

Radio – John Morton listens in

## MEA CULPA

IT is time for a small confession. I have over-generalised a little and it is reparation time. A little while ago I was asked if I would take part in *All in the Mind*, in a section called 'Essential guides: Cognitive psychology'. It turned out that the interviewer was, indeed, going to be Raj Persaud. It seemed fair to send a preview of my July column, to which came the reply 'It's all right by him if it's all right by you'. He was pleasant, intelligent, interactive, starting by observing that cognitive psychology was the only branch of psychology that actually studied the mind, and we had a very agreeable half-hour chat.

At the end of the recording I said to him: 'I really disliked your *Fame* programme. I've concluded you were badly exploited by the programme makers.' 'It wouldn't have been the first time,' he said wryly.

The AIMM editor who was in attendance interjected: 'I should point out that, on the corridor, *Fame* was very highly rated.' Which tells us a story about the kind of programme we (well I, anyway) expect from the Beeb compared with what they want to put out. However, I thought that this editor did a terrific job with my interview. I'm sure I wasn't that fluent spontaneously!

The other two sections in this series were David Messer (University of Hertfordshire) on developmental psychology, and Bundy Macintosh (Open University) on biological psychology. The trail for the latter was a bit ominous: 'Is everything there is to know about you stored in your brain, or are you more than just biochemistry?' What could they be going to say, I wondered. It turned out there was a bit on cochlear implants and nothing at all on the mind-brain issue.

Other tidbits from this series of AIMM included a user of workplace counselling commenting: 'to call it incompetent would be charitable'. Then South Bank University is closing its student counselling service, which someone called 'like launching a ship without lifeboats'. UCL Hypnosis Unit train self-hypnosis for stress management; Persaud asked about placebo effects, and Val Walters said 'Maybe. But it is an honest placebo' – which I thought both delightful and accurate. There was someone who in the 1950s had suffered aversive conditioning at age 18 to 'cure' his homosexuality in the good old days of behaviour therapy; he gave a very moving account of the resulting 40-odd years of depression. There was a special on children's mental health with the alarming figure of around a tenth of 5- to 15-year-olds having serious mental health problems – problems that have a 'major' impact on their lives. Press Committee chair Pam Briggs from the University of Northumbria talked about children and adults who become socially isolated following too much interaction by computer.

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Lifeboats – a good idea

Television – Nick Neave looks on

## Don't believe the hype!

MENTION the words 'illegal drugs' and you normally obtain a knee-jerk emotional reaction of Pavlovian proportions – especially in politicians desperate to cling on to their parliamentary privileges. The Channel 4 series *Drug Laws Don't Work* addressed some of the hype and hypocrisy surrounding Britain's drug laws, and the episode 'Under the influence' provided a welcome and thought-provoking psychological angle. The programme was based on the attempts of psychiatrist Adam Winstock and clinical researcher Dr Kim Wolff (National Addiction Centre) to objectively quantify just what was happening at a physical, behavioural, and psychological level in young people before and after a night's clubbing and drug taking.

Their findings showed Ecstasy use to be linked with memory and mood impairments, but on the sobriety test – a standard series of measures used by the police to detect drug-drivers, the use of this drug (along with other stimulants like cocaine) seemed to produce no detectable measures of impairment. Professor Ian Hindmarch (University of Surrey) argued that 'critical flicker fusion' (a test of a person's threshold for detecting that a light source is rapidly flickering) is a much better indicator of whether someone has been using drugs, though whether the government will listen to such sensible scientific expertise is of course another matter. Something that all the researchers agreed on was that the most dangerous drugs were

the legal variety (alcohol and nicotine). Of greater concern (and a fact likely to be completely ignored) is that nicotine was more likely to serve as a 'gateway' drug than cannabis.

So what makes a genius then? I should know of course (just kidding), but *Can You Make a Genius?* on BBC1 tantalisingly dangled some answers. It delivered an insight into the minds and talents of the amazingly gifted, and some of the possible factors involved in creating such exceptional skills. We saw Justin, who at age two could read aloud, at three excelled at chess and music, scored 160+ on conventional IQ tests, and was thus packed off to university at age six. Quite what made Justin tick was hard to fathom, and his obvious autism and the possible links between this disorder and his exceptional talents were glossed over all too quickly. The programme focused more on IQ-raising gimmicks, some of which looked interesting and others plain daft. In fact, the programme didn't really come to any firm conclusions at all, and the appetite remained whetted but not sated.

By the time this column appears the winner (or should I say the least irritating) of the second series of *Big Brother* will have emerged blinking into the glare of instant stardom. I could comment on the deep psychological and moral issues that this kind of rubbish raises, but instead of suffering any of it, I watched the paint dry on our garden shed.

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