



TO THE EDITOR...

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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.

Ethics and *The Experiment*

MANY readers will now have seen *The Experiment* screened on BBC2 in May. Hopefully its broadcast will have laid to rest a series of misconceptions about the study that had previously been reported in the press and, rather more disturbingly, reproduced in *The Psychologist* (March, p.109; May, p.244).

In the May issue, Miller and Philo ('Silencing dissent in academia: The commercialisation of science') discuss reported concerns about our experiment and then quote Philip Zimbardo as saying: 'That kind of research is now considered unethical and should not be redone for sensational TV and *Survivor*-type glamour. I am amazed a British University psychology department would be involved.'

There is something ironic about two experts in critical media analysis basing their own analysis of psychology on unsubstantiated newspaper articles in *The Guardian* (they wrote without having seen *The Experiment* and without bothering to contact us) and crowning their claims with a newspaper quote from Zimbardo reacting to what he had been told by the press about our study! This hardly meets the basic academic criterion that arguments should be based on the evidence, and it misses a simple but crucial point. Zimbardo is talking about his own study as unethical. There he is quite right. He criticises us, having been informed that we are replicating his study. There he is quite wrong.

As anyone who watched the

television programmes will have seen, our experiment differs from the Stanford prison study in terms of its theoretical basis, its operationalisation, the systematic collection of observational, psychometric and physiological data and, most notably, in terms of a raft of ethical safeguards built in to the procedure. We don't have the space to go into all our ethical procedures, but the contrast between our study and the Stanford study is symbolised by the fact that Zimbardo had to be told to stop his study early on ethical grounds, but when we decided to end slightly early on scientific grounds, the ethical committee (which was present or on call 24/7 throughout the study) was more than happy for us to continue.

What really concerns us about all the misinformation is that it creates a smokescreen that obscures the serious and important issues raised by our

research. We undertook the study because we believed that Zimbardo's message concerning the inability of people to resist the roles thrust upon them is both wrong and dangerous. It provides an excuse for tyrants

who can say that the uniform forced them to excess. It disempowers their victims by saying that resistance is futile. For us, and we think our analysis shows it, people *do* have responsibility and choice over the conditions that lead to tyranny. Our aim in *The Experiment* was not so much to get the audience to agree with every step of that analysis as to debate the issues (a debate that, given recent election results in France and England, is all too timely). It would be sad if that aim were to be undermined by inaccuracies in the media that are given credibility by academic repetition. Does it really take us to tell David Miller and Greg Philo not to believe all they read in the press – even *The Guardian*?
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Alex Haslam
University of Exeter

No to commercialisation – Too cosy a view?

THE article 'Silencing dissent in academia: The commercialisation of science' by David Miller and Greg Philo (May 2002) caught my attention by suggesting that a focus on the analysis of texts leads to an inability to discuss material determinants of psychological states. I wondered why they then engaged in an unsubstantiated and unreflective critique of cultural change; conducting a pseudo-analysis of 'texts' that are popular in the media.

As I considered the

connotations of the 'cultural degradation' they describe, I wondered what they make of the increasing reinvention of the past in the discussion of 'dumbed down' drama. In this 'discursive genre', the past is a golden era. Authority figures were so decent and honest as to have no need to be held to account. Social order was so certain that wrongdoers were always strangers, always caught and always punished. There were no interfering journalists, stirring up trouble to sell tabloids. Left-wing students were just

Autism and MMR

THE question of a possible relationship between the trivalent measles-mumps-rubella vaccine and a possible increase in the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders is perhaps more complicated than the article written by Tony Charman (News analysis, April 2002) indicated. This debate has continued for over four years without resolution at the current time, and within the autism research community (encompassing all aspects of research not just those based in psychology) there seems to be a gulf opening between the two opposing sides.

Research has to date not proved a causal relationship between MMR and autism, but conversely neither has it disproved a link. The 'increase' in numbers of people being diagnosed with autism is quite possibly a result of better awareness and improving diagnosis of the condition, but one has at least to explore the possibility that other exogenous factors may also be involved. One only has to look at other organic-based diseases manifesting cognitive and behavioural symptoms such as PKU (phenylketonuria) to realise that environment (in the case of PKU, the dietary-derived amino acid phenylalanine) can play a role.

