

Psychology of scams

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) published a report in May on the psychology of scams, compiled by psychologists at the University of Exeter. Professor Stephen Lea, Dr Peter Fischer and Dr Kath Evans conducted interviews with scam victims and near-victims; mined the text of real-life scams; and performed a simulated scam of their own.

Their investigations threw up a number of counter-intuitive findings. For example, scam victims often had more background experience than non-victims in the financial domains exploited by scammers, such as lotteries or investments. Moreover, victims tended to spend more time considering a would-be scam, not less, as you might expect. Non-victims, by contrast, often deleted or disposed of scam material without even looking at it. Another finding was that victims often concealed their involvement in a suspected scam, for fear of being reprimanded by friends or family. Lea's team said it was almost as if their rational selves realised the danger but decided to proceed anyway.

The report makes a number of recommendations for helping prevent people fall victim to scams. For example, it might help to educate people to consider what they have to lose, rather than focusing on what they have to gain, from a suspected scam. Based on the finding that many victims appear to

harbour suspicions, it might also help to advise people to trust their gut instinct when they sense something isn't right.

The University of Exeter psychologists won the contract to produce the report after the OFT put the



project out to tender. 'It's different from other academic research in the sense that someone has given you a problem, but it's not as different as you might think,' Lea told *The Psychologist*. 'And in some ways the differences are very positive – the

OFT were good to work with, they have very sharp staff, ideas of their own, and above all they have a lot of resource. For example, part of our research depended on a corpus of scam materials, which they'd collected over the years, which would have cost us enormous effort to acquire. They also put us in touch with people who had been victims of scams, so there are huge advantages to working with a body like that.'

Lea said he would recommend that other psychologists get involved in similar collaborations with government organisations. 'I believe it's very important that we do get involved in this kind of work. It's a sure thing that psychological explanations will be advanced with this sort of phenomenon, much better that they come from qualified psychologists,' he said.

'It was a very interesting challenge,' he added. 'We found ourselves applying theories that we had thought about in quite different contexts to a different and challenging and socially important problem.'

'The one thing you have to watch with government bodies is that they often work to different time scales [from university-based psychologists] but it's not difficult to work things out,' Lea said.

According to the OFT, 3.2 million adults in the UK (around 1 in 15 people) collectively lose around £3.5 billion to mass marketed scams each year. **CJ**

I The new report *The Psychology of Scams: Provoking and Committing Errors of Judgement*, is available free online: tinyurl.com/lqfqqq

ESRC doctoral funding

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is to change the way that it funds postgraduate training. Instead of funding individual departments and courses, the ESRC plans to create a network of around 25 Doctoral Training Centres, each to be hosted in one or more

institutions, and Doctoral Training Units, which will be greater in number and more specialised. Each Doctoral Centre will receive a guaranteed annual quota of between five and 40 studentships for a five-year period. A peer-reviewed competition is to be launched

this month, in which institutions will be able to submit proposals to create Doctoral Centres and Units. The results are expected to be announced in late summer 2010, allowing institutions to begin recruitment of students to start their studies in October 2011. Julie McLaren,

ESRC's Head of Postgraduate training, said it was hoped the new framework 'will lead to greater opportunities for institutions to develop innovative approaches and purposeful interdisciplinary training required to address increasingly complex research questions'. **CJ**

Recognising talent

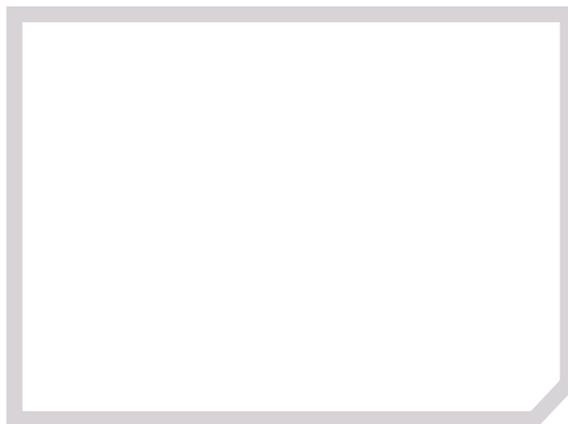
Psychologists have identified four people who appear to be extraordinarily gifted at recognising faces – a group they've dubbed 'super-recognisers' (*Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*: tinyurl.com/lqklax).

