

A woman of achievement

What is your area of interest?

The debates around sex and the media. The majority of studies are based on lab experiments using male psychology undergraduates, who will watch a film that may be sexually violent, and will then be tested to see how hostile they are to women. Evidently this behaviour isn't representative of all men, or of the usual circumstances people look at porn. In addition, very few studies feature female participants or female researchers. And the results from a lab study are held as having more worth than the testimonies of women who have been abused. So I could see a number of areas for improvement.

What has your research found?

The aim of all this was to establish what people thought about sexually explicit material (SEM), and to see whether these views were linked with viewing material (as argued in existing causal studies), or whether they existed anyway – and could be elicited by a prompt-word or image.

The results suggested that men and women had views about sexual materials, but these were influenced by context. For example, in one study where participants believed an article was from a pornographic magazine they rated it negatively, whilst the same article described as being from a women's magazine was described as supportive. Participants described women in pictures in SEM negatively, but if you asked them to talk about a glamour model without an accompanying picture, they could give you

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Petra Boynton discusses her Woman of Achievement Award for Education (sponsored by Cosmopolitan and Secret), and tells how she believes psychologists need to make better use of the popular media.

Interview by **ANGUS SMYTH.**

the same description – which suggested that people arrive at a study with the views rather than them being caused by sexual materials alone.

Of course, this meant nothing to me if it wasn't useful. My studies allowed me to look at the way SEM is treated in research and suggest improvements to experimental methods generally; particularly around the overuse of psychology students as participants. Outcomes have also allowed me to talk about issues around sexual behaviour, stereotypes, body image; other topics of discussion have been around how we can improve public information against date rape, and media coverage of sex and relationships. Charity groups have latched on to some of the ideas and two women's magazines have run articles on the basis of these outcomes.

Whilst completing my PhD I was also commissioned to complete a community-based study on prostitution. I trained local people to interview prostitute women, to find out about their lives and those who worked with them or lived near the red-light area. This was a real eye-opener in terms of organising research – I was working with 'real' people who had their own ideas about research – not students who were used to doing as they were told. However, it was a really rewarding experience. My best compliment from the study was that many of the working women enjoyed reading the final report – you can't get much better peer review than that!

How did you win the *Cosmopolitan* prize?

I won the prize in September 2000, recognising my achievements in the area of research and education. There were thousands of entries, and 100 women were chosen as the achievers of the year. From these, 10 were selected as winners in each category. My story was chosen partly because of my determination to complete my PhD, despite fending off serious illness and funding my own studies. But, more importantly, because I was never seen as an achiever at school. My parents were wonderfully supportive, but were continually told I wasn't bright, or in the words of one teacher 'I see nothing in her'. I wasn't predicted to do well, and so I wasn't supported. I wasn't a naughty pupil, I was simply considered so average I wasn't worth bothering with. I had no self-esteem when I left school, and still feel resentful that certain teachers felt it acceptable to call me 'thick'. Luckily, I went to a local technical college in Basingstoke, where I had support and teaching – and I changed from someone who'd hated learning, to someone who couldn't get enough of education. The *Cosmopolitan* prize showed my case as an example to other women, and suggested to them that education was an option.

What were the positive and negative aspects of winning the prize?

I experienced a lot of positive aspects. The main one is that my life has changed

completely since winning the prize. I've been invited to do so many things – had my story featured in a number of papers, and even a small film made about me for the BBC. Most researchers only aim to get their work into peer-reviewed journals, but I don't think you can underestimate the impact of being in the mainstream media.

The negative aspects were silly really, but I did find them hurtful. Sadly a few colleagues and academics were either very dismissive about the prize, or made cutting remarks about it. The main criticisms I received were that I was undermining psychology or that I was showing off!

The most bizarre thing was I became a woman in a magazine. I've spent 10 years analysing how women look in magazines, and suddenly I was one of them. It's a very strange feeling to be scrutinised by people – and to then get told what they think of you. My favourite was an old professor I met at a dinner who said: 'Oh, you're not nearly so fat as in your photo.' I've spent much of my life trying to believe what I look like is not as important as what I do – but I've discovered this isn't true. Of course, psychologists have been criticising this for years – particularly feminist psychologists, but I was now in the position of the women I'd been asking other people to talk about – and I didn't really like the feeling.

I also found this happened in interviews. I suddenly saw my words repeated, but in several of the stories they were wrong, or I hadn't said them, or they just didn't sound like me at all. And people only wanted one version. When I worked with the prostitute women, they said they were bored talking about their lives, as no one ever wanted to hear anything apart from what they did with clients. I found interviewers were asking me to talk about my school life, until I sounded like I was describing something dreadful from Dickens. When I asked to talk about other stuff, I was told 'we don't want to hear about that'. So I now have much more respect for my participants – and an understanding about how it feels for them when we reinterpret their lives for our work.

Would you suggest that more psychologists should consider working with the popular media?

Absolutely! The media are crying out for well-informed professionals like psychologists. I think there is a real fear about speaking to the media, or fear that others will not take you seriously. This means many people don't speak to the

media, but some seem to be strangely jealous of those who do. No one has to speak to the media, but as our work is about people I think it is pretty unforgivable to send work only to journals. We cannot rely on work trickling down from journals to the public. If we don't promote it, who's going to know about it?

What advice would you give to psychologists thinking about venturing into the world of media?

The most helpful thing I found was the Society's Media Training Course [see advertisement on p.395]. It really was excellent – taught me lots of things to do, and how to avoid mistakes. I would recommend that any psychologist thinking of doing more media work takes the course – and maybe those who already work with the media could do it as a refresher.

What is your involvement with the Psychology of Women Section (POWS)?

I first heard about POWS from Jane Ussher, who taught me at Sussex. I took her course on the psychology of women, and it just made everything I'd learned make sense. Psychology often reflects the views and ideas of the time, and it's not surprising that a number of areas in psychology are biased against women. I'm a third-generation feminist and proud of it, so an interest in women's psychology was inevitable. However, POWS isn't just about studying women. We look into areas of difference including class, race, and sexuality. We are a diverse group, so my ideas probably aren't reflective of all members – but we are a really friendly and supportive network as well as being academically rigorous. I think many women who are in the BPS could benefit from joining POWS, regardless of whether they feel they are a feminist or not. I joined because it is the most supportive place to present and discuss work. The membership is active at supporting women at so many levels – and I think that it serves as a great academic network. Our conferences are fantastic too. I'm involved with the *POWS Review*, which is a forum for cutting-edge research about or by women. Our policy encourages links between practitioners and research – and the public too.

What do you hope to be doing in the forthcoming years?

Many of the things I wanted have come true over the last few months, so I hope this continues.

Have your dealings with the media helped in 'Bringing psychology to society'? If you've any useful tips, why not share them on the letters page?