Given the increasing amount of research directed at the possible organic basis of the syndrome, the role of psychology in both evaluating the outcomes of more biomedically oriented interventions as well as identifying subgroups within the spectrum (possibly as a result of different aetiological factors) is only going to increase. The subject of MMR and autism is not in the most part an issue of parents' wanting to 'blame' something

for their child's condition. On the contrary, many parents purely want to know what they can do to alleviate their child's condition.

Speaking to a very eminent physician on this matter, he replied to me: 'If in doubt examine the patient'. With the improvement in standardised diagnostic criteria and screening instruments, a close examination of the developmental history of children with autism possibly linked to the MMR vaccine, as well as thorough medical examinations, is the key to resolving this issue, rather than sole reliance on epidemiological studies.

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DR Tony Charman argues very clearly in his news analysis piece for what amounts to a change in the role and purpose of psychologists. I would like to ask every psychologist and nearly-psychologist what they think their role is in the MMR debacle and in relation to medicine generally. Unfortunately, if psychologists become, as appears to be the case, more and more affiliated with 'brain sciences', and further from felt experience, I fear there will be a departure from psychology into biology, and we shall become 'enforcers' on behalf of the medical profession. I believe this is already the situation in the MMR debate.

Many psychologists appear to be attaching their own colours to the medical mast in a strange alliance with medical professionals and the government. This in itself appears to be a desertion of our true

role as well as highly risky, given the very real doubts about the vaccine's safety.

We do not have to go very far to find evidence against the MMR vaccine, but we must go more deeply in order to understand the psychology of those who do not want parents to hear it. The medical orthodoxy have their own reasons for preferring parents to conform to their own interpretation and they use every means available, supported by taxpayers money, to influence parental decisions. These include psychological pressure through the demonisation of infectious diseases and fear of harming the child from parental negligence. We must ask ourselves what we think of these methods, which in other circumstances could easily be labelled propaganda.

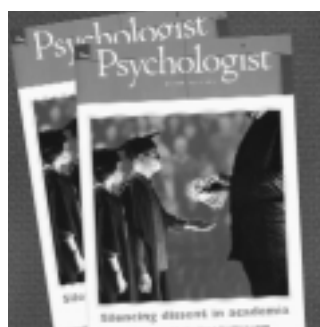
The way forward, as I see it, is for us to use our knowledge of psychology to understand the resistance within the medical profession and the government who depend upon them to conducting a genuine scientific enquiry into the MMR vaccine and its effects. Instead of assuming parents are misguided we need to look at why the medical fraternity insists on denying something so clearly real to them. We are not here to police our culture on behalf of the medical profession, but to support and understand human experience. And because of the broad sweep of our expertise psychologists are in the best possible position to conduct and co-ordinate a truly scientific enquiry into the effects of MMR.

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a strange fringe minority and people in trade were greedy, common people, who could easily be put in their place.

Discourse analysis alerts us to the action in text. Miller and Philo are not describing the passing of 'better times', so much as persuading us to accept a possible future. In a future golden era of psychology there would be no need to make a case for your work, or explain it. Like the gentlemen scientists with private means and friends in government, psychologists would work in splendid

isolation, bringing great goodness to a grateful world by discovering truth. Their theories would of course be too complex for ordinary people to grasp.



They would operationalise their concepts over afternoon tea, in neat and clear terms. Their experiments would be conducted using malleable undergraduates and their funding always renewed.

Perhaps, if graduates sign up to an obscure monolithic approach written in a cryptic language, this sepia-toned world could be preserved for ever. Psychologists would then be free to reach their own conclusions concerning the 'material determinants of psychological states'. This

work would be safe because it would never be divulged to outsiders; whether they be interfering officials, nosy journalists or flashy business executives.

This might sound very nice to Miller and Philo, but excuse me, I do not want to live there. I think perhaps psychologists have struggled with a world that has always been commercial or, as discourse analysis presumes, a contested space.

Simon Wharne
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Birth and the baby

I CONFESS to being quite amazed at how a psychologist can write a whole long article about the psychological impact of caesarian section at birth without at any point making reference to the psychological impact on the baby (Jane Weaver, 'The birthing body', April 2002).

