

Quotes – Sorted

BY CHRIS HATTON

PSYCHOLOGICAL profiling. A topic that we all appear to be obsessed with, if media coverage is anything to go by. How can we get inside the mind of a serial killer? A road rage driver? A fan of Alan Titchmarsh? As ever, psychologists are on hand to help, with articles, soundbites and quotes to order. Yet when it comes to our own personalities, we can seem strangely reticent.

To peer behind the mask I use a psychological profiling method called Q-Sort methodology (Quote-Sort, involving the systematically biased selection of psychologist quotes from last month's press cuttings to fit my story). When psychologists provide a quote about a news event or celebrity, could they really be projecting their own feelings about themselves on to others?

Relying on such theories of projection and transference, my analysis shows that some psychologists appear to display a subconsciously negative view of their personality. 'On a superficial level, they are often charming with a grandiose sense of self-worth, an ability to lie and manipulate, plus a lack of remorse and shallow

emotions' (Raj Persaud on our Machiavellian nation in the *Daily Mail*). 'It's a hell of a lot more than a simple need to be the centre of attention' (Dave Collins, University of Edinburgh, on veteran athletes in *Tennis World*). 'They are basically fairly insecure people: they have to keep proving to themselves and other people that they have what it takes, that they can make it' (Cary Cooper, UMIST, on entrepreneurs: *Western Mail*). 'Relentless in his self-construction' (Geoff Beattie, University of Manchester, commenting on *Big Brother* contestant Paul in *City Life*).

Others offer explanations based on lifestyle aspirations. 'We are all after the big buck, the quick fix of cash' (Cary Cooper commenting in the *Wigan Evening Post* on our Americanised, consumer-led society. 'There is a desire to emulate the celebrity lifestyle' (Sharon Clarke, UMIST, in *The Sun* on the attraction of convertibles). But that doesn't mean psychologists remain in their fancy ivory towers: 'Wooden sheds of all kinds have long played a key role in the creative life of the Western world,' explained David Lewis in the *Bolton Journal*.

Beyond this, many diverse causal factors are invoked. 'There is some genetic influence in one's tendency to live in a fantasy world rather than a real one' (Robert Edelmann, University of Surrey Roehampton, on Jeffrey Archer in *The Week*). 'They don't learn communication skills – both verbally and in terms of body language' (occupational psychologist Shirley Wilkinson on the lack of male role models for young boys: *The Daily Telegraph*). 'They are also a little bit different from the norm. They have an accent and adhere to a different culture. That makes them interesting to other people' (Cynthia McVey, Glasgow Caledonian University, on the popularity of the Welsh in reality-TV shows: *Daily Post*, Wales).

Although the work of a psychologist in the media is highly skilled, a deeper analysis could suggest a less than optimistic view of their activities. 'For a couple of minutes stuff you need a lot of ideas' (Geoff Beattie, telling *City Life*

about being a *Big Brother* analyst). 'Communication that develops ideas that have already been suggested' (Glasgow Caledonian University's Ray MacDonald in the *Irish Times* on the music-making process). 'He skims over the surface of life. He doesn't have to believe things in order to say them' (forensic psychologist Ian Stephen on Jeffrey Archer in the *Sunday Post*, Glasgow).

Perhaps inevitably, this kind of negative view nagging away in the subconscious can lead to a vicious cycle of lowering self-esteem and social withdrawal. 'It's a skill, but in the end it means no-one believes what you say' (Ian Stephen in the *Sunday Post* on Archer's storytelling 'skills'). 'You may be making a statement about yourself which is not what you intended' (occupational psychologist Malcolm Hatfield on armpit hair: *Sunday Herald*, Glasgow). 'There's an increasing disparity between our expectations and what we actually get. There's this idea that there's a solution to all our problems, when really there isn't' (clinical psychologist Gareth Hughes on anger in *Your Life*). 'It's too easy for the intended recipient to evolve resistance to the manipulative display, to essentially ignore it' (Geoffrey Miller, London School of Economics, on animal and human courtship in *Church Times*). 'He has no friends outside of those he meets in chatrooms and doesn't want to make any' (Mark Griffiths, Nottingham Trent University, in the *Daily Express*).

Obviously, many psychologists may disagree violently with this profile. They may feel that it is somewhat flippant, makes sweeping generalisations and is hurtful to those people it is ostensibly about. Or they might just complain that their names haven't been mentioned.

The final word goes to a psychiatrist (Thomas Oxman, in the *New Scientist* on how the words of poets may reveal if they will kill themselves): 'This study reinforces my belief that one's choice of words reveals much about one's mental state.'

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