Richard Russell at Harvard University and colleagues said the discovery came about following their studies of developmental prosopagnosia, or 'face-blindness'. The face-blindness research was widely reported in the media and prompted several people to come forward claiming to have extraordinary prowess at recognising faces. 'I've learned to stop surprising people with bizarre comments like "Hey, weren't you at that so-an-so concert last fall... I recognise you",' one person recalled.

Russell's team put four such people – C.S., C.L., J.J. and M.R. – through a series of challenging memory tests, including requiring them to identify the faces of celebrities before they were famous, and to identify previously presented faces when shown later from a novel angle, or under impoverished viewing conditions. The four 'super-

recognisers' significantly outperformed 25 age-matched control participants.

A second experiment, which required participants to match an array of digitally



morphed faces to a target face according to degree of similarity, confirmed that the super-recognisers also had enhanced facial perception skills relative to 26 new controls and 26 participants with

developmental prosopagnosia.

On tests of facial memory and perception, the super-recognisers were superior to controls by about two standard deviations, which is similar to the amount by which developmental prosopagnosics are inferior to controls. Russell's team said this suggests facial memory and perceptual skills are distributed more widely than previously thought, and that both prosopagnosics and super-recognisers are quantitatively, not qualitatively, different from controls.

The researchers also said their discovery of super-recognisers had important implications for the real world.

'Various social institutions are premised upon the false assumption that all people have similar face recognition ability,' they said, pointing to the security professions and eyewitness accuracy as two possible areas where face recognition could be usefully assessed. **CJ**

Schizophrenia and violence

Two new studies have cast fresh illumination on the nature of the association between schizophrenia and violence. From a wide-ranging literature search, Matthew Large and colleagues in Sydney identified 18 studies involving over 16,000 murders. They found that regions with a high rate of homicides by people suffering from schizophrenia also tended to have a higher total homicide rate (*Schizophrenia Research*: tinyurl.com/mas3hz). This contradicts the widely held view that rates of homicide by those with schizophrenia are somehow fixed, reflecting an aspect of the illness itself, and highlights instead the role played by social and other extraneous factors.

The Psychologist put it to Dr Large that his new study contradicts work he published last year showing that rates of murder in the UK by people with mental illness have fallen steadily since 1979, even while overall homicide rates have risen (see News, August 2008; tinyurl.com/lcl9n6). 'Interesting question and on the face of it they do contradict. I believe that the natural tendency is for normal and abnormal to be correlated – however it seems likely that community treatment can intervene and dissociate the two rates. The rate of abnormal homicide in the UK is now lower than it has been, and lower than might be predicted from the total homicide rate.'

Large's team said: 'Our findings suggest that measures to prevent homicide by those diagnosed with schizophrenia should include not only an attempt to provide optimal treatment to reduce the effects of symptoms, but also attention to those factors known to be associated with higher rates of *all* homicides, such as social deprivation, access to weapons, and substance misuse.'

Indeed, a new study from psychologist Martin Grann (Stockholm University) and colleagues examined Swedish crime registers and found that rates of violent crime by people with schizophrenia were higher than among the general population, but that this difference disappeared

when the comparison was restricted to people with schizophrenia who didn't also have a substance misuse problem (*JAMA*: tinyurl.com/lhxgko). 'Hence the idea that people with schizophrenia are generally more violent than those without is not true,' said lead author Niklas Långström.

Misunderstandings about the link between violence and mental illness encourage stigma and can deter people with mental illness from engaging with services (to download a related BPS leaflet, see tinyurl.com/l44xnl). **CJ**

For the latest on statutory regulation, see www.bps.org.uk/statreg

HPC heeds advice on entry levels

The Health Professions Council (HPC) has announced that it is maintaining the entry-level qualifications for psychologists to be admitted to the statutory register of practitioner psychologists.

The HPC had suggested that psychologists would be able to join the register with master's-level qualifications, but the British Psychological Society had strongly advised that the entry level needed to be the same as the Society's current 'doctorate level'. Sue Gardner, President of the British Psychological Society, said: 'We are delighted that the HPC listened to our advice about

education entry levels. We are the existing voluntary regulator and have been since the late 1980s. We are the experts in knowing what level of education and training is required before a psychologist is deemed safe to practise independently, and this level has been agreed with the largest public sector employers – the health and education services.'

