

An even Bigger Brother is watching

FOR many years psychologists have been accused of not getting sufficiently involved in the 'real' world, representing themselves from time to time as expert witnesses or whatever, but frequently keeping themselves clear of the decision-making processes. Reality television has now extended the ambit of this 'real world'. Psychologists who have shown some considerable ingenuity in picking up on the massive public interest in reality TV have recently been receiving some provocative press coverage.

The Experiment will take 15 people from a mixture of backgrounds and place them under surveillance to see how they cope in different environments – for example the office and home. Whilst it has clearly been an irresistible temptation for the media to dub this a variation on the *Big Brother* theme, it is indeed very different from such reality-TV programmes and is not designed as entertainment. It is seen as a major piece of scientific research that will hopefully yield important findings about how conflict arises and how it is resolved, about leadership, co-operation and power differentials.

The Experiment has been variously reported as 'Big Brother for grown-ups' (*Express and Echo*, Exeter) and 'Beeb tries stir crazy experiment' (*Daily Record*, Scotland). Whilst there has been an attempt to inform the general public of what two psychologists (Professor Alex Haslam and Dr Steve Reicher) are planning, this has been embedded in a rather sensational account of what psychologists get up to. It is in some senses quite a coup to generate an interest in Zimbardo and experimental ethics in fairly small circulation local newspapers; nevertheless, the reportage is troubling both in relation to this particular experiment, and indeed in relation to general handling by the media of interesting 'real-life' research.

The *Daily Record* introduces the piece 'The BBC have come under fire for plans to re-enact The Stanford Prison Experiment – one of the most notorious psychological studies in history'. Zimbardo, tagged as

BY MARY JOHN

'the man behind the Stanford Prison Experiment' is later rolled out to comment: 'This kind of research is now considered to be unethical and should not be done just for sensational TV. Video tapes should be checked every day and there should be the option of an independent overseer blowing the whistle at any time.' A highlighted strapline quotes him, alongside his picture, as saying 'I am amazed that a UK university would become involved in this'. One is left wondering how *The Experiment* had been reported to him and in what ways his remarks had been edited to add to their media impact.

While the planned experiment does present some ethical challenges, media reporting has again clouded the waters as a working party at the BPS gets down to a detailed study of its implications. In its 'Corrections and clarifications', *The Guardian* reported: 'The chair of the British Psychological Society's ethics committee has asked us to make it clear that, contrary to the statement in our G2 lead, The Experiment, yesterday, about a proposed BBC programme, the committee has not given "the green light" to the venture, which involves volunteers acting as guards and prisoners. The committee offered guidance in relation to the society's code of conduct. It did not give approval for the programme as that would be outside its remit.' This in itself could be misinterpreted as it stands. For the average reader it would imply disapproval, whilst in fact the BPS ethics committee is not in the business of approving or disapproving any proposal – it merely gives advice and comment. With such an apparent cloud hanging over *The Experiment*, will it be received by the viewing public in the way it was intended: as a carefully thought out, carefully monitored and controlled piece of psychological research that they could share in?

So selling ethical research presents its own problems in handling the media, and

indeed many psychologists will be watching this experiment to examine the extent to which it is scrupulous in its approach and execution. Rarely does any psychological experimentation get such exposure – not only to the general public but also before the censors within our own profession. In our centenary year the slogan was 'Bringing psychology to society' – the media treatment of this experiment demonstrates this is not an unproblematic process.

■ *Mary John is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Exeter and is a member of the Society's Press Committee. Co-ordinating Editor is Professor Pam Briggs.*

Press Committee

Media Training Days 2002

Monday 18 February
Wednesday 13 March
Monday 16 September
Monday 9 December

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- news writing
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For a registration form and further details contact:

Dawn Schubert
 The British Psychological Society
 St Andrews House
 48 Princess Road East
 Leicester LE1 7DR
 Tel: 0116 252 9581