



'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.

# Gritted teeth at rictus election

**E**LECTIONS are usually a great opportunity for psychologists – they can conduct research into all sorts of interesting topics, like the impact of boredom on ability to place a cross accurately on a chosen target, or the least noticeable difference between candidates and cognitive vigilance. This year provided particularly rich pickings, including the effect of sleep deprivation in new parents on cognitive functioning (Charles Kennedy), fake tanning and impression management (Blair, Kilroy-Silk) and motivated forgetting (Howard). Despite this, as one commentator noted on Radio 4 (and repeated by Ian Hislop on election night on BBC1), this time round the electorate were much more interesting than the politicians.

In an attempt to prove that psychologists could be just as interesting, Steve Reicher (St Andrews), Peter Bull (York) and Simon Meyerson (Hampstead) took part in a well-publicised news conference on the psychology of voting. Steve Reicher discussed the 'threat discourse' used throughout the campaign (BBC News Online, Reuters, PA), and the framing of a 'comparative context' by politicians – ensuring that voters judge you against the competition, not against perfection (or anything close to it). Reicher's phrase – that this was the 'gritted teeth' election, perhaps explains the large number of references to Blair's 'rictus smile' during the election and immediate aftermath (*The Times*, *Mirror*, *Guardian* and *Daily Mail* all noted this).

Peter Bull, at the event sponsored by

the British Psychological Society at the Dana Centre in London on 3 May argued that the negative campaigning may well 'depress the vote' (and voters?) leading to a low turnout. Bull also argued that people's attitudes don't predict their voting

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behaviour very well – rather, it's an 'instinctive reaction to the tone of politicians' campaigns' (BBC News Online). Simon Meyerson is also widely reported as arguing that voting for an untrustworthy leader would be 'akin to a self-wounding act to the emotional fabric of the nation'.

BBC News Online also wondered what had happened to all the posters that used to be displayed in windows and gardens. While in years past, streets used to be decked with political posters, this time round, they have been noticeably absent. The journalist decided to count the number on his bus ride into work (OK, so it was probably a quiet news day). Helen Haste (University of Bath) explained that, 'maybe this time around there is not that much national excitement', while Simon Meyerson noted that potential poster hosters, 'may fear public shame – or even the prospect of a brick being thrown through their window'.

Sticking to counting, the claim of the Labour party that '1 in 10' Labour voters staying at home would 'let the Tories in' came in for some statistical critical analysis. *The Times* pointed out that (according to their analysis), the figure should be closer to 1 in 4. This discrepancy is interesting because, at some point, there must have been a discussion at Labour HQ about what proportion is needed to make someone feel responsible enough to vote (or, that their vote counted).

*Metro* newspaper in Manchester also wondered why politicians are seen as attractive – the tone of the article seemed to be 'they're not lookers, but they still pull'. According to Lisa Matthewman (Westminster), it might be because of their skills in the use of verbal and body language. She also proposes that they may well simply smell good: 'Put simply, ugly men can be very attractive because they have a good smell.' Not sure how Blair's well-publicised excessive sweating fits this explanation.

Early May saw the climax of the competition between another bunch of preening, self-congratulatory over-achievers. Over the previous few weeks, I had been glued to my TV screen as, one by one, those who failed to make the grade were unceremoniously fired by Sir Alan Sugar. For me, as a psychologist, *The Apprentice* (BBC 2) made compulsive viewing. As an insight into the psychology of leadership, certain episodes were invaluable. Earlier in the season, one of the would-be apprentices rode rough-shod over her team with her single-minded belief that semaphore for kids would be a sure-fire success. Despite the contrary evidence of focus groups, toy designers and the rest of her team, she overcame all with her vision of children in the playground holding small signs to communicate messages. The idea sucked, she was booted off, yet she still blamed everyone else but herself. Never mind groupthink, this was no-think.

On the eve of the UK general election, the final pitted nice guy – and psychology graduate – Tim against the incredibly noisy Saira, who you get the impression could sell anything to anyone, perhaps even Amstrad video phones. Their final task – organising a boat 'do' in three days – was typically excruciating. Tim organised a fashion show which seemed to include a large number of PVC corsets – described defensively by the designer as 'not pervy'. Saira blagged some free wine, and then promptly gave it away in a wine tasting (even though her profits relied on bar sales). Tim won, and for a year can learn from the Robert Winston of the business world.

Adam Joinson

## TIP OF THE MONTH

Always try to respond to journalists' enquiries quickly. Many journalists will be facing strict deadlines, so will appreciate a speedy response, even if it is a return call simply to say you cannot help them.

■ Next media training days – Broadcast Interview Skills (27 August), Introduction to Working with the Media (26 September). Contact Dawn Schubert for details on [mediatraining@bps.org.uk](mailto:mediatraining@bps.org.uk) or tel: 0116 252 9581.