Who is the fairest of them all?
Gendered readings of *Big Brother 2* (UK)

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Introduction

The UK version of *Big Brother* (an Endemol production) was launched in 2000 and had reached its fourth series at the time of writing. Viewers are actively encouraged to view the show 24/7 on E4, which offers a live feed to the *Big Brother* house and options to 'go interactive', with added top-ups in the form of carefully edited daily scheduled shows on Channel 4 (and S4C in Wales). It is up to us to decide which of the housemates is 'evicted' from the house on a weekly basis by phoning or texting our votes, with additional polling on-line, and our decisions are informed by the accompanying media frenzy of endless tabloid speculation. Further analysis is offered by the spin-off show *Big Brother's Little Brother* (also Channel 4), to ensure that we have plenty to talk about with friends and colleagues. Fans of the show find themselves in the company of these 'characters' for a prolonged period of time, within a virtual 'social circle', and are prompted to make judgements about them. So how do viewers relate to those onscreen?

Big Brother 2 began on Friday 25th May, 2001, running for its usual 10 weeks. The official *Big Brother* website posted a link to a questionnaire set up by Janet Jones and Daniel Chandler at the University of Wales Aberystwyth on Saturday 26th June, (during Week 5). We closed the questionnaire on Friday 16th June (during Week 8), having received over 8,000 responses from viewers—2,987 male and 5,173 female (reminiscent of a ratio commonly reported for soap opera audiences). The subset of the data that we are exploring here included demographic data about the viewers themselves plus questions about which characters they 'liked' the most, 'disliked' the most, thought that they were 'most like', most 'wanted to be like', and had most 'sympathy for', as well as about which character was 'most similar' to someone they knew. We also asked for their reasons for making these judgements. At the time of initial posting, seven of the original ten *Big Brother* contestants still lived in the house (Bubble, Amma, Paul, Elizabeth, Dean, Helen, and Brian) along with Josh, an additional housemate who had been introduced later in the series. In previous weeks, three other contestants had been 'evicted' from the house (Penny, Stuart and Narinder), while Bubble, Amma and Josh were 'evicted' during the time that we were gathering the data.

Looking into the mirror

What might we expect in mediated relations between viewers and viewed? Social identity theory suggests that we seek out that which supports our social identity (Abrams & Hogg 1990). Lazarsfeld and Merton used the term *homophily* to describe 'a tendency for friendships to form between those who are alike in some designated respect' (Lazarsfeld & Merton 1954: 23). Successful interpersonal relationships are more often than not based on similar age, socio-economic status, religion and ethnic

background (Berger & Kellner 1964, Kerckhoff 1974, Kandel 1978). The empirical evidence in relation to interpersonal relations overwhelmingly supports the proverbial wisdom that 'birds of a feather flock together' (or 'like attracts like') rather than that 'opposites attract'. While this may be true of interpersonal interaction, does it also apply to what Horton & Wohl (1956) described as 'parasocial relations' between readers (or viewers) and texts? From classical times it has been theorised that audiences seek some kind of reflection of themselves in textual characters. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, argued that we must perceive the tragic hero as sufficiently like us for us to feel pity for (empathy with) his undeserved misfortune. Some theorists argue, more sociologically, that we may be drawn to textual characters similar to us in 'certain major social characteristics, such as sex, age and race' (Maccoby & Wilson 1957: 77). Perceived similarity may involve a certain amount of wishful thinking. The viewer-viewed relation between audience and textual characters is often theorised as something of a 'magic mirror' (Horton & Wohl 1956: 222). Psychoanalytically-oriented theorists have argued that we may narcissistically seek in textual characters an idealised image of what we *would like to be* (an 'ego-ideal') (Zajonc 1954).

What we may call 'the mirror hypothesis' in relation to the moving image, then, is that viewers will tend to relate favourably to those onscreen who are either *like themselves* (the mirror) or who represent what the viewer *would like to be like* (the magic mirror). Empirical evidence has been advanced to support the mirror hypothesis, particularly with regards 'reflections' of gender. For instance, Maccoby and Wilson (1957) found that, among twelve-year-olds, 90% of girls and 84% of boys favoured same-sex leading characters in films (both 'liking' and 'wanting to be like' them).

Is the mirror hypothesis reflected in the *Big Brother 2* data? We will look at each of the key variables in turn.