The HPC's decision on the entry-level threshold recognises promises made by the government to the Society that standards would not drop as a result of the transition from voluntary to statutory regulation. However, Sue Gardner added

that 'it is disappointing that the HPC chose not to explicitly mention the Doctorate routes in forensic and health psychology. It is also disappointing that our advice to protect the title "psychologist" was not taken on board, as this would have been comprehensive and less confusing for the public.'

The Society and the HPC are working together to ensure the smooth transfer of chartered psychologists to the HPC register on 1 July. All those eligible individuals should receive letters from both the HPC and the Society shortly after that date.

FROM THE RESEARCH DIGEST...

Use your imagination to beat racism

Prejudice and animosity between groups derives largely from the idea that 'they' are somehow different from 'us'. Hundreds of studies have shown that this animosity can dissolve when members of different groups make contact with each other – becoming friends, colleagues and neighbours. Unfortunately, contact between members of different groups isn't always possible. Just think of the segregation in parts of Northern Ireland and the Middle East.

Promisingly, however, research has shown that so-called 'extended contact' can also help break down prejudices – that is, simply having a friend who is friends with a member of the outgroup can improve a person's attitudes towards that group. Now an exciting new study has taken this line of research even further, showing that merely imagining positive contact with members of an outgroup can help improve attitudes towards that group.

In an initial experiment, Society award winners Rhiannon Turner and Richard Crisp had half of 25 students aged between 18 and 23 spend two minutes imagining a positive encounter with an elderly person, whilst the remaining students imagined an outdoor scene. These were the specific instructions for the imagined contact group: 'Imagine yourself meeting an elderly stranger for the first time. Imagine that during the encounter, you find out some interesting and unexpected things about the person.'

Afterwards, the students who'd imagined meeting an elderly person subsequently showed more positive attitudes towards elderly people than did the control group. This was true whether their attitudes were tapped using an explicit questionnaire, or using a test of implicit, subconsciously held, attitudes – the IAT. Briefly, this measures how easily people associate pairs of categories, such as old people and negative words, or young people and positive words, by allocating the categories to the same or different response keys.

Having friends who have friends from groups you don't have contact with, can break down prejudice

A second experiment replicated this finding but in the context of non-Muslim participants' attitudes towards Muslims. In this case, the control condition required the participants to merely 'think about Muslims' in contrast to the intervention which required participants to imagine a positive encounter with a Muslim person. Again, the participants who imagined a positive encounter subsequently showed more positive attitudes, explicit and implicit, compared with the control group. This shows that it is specifically imagining a positive encounter with an outgroup member that is beneficial, not just thinking generally about that outgroup.

Writing in the *British Journal of Social Psychology* (see tinyurl.com/lkfhj6), the researchers said: 'Given that direct intergroup contact is a highly effective means of reducing prejudice, these findings suggest that imagined contact is an exciting alternative to direct contact that can be used in contexts where face-to-face contact is not possible'.

DUNCAN PHILLIPS/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

This item originally appeared in the Society's free Research Digest. For more and to sign up, see www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog
Digest on Facebook: <http://tinyurl.com/digestonfacebook>; Digest on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/researchdigest>

Bullying and psychosis link

A new study claims that being bullied can increase a child's risk of developing psychotic symptoms (see *Archives of General Psychiatry*: tinyurl.com/mx9zkt). Previous research had already suggested there might be a link between bullying and later psychosis, but these studies had severe limitations, including being cross-sectional or retrospective in design. The current study, by contrast, was prospective and longitudinal.

Psychologist Dieter Wolke at the University of Warwick and his colleagues, including lead author Andrea Schreier, drew on interviews conducted with over 6000 children when they were aged 8, 10 and 12. Unlike previous studies, teacher and parent reports of bullying were also gathered. It emerged that children who were bullied more at ages 8 and/or 10 were between two and four times more likely to report experiencing psychotic symptoms at the age of 12. There was a dose-response relationship, so that children who experienced more severe or chronic bullying were at greater risk of developing later psychotic symptoms. The type of bullying – whether overt or more subtle and emotional – seemed less important as a predictive factor.

