



'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@boro.ac.uk.

The human mind boggles

IN another landmark series the UK's favourite fertility expert, Robert Winston, tackled the human mind in three hour-long programmes on BBC1. Despite (or perhaps because of) the dodgy recreated experiments, the Groucho looks and an increasing orange glow as the series went on, this made quite entertaining, if infuriating, television.

Rather than being truly informative, *The Human Mind* tended to skip from one piece of self-help-type advice to another, along the way causing Delia-like rushes on Omega-3 oil supplements to improve the concentration of children who probably watch too much TV like this.

Metaphors were flogged to within an inch of their lives – one in particular, involving children conducting an orchestra to demonstrate the development of the brain, seemed utterly pointless. There were also some fantastically superfluous 'experiments'. Sean was a very angry white-van driver. He shouted, got angry and even swore at people in his van – especially when the BBC were filming.



Utterly pointless?

After his anger management training, lo and behold, if not quite the picture of serenity, he was certainly calmer (although that may have been caused by Winston's relentless deadpan delivery). I couldn't help thinking that taking away his white van and replacing it with a Nissan Micra would have done the job in half the time.

The same trick (single 'experiment' presented as proof despite obvious methodological and demand problems) was also clear in the 'shopping' experiment. Two twins were made to feel either happy or sad – one by listening to depressing music (although to me it sounded quite

perky), the other happy music. A couple of 'manipulations' later and off they went shopping. Happy twin bought lots of stuff. Sad twin didn't. Happy twin bought some quite unusual items, sad twin moped about. Happy twin bought sad twin some presents. Conclusion? Personality can be temporarily altered by mood (although of course the more likely culprit here is the TV cameras).

But of course, psychologists aren't supposed to like this kind of programme – if we were the intended audience, the whole series would be aired at 4am on cable, interspersed with shopping channel adverts for SPSS books. Each visual stunt or demonstration would be followed by a 15-minute discussion about the problems with the methodology or the nature of measurement itself. There is probably middle ground between a programme that would be appealing to psychologists and one aimed at an audience in need of constant visual stimulation, but whether or not *The Human Mind* occupied it is open to question.

Adam Joinson

DON'T MISS...

...this month's Radio 4 series *The Mind Changers*. Three programmes will look at experiments that shifted our understanding of the human mind – Piaget's three mountains, Asch on conformity, and Bartlett's War of the Ghosts. The programmes air on 9, 16 and 23 December at 11am, or you can listen again on the Radio 4 website.

TIP OF THE MONTH

Dealing successfully with the media starts with becoming an active and discerning consumer. Broaden your points of reference, and refresh your awareness of different sections of the media at every opportunity.

■ Next media training day – Monday 16 February. Contact Dawn Schubert for details on dawsch@bps.org.uk or tel: 0116 252 9581.

EXPERIMENTAL MATTERS

Judging by the BPS press office figures, autumn is a busy time for media interest in psychology. With Channel 4's month of programmes on magic and the second anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center, I was pleased to see that *The Times* had prominent psychologists discussing the supernatural (Richard Wiseman) and conspiracy theories (Patrick Leman). What was reassuring about these reports, was not so much the content, but the focus on scientific method. At a time when the HEFCE funding of psychology in universities is threatened, and its status as a topic of laboratory investigation is under debate, I was encouraged by the concise and clear reporting of laboratory experiments testing how paranormal sensations can be simulated using low-frequency vibrations, and how conspiracy theories are likely to be generated only for hypothetical events of great importance. It is always good to read reports of what psychologists do, rather than what they think.

With this emphasis on experimental methods in the media I was disappointed also to read in *The Times* that 'British universities are conducting human experiments comparable to those carried out by the Nazis' in an article about some psychology departments that make participation in experiments compulsory for students. The principle of 'no coercion' and the practice of having students take part in experiments are under review by a BPS working party.

Chris Moulin