the presenter, Robert Winston, the children themselves and the topics explored. There is also extensive supporting material on the BBC website which extends these and related topics. What is perhaps remarkable about the series is the close involvement of a number of psychologists with expertise in children's social and cognitive development, as well as in parenting and social skills. Some of them also appear in the programmes demonstrating the research activity on which information presented about the children's progress and outcomes is based. It is gratifying to see my fellow psychologists getting public exposure, but what is it like taking part in these types of programme and how did the experts get involved?

Contacting some of these experts revealed that getting involved was initially via a BBC researcher, though no one was very sure how their names had been chosen. Some suggested word of mouth and others thought that the BPS might have provided names. For many of those participating, the benefit was being able to bring research to a much wider audience. However, not everyone initially contacted will necessarily be involved or receive credit for their input. So if you are approached, make sure you understand what is expected and what influence you might have. If necessary, clarify any financial arrangements too! It's also worth remembering that things that are interesting from a psychologist's point of view may not make good TV and disappointingly end up on the cutting room floor!

On the positive side, there was a feeling that things have changed over time from the programme makers looking for general guidance to a more focused demand on experts to provide demonstrations of their specific research, with a commensurate improvement in the scientific element of the programmes. Less positively though, none has a say over final editing and what actually finally appears on screen. For some of the participating psychologists, conclusions drawn in a programme may make them wince slightly. Watching this week's programme as a parent and a developmental psychologist (though not as a contributor), even I wondered whether I had praised my children enough to maximise their developing self-esteem!

Harriet Gross