Not only might the attitude towards vaginal birth have a bearing on the mother's

feelings about the baby (worth researching in itself), but the physical and emotional process of vaginal birth, not to mention the physiology of it (the role of vaginal birth in the activation of hormonal systems, etc.) have a profound impact on the mother and baby relationship and on the resolution of trauma.

Not having a vaginal birth can also be a stressor on the baby. This is evidenced in the research that has been done on the effects of perinatal trauma and subsequent somatic and psychological patterning in the infant, which also manifests in the mother-baby pair, and can serve as a template for the child's subsequent experiencing of the world.

The work of Frank Lake, William Emerson, and Franklyn Sills in this area is seminal in marking out the

territory, and there is a potential goldmine for research psychologists who are interested in exploring this, now that the subtle mapping of neurobiological processes and their relationship with emotional development and

trauma resolution is being opened up. What about including the baby in the consideration of the effects of caesarian births, for starters?

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Self-esteem IS a weighty issue

CONGRATULATIONS to Fiona Jones (Media watch, April 2002) for spotting the recent publicity given to Britain's overweight children and for a generally excellent coverage of press reports on this topic. However, I feel that she spoiled her article by jumping on a 'let's knock self-esteem' bandwagon.

It was with some dismay that I read her apparent support of Emler's research, which

concludes that there is no evidence for the negative effects of low self-esteem in children. Emler's conclusion is totally at variance with the results of over 50 years research on this topic, which includes the mammoth meta study of 4500 children by Wylie (1961) as well as more up-to-date research (e.g. Lawrence, 1999). Reputable research over the last 50 years has regularly shown a positive correlation between self-

HUGH LYTTON (1921-2002)

FROM 1969 Hugh Lytton was our colleague in the Department of Educational Psychology, University of Calgary. Prior to this he had served six years at the University of Exeter.

Hugh was born in Germany but left before the war because of anti-Semitism. Consequently, he received all his higher education in England. His first two degrees were in languages, followed by an MA in psychology from the University of Liverpool and a PhD from the University of London. Prior to his doctorate he trained as an educational and clinical psychologist at the Tavistock Clinic. Hugh was a Fellow of both the British Psychological Society and the Canadian Psychological Association.

His early work as a practising educational psychologist was in Midlothian, Scotland. Once he arrived at Exeter he started a long and distinguished career as lecturer and researcher. His early

interests focused on children and families, later expanding his work into such areas as gender differences in socialisation, and the development of conduct disorder and criminality.

Hugh was a meticulous and scrupulous man. He was also very tenacious, sometimes to the point of exasperating his colleagues at departmental meetings. However, throughout various tussles and struggles, I never saw Hugh other than precise, earnest and polite. Socially he was always warm and hospitable, making a clear distinction between personal and professional relations.

Some of his traits stood him in good stead as a researcher of international repute. He was assiduous in his research, designing and applying his methods in a rigorous manner. He wrestled with sources of error and would examine his material in minute detail, debating his perceptions with colleagues through lecture, conversation and publication.

Contrary to the fashion of the times, Hugh was more interested in doing excellent research than churning out papers and books every year. He was in for the long haul and this resulted in publications such as his major work, *Parent-Child Interaction: The Socialization Process Observed in Twin and Singleton Families* (1980). This work gained him considerable international recognition for its theoretical and practical implications.

Often we would see colleagues visiting Hugh from around the world to ask for advice or compare notes and data. He wrote five books, including one on guidance and counselling in British schools and one on creativity. The Italian version of the latter had a preface by the priest-translator indicating that God was more than a little linked to creativity. Apparently, Hugh did not know about this addition before it came out, and was more than a little perplexed by

this intrusion. I remember him saying that his book was about research and people. The increase of Hugh's sample size by One was not entirely appreciated!

Hugh published around seventy peer-reviewed papers and chapters, the last being in 2000. He also blended scientific writing with more practical articles for the general public in the popular press. Hugh will be remembered by many of us as an 'academics' academic', who was also concerned to see his work related to the day-to-day life of the family. The quality and nature of his work serve as important models for those who would aspire to the rank of international scientist.

Hugh is survived by his wife Cornelia, his children Jonathan and Stephanie, and his five grandchildren. He will be greatly missed.

