

Harry's wild about Big Brother

Scientist and former BA Charles Darwin Award Lecture winner Dr Harry Witchel takes a break from analysing the housemates' body language in Big Brother to talk to **Sue Hordijenko** about politicians, pleasure and perfect pitch . . .

Harry, you were part of the psychology team on this year's Big Brother's Big Brain. How was that?

Fabulous! This year the Big Brother house was more extreme than ever. It was smaller, less private and had more devilish tasks. The housemates were an odd crop, and from the first day there was public outcry as well as fireworks aplenty inside the house. As for working on the Psych team, we have gone from six minutes of pre-recorded material last year to 22 minutes of live interview in front of a studio audience late at night.

You are a specialist in reading body language. Analysing housemate Nikki must have been an interesting task, with all those enormous, exaggerated gestures.

Nikki is a delight to watch because her facial gestures are so extreme. She has a childlike quality of conveying emotions in purest form.

So what can you tell me about my body language right now?

Well, your posture is slightly buckled and your neck is not quite vertical, so I would guess that you have made it to the end of today in a state of slight tiredness, either that or you had an excellent night out last night. No, but really, that is not how I do body language at all – instead of making an overall judgment about you from a single pose, I teach people how to use the timing of changes in body language to piece together what it really means.

You have also been looking at what the body language of some of our leading politicians reveal about them. In your view, what do Tony Blair and Gordon Brown really think of each other?

I think they have a changing relationship. The context is that in terms of nonverbal communication Blair is much more polished. When I have done body language for BBC television, I have had access to private pieces of footage that showed that Brown was jollier than I thought. Also, while Blair always paid obeisance to Brown, Brown definitely did not pay obeisance to Blair,

You can meet Harry at the Festival between 10am and 4.30pm on Monday, September 4, where, with others, he will be exploring the human brain, including the origin of mystical beliefs, comedy and debunking.

particular with regard to eye contact, body contact, and body direction. It looks like they are not angry with one another, but that Brown is still nursing a past hurt.

You've also been analysing the ascent to power of the "great pretender". Have you noticed any marked changes in David Cameron's body language.

David Cameron definitely shows fewer of the physiological signs of "fight or run" response than he used to – turning red, shaking, sweating, shoulders raised. He seems to be acclimatising to his new profile, and his youthful body language will do him no harm with the public.

When you are not in the media spotlight your "day job" is researching the way we react to different types of music. That must be fascinating, but surely we all react differently?

Designing experiments to investigate music is a big challenge. Consistency, and attaining statistically significant results, is one of the main goals; as far as I am concerned, finding any statistically significant results is a big achievement. Probably the best known experiment in the field was done at the Montreal Neurological Institute, in which they did brain scanning during music that led to shivers down the spine, the chills response. We all respond differently. In fact, the first problem we had with our research was finding any musical pieces that elicited the same emotion. Fortunately, Barber's adagio for strings is always sad, the Monkees' I'm a Believer is always happy.

Armed with this knowledge do you see



yourself putting together the formula for the biggest feel good hit of all time?

I have been asked to use science to predict the winners of Eurovision in 2005 and 2006, and I failed miserably both times, although my own taste was spot on. In 2006 we dismissed the chances for Finland immediately because they were a tongue-in-cheek heavy metal band in full regalia. I proposed that they would not be appreciated internationally, because humour is not a "least common denominator" cross-culturally.

Most of your research is about drug safety and cardiac rhythms. What does that have to do with the brain?

I work on disorders of rhythms in the heart, and some of these abnormal and even deadly rhythms can be triggered by what goes on in the brain in response to emotions or events – one woman was sleeping and the sound of her alarm clock caused her to die.

What will you be doing at the festival?

On September 4 I will be hosting The Beautiful Brains, a day-long event of demonstrations, discussion and humour about the workings of the brain (over 11s only). I will kick off the proceedings and to stimulate the public, cajole the speakers and fire up the engagement between the two.

And finally, who's going to win Big Brother?

The bookies have rated Pete as the favourite since week one, and I reckon that is your safest bet. A good second choice is Glyn. They both elicit from the public the magic ingredient for winning big brother, which is: "Aw, bless".

