



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.

The real deal on alternative medicine

MY head was full of ideas for this month's column. Two colleagues from Leeds had recently invited media attention for markedly different types of work (Mitch Waterman, 'The thinking man's approach to sex', *Yorkshire Post*, 13 January; and Peter Stratton, 'A family affair', *The Guardian*, 31 December). Also, I had been involved in a memory documentary (*Jonathan Edwards Investigates*, Radio 4, 19 January). And, finally, my attention was drawn to the fantastic figures from the BPS Media Centre's report for 2005, such as the impressive figures that the 208 press releases in the year yielded an average 3.57 cuttings per release, and that 1258 paper cuttings were generated from the 3023 calls to the BPS from newspapers interested in all things psychological. Crucially, all these figures show growth over the last three years.

So, full of these ideas, and reflecting on what a broad church psychology is and the variety of its topics, I recently sat down to enjoy the first part of BBC2's new science series, *Alternative Medicine* (www.open2.net/alternativemedicine). This show, which surely should have been called 'Placebo Selecta' if it had been any more accessible, spent an hour examining whether acupuncture works, from a strict science perspective. The other episodes consider faith healing and herbalism. And enjoy it I did, at least at first, with the usual frissons of jealousy and anger I reserve for non-psychologists talking about psychological topics. As usual, we were treated to a colourful barrage of shots of dense crowds of people as our presenter, Professor Kathy Sykes (Chair in the Public Understanding of Science) travelled the world in search of her answer, peering quizzically into shop windows and generally looking lost in thought. From a series of different hotel bedrooms, perched on the bed, she summarised her observations starting with, 'As a scientist...' – a phrase she earnestly intoned like a mantra several times in the show. I imagine the BBC might like this construction because it helpfully explains to the viewer that this slightly over-sincere and wooden presenter is the real deal, and



Pointing the way ahead?

not a journalist. Presenters like this repetitive preface because it is a reminder of their credentials in the face of so much dumbing down.

But this was actually an excellent piece of television, at least for the middle half hour. Kathy neatly and passionately described the need for placebo-controlled studies, and without patronising the viewer, hinted at the whole world of psychological effects, and how healing could be all in the mind. Then she explored different control conditions and their relative merits, and the difficult issue of tricking someone into thinking that they had been treated by needles being poked into their flesh, when actually they hadn't. The second in the series went even further, reviewing excellent work on decaffeinated coffee as a placebo (conducted by Irving Kirsch at the University of Plymouth), and also telling the viewer that in terms of placebo, four fake pills are more powerful than two fake pills.

But the most amazing part of the first show was that it appeared that the BBC, through Kathy, had commissioned a novel piece of research to examine the effects of acupuncture at a neural level, as measured by fMRI. This is where, I felt, in a very specific task – which one could barely describe as acupuncture – the programme lost some of its weight. Kathy, as a scientist, was clearly happier with the robustness of the effects of acupuncture if she could see them 'light up' in the brain, engage in all kinds of speculation about their neural basis, and thus, with neuroimaging, 'prove' the power of acupuncture. To my mind, this totally

detracted from the otherwise psychological angle running through the rest of the show. It was an example of why psychologists should be cautious in referring to heavily constrained experiments run in neuroimaging laboratories, when as a scientist, one should examine the basic phenomena, and the ground rules of some established effect. One can't help thinking that colourful pictures of the brain, and an eclectic scraggle of academics sat debating in a well-furnished lounge, just makes good television – as far as science is concerned.

And after that (on the whole) excellent programme, I never did get to weave a story out of my colleagues' various efforts, and wonder what the general public must think of it all.

Chris Moulin

Press Committee

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Registration form and further details from: Dawn Schubert, The British Psychological Society, St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR
Tel: 0116 252 9581
E-mail: mediatraining@bps.org.uk