Peak personalities

What sort of people are these Everest climbers? Canadian researchers have been sizing them up on their way to the top. **Geoff Lowe**

In the spring of 2000 Sean Egan was one of 167 climbers from 17 different countries at the Everest Base Camp (at 18,000 feet). All were raring to head for the summit, but had to several idle weeks adapting to the high altitude and waiting for their scheduled slots. This presented a great opportunity for Egan – a researcher in human kinetics at the University of Ottawa – to measure the personality characteristics of the climbers.

Egan's colleague, psychologist Robert Stelmack, had provided him with copies of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised (EPQ-R). Armed with these, Egan visited each climbing team and persuaded 39 climbers (including one female) to participate. Their average age was 40 years, with a range from 26 to 69 years. The EPQ-R provides personality scores for extraversion (sociability), psychoticism (toughmindedness), and neuroticism (anxiety), and also includes a lie scale.

Egan and Stelmack compared the personality scores of their Everest climbers against the standardised, normative scores for males in the 30- to 40-year age range. The scores were higher than average on extraversion and psychoticism, and lower on neuroticism. All climbers were higher than average on the lie scale.

A further comparison was made between those who subsequently reached the summit (N = 17) and those who were unsuccessful (N = 22). There was little difference between them on personality scores, but the non-summit climbers were especially high on the lie scale.

The lower scores for neuroticism indicate lack of worry and low reactivity to stressful situations. 'For mountain climbers,' says Egan, 'this disposition is a necessary asset signalling little pause for worry about falling off the mountain or inability to react to sudden changes.'

People with higher extraversion scores are typically more assertive, more venturesome and more into risk taking. High psychoticism scores reveal aggressiveness, dominance and determination – notable characteristics of high-achieving performers. One would expect these Everest climbers to be toughminded, with high levels of determination and resolve required to tackle this mountain challenge. But we should not be surprised, when they get back home, at the odd fib or bit of embroidery.

Egan, S. & Stelmack, R.M. (2003). A personality profile of Mount Everest climbers. *Personality and Individual Differences, 34*, 1491–1494.

■ *Dr Geoff Lowe is at the University of Hull.*

Fame and fixation

Does 'celebrity worship' have roots in normal personality traits? **JEANETTE SENIOR** *reports.*

THE media clearly think we are obsessed with celebrities – *I'm a Celebrity…Get Me Out Of Here!*, *Celebrity Wife Swap*, a glut of celebrity magazines… At its most extreme, this obsession can lead to stalking. But could celebrity worship also be an extension of normal personality traits, which the media could easily pander to in order to fuel our obsession?

John Maltby (University of Leicester) and his team set out to test the prediction that there are three stages of celebrity worship, mirroring the three dimensions of Eysenckian personality theory: extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism. A large sample from UK universities, workplace and community groups completed a celebrity attitude scale and the abbreviated form of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised.

Different personality components were associated with different types of celebrity worship. Low levels of celebrity worship were associated with extraversion and reflected social aspects to celebrity worship: attitudes and behaviours such as 'My friend and I like to discuss what my favourite celebrity has done', and 'Learning the life story of my favourite celebrity is a lot of fun'. The personality dimension most associated with neuroticism, and of an intermediate level of worship, is categorised by intense personal feelings. This is identified by items such as 'I consider my favourite celebrity to be my soul mate' and 'I have frequent thoughts about my celebrity, even when I don't want to'.

The most extreme form of worship is labelled as borderline pathological, and is associated with psychoticism. It is identified by items such as 'If someone gave me several thousand dollars to do with as I please, I would consider spending it on a personal possession (like a napkin or paper plate) once used by my favourite celebrity' and 'If I were lucky enough to meet my favourite celebrity, and he/she asked me to do something illegal as a favour I would probably do it'.

It may be the case that Eysenckian personality dimensions regulate the degree to which celebrity worshippers are uninhibited in behaviours related to their fixation. Perhaps without the right mix of E, P and N we all have the potential to end up lurking in that popstar's shrubbery.

Maltby, J., Houran, J. & McCutcheon, L.E. (2003). A clinical interpretation of attitudes and behaviours associated with celebrity worship. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 191*, 25–29.

■ *Jeanette Senior is at Tees and North East Yorkshire NHS Trust.*

CONTRIBUTIONS WANTED

Please send lively, informative reviews (up to 400 words) of papers published in peer-reviewed journals (or at proof stage), and a copy of the paper, to *The Psychologist*, St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester, LE1 7DR; e-mail: psychologist@bps.org.uk.

The BPS Research Digest – a free e-mail service aimed primarily at students – is available from this month (see p.484). Here's a taster from the Digest editor, **CHRISTIAN BERESFORD JARRETT**.

Giving really is more rewarding

The reward that comes from helping others could be a longer life! That's the message from Stephanie Brown (University of Michigan) and colleagues. They measured the giving and receiving of emotional support between 423 husbands (all over 65 years old) and their wives, and also how much practical help each person gave, or received, from friends. Crucially, five years later, they looked at who had died. Controlling for a range of factors, including personality, age, health, socio-economic status, they found that older adults who reported helping others were significantly less likely to have died.

Brown, S.L., Nesse, R.M., Vinokur, A.D. & Smith, D.M. (2003). Providing social support may be more beneficial than receiving it. *Psychological Science, 14*, 320–327.

Syllabus advice: Social psychology modules on altruism, and health psychology and abnormal psychology modules on the importance of social support for coping with illness, etc.

The brains of the blind

Up to a quarter of the human brain is involved in visual processing, so what happens to all that grey matter in people born without sight? Previous neuroimaging experiments have shown that in blind people, these visual areas are activated during the reading of Braille, and during verbal generation tasks. Now, using functional neuroimaging, Amir Amedi (Hebrew University, Israel) and colleagues report that primary visual cortex (V1) was activated in 10 people born blind when they recalled abstract words they had memorised one week earlier. Similar activation was not found in seven blindfolded sighted people. Most compelling was the finding that this visual cortex activity was greater in the blind people who remembered the most words. This study complements research suggesting blind people have superior verbal memory, and might explain the tradition in ancient times of relying on blind people to remember interpretations of the Bible for posterity.

Amedi, A., Raz, N., Pianka, P., Malach, R. & Zohary, E. (2003). Early visual cortex activation correlates with superior verbal memory performance in the blind. *Nature Neuroscience, 6*, 758–766.

Syllabus advice: Biological psychology modules on localisation of function in the cerebral cortex.

How could I forget?

In the 1970s a witness that drank at a Liverpool bar with a fugitive criminal for several minutes, later erroneously identified innocent Laszlo Virag to be that criminal, claiming Virag's face was etched on his brain. Inspired by such cases, Amina Memon (University of Aberdeen) and her colleagues examined whether eyewitness memory might somehow become less accurate with prolonged exposure to a criminal's face. There's limited evidence that prolonged exposure might lead witnesses to become overconfident in their memories. However, Memon *et al.* actually found the memory of 164 young and old participants for a criminal to be more accurate, on average, after watching a 45-second crime reconstruction video, compared with a 12-second one. But what's interesting is the fact that all the participants became more confident in their memories after the longer video, regardless of whether they subsequently made an accurate identification. So perhaps jurors should beware, because evidence shows they are often influenced by eyewitnesses' claims of confidence.

Memon, A., Hope, L. & Bull, R. (2003). Exposure duration: Effects on eyewitness accuracy and confidence. *British Journal of Psychology, 94*, 339–354.

Syllabus advice: Eyewitness testimony is the AQA (Spec A) exam board's cognitive psychology critical issue.