Age

Viewers who *liked…*	**Under-26s onscreen** Brian, Bubble, Paul, Amma and Helen		**26+ onscreen** Dean, Josh, Stuart, Elizabeth, Narinder and Penny	
	#	%	#	%
Viewers under 26 N=4787	4044	84.5	726	15.2
Viewers aged 26+ N=3389	2717	80.2	650	19.2
	X^2=23.2 (p<0.0001)			

Table 1: Liking, by age

When we compare the viewers who named the onscreen person they most *liked* we find that although the under-26s were overwhelmingly the most liked overall, about 4% more of each group favoured those from their own age-group. This is enough to constitute an extremely significant statistical difference.

Viewers who *wanted to be like…*	**Under-26s onscreen** Brian, Bubble, Paul, Amma and Helen		**26+ onscreen** Dean, Josh, Stuart, Elizabeth, Narinder and Penny	
	#	%	#	%
Viewers under 26 N=4787	587	12.3	1193	24.9
Viewers aged 26+ N=3389	953	28.1	913	26.9
	X^2=121.5 ($p<0.0001$)			

Table 2: Wanting to be like, by age

Asked whom they most *wanted to be like*, the differences became more marked. More than twice as many of the older group wanted to be like one of those popular under-26s, suggesting the influence of the magic mirror.

Viewers who *saw themselves as most like…*	**Under-26s onscreen** Brian, Bubble, Paul, Amma and Helen		**26+ onscreen** Dean, Josh, Stuart, Elizabeth, Narinder and Penny	
	#	%	#	%
Viewers under 26 N=4787	2096	43.8	1656	34.6
Viewers aged 26+ N=3389	865	25.5	1468	43.3
	X^2=202.5 ($p<0.0001$)			

Table 3: Most like, by age

Viewers were much more likely to see themselves as most like one of their own age group onscreen than as like one of the other age-group. Here, the differences become very dramatic as the mirror comes into play.

Ethnicity

Viewers who *liked…*	**White onscreen**		**Non-white onscreen** Dean, Amma & Narinder	
	#	%	#	%
White Viewers N=7834	7036	89.8	764	9.8
Non-white Viewers N=342	274	80.2	63	18.4
	X^2=27.1 ($p<0.0001$)			

Table 4: Liking, by ethnicity

Open-ended responses referred to race only in the context of *disliking* a housemate. For instance, of Bubble, one viewer wrote: ‘He’s just white trash’ while another described Amma as a ‘moody two faced black bitch’. The statistical comparison of white versus non-white viewers shows that while the (more numerous) housemates who happened to be white were generally markedly more popular regardless of the ethnicity of viewers, the non-white housemates were nearly twice as popular amongst the non-white viewers, who were also less likely to like the white housemates

onscreen. Clearly, the mirror matters for a significant minority. Similarly significant differences emerged when we looked at the issue of whom viewers *saw themselves as most like*. A majority of white viewers saw themselves as most like a housemate who happened to be white. While, again, more non-white viewers favoured a white rather than a non-white housemate in this respect, over 30% of non-white viewers saw themselves as most like one of the non-white characters – once again, the mirror makes a difference.

Viewers who *saw themselves as most like…*	**White onscreen**		**Non-white onscreen** Dean, Amma & Narinder	
	#	%	#	%
White Viewers N=7834	4348	55.5	1489	19.0
Non-White Viewers N=342	144	42.1	104	30.4
	X^2=32.4 (p<0.0001)			

Table 5: Most like, by ethnicity

Social class

The only socio-cultural indicator that we had for the viewers was newspaper readership. The viewers' own open-ended responses to why they chose particular characters in response to our various questions provided scattered references to social class which referred to five of the housemates: Bubble – the only one referred to explicitly by some viewers as working-class; Dean – referred to dismissively as a *Guardian*-reader by one viewer; Paul, referred to explicitly as middle-class, and Stuart and Elizabeth, both referred to variously as middle-class and upper-class. We took the viewers' lead and examined the pattern of attitudes to these five housemates.

