



TO THE EDITOR...

Letters should be marked clearly 'Letter for publication in *The Psychologist*' and addressed to the editor at the Society office in Leicester. Please send by e-mail if possible: psychologist@bps.org.uk (include a postal address). Letters over 500 words are less likely

to be published. The editor reserves the right to edit, shorten or publish extracts from letters. If major editing is necessary, this will be indicated. Space does not permit the publication of every letter received. Letters to the editor are not normally acknowledged.

No comparison – no place

CHILDHOOD experience is an important factor in the formation of belief systems and moral values of terrorists. The bigger the difference between belief systems, the more difficult it will be for two parties to change their perception of each other. This will be a contributing factor to what Andrew Silke ('Action plan:

Terrorism', November 2001) describes as the success of the UK government, which he contrasts with the failure of the Israeli government.

The UK government has the Irish government as a partner for peace, and the warring factions in Northern Ireland (which I assume he is referring to, though no direct reference is made) are both raised speaking

the same language within a democratic state with a Judaeo-Christian belief system and associated moral values. Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East, is the only state with a Judaeo-Christian belief system, and has a different language. Differences between the Middle East and Northern Ireland are marked.

He makes the point that

terrorists are normal people and that we must first recognise this to resolve terrorist conflicts. 'Normal' is a relative concept. We draw our own parameters of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour depending on a range of factors. Early childhood experience and education will contribute to this. Different conflicts around the world have enormously different issues to grapple with in this respect.

Psychological research will never be in a position to tell people what moral values to hold. The reverse is true. Reporting on the politically sensitive conflict in the Middle East without presenting a balance of information shows bias. Partial journalism in the guise of an academic article should have no place in the editorial policy of *The Psychologist*.

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HAS YOUR E-MAIL GONE MISSING?



From 14 October to 15 November e-mails to psychologist@bps.org.uk were routed to the wrong inbox and deleted. If you sent an e-mail to us in this period and have not heard back, please resend it stating when it was first sent. *Sorry!*

Bothered about *Big Brother*

I TOO would like to hope, along with Peter Collett (News analysis, October 2001) that *Big Brother* has achieved something significant 'in the areas of ethnic, religious and sexual politics'. Yet my first reading of the article left me with an uneasy feeling – as if I was failing to be enthusiastic about something I ought to be. I would like to share some of my reflections on this with fellow readers.

Collett claims that part of the popularity of *Big Brother* is due to its being 'uniquely

interactive' because it allows people to 'get involved by voting contestants out and deciding the winner'. But is voting via an automated phone-in, or choosing a camera view on the internet, a real 'interaction'? The contestants are effectively quarantined from all outside influence. What remains is one-way action or influence, or better, power. Viewers exercise power over contestants by selecting or expelling, granting or withholding, and glamorising or demonising. This application of power by

a majority group (not, we should remind ourselves, individual viewers) on to constrained individuals is by no means an 'interaction'.

Collett further claims that, in contrast to scripted and predictable soap-opera characters, *Big Brother* contestants are 'multifaceted and mercurial – they're constantly surprising each other and themselves'. This, he argues, 'forces viewers to reappraise their opinions' such that they develop more balanced, less 'black-or-white' views of the contestants. At first, this sounds common sense; yet if this could actually be demonstrated in some manner, it would be an astonishing discovery! One of the most robust psychological findings, one that underlies much of developmental, social-cognitive and clinical theory, is that our cognitive structures are deeply resistant to change. This ensures predictability and homeostasis (personal and relational) and minimises the use of cognitive resources; however, it can also result in biased, inflexible, stereotypical attitudes. Thus,

I cannot see how the viewing public's opinions will be anything but further entrenched and not, as Collett claims, challenged and broadened.

Finally, Collett argues that the show's camerawork allows viewers 'a sense of omniscience... Rightly or wrongly, the viewers feel they know better'. Now, assemble the above components: power, bias and omniscience, and you essentially assemble a state that glows in self-satisfaction and basks in complacency. This, I fear, is why *Big Brother* has really caught on. It serves me, the viewer, with a way of making me feel justified, powerful and in control. In the process, it cannot but dehumanise the contestants into puppets, albeit fascinating, cunningly animated ones. Thus, perhaps it is overly optimistic to be quite so enthusiastic about *Big Brother's* achievements, and perhaps more critical analysis is needed when interpreting media–society interactions.

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Behind on smacking

I AM glad to see *The Psychologist* covering the important issue of smacking ('Scots lead the way on anti-smacking laws', November 2001), but since the news is ongoing, may I correct some factual errors.

While it is true that in September 2001 the Scottish Executive announced plans to prohibit all hitting of children under three years, and the use of implements, blows to the head and shaking of children of any age, we do not know for certain that 'the Scottish Parliament will bring in a law next year'.

Hopefully Scotland (though sadly not yet

Westminster) will make this legal change but doing so will by no means bring us 'into line with 10 other European countries in which it is illegal for a parent to hit or shake a child under three or to hit any child on the head'. We shall still lag far behind Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Norway and Sweden where hitting any child, of any age, anywhere on the body is prohibited.

