



## MEDIA

'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.

# Autistic licence to thrill

**I** DOUBT if there is any other single psychological topic which gets the media attention that autism does. Long may it continue: most of what I have seen is excellent, and recently there have been three more examples.

Channel 5's *The Boy with the Amazing Brain* seemed to avoid the sensationalism often found in these 'boy with'/'woman who' programmes as it followed Daniel Tammet (see [tinyurl.com/5pgfw](http://tinyurl.com/5pgfw)) on a journey of discovery, for him and the scientists. There is some doubt over whether or not he's autistic, and there seems to be a fair amount of scepticism online about whether he's even a savant as opposed to a self-publicist with an extremely good memory. Recalling pi to 22,514 decimal places is pretty impressive

PHIL FISK/CHANNEL 4

whichever way you look at it, although perhaps not much use. More interesting were his explanations, rare in this field, for how he does it. It seemed to be down to visualising numbers as shapes, and seeing the shape between them. It was fascinating to watch the neuroscientist Ramachandran

assessing him and trying to catch him out. It must be hard enough to research in an area like that without having doubts about whether the person is genuine; but real or not he certainly was a boy (well, a 26-year-old man) with an amazing brain.

Next up was famous autistic livestock scientist Temple Grandin, in an article by Dan Glaister in *The Guardian* ([tinyurl.com/8p23z](http://tinyurl.com/8p23z)) and an accompanying article by the woman herself ([tinyurl.com/bqcx7](http://tinyurl.com/bqcx7)). She described how her ability to think in pictures rather than language had (in the words of the article) 'led fearful, struggling animals to change their nature in an instant and wander contentedly to their deaths'. She suggested other jobs where autistic people would be better than non-autistic, citing a factory in Maryland where they are employed to spot flaws in T-shirts.

The children in Channel 4's *Make Me Normal* hadn't yet entered the world of work, and until the mood lifted a little in the last couple of minutes their prospects looked pretty bleak. I'm not sure I've ever seen such a powerful bit of film-making, particularly the scene when Moneer, a 12-year-old with Asperger's, locked himself in a box as it was only then that he felt he could express his pain over his mother's death. To see each child struggle to understand what autism is and what the 'normal' world is, and to see how carefully the teachers had to choose their words and actions in the light of the autistic tendency towards literalism...each individual story was gripping stuff.

There was no expert comment in *Make Me Normal*, but to be honest I didn't feel there was room for it (although the Channel 4 website included material to back up the personal stories). A point for discussion perhaps: Are psychologists in the media always necessary or desirable?

Jon Sutton

**J**ULY is possibly the only month when football will not dominate the sports bulletins and the back pages of our newspapers. Yet ever keen to buck the trend this column will begin by reflecting on Liverpool's recent triumph in the Champions League Final.

It seems that Liverpool's comeback from three goals down to win on penalties may have had much to do with the colour of their shirts (*The Times*). Dr Russell Hill and Dr Robert Barton (University of Durham) looked at Euro 2004, and four events held at the Olympics where competitors were randomly assigned either blue or red outfits (boxing, taekwondo, Greco-Roman wrestling and freestyle wrestling). In the Olympics the competitor wearing red won 55 per cent of all competitions, and this rose to 60 per cent in competitions that were deemed to be evenly matched. In Euro 2004 football teams for whom red was the colour of at least one of their strips performed better when they wore red compared to their other colour. Yes, Greece may have won eventually, and yes, Brazil do all right for themselves in yellow, but as Dr Hill was heard patiently explaining to one interviewer, comments like that are why he's the scientist and they are not.

The reasons for the effect are unclear, although according to Dr Hill a red face is associated with anger and aggression; a red outfit may intimidate an opponent while the wearer may get a surge of testosterone as they pull on a red shirt. As a Welsh rugby fan I hope this effect is constant, although (last season's heroics aside) it does make the disappointing performances of the past 20 years or so even harder to take when Wales lost despite having the advantage of a red shirt.

Of course, it is not always possible to win every competition, and after losing beaten competitors often praise their conquerors. According to researchers at the University of Ohio, praising your opponent after you have lost is a mechanism to help maintain or even boost self-esteem (*Glasgow Herald*). The logic is that being beaten by someone who we perceive is very good makes us in turn good by comparison. This effect is not only confined to sport but can also be seen in any area of life where we might be outperformed by someone else, such as exams and job interviews.

At least praising an opponent is a lot better than other options we can take. Dr David Buss (University of Texas) gathered a great deal of media attention with his assertion that killing is fundamental to human nature. The most fascinating and frightening part of Dr Buss's research was a study with over 5000 people (375 who were actual murderers) out of which 91 per cent of men and 84 per cent of women admitted having had at least one fantasy of committing murder. In general men indicated a willingness to kill when their status or reputation was threatened, and they also expressed a willingness to kill if their mating prospects became dire, whereas women did not. Thank goodness for social convention which, most of the time, keeps these urges in check.

Marc Jones

## MEDIA TRAINING

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.