Viewers who *liked…*	**Bubble**		**Dean**		**Paul**		**Stuart**		**Elizabeth**	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Tabloid[1] Readers N=249	653	15.4	153	3.6	213	5.0	17	0.4	110	2.6
Broadsheet[2] Readers N=2039	170	8.3	184	9.0	66	3.2	19	0.9	153	7.5
	X^2=216.3 (p<0.0001)									

Table 6: Liking, by social marker

[1]*The Daily Mail, The Daily Star, The Express, The Mirror* and *The Sun*
[2]*The Financial Times*, *The Guardian, The Independent, The Telegraph* and *The Times*

Only seven viewers referred explicitly to class as the reason for liking one of the housemates, and all of these referred to Bubble. Ten others alluded to social class as a reason for *disliking* one of the other housemates. The statistical comparison of tabloid versus broadsheet readers on the issue of *liking* produced an extremely significant difference. Clearly, tabloid readers were much more likely to like Bubble than broadsheet readers were, while broadsheet readers were much more likely to like Dean or Elizabeth. So once again the mirror comes into play for some viewers. Perceived membership of one's own social group seems to have interacted with the likeability of those onscreen for some viewers. However, the largest percentage

difference (over Bubble) is only 7.1% and overall these figures account for only 27% of the tabloid readers and 28.9% of the broadsheet readers.

Viewers who *wanted to be like…*	Bubble		Dean		Paul		Stuart		Elizabeth	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Tabloid Readers N=249	338	8.0	284	6.7	107	2.5	54	1.3	248	5.8
Broadsheet Readers N=2039	59	2.9	236	11.6	38	1.9	24	1.2	165	8.1
	X^2=106.1 (p<0.0001)									

Table 7: Wanting to be like, by social marker

Echoing the pattern of liking, tabloid readers were much more likely to see Bubble as a model than broadsheet readers were while broadsheet readers were more likely to name Dean or Elizabeth as models than tabloid readers were. Here we see an intimate link between liking and wanting to be like.

Viewers who *saw themselves as most like…*	Bubble		Dean		Paul		Stuart		Elizabeth	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Tabloid Readers N=249	394	9.3	338	8.0	276	6.5	40	0.9	579	13.6
Broadsheet Readers N=2039	72	3.5	269	13.2	76	3.7	33	1.6	438	21.5
	X^2=160.9 (p<0.0001)									

Table 8: Most like, by social marker

As for *seeing themselves as most* like one of the housemates, the pattern is repeated with the same pivotal housemates in this regard—Bubble once again attracting more tabloid support while Elizabeth and Dean attract more broadsheet support. Interestingly, the largest percentage point difference here (7.9) relates to Elizabeth.

Sexual orientation

We considered the issue of sexual orientation because there were two self-identifying gay men in the programme – Brian and Josh. There were also four apparently heterosexual men in the programme but Brian was so widely popular that he became the eventual winner. There were no self-identifying lesbians in the programme this time round (although there were passing references to Amma being bisexual). We focus here on the gay male housemates and on male viewers.

Viewers who *liked…*	**Heterosexual Same-Sex Onscreen**		**Non-Heterosexual Same-Sex Onscreen**	
	#	%	#	%
Heterosexual Male Viewers N=2301	952	41.4	702	30.5
Non-Heterosexual Male Viewers N=686	61	8.9	480	70.0
	X^2=349.5 (p<0.0001)			

Table 9: Liking, by orientation

A massive majority of non-heterosexual viewers listed one of the two self-identifying gay housemates as the person onscreen whom they most liked, while of the heterosexual viewers, those who favoured heterosexual housemates clearly outnumbered those who liked one of the gay housemates. Here the principle of homophily is very strongly evident.

Viewers *seeing self as like…*	**Heterosexual Same-Sex Onscreen**		**Non-Heterosexual Same-Sex Onscreen**	
	#	%	#	%
Heterosexual Male Viewers N=2301	1381	84.9	246	15.1
Non-Heterosexual Male Viewers N=686	122	25.8	351	74.2
	X^2=625.9 (p<0.0001)			

Table 10: Most like, by orientation

Even more dramatically, these groups showed almost opposite trends in relation to those whom they saw themselves as *being like*. In relation to same-sex screen housemates an overwhelming majority of each group of viewers saw themselves as being like someone of the same orientation on the screen. A similar pattern (only slightly less dramatically polarised) applied to *wanting to be like* one of the onscreen housemates.