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esteem, achievement and behaviour.

I suspect that both Fiona Jones and Emler have fallen into the trap of regarding self-esteem as the sole determinant of behaviour, when in practice it is clear that the self-esteem variable is only one factor in a multifaceted personality. This is reflected in the research where the correlations are usually small, indicating, as common sense would recognise, that other factors beside self-esteem are also responsible for behaviour. I further suspect that they may have become victims of the not

uncommon confusion over the substantive definition of self-esteem. For instance, are they talking of global self-esteem (an all-round feeling of self-worth), or are they talking of specific self-esteem (self-feeling with regard to a specific topic, such as being overweight)?

In view of the voluminous research over many years on the subject of self-esteem it is disappointing to see quoted in a reputable publication comments such as 'a low sense of self-esteem may not really be so bad', 'high self-esteem is not related to real

achievements', and that 'confident children are more likely to...bully others'.

To equate high self-esteem with negative behaviour shows a complete lack of understanding of the nature of the concept. It also does a grave injustice to the vast number of children who daily have to cope as best they can

with feelings of inadequacy and its negative consequences.

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References

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Wylie, R.C. (1961). *The self-concept*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Justice for litigants and patients

WE would be delighted if it were the case, as D.N. Brooks alleges (Letters, April 2002, in response to our February article 'Unreliable assessment in civil litigation'), that experts include structured interviews as part of their medico-legal assessment. Unfortunately we have between us conducted over 2000 assessments for psychological damage and we can recall at most a handful of cases in which the opposing expert has included a structured interview.

Brooks rightly reminds us of the limitations of DSM-IV, but in the final analysis it is the only show in town and unless we are all singing from the same hymn sheet personal bias is likely to have a field day. Stepping outside of the arena of DSM-IV means entering territory where there are no established standards for reliability across clinicians in assessing psychological distress. It is important that we differentiate between a standardised structured clinical interview (with

proven reliability) and an individual clinician using their own idiosyncratic questions during an assessment.

David Ruthenberg (Letters, April 2002) makes the point that unreliable assessment may be ubiquitous and not confined to the medico-legal area; indeed we referred to the work of Zimmerman and Mattia in this context. This is a very serious matter as treatments both pharmacological and cognitive-behavioural are diagnosis-specific. We suggest that an imbalance has occurred in the energy and resources devoted on the one hand to case formulation and therapeutic skill, and on the other to diagnosis. This lack of attention to diagnostic rigour means that many litigants do not get justice and many patients receive an inadequate service.

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INFORMATION

■ WE are three second-year psychology students looking for experience of, or information about, different careers in psychology. If **anybody in the Wales area or Borders is able to offer their time and experience** we would be grateful to receive information or shadowing work in any area of psychology.

We are dedicated, enthusiastic, hard-working and hoping for a career in psychology.

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■ I'M yet another psychology student graduating this year (expecting a 2:1) who is hoping to gain **voluntary clinical experience**. I'm happy and willing to move anywhere in the country. Any experience would be greatly appreciated, but my particular interest is in personality disorders, as I find people with this diagnosis to often be the most interesting and challenging. If anyone is able to help or offer advice I would like very much to hear from them.

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■ I WOULD like to set up **quality-of-life programmes for individuals and organisational employees** addressing issues such as improvement of relationship, career and social satisfaction. I am currently completing a PhD in psychology at the University of

London and have previously run similar initiatives in South Africa. I am keen to find someone with whom to work who has relevant experience in this area and who would be interested in collaborating with me to set up a programme in the London environs (part-time initially).

Max Blumberg
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■ I AM a psychology graduate and am going to be studying for an **MSc in occupational psychology** in October. I was wondering if there is **any possibility of being sponsored** through the one-year course. I have gained work experience in recruitment in the past six months and feel I would be a worthwhile 'investment' to a company. If anyone can help with this or has any opinion with regard to my being eligible for sponsorship, please get in touch. I will be studying in London.
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■ I AM a second-year psychology student and am looking for a **voluntary work placement over the summer in a forensic setting**, working with prison psychologists. Please could anyone with relevant information get in touch? I can work in the South Wales area.
Nicola Morris