

# Dr Harry Witchel

## 'Big Brother' analyst

Interview **Kat Levy**

**F**ormer New Yorker Dr Harry Witchel is an expert in physiology and the brain, and is an academic researcher at the University of Bristol. For the last two years he has been part of a team of expert commentators on 'Big Brother's Big Brain', a weekly programme hosted by the ruggedly appealing Dermot O'Leary which features a thorough psychological analysis of the show's contestants.

### What fascinates you about the brain?

The brain has immense power to influence our actions as well as to perceive both consciously and unconsciously the world around us. The influences that it can have include what is called peripheral physiology and that is a particular interest of mine. That is how the heart beats, how people breathe - essentially everything that goes on below the neck. This influence on peripheral physiology is in many ways an indicator of some aspects of our emotional state. (For us simpletons, basically the brain is related to the body, innit?).

### What interests you about being on Big Bro's Big Brain?

I love 'Big Brother'. The opinions on the value of the show vary. Certainly for me, once you've started on it and you've accepted the housemates as your own, it's gripping, it's hard to stop thinking about and it's definitely hard to stop watching. It's like a mini-psychology experiment. In some ways you can discover more about these people than you could about the partner that you live with. Theoretically, you have these guys 24/7. There's nobody you know 24/7 like that. You don't watch your loved ones when they're asleep, you can't see them when they're in the loo, you can't read their diary unless you're a very naughty person...

### So you believe these people on 'Big Brother' are themselves - you don't believe they're putting on a show?

All of them are definitely putting on a show of some description. They are all aware that there are social rules and display rules to abide by.

### What is your opinion regarding the mental health concerns that have been raised during this year's show?

Well, the first mental health concern that came up was a complete media feeding frenzy - worse than a storm in a teacup. It was simply the media getting it wrong. It was when they said that Pete (this year's winner) should not have been allowed in the house because he was a Tourette's sufferer. There was that huge furore where people said he was being exploited for entertainment. Now, having got as far as we have, we can see how wrong the media were. It's obviously done a great deal of good for Pete, whose goal is to be a public performer, it's been great for Tourette's and it's great for the show. And finally, if they had rejected Pete with the opinion that a Tourette's sufferer should not be on BB, it would have had all sorts of legal implications and it would have been discriminating against people with his condition.

### What about Shahbaz, who left after having admitted to feeling suicidal?

There was an issue with Shahbaz but that wasn't actually apparent with the first interview. It was not clear to anyone that he would wind himself up into such a state as he did. But the advantage of keeping him there, oddly enough, is that unlike any place else - including any psychiatric ward in the country - there is 24/7 observation. By any standards, you can't get that in a ward, so there was no chance of him being able to do anything. The main thing is that people are offered therapy and counselling at the end of the show to make sure they're OK.

### Do you think that 'Big Brother' is an adequate representation of society?

Absolutely.

### Really?

Don't be ridiculous!

### Why do you think Pete (this year's winner) was so popular?

There are so many different things that could make him popular but all of them are quite normal and everyday. He's a cool dude, he's good-looking, he's nice, he's entertaining, he doesn't whinge. One sure fire way of winning, in my view, is to be good humoured and smile through adversity.

### Many of the girls are professional whingers. Why is whinging such a detestable trait?

It's just darn negative, isn't it? But it is a great English sport - we don't even have the word in America. I've learned to do it myself and I delight in it. The thing about whinging is that it's usually only yourself and maybe one or two of your friends who find it endearing. I think most people find it really limiting.

### Who was your favourite housemate this time?

Nikki. (Pause). Man, I'm a body language expert, what's not to like?



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