Viewers *wanting to be like…*	**Heterosexual Same-Sex Onscreen**		**Non-Heterosexual Same-Sex Onscreen**	
	#	%	#	%
Heterosexual Male Viewers N=2301	809	64.2	451	35.8
Non-Heterosexual Male Viewers N=686	88	20.7	337	79.3
	X^2=239.8 (p<0.0001)			

Table 11: Wanting to be like, by orientation

Sex

Now we turn to the issue of whether (regardless of sexual orientation) there was any relation between the sex of the viewer and that of the onscreen character that they most favoured in terms of the various factors we were concerned with – *liking*, *seeing oneself as like* and *wanting to be like*.

Viewers *liking…*	Same-sex onscreen		Other-sex onscreen	
	#	%	#	%
Male Viewers N=2987	2195	73.5	773	25.9
Female Viewers N=5173	1162	22.5	3991	77.2
	X^2= 2052.3 ($p<0.0001$)			

Table 12: Liking, by orientation

If we do a statistical comparison of liking same-sex versus liking other-sex the difference between male and female viewers is very dramatic indeed. At first glance we might assume that this is purely because the male housemates happened to be more likeable. If that were the case, it might be fairer to make the comparison absolute rather than relative—to males and females rather than same-sex and other-sex. Yet, an absolute comparison would still produce a Chi-Square value of 12.5—much lower, but nevertheless a very highly significant difference ($p<0.001$).

The pattern for the following factors will make clearer why a relative comparison may be justified. We might point to there being 6 male housemates compared to 5 female ones, but on the other hand female viewers were in a substantial majority (63:37). We have already seen that *liking* is linked to the other factors. The top three in terms of overall popularity amongst our viewers were: Brian (4167), Helen (1149) and Bubble (1040). Brian was the most popular among both males (1115) and females (3046), although this represented only 37.3% of the males in comparison to 58.9% of female viewers. Among male viewers, Bubble was the next most popular (18.6%), while among female viewers the next most popular was Helen (14.8%). Brian's extraordinary popularity certainly skewed the figures. But, as we shall see, there is more to this data than meets the eye.

Viewers *seeing self as like…*	Same-sex onscreen		Other-sex onscreen	
	#	%	#	%
Male Viewers N=2987	2100	70.3	226	7.6
Female Viewers N=5173	3010	58.2	735	14.2
	X^2=105.02 ($p<0.0001$)			

Table 12: Most like, by sex

In terms of *seeing oneself as like* a housemate, in the figures overall (regardless of the sex of the viewer) the top seven were: Elizabeth (1328), Helen (979), Brian (768), Dean (762), Narinder (612), Bubble (567) and Paul (428). Among male viewers, Dean topped this list (618), followed by Brian (440) and Bubble (415) and then Paul (385),

whereas among female viewers the top four were Elizabeth (1215), Helen (947), Narinder (560) and then Brian (326). In general, viewers were more likely to *see themselves as being like* a same-sex housemate on screen. The descriptive statistics bear out the general principle of homophily. However, a new pattern also emerges: statistical analysis demonstrates an extremely significant difference between male and female viewers in this respect. A much larger proportion of female than of male viewers (nearly *double*) saw themselves as being like an other-sex screen housemate, while 12% fewer females than males saw themselves as being like a same-sex person on screen. This may lead us to see the data on *liking* in a somewhat different light.

For *wanting to be like*, the overall order was very clearly led by Brian (1488), followed by Dean (669), Helen (641), Elizabeth (515), Bubble (479), Narinder (436), Josh (377), Amma (208), Paul (186), Stuart (87) and Penny (22). For males the top five were: Brian (494), Dean (394), Josh (294), Bubble (291) and Paul (144). For female viewers the top five were: Brian (992), Helen (568), Elizabeth (450), Narinder (380) and Dean (275). In relation to this issue, the statistical difference between male and female viewers was even more dramatic. Female viewers were *equally likely* to *want to be like* an other-sex housemate as a same-sex one. We can no longer downplay this apparent deviation from the primary tendency towards homophily in both interpersonal and parasocial relations in the case of sex.