Is it possible that the cause lies not with bullying, but with the fact that children at risk of developing psychotic symptoms are somehow different from their peers and therefore more likely to be targeted by bullies? 'Reverse causality is always a possibility but we do not believe this is the explanation,' Wolke told *The Psychologist*. Wolke pointed to the fact that the association between bullying and later psychotic symptoms was largely unaffected even

after taking the children's baseline mental health and family adversity into account.

However, Wolke cautioned that previous research had shown that bullying victims tend to be different from non-victims, for example having fewer friends and being less



popular. An ideal study would measure early evidence of psychotic-like symptoms, prior to measures of bullying. This is tricky, though, as Wolke explained: 'For example, it is part of children's normal developmental experiences to believe in Santa Claus or fairies but these are not hallucinations or delusions but developmentally appropriate.'

In their report of the research, the researchers said there were several possible mechanisms that could explain the link between being bullied and developing psychotic symptoms. For example, being bullied could chronically over-activate the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis system causing exaggerated cortisol release and stress sensitivity. Alternatively, according to cognitive models, perhaps victimisation by one's peers leads to attributional biases and dysfunctional schemas of the self and world. 'A major implication is that chronic or severe peer victimisation has non-trivial, adverse, long-term consequences,' the researchers said. **CJ**

IN BRIEF

Christian Jarrett with news from the Association for Psychological Science 21st Annual Convention 22–25 May, San Francisco

When it comes to judging the value of advice, we're wooed by people's confidence. Don Moore of Carnegie Mellon University asked participants to guess the weight of people from their photographs. To help them were four 'advisers', whose confidence in their own judgements was made public. The participants consistently bought more advice from the most confident advisers. (Source: *New Scientist*) The finding adds to past research showing we're more likely to heed advice that's expensive (tinyurl.com/43fcu8).

We're in the midst of a global economic crisis, but our optimism still rides high. That's according to Matthew Gallagher at the University of Kansas who reported the results of a survey involving 150,000 adults across 140 countries. Eighty-nine per cent of those asked said they expected the next five years of their life to be as good as or better than the present. The most optimistic countries were Ireland, Brazil, Denmark and New Zealand, while the least optimistic were Zimbabwe, Egypt, Haiti and Bulgaria. (Source: *USNews.com*)

Emotion expert Paul Ekman, the inspiration behind, and consultant to, the hit US drama *Lie to Me*, said he fact-checks the scripts but allows some artistic licence. For example, the series implied that nose scratching could be a sign of lying when really it isn't. In real life, Ekman heads a consulting firm that advises the FBI. Of his fictional counterpart Cal Lightman, he said he 'solves crimes more quickly and with more certainty than I've ever done'. (Source: *PsychCentral*)

To help prevent driving collisions, cars of the future might be equipped with vibrating steering-wheels. Robert Gray at Arizona State University had participants undertake a driving simulation test in foggy conditions, whilst distracted by a hands-free phone call. Drivers alerted by a vibration on their arm reacted to hazards three times as quickly as participants who weren't given a warning. Visual warnings gave no response advantage, whilst audio warnings speeded driver reactions two-fold. (Source: *ScienceNOW*)

There's a growing trend for American parents to seek uncommon names for their children. Jean Twenge of San Diego State University analysed 325 million applications for social security numbers submitted between 1880 and 2007. In 1955 just over 30 per cent of boys had a name that was among the top ten most popular. In 2007 by contrast, this proportion had dropped to 9 per cent. Among girls, the drop was from 22 per cent to 8 per cent. Twenge said whereas people in the past wanted their children to fit in, today they want them to stand out. (Source: *USA Today*)

People are beginning to associate status with having green credentials. Vadas Griskevicius primed students with one of two stories. The first required them to imagine they had a new job at a successful company with a swanky lobby, and was designed to provoke a desire for prestige. The second story involved the student losing a show ticket but then finding it again and was intended not to provoke a desire for prestige. Afterwards, those students primed by the business story were more likely to choose the eco-friendly rather than the luxurious models from among equally priced pairs of cars, dishwashers and cleaners. (Source: *Time*)

The mirror crack'd?

