

The 'social experiment'

I USED to think I understood the term 'experiment'. I believed it to be a process entailing (a) a proper understanding of relevant research, (b) an explicit research question, and (c) an appropriate methodology. However, there has been a recent media frenzy for 'social experiments' that follow the recipe: 'throw a dozen assorted bodies into a new pot, add a dash of fear, a pinch of sex, mix well with a handful of assorted variables, and set on a low boil'. What is going on?

Let's start by looking at a key recent offering. The Channel 4 proposal for June's *Cutting Edge* documentary 'Boys alone' read as follows:

Take ten boys aged 11 and 12. A variety of shapes and sizes. A variety of backgrounds. A variety of experience of being away from home. Put them together in a house, with no adult control. Watch what happens. Boys Alone tests the common belief that a pack of boys left together in a house for a long period of time, will self-destruct. In any group of boys, it is thought, fierce hierarchies will quickly form. The strongest and most assertive will survive; the most sensitive and vulnerable will suffer. But is it true? And if it is, how exactly does that process happen?

Just imagine for a moment that this is the research proposal from a third-year psychology student. 'Hmm, lets see, Robbie, can we explore your sampling strategy a little more – and when you talk about suffering...are we talking about suffering which is ethically approved?' Five days later – following an intense period of data collection: 'Ah, I see your experiment has resulted in an entire house being trashed, depression, insomnia, bullying and "a great deal of standing in the garden and bellowing like demented pygmies" [Kathryn Flett in *The Observer*]. Well done. Now, I wonder if you could explain how the cola-and-sweets diet tied in with your initial hypothesis.'

Sadly 'Boys alone' is not the only example. Even *Big Brother* – which had formerly revelled in its trash-but-riveting-entertainment role – has now made a bid for experiment status, with new prison bars creating 'rich' and 'poor' sides of the

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house. Eat your heart out, Zimbardo, Reicher and Haslam – these people didn't even have to come up with a rationale. In the new world of pseudoscience, if it looks



good (and those Perspex bars are cool) then let's have some of it!

I've recently been told of a number of psychologists who have been approached about a new 'social experiment' in which hidden cameras are placed around an office environment and unsuspecting workers are subjected to various stressors. Also coming soon to a television near you courtesy of Endemol, the creators of *Big Brother*, a study in which unmarried women choose between potential sperm donors – likely to open up a whole new world of experimentation for the evolutionary psychologist. Finally, hot on the heels of 'Boys alone' – a series in which a dozen teenagers will be locked up in a Scottish castle for a month.

I can't wait to see the research questions driving this last one. Is sulking behaviour a learned response? Does the presence of acne moderate overt singing? Can young people communicate without the aid of a text message?

Up to now, viewers have largely played a passive role in this experimental process. True, we are asked to vote contestants out of *Big Brother*, and we all had a chance to test our IQ in *Test the Nation*. But by and large we do not get involved in shaping destinies through our television sets. This may be all set to change, courtesy of digital TV. So just how long will it be before we're constructing interactive Milgram-

type experiments on screen? I can see it now – four million people sit poised with their remote controls...press the red button to increase the electric shock, and the green button to decrease. Sure, those of us in the know will realise that the guy writhing in agony is only an actor (or is he?) – but most participants in the study would be doing it for real. Gripping stuff. But don't be surprised if your television (or your life) disappears in a puff of smoke.

Last year in *The Observer* Germaine Greer argued that 'reality television is not the end of civilisation as we know it – it is civilisation as we know it' (available from members.optushome.com.au/thesquiz/greer.htm). With the internet and interactive TV, the social experiment looks set to become psychology as we know it and more importantly as the general public knows it. Heaven help us all.

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