Viewers *wanting to be like…*	**Same-Sex Onscreen**		**Other-Sex Onscreen**	
	#	%	#	%
Male Viewers N=2987	1685	56.4	219	7.3
Female Viewers N=5173	1599	30.9	1592	30.8
	X^2=772.8 (p<0.0001)			

Table 13: Wanting to be like, by sex

Reviewing the theories

This very marked pattern (both in parasocial and interpersonal relations)—which is invariably characterised as a greater relational 'flexibility' among females (rather than as a relative 'constriction' amongst males) has been noted before in the research literature. For instance, Horton & Wohl remarked that in watching films we are encouraged to 'identify' with the protagonist but that 'resistance is… manifested when some members of an audience are asked to take the opposite-sex role— the woman's perspective is rejected more commonly by men than vice versa' (Horton & Wohl 1956: 221). The psychologist Grant Noble observed that 'researchers have long been puzzled because girls tend to "identify" with both male and female performers... Boys, on the other hand, tend to identify only with male heroes' (Noble 1975: 53). Building on Freudian theory, Mulvey asserted that 'for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second Nature*' (even if it 'does not sit easily') (Mulvey 1988: 72). Indeed, Anneke Smelik suggests that 'it has become a general assumption of feminist film theory that female spectators are more fluid in their capacity to identify with the other gender' (Smelik 1999). Neither film theory nor psychoanalytic theory is noted for an attention to empirical evidence, so we offer here some brief references to relevant findings.

In studies of 'modelling' in interpersonal relations, boys have been found to favour same-sex models more strongly than girls do (Bandura *et al.* 1961, Bandura, Ross & Ross 1963, Slaby & Frey 1975, Perry & Perry 1975, Bussey & Bandura 1984, Frey & Ruble 1992, Luecke-Aleksa *et al*. 1995). In one study, as early as 2 years of age, girls showed no differential emulation of female- and male-stereotyped activities whereas boys showed a stronger tendency to emulate male-stereotyped activities (Bauer 1993). Grusec & Brinker (1972) found that after 5- and 7-year-old children had watched a male and a female model simultaneously presented, the boys remembered significantly more of the actions of the male than of the female model, while the girls showed a less clear tendency to remember more of the actions of the female than of the male model.

Such findings have been echoed in studies of parasocial relations, where Reeves & Miller found that 'girls are more likely to identify with male characters than boys are to identify with females' (Reeves & Miller 1978: 83). Miller & Reeves (1976) found that 3rd-6th graders (approximately 8- to 11-years-old) overwhelmingly wanted to be like same-sex characters on television. However, while boys just named male characters, only about 70% of those named by girls were female. Reeves & Miller found that 'while both sexes identified more with same-sex TV characters… females are almost equally as likely to identify with all characters on television as they are with same-sex models' (Reeves & Miller 1978: 83). Hoffner (1996) found that amongst 155 children aged 7-12 nearly all of the boys (91%) chose favourite television characters of the same-sex while just over half (52.6%) of the girls did.

A significant developmental pattern has been noted. 'Gender constancy'—primarily a recognition of the relative stability of sexual identity—occurs about 6 years of age (Slaby & Frey 1975). Several studies have suggested that pre-school or 'pre-constant' children—boys or girls—tend to pay more attention to female than to male television characters (Anderson & Levin 1976, Alwitt *et al.* 1980, Luecke-Alecksa *et al.* 1995). Differential patterns emerge with the acquisition of gender constancy. Several studies have reported that for boys (though not for girls) gender constancy is associated with higher attention to a same-sex character on television (Slaby & Frey 1975, Luecke-Alecksa *et al.* 1995).

Many explanations have been offered for this pattern. In the Freudian tradition, identification with the same-sex parent is seen as stronger for boys than for girls because boys have to distance themselves from a primary identification with the mother. Chodorow (1978) argues that the normative pattern is for males to define themselves negatively in terms of difference from females. Certainly, sex-typing in boys has been found to be more rigid and to constrain cross-sex behaviour (Bem & Lenney 1976; Perry & Bussey 1979; Brookes-Gunn & Matthews 1979; Archer 1984, Frey & Ruble 1992). Boys tend to have a more homogeneous conception of sex roles than girls do; girls are less strongly identified with female sex roles than boys are with male sex roles (Brown 1957). Indeed, a complicating factor is that 'it is conceivable that boys would be reluctant to admit to identification with female figures even if they experienced it' (Durkin 1985: 81).

