

Radio – John Morton listens in

A SANDWICH SHORT OF A PICNIC?

PREDICTABLE reactions when the news broke that girls were now getting better A-level results than boys. A *Spectator* columnist whinged forth on the *Today* programme that it all has to do with increases in the amount of coursework favouring girls because boys like to save everything up for the end. Funny that. I remember girls used to get better university results for the same reason; except for firsts, which boys were better at because they were more creative. Now that girls are getting more firsts as well I'm not sure what the excuse is.

Memories Are Made of This was a mid-morning, three-part series made for a general Radio 4 audience. There was a comprehensive, largely British, gang of memory psychologists doing their stuff. And the interviewer was really trying to understand, so there was no dumbing down.

Pillories of the State, Radio 4 on Sundays, was on 'the therapy industry'. It featured a (not very funny) Scottish stand-up comedian who, if I understood him correctly, had been thinking about going into therapy but hadn't, a couple of assorted therapists, and Raj Persaud. There was a lot of confusion about the nature of therapy and how it differed from pills. No one mentioned cognition, thoughts or even the mind, but we had attempts to give more specific objectives like 'coming to terms with oneself'. Persaud did not help particularly and the presenter, Phil Hammond, sounded badly briefed. The therapists fought their own corners reasonably well but didn't know enough about the topic as a



Getting less sniffy about Raj Persaud

whole. Given that the programme was put out at 7.15 on a Sunday evening it was an inexcusably wasted opportunity. For example, the presenter claimed that mental health professionals could have sex with their clients without being punished. And no one was able to cast the lie into his face.

And so to the latest series of *All in the Mind*. I was very sniffy about presenter Raj Persaud back in November but I am delighted to say that he has settled in. He sounds in control of his material and carries on conversations, rather than asking someone else's questions. There was some dissatisfaction with conventional psychiatry and coverage of a wide variety of alternative therapies. Persaud was very good on the need for evaluation and the role of control groups. Each programme contained a section on some part of the brain – with particularly irritating space-age music in the background. Distracting, because the material was good enough. Highlight was the frontal lobe patient who, asked to make a cheese sandwich, put the lump of cheese straight into the sandwich box. This seems like a good metaphor for some psychologists in the media.

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Television – Nick Neave looks on

Makeo ver, anyone?

I'M sure you intellectual folk out there don't demean yourselves by watching makeover programmes. For the blissfully ignorant among you, they are the ones where some cheery folk arrive at your home/garden when you are down the shops, and turn your shabby pad into a nightmare of purple paint, water features, and MDF fittings. After watching some of the psychological fodder on offer, I began to feel a makeover *déjà vu*, as their focus was all about self-help and self-improvement: *Changing Rooms* for the mind if you like.

Channel 4's *Living by the Book* showed various groups trying to follow advice given in several very popular self-help texts. This was quite a good idea, and the programmes were very entertaining, not least because the advice they portrayed seemed highly sensible in print, and yet was invariably flawed when put into practice. In a very similar vein BBC2 provided *Confidence Lab*, in which a host of nervy folk underwent a week of intensive confidence-boosting techniques for mastering their particular hangups, generally with good results.

A makeover of a different sort seems to have happened to the normally reliable *Horizon* (BBC2). Once upon a time this programme could be fairly well guaranteed to provide a thought-provoking, and balanced scientific viewpoint on a particular issue. This current series sadly appears to be trying to emulate its cheaper and tacky cousins over on the satellite channels by embracing controversy and sensationalism.

Two editions trod this

uneasy path – the first dealt with a former stuntman whose use of Ecstasy appeared to alleviate the unpleasant side-effects of medication for Parkinson's disease. The outcomes were indeed impressive, and the clinical implications may be significant; but several times in the programme statements were made that were downright misleading – presumably to dramatise and sensationalise.

Horizon gave a similar one-sided view in 'Taming the problem child', featuring the highly controversial techniques of neuropsychologist Ron Federici. Occasional temper tantrums are experienced by every parent, and very distressing they are too; but what can you do if they occur unremittingly? Federici's harsh solution is to punish and sanction the child until their identity is broken down completely, and is then 'rebuilt' with the parents as strong role models. Two illustrative case studies were presented in which the clearly unhappy parents tried out the various 'techniques'. I personally found the sight of grown men forcing small children on to the floor and sitting on them until they 'calmed down' deeply unnerving. Did it work? Well, no and yes; on home ground with the threat of a parent forcing your nose into the shagpile the moment you disobey seemed to do the trick, but once released back into the world the children fell back into their old ways.

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