



'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.

Blame and responsibility in Abu Ghraib

THE spotlight of psychological scrutiny has been turned recently on the whys and wherefores of the appalling abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison by members of the US military. Have we come up with the goods?

In a compelling piece on the BBC website, Alex Haslam (Exeter University) and Stephen Reicher, (St Andrews University) discussed 'Why not everyone is a torturer'. They argued that what is needed is a 'psychological analysis that addresses the values and beliefs that we, our institutions and leaders promote', which 'create the conditions in which would-be torturers feel either emboldened or unable to act'. As social psychologists and instigators of the BBC prison experiment in 2002, Reicher and Haslam have been studying social influence processes in such environments. They are keen, however, not to absolve those who perpetrate abuse from responsibility for their acts by blaming aspects of the social context. But at what point in the psychological analysis of causes does individual responsibility predominate over social responsibility for abusive acts, and vice versa? As psychologists, with our aptitude for perceiving complexities, we struggle with this question, unable unconsciously to apportion causality to either.

Haslam and Reicher have taken inspiration for their work from Philip

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Zimbardo and his 1971 Stanford Prison experiment. However, they have positioned their study as producing different conclusions from that of Zimbardo, suggesting that 'people in positions of unaccountable power' do not 'naturally resort to violence'. In essence though, their work tells a very similar story: if ordinary people are placed in extraordinary situations, and are allowed, implicitly or otherwise, to think that various values and behaviours are acceptable, then often those people will behave in extraordinary ways – ways they would not have imagined of themselves, and ways that can be highly antisocial, even amoral. But Zimbardo, like Haslam and Reicher, believes that the wider social context is as contributory as the processes within the immediate social situation of a prison environment. Writing in *The Boston Globe* he said that 'we must not permit the authorities to deflect blame and responsibility from themselves by pointing fingers at those soldiers who went into the administration's preemptive war as proud Americans and return now as disgraced prison guards'.

Zimbardo and Haslam and Reicher are in accord, in that their work suggests that neither society nor the individual can be absolved of blame and responsibility. The chilling events at Abu Ghraib remind us that empirical work examining the

dynamics of simulated prison environments is as relevant now as it ever was. It is entirely appropriate then, that psychologists should be finding their voices within the media to comment upon and enhance the analysis of these dehumanising and degrading forms of behaviour.

The ontogeny of a psychologist

Another UK psychologist in the media spotlight recently has been Geoff Beattie (University of Manchester) who was featured in the colour supplement of *The Times* in May. The article was an extract from his latest book, *Protestant Boy* (Granta Books), a personal memoir about growing up in Ligoniel, a Protestant enclave in north Belfast. The extract illustrated Beattie's ability for reflection and candid disclosure, the writing being accessible and absorbing – an extract that made one want to read the rest of the book from which it came. The piece successfully treads the fine line between honouring the past and getting bogged down in it. Beattie conveys a clear sense that he knows how to integrate his origins adaptively into his present and future – recommended reading, then, for anyone interested in the development of social identity, personal transitions, family dynamics and autobiographical memory.

Mark R. McDermott

TIP OF THE MONTH

Do not underestimate your own contribution to your chosen field of psychology. While there are leading figures in all areas, if you know your subject then help communicate it to the public via the media. But remember that consideration for colleagues' work and a certain amount of humility is always needed!

■ Next media training day – Monday 27 September 2004. Contact Dawn Schubert for details on dawsch@bps.org.uk or tel: 0116 252 9581.