Girls may be less sex-typed because they suffer less intensive sex role pressure from adults and peers. It is more socially acceptable for females to behave in ways traditionally associated with the other sex (Huston 1983). Boys take 'sex appropriate

behaviour' more seriously (Bandura 1986) and monitor their behaviour more than girls because they are more likely to be rebuked when this is seen to deviate from gender norms (Martin 1993, Fagot 1985). Parents (especially fathers) promote stronger differentiation of gendered conduct with boys than with girls (Maccoby & Jacklin 1974, Langlois & Downs 1980, Bradley & Gobbart 1989, Fagot & Hagen 1991). Bandura notes that boys tend to be criticised by teachers for engaging in activities considered inappropriate for their sex (Bandura 1986: 93). Peers also police masculinity among boys (Carter & McCloskey 1984). Negative sanctions for cross-sex behaviour are typically more severe for males than for females. The label 'sissy' is much more negative than 'tomboy' (Reeves & Miller 1978; Frey & Ruble 1992).

According to social learning theory, the differential imitation of same-sex models is a key developmental phase helping to establish sex role identity. In relation to parasocial relations, the favouring of male characters onscreen by adolescent female viewers may sometimes, of course, represent heterosexual physical attraction (Fischoff *et al.* 1997, Durkin 1985: 81).

Girls realise at an early age the positive social valuation of male roles compared to female ones (Kuhn, Nash & Brucken 1978, Meyer 1980). Males have a more privileged social status. Traditionally female-related activities and characteristics are still less valued than male-related ones (Connor & Serbin 1978, Hall & Halberstadt 1980, Zalk & Katz 1978). Girls thus have an incentive to emulate other-sex models because of the perceived social power (rather than gender) of such models (Bandura, Ross & Ross 1963, Slaby & Frey 1975, Bussey & Bandura 1984) as well as notions of 'acceptance and approval' (Kohlberg 1967: 163). Sometimes, female attraction to male figures onscreen may be an attraction to stereotypically 'masculine' traits (Hoffner 1996: 399). Boys have a double incentive to favour same-sex models, because they are "like self" and because of perceived prestige and power (Kohlberg 1967: 136).

While it would be epistemologically naïve to expect onscreen representations to 'reflect' demographic realities in the everyday world such representations do remain symbolically important in reflecting dominant *values* in the world in which they were produced. Indeed to ignore this dimension would be to accept dominant values as 'natural' and unchallengeable. One posited reason for any tendency for more women than men to identify with other-sex characters onscreen is the overall under-representation of women onscreen (Reeves & Miller 1978: 82-3; Durkin 1985: 81; Hoffner 1996: 390; Fischoff *et al.* 1997). Luecke-Alecksa *et al.* (1995) argue that boys may need to observe adult same-sex models onscreen more than girls do partly because boys have less exposure to adult male models in everyday life. Girls, on the other hand, have less choice of female screen characters to relate to. A survey published in 2002 by the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) surveyed cinema and primetime television in the USA, declaring that 'women… remain underrepresented in television and film'. It was reported that (although women constituted around 51% of the US population), 'men received 62% of the roles cast in 2001' (SAG 2002). The proportions were much the same as in previous years.

It is not simply a matter of relative proportions, however. Female characters on television and in the cinema have often been cast in minor roles or as victims while male characters onscreen have long enjoyed more exciting and interesting roles.

However, some theorists argue that there may also be deeper biases. Mulvey has famously argued that (notably in its objectification of women as bodies on display) camerawork has favoured the [heterosexual] male spectator. She declares that ‘regardless of the actual sex… of any real live movie-goer’ (Mulvey 1988: 69), ‘the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist’ (Mulvey 1975: 12). She theorised that even female moviegoers thus identify with (and become accustomed to identifying with) what she termed the ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey 1975: 11). However, this purely theoretical stance has been widely criticised as overly deterministic.