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Editor's note: For more on smacking, see p.8.

C.S. Myers and his role in founding occupational psychology

FROM Geoff Bunn's C.S. Myers Lecture ('Charlie and the chocolate factory', November 2001) one might conclude that, having made his disastrous decision to move to London, and with Frederic Bartlett having rescued the psychology of work and taken it to the Applied Psychology Unit at Cambridge, Myers' career and influence were at an end. As psychologists who work in business organisations applying psychology to improve the outcomes of human activity at work, we don't see it that way at all.

Myers was the founder of occupational psychology and, through his own influence, through that of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology and above all through that of his successor, Alec Rodger, a tradition and a body of knowledge and practice were established which live on to this very day. Those of us who choose to apply psychology in the untidy, messy world of real-life work organisations see tightly controlled laboratory studies alone as far too narrow to answer the problems with which we are presented. The fact that Myers was the first psychologist prepared to tackle these kinds of issue head-on is arguably more of an indication of his vision, courage and commitment than any emotional or intellectual limitation. And through the enormous influence occupational psychology has had on personnel management and, indeed, management in general, there is no question which model has made the greater impact on the lives of ordinary working people.

In the world of modern business the issues of conflicting interest that were faced by the NIIP remain everyday matters. They are not

always dealt with easily, and require a level of intellectual adaptability not apparently shared or understood by all psychologists. The world outside the laboratory, which potentially can benefit so much from the application of psychological insight, moves on irrespective of whether



C.S. Myers

psychologists are involved or not. Some of us, perhaps sharing the views of C.S. Myers, feel that this represents one of the crucial challenges of being a psychologist.

In a way this wouldn't matter if it were merely a question of history, but the antagonism and prejudice so evident in the diametrically opposed models to which Geoff Bunn refers are still active. When a number of us recently proposed that a new Division of the Society be created for those with an interest in business psychology, we were quite surprised at the personal hostility that was directed against us. It became clear that, for many members of the Society, the values of 'business' are incompatible with those of psychology.

As a result, the independent Association of Business Psychologists was created. At the time, many of us hoped that

before long we might be accepted in the Society as business psychologists. The fact that Geoff Bunn didn't even mention occupational psychology in his C.S. Myers Lecture is a small piece of the growing evidence that regrettably, even after half

a century, this acceptance seems to be as far away as ever.

Malcolm Ballantine

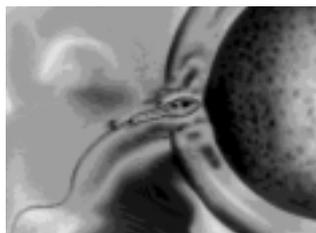
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Opportunity, possibility or risk?

WITH reference to 'Monsters in the mind' (September 2001), I was intrigued to note that in discussing the effect on perception of different phases within the menstrual cycle, the fertile phase of this cycle is referred to as the 'high conception-risk stage'. To characterise it in such terms seems to indicate an assumption that conception is necessarily a disaster, rather like an accident or illness.



Couldn't a neutral term have been found?

Iona Seymour

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INFORMATION

■ I AM a trainee clinical psychologist interested in **researching the neuropsychological effects of end-stage renal disease (ESRD)**. I would be grateful to hear from any clinical psychologists who are interested in this topic, particularly those who are working in services where this research may be conducted.

Phil Ray

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■ I AM a student of psychology in my final year at Reading University. I hope to do an MSc in **forensic psychology** after I graduate. I am trying to find some **work experience** either shadowing or assisting a forensic psychologist working in the Reading or Berkshire area. I was wondering if there was any such psychologist who would consider taking on a student like myself for voluntary work.

Rosie Barlow

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■ I AM a psychology graduate who has varied experience of adults and children with learning disabilities and mental health issues. I am looking to gain clinical experience and would be willing to work on a voluntary basis as an **assistant psychologist**. I live in Sheffield but would be prepared to commute to further afield.

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■ I AM a trainee counselling psychologist exploring reports of the mother-daughter relationship provided by adult female offspring of mothers with eating disorders, in order to help identify effective ways

of **supporting families where the mother is suffering from an eating disorder**. I would be very grateful to hear from any female with this experience.

Nadia Ahlenius

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■ WE are looking for a **volunteer to act as unpaid editor** of our newsletter from February 2001. The role would particularly suit a postgraduate student or an assistant psychologist with an interest in obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). The postholder would have opportunities to meet and work both with people suffering from OCD and with leading professionals in the field.

We are the only national charity that focuses exclusively on OCD. The newsletter is central to our information work and is published three times a year. There would be full training from the existing editor, and full support with production from paid staff at our north London office. Please contact me for further details.

Laura Simonds

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■ I AM a graduate who is interested in **occupational psychology**. Before committing to studying it at a postgraduate level I would be really appreciative if any occupational psychologist could offer me any **career or course advice** or even better some work experience.

Salma Shah

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