

Raising the profile

Gail Kinman on media coverage from the Society's Annual Conference in Glasgow, 4-6 May

The Society's Annual Conference never fails to attract attention from the media, reflecting the public demand for accessible stories that provide insight into what people do, why they do it and how they are affected by the world around them. This year's conference was no exception. The BPS PR team, supported by members of the Media and Press Committee, press-released 19 papers and posters, and a further 11 were identified as being potentially 'media friendly'.

Press releases were distributed to newspapers, magazines and periodicals, radio and TV stations and news websites. Specialist journalists from *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *New Scientist* and BBC Scotland were also in attendance. The high-quality coverage generated across all types of news media indicates that research presented at this year's conference will reach a very diverse audience, and not only in the UK – some stories were covered by overseas newspapers and websites, including the USA, Australia, Ghana, China and Korea.

From a media perspective, one of the most popular stories from the conference related to the impact of 'quarter-life' crises. Oliver Robinson from the University of Greenwich interviewed 50 young people aged between 25 and 35 about their experience of relationship and career crises. Findings revealed that, although quarter-life crises typically result in emotional upheaval, panic and self-doubt, once resolved the outcome can be positive. These crises are believed to be increasing due to greater parental pressure to succeed, unrealistic expectations on

the part of young people, and too many alternative life choices. This story had broad appeal and was covered widely in newspapers and periodicals ranging from *The Guardian* and *New Scientist* to *Marie-Claire* and *Cosmopolitan*, as well as national and international news websites. The concept of quarter-life crisis was also discussed in the *News Quiz* on BBC Radio 4 by Sandi Toksvig and guests.

Experimental research conducted by Andy Johnson and Kam Mistry (Coventry University) found that jokes seem funnier when we think they were delivered by a well-known comedian (such as Ricky Gervais) than non-comedian 'celebrities' (such as Peter Andre).



No smoking signs backfire?

The research was apparently inspired by a disgruntled friend of Johnson's who complained that people would laugh more at his jokes if they heard them on TV. The quirky but rigorous nature of this research led to particularly wide coverage in national and international press and global websites.

The impact of violent computer games on levels of aggression has been fiercely debated by psychologists and in the media. Unsurprisingly, Simon Goodson and Sarah Pearson (University of Huddersfield) attracted considerable media coverage for their findings that the effects of playing violent video games are exaggerated, and playing football video games induces stronger emotional and physical effects than violent shoot 'em ups. Brian Earp's (Oxford University) finding that 'No Smoking' signs actually encourage people to light up was also a popular focus of interest. A study by Richard Stephens and Claudia Umland

(Keele University) that found that swearing relieves pain only for people who swear infrequently was also covered extensively, with the *Daily Mail* illustrating their article with a photo of 'potty mouthed' celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay.

Several national newspapers covered a study by Carolyn Choudhary and colleagues (Queen Margaret University) on handedness and the fear response. The researchers found that left-handed people who watched a short clip from a scary movie reported more symptoms associated with PTSD than their right-handed counterparts. Coverage of these findings on-line inspired several pages of readers' comments. Headlines such as 'Fear affects lefties more than righties' sparked a lively debate (especially amongst left-handed readers).

Some academics are reluctant to engage with the media as they worry that their research findings will be trivialised or misrepresented. A few articles tended to dismiss research presented at the conference as 'psychologists-stating-the-bleeding-obvious', but the vast majority of the coverage highlighted the importance of findings and their relevance to real-world issues. Similarly, journalists typically described research findings clearly and accurately, closely reflecting the content of press releases – in some cases, backed up by interviews with researchers. A notable exception related to coverage of Goodson and Pearson's study of the impact of video games mentioned above; several postings in news and gaming websites complained that the findings had been taken out of context or deliberately twisted; some readers suggested that people should read the research report to get a more balanced perspective. Indeed, comparing headlines published in a national daily newspaper ('Playing football games on computers makes you more aggressive'), with those in a regional newspaper and a computing website ('Effects of violent play overstated' and 'Report finds no link between video game violence and real-world aggression' respectively) made me question whether they were describing the same study.

The Society's PR Team, the Press and Media Committee and psychologists presenting their research at the conference worked together to disseminate research as widely as possible and to raise the profile of our discipline. At the time of writing this column, we are still receiving details of news coverage in specialist press, magazines and periodicals, and websites from the UK and worldwide.

contribute

The Media page is coordinated by the Society's Media and Press Committee, with the aim of

promoting and discussing psychology in the media. If you would like to contribute, please contact the 'Media'

page coordinating editor, Fiona Jones (Chair, Media and Press Committee), on f.a.jones@beds.ac.uk