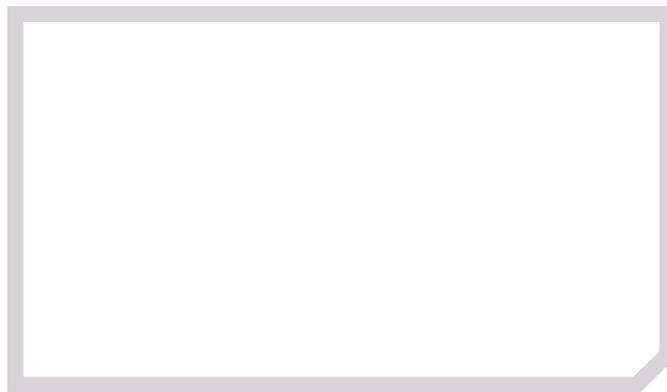
A new brain-imaging study claims to provide robust evidence inconsistent with the idea that the human brain contains 'mirror neurons' – postulated cells thought to respond both when an action is executed and when it is observed (PNAS: tinyurl.com/n88ad4).

Such neurons have been identified via single-cell recording studies in monkeys, and their possible existence in humans has been linked with a number of cognitive functions including empathy and language development. Indeed, the seriousness of the new claim that human mirror neurons might not exist is perhaps best captured by a reminder of the hope that was pinned on them in 2000 by celebrated neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran. Writing for *Edge* magazine (tinyurl.com/9ps6y) he predicted 'that mirror neurons will do for psychology what DNA did for biology: they will provide a unifying framework and help explain a host of mental abilities that have hitherto remained mysterious

and inaccessible to experiments.'

The new study by Alfonso Caramazza and colleagues at the Universities of Harvard and Trento depended on cellular adaptation to detect the presence of mirror

adaptation for executed and observed motor acts is not compatible with the core assumption of mirror neuron theory, which holds that action recognition and understanding are based on motor simulation.'



fMRI scans did not reveal cross-modal adaptation for executed and observed motor acts

neurons. Adaptation is the tendency for the response of cells to gradually reduce with repeated stimulation. There were two key tests of adaptation in Caramazza's experiment: during the observation of hand movements followed by the execution of those same movements, and secondly, during the execution of the movements followed by their observation. Unlike previous adaptation tests of mirror neurons, the current study used the observation and execution of meaningless actions not involving objects, to ensure that the results weren't contaminated by brain activation involved in anticipation or object perception.

Scans of 12 participants' brains using fMRI revealed areas of adaptation when the same hand movements were first observed and then executed, but crucially not the other way around. According to Caramazza and colleagues, this 'failure to find cross-modal

However, leading mirror neuron researcher Marco Iacoboni (University of California) was not convinced by the new paper. 'In life science in general and in brain imaging in particular a negative result can't possibly prove the non existence of a phenomenon. It is surprising that Caramazza's paper makes those claims and that a high profile journal like PNAS publishes it,' he told us.



Beyond this general point, Iacoboni told us there were multiple, fatal flaws with Caramazza's study. For a start, he said the technique of detecting cellular adaptation using fMRI had been shown to be profoundly unreliable. 'Some initial results were promising but careful studies looking at the neural correlates of fMRI adaptation paradigms have revealed that the results of fMRI adaptation studies are uninterpretable with regard to the activity of specific neuronal populations (the mirror neurons, in this case)' (see tinyurl.com/mmaqzw for a review).

Iacoboni added that there isn't any reason to think mirror neurons should exhibit adaptation in the same way that sensory neurons do. 'Although nobody has done a thorough study on adaptation in mirror neurons, inspection of the single unit recordings in neurophysiological studies does not suggest that mirror neurons adapt.' What's more, he said that our understanding of most neuron types is heavily dependent on monkey work, so it doesn't make sense to doubt human mirror neurons on this basis. 'To question the existence in humans of any kind of neurons recorded only in monkeys is tantamount to questioning the evolutionary framework itself and even the ethical grounds for doing neurophysiological studies in monkeys', Iacoboni said.