Lauzen & Dozier (1999) noted a correlation between the numbers of women employed behind the scenes and the extent to which women are shown on the screen. Women still constitute only a tiny minority of the writers, producers and executives in the television and film industries. Anticipated box-office returns obviously play a key role in deciding what kinds of movies are made. Many commentators refer to a widespread assumption amongst film-makers and television producers that while genres traditionally favoured by (and primarily featuring) men (such as the western, detective story, science fiction, action-adventure) will also attract some women viewers, genres primarily associated with women (such as romance, domestic melodrama, family saga) tend to alienate the male audience (Seiter 1995: 166 & 168). Fischoff *et al.* (1997) have provided evidence supporting this assumption. Men were more inflexible than women in their inclusion of films deemed as aimed at the other sex. Women were generally less dismissive of action-adventure films than men were of the romance genre. However, men in older age-groups were less gender-stereotypical in their film preferences and did include romantic films amongst their favourites. This is of course an additional disincentive against producers taking much account of female viewers. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that ‘relative to films with the male point of view… few women’s films are produced’ (Fischoff *et al.* 1997).

Qualitative data

With the quantifiable patterns in mind, coupled with an outline of the research findings pertaining to gender and ‘parasocial relations’, we set about deciding upon a more specific focus for assessing the qualitative questionnaire responses.

Given the sheer volume of data that we collected, we decided to look in detail at the ways in which male and female respondents differentially related to the characters on-screen. We wanted to ascertain whether the gender of the respondent had a bearing on the type of *Big Brother* characters that they saw themselves as being *‘most like*’ and the reasons that they gave for this. By extracting the key issues that became apparent when reviewing the literature, we were particularly mindful of the functioning or role of the ‘mirror’ phenomenon in relation to how the male and female respondents differentially related to the male and female *Big Brother* characters. That is to say, the lower likelihood of male respondents relating to an opposite-sex *Big Brother* character, and whether differential responses could be accounted for by a clearly apparent awareness of gender (by the respondent and in relation to the *Big Brother* character).

Given that the programme was primarily targeted at the ‘youth’ audience, we concentrated here on responses given by those under the age of 26. We likewise

focused on the greatest volume of responses as per ethnic origin, extracting all responses made by 'white' viewers. We then narrowed things further by looking primarily at tabloid readerships (the so-called 'working-class majority'). As a result, we dealt with four key sub-sets of respondents:

- heterosexual white male tabloid readers under-26
- heterosexual white female tabloid readers under-26
- non-heterosexual white male tabloid readers under-26 (including those identifying themselves as gay, bisexual or 'not sure'), and
- non-heterosexual white female tabloid readers under-26

These sub-sets could arguably be seen as the most substantial and/or important elements of the questionnaire data we collected because they formed the majority response and could be seen as broadly 'representative' of the *Big Brother 2* viewers as a whole.

It should be noted from the outset that there was a slight bias towards commenting on and responding to the *Big Brother* characters who remained in the house the longest. The first two housemates to be evicted from the house (Penny and Stuart), for example, initiated very few responses, while those who remained until the final week (Brian, Helen, Dean and Elizabeth) elicited the greatest number of responses. One might suggest that this would be expected given that prolonged acquaintance with the longer-running *Big Brother* characters afforded the audience more time to form opinions about them. While we retain an awareness of this issue, we were not overly concerned about whether it skewed the overall patterns of response, especially given the fact that there was a fairly equal gender balance amongst the housemates when the questionnaire was posted on-line.

We approached the qualitative data on a number of different, increasingly penetrative levels. We began by asking ourselves whether there were any general patterns in the responses made by *all* the male respondents in relation to the female *Big Brother* characters, and *all* the female respondents in relation to the male *Big Brother* characters. Then, we refined our focus by looking specifically at the responses given by members of the four sub-sets outlined above. The main question was whether the male and female respondents saw themselves as being most like onscreen characters for the same or for different reasons. Within the first stage of analysis (looking at responses by all the respondents), we attempted a basic categorisation of the nature of the qualitative responses – the reasons why they saw themselves as being most like a particular *Big Brother* character. This came under closer scrutiny at the second stage of response analysis (looking at specific sub-sets). It was possible to identify a number of common response patterns regarding how the respondents identified with the *Big Brother* characters. What was most interesting, however, was the fact that the respondents made few references to gender.

In general, the respondents (whether male or female and whether responding to male or female *Big Brother* characters) referred to a number of common factors – a generalised approach to determining 'likeness' – which might feasibly be accounted for in terms of the 'mirror' phenomenon. There were even many instances of viewers remarking on the mundane fact that they shared the same name as a *Big Brother* character. We were able to generate certain key fields of response pertaining to:

‘positive’ and ‘negative’ character traits, physical appearance, demographics (in the broadest sense of lifestyle