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Short articles (around 600 words), news, tips, quotes, cartoons and other contributions of particular relevance to students are most welcome. Send to: Nicola Hills, c/o the Society's Leicester office. E-mail: Nicola_Hills@hotmail.com

Pop tarts or psychology pioneers?

BY HAYWARD GODWIN

It is the moment every psychology student dreads. Imagine yourself, during the summer holidays, working in temporary employment in order to pay for your time at university. You would rather be out with your friends, enjoying your holidays in the sun. To make matters worse, someone has just asked you 'the dreaded question': 'So, what are you studying at university?'

You look at your feet rather sheepishly, like a schoolchild awaiting a punishment. 'Psychology,' you say. The reply tends to be:

1. 'Go on then, analyse me.'
2. 'You'd make tons of money out of all the people round here.'
3. 'Come on – tell me what I am thinking!'

These are quite funny, at first. AT FIRST. After nine months of it, you end up 'laughing' with less than 5 per cent sincerity. At that level of honesty, I think it can officially be called a grimace.

In many ways it is a shame that these stereotyped impressions of the subject exist. But the impressions must come from somewhere – what is the media's role in all this?

I understand that much of the academic community dislikes the way that

psychology is presented in the media. But what do students – the next generation of academics – make of all this?

I have conducted an informal survey on this topic by canvassing the views of my

fellow students at university and through my website (www.psychwire.co.uk).

The general feeling of the students I have spoken to is that they do not mind the way that psychology is presented in the media, and are keen to explore the opportunities that the media can offer. Many watch and enjoy shows such as *Big Brother*, *The Human Mind* ... even *Shattered*.

Others might say that these views reflect a lack of a real understanding of the situation, that 'pop' psychology devalues the subject to triviality, making it suited only to game shows and pub quizzes.

To some extent, both of these views are correct. Perhaps the open-mindedness of the students could be combined with the pragmatism of the experienced academics. There is certainly no way to put a stop to psychology programmes appearing on the television – after all, we have a British Psychological Society, not a British Psychology Censorship Society.

What this all points to is that we need individuals who are eager to get out into

the real world and really 'bring psychology to society'. All that is needed is enthusiasm and a genuinely interesting subject. We need individuals who can present the subject to a large audience, and not only present the material clearly, but present it in such a way that people can't help but engage themselves with it.

I am afraid that I made an omission earlier on in this article – I left out a fourth possible option in the set of responses to telling someone that you study psychology – 'Oh cool, that sounds really interesting.'

It is here that we come to the core of what all the pop psychology has done for the subject. Trivial and anecdotal programmes have struck a chord and sparked an interest. People want to know more, but they don't know where to start.

This is where the Society can step in: it can help to push psychologists to inform, to teach and to entertain. It is only through these measures that the subject's presence in the media can be improved – we need to outshine the trivial and 'pop' psychology with something far more attractive: the truth.

The match has been lit; all we need now is something to burn.

■ *Hayward Godwin is an undergraduate at the University of Southampton.*

What do you think of the way psychology is presented in the media? How can psychology use the media to improve its image and educate the public? Have you already had experience of presenting your own work, and if so how did that go? Send your views to Nicola Hills, associate editor for the Students page, on Nicola_Hills@hotmail.com.

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The Society for Reproductive and Infant Psychology (www.srip.ac.uk) is a multidisciplinary organisation concerned with the psychological, behavioural, medical and social aspects of all areas of reproduction, birth and infancy. If you are working on a dissertation in these areas as part of an undergraduate degree, master's by research, or equivalent level professional training, why not enter their annual competition?

□ *Deadline for entries is 2 July. For more details about what is required, contact Dr Kenneth Gannon on k.n.gannon@uel.ac.uk.*

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