But Alfonso Caramazza was staunch in defence of his findings. Providing some background, he said there was every reason to doubt the existence of mirror neurons in humans – people with apraxia, for example, who are impaired in using objects, nonetheless can have normal recognition of the use of those objects. 'There is no meaningful evidence for such a mirror neuron system in humans,'

BATH PAIN CENTRE

The University of Bath launched the Bath Centre for Pain Research in June, with an evening of public lectures and poster presentations by research staff, including Centre Director and Founder Professor Chris Eccleston and fellow psychologists Dr Lance McCracken and Dr Ed Keogh. A major focus of the Centre's research is on developing novel treatments for children with persistent pain, and raising the profile of childhood pain and suffering.

See www.bath.ac.uk/health/pain/index.html for further information.

Caramazza told us. 'That is, there is no evidence that there is a motor-based system that plays a causal role – as opposed to just an associative role – in the recognition of motor acts.'

Caramazza also denied the suggestion that his paper used a negative finding to disprove a phenomenon. 'We did not report negative results,' he said, 'we reported clear and robust interactions showing that one can get reliable fMRI repetition adaptation in predicted areas but not for the theoretically critical condition.'

In further remarks, Caramazza defended the use of fMRI to study cellular adaptation, and he argued there was every reason to think postulated mirror neurons would show adaptation, given that he and others have previously shown that the relevant brain areas exhibit repetition adaptation.

'It is not theoretically impossible that mirror neurons have radically different properties from other neurons,' he said, 'but such a claim is plainly ad hoc and would constitute a remarkable discovery if true.'

Caramazza also questioned the way the monkey results have been interpreted. 'The mere fact that some premotor neurons respond both in executing an action and seeing the action does not imply that those neurons play a causal role in action recognition,' he said. 'It is an elementary error to confuse correlation with cause. So-called mirror neurons may be responding as a consequence of, and not as the basis for, action categorisation. The monkey data is better explained as the result of learning to associate a motor pattern to a perceptual event (see for example tinyurl.com/lk8utm).' CJ

RESEARCH FUNDING NEWS

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) has launched competition 3 of the Research for Innovation, Speculation and Creativity (RISC) programme. This provides funding of up to £200,000 for **new and radical research proposals that could lead to a step-change in the management and care of patients within the NHS in England**. Funding will be awarded to NHS organisations; joint applications from NHS researchers and academic partners are welcome. The closing date for applications is 4 August 2009.

tinyurl.com/ra93ud

Both the ESRC and the MRC have funding available for methodological research:

Comparative Cross-National Research Methods is an ESRC initiative to develop research methods for the conduct of high-quality international and cross-national comparative research. Four to six projects will be funded that address one or more substantive research questions upon which to base the methodological work. Closing date for full proposals 25 August 2009.

tinyurl.com/la3zgo

Methodological Research to Underpin NICE Decision Making is an MRC-led initiative. The call has come out of a scoping study that was carried out to identify NICE's methodological research needs. Areas of particular interest include synthesis of evidence from patients, the public and stakeholders and decision making at NICE. The closing date for submissions is 22 July 2009.

tinyurl.com/omoa2a

Patient Reported Outcome Measures (PROMs). PROMs are an assessment of health status and health-related quality of life based on patient feedback. They will increasingly be used within the NHS to evaluate healthcare services and regulatory decision making following Lord Darzi's NHS Next Stage Review. The MRC wishes to support research into improving the generation and validation, and interpretation and evaluation of PROMs. Applications are encouraged in the short term by 22 July 2009.

tinyurl.com/nwaxgh

Via the **Methods Research for Complex Interventions** the MRC is seeking to support methods research that seeks to strengthen the knowledge base of the impact of complex interventions in health research. They are particularly keen to support research into behavioural change interventions and psychological interventions. Applications are encouraged in the short term by 22 July 2009.

tinyurl.com/nrdkzt

The Food Standards Agency is calling for proposals to design and carry out a **dietary survey of children living in Scotland** using validated FFQ to collect data on saturated and total fat intakes. Research proposals should also collect information on meals and snacking habits, and have an emphasis on foods eaten outside the home. The closing date for application is 7 August 2009.

tinyurl.com/q5te5d

Under the Royal Society's Joint Projects Grants Programme the close for bids for **funding for travel and subsistence** costs to support research collaborations with institutions in **Ireland and Russia** is 17 September 2009.

tinyurl.com/54tgn5

info

For more, see www.bps.org.uk/funds
Funding bodies should e-mail news to Elizabeth Beech on elibee@bps.org.uk for possible inclusion

Britain's got psychology talent

Fiona Jones on a role for psychologists on TV

The climax to the ITV show *Britain's Got Talent* seemed to raise plenty of issues deserving psychological input, but despite numerous requests for comments that came in to the Society's Media Centre psychologists appeared to have little to say. Furthermore, there seems little awareness amongst producers that psychologists' input might have been helpful.

