



DAVID GILES

Why I study...

media psychology

KNOW it's customary, and perhaps clichéd, to start off these 'Why I study' articles with an autobiographical anecdote, but I can indeed vividly recall the moment I decided to return to academia to study psychology.

As an English graduate and freelance music journalist, I found myself near Zurich doing a feature on a dreadful British group (one of whose members used to be in Kajagoogoo, which gives you some idea of the scale of awfulness we're dealing with here). It was teatime before their performance, and – as happens with most substellar groups on tour – the three band members were dining backstage with their road crew, assorted press bods, and representatives from their record company.

Throughout the meal the whole company was focused on the three band members, who were playing the rock star role to perfection, cracking unfunny jokes that had the entourage in stitches, and delighting in the fact that all these lackeys were hanging on their every word. What a weird situation this is, I was thinking – three talentless idiots fêted as though they were sages and philosophers, while all the really clever people – engineers, backing musicians, critics and photographers – sat wondering what they had to do to deserve such acclaim.

Of course, it didn't last: the band sank without trace, and no doubt the talented folk are now in much more exalted positions. But the whole episode (grotesque, but certainly not unusual in the music business) left me thinking that there must be some psychological explanation of why such reverence is accorded people simply for standing on stage with a guitar and looking pretty.

After studying for a psychology degree, I ended up researching children's use of visual memory in spelling. But British psychology departments are full of people who toed the research line to get a PhD and then found something much more interesting to study. And that's exactly what I did.

After passing myself off briefly as

a cognitive psychologist to get full-time posts, I eventually found room to research and write a book on the psychology of fame and celebrity (Giles, 2000), carry out research into parasocial interaction between media users and media figures, and eventually to start a final-year module on media psychology. The next step is to create a centre for research in media psychology.

Of course, psychologists have always been interested in the psychology of various media. Cantril and Allport's *The*

safely at home, and the internet and video games have joined the threat to homework.

However, study of media psychology *per se* has never really taken off, certainly not in Britain. Why is this? So much of our time is spent consuming media – from the morning paper, through the use of e-mail and the internet, to watching television in the evening, not to mention our consumption of magazines, films, and other audio and video entertainment. It is claimed that there are more television sets in the United States than there are toilets

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Psychology of Radio came out in 1935; and shortly after, in 1938, there was much interest from psychologists in the extraordinary panic created in the US when H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* was read out on air as a mock newflash.

Early psychological studies of television are fascinating too, largely because of the concerns. Will watching the telly affect children's homework? Will it affect their eyesight? Will it keep them indoors instead of playing in the street? Now, of course, the emphasis has changed so that parents actively try to find ways of keeping children

(Bushman, 1995), but admittedly the psychology of defecation has not taken off either (although Jeffrey Gray does some interesting things with rats...). Even our conversations with others are full of media-related talk, and our opinions, self-perceptions and other cognitive processes cannot avoid the media's ubiquitous influence.

Perhaps media psychology has not been allowed to evolve because the media themselves change at such an alarming pace, and research takes place so desperately slowly. If I wanted to study the

effects of mobile phone communication among teenagers, I would spend months applying for a grant, then spend months (maybe years) collecting data, weeks analysing the data and writing a report, and then another year or so waiting for someone to publish the thing. By that time mobile phones might have changed so much that the original study is already out of date, or everyone has traded their phones in for a new plaything, or they have all been banned because of radiation fears.

Research into the psychology of the internet is similarly bedevilled: so much guff is talked about what the internet is *going to do* to our lives, who's interested in a new study about what it *did* to our lives three years ago?

All the same, there are so many areas of the media that have become firmly entrenched in our cultural life that it is impossible to ignore their contribution to behaviour, cognition and discourse. Television is one such area; the cult of celebrity is another. Most research in these areas is squeezed into other fields – the study of media violence is shelved under social or developmental psychology, depending on the age of the participants; study of media representations is largely left to cultural studies or discourse analysts; the psychology of advertising has been subsumed under consumer research. The problem is that we need an awareness of the psychological effects of the media in general before we can start making claims about specific topics like sex and violence.

An awareness of media psychology is necessary because it is so easy to take its effects for granted, even in the course of psychological research. A nice example is in an otherwise excellent paper by Aron *et al.* (1991). In their study on close relationships they happened to mention that participants generated more vivid visual images of the pop star Cher than of their own mothers! This is one of the most sensational psychological findings of the century, but receives no more than a by-the-by in a method section.

Certainly it is not too late for media psychology to cultivate a distinctive identity of its own. The process has already begun in the United States, with the journal *Media Psychology* launched by

Erlbaum last year, although there the situation is muddied by the fact that so many psychologists have decamped to communications and media departments. In Britain that gap remains unfilled (most media studies departments here tend to fall into the humanities). Even in the rest of Europe there is more interest in psychological effects of television and other media than in the UK, where the research dictum seems always to be 'more of the same'.

One potential stumbling block, however, is the perception that media psychology refers to the practice of psychologists appearing in the media. Indeed, there is now an APA division called 'media psychology' which seems to have only tenuous connections with academic research. This division is calling for the media behaviour of psychologists to be regulated so that who appears in the media, and what they are able to say, needs approval and special training beforehand.

In my opinion this is a terrible road to go down. Ultimately psychologists will be selected to appear on TV because they are pretty, and are not going to say anything controversial. We must resist this type of 'media psychology' at all costs.

References

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- Bushman, B. J. (1995). Moderating role of trait aggressiveness in the effects of violent media on aggression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*, 950–960.
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- Giles, D. (2000). *Illusions of immortality: A psychology of fame and celebrity*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Weblinks

- David Giles's homepage:
www.hss.coventry.ac.uk/psychology/giles.htm
- 'Psychology and the media' module at the University of Denver: www.du.edu/~mbasill
- Leonard Jason's guide to 'responsible' TV viewing for children: www.condor.depaul.edu/~ljason/TVPresen
- 'Media and communications' site at Aberystwyth:
www.aber.ac.uk/media/Functions/mcs.html

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