So far one of the few academic commentaries I have found (*Daily Mail*) was not from a psychologist. Here David Wilson (Professor of Criminology at Birmingham City University and briefly an adviser to, and critic of, *Big Brother*) accused the producers of BGT of 'cynical exploitation'. He states that 'Britain's Got Talent makes *Big Brother* look saintly'. He claimed that Susan Boyle (the

unknown Scottish spinster thrust into worldwide fame) was ill-prepared for her success and would have a 'terrible emotional price to pay'. In response to concerns about the singer's well-being the *Sunday Times* quoted 'an insider' from the programme as saying: 'We are not like *Big Brother*, with psychologists to study the contestants and then use every psychological trick against them. Susan has all the support she needs.' This displays a worrying misunderstanding of the role of psychologists in this context. Miss Boyle's admission to the Priory Clinic in the days after the final seemed to back up her brother's view that the show's producers 'sent her into the lion's den totally unprepared' (*Metro*). Just possibly, a little preparation and professional

support from psychologists might have gone a long way, a point that was endorsed by psychologist Dr Linda Papadopoulos on *BBC Breakfast*.

The effects on the children in the competition, some as young as 10, is another worrying issue. The children's charity Kidscape has criticised 'the brutality of the format' and argued that there should be a separate, more child-centred show (*The Telegraph*).

What does seem clear is that the continued popularity of reality television and the quest amongst certain sectors of the population to achieve fame and celebrity is leading to a shifting of the boundary between what is acceptable and ethically justifiable. At a time when psychology departments are subject to ever more restrictive ethical rules for psychological research, some television companies take a less stringent approach. This has led to an increasing number of concerns being expressed by psychologists both in the letters pages of newspapers and to the

Society – see, for example, the concern over *Boys and Girls Alone* (Forum, April 2009). More recently, the BBC *Horizon* programme 'recreated' the Milgram study.

The Society's Media Centre and individual psychologists are frequently consulted about broadcasting ideas and are able to discourage or mitigate some of the more extreme excesses. While this is frequently a difficult and uncomfortable role, there is increasingly a need for psychologists to exert influence on broadcasting. As a professional organisation we also need to work more closely with TV companies so they know what our role is and so they make appropriate use of our expertise. We are currently working on this issue and will report back in due course.

Red carpet treatment

A call to the Society's Media Centre from film production company Thursday Film led to a Leicester Square premiere for one of our members recently. Clinical psychologist Sally Austen was one of the special guests at the showing of the short film *Pictures*, starring Neil Pearson and Andrea Corr. Austen was a major contributor to the film, using her experience in clinical psychology to advise on both the script and the acting.

The film is short but emotionally powerful, tackling a controversial and little discussed topic; Munchausen syndrome by proxy (fabricated or induced illness). Flashbacks are used to fill in the background to a police interview between Neil Pearson's police detective and Andrea Corr's Donna, the mother of a child admitted to hospital. Donna is questioned in depth about her child's previous visits to the doctor and hospital admissions and the

film reaches its climax when CCTV surveillance images of Donna tampering with her son's IV drip are shown to her, and pictures drawn by Donna's second son, found by the children's father, reveal other instances of abuse.

Sally said: 'The film is clinically very accurate despite its author, Phil Blake, having no clinical experience. The actors, also with no previous experience of this subject, achieve amazing poignancy and put me further in awe of the work that goes into acting. I hope that the film will be the catalyst for useful discussion about fabricated and induced illness. The film was created from a not-for-profit organisation so I agreed to offer my services for free, in return for having my name on the credits. You are never too old to enjoy showing off a bit!'

JOANNA COLBURN

contribute

The Media page is co-ordinated by the Society's 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, Press Committee), on f.a.jones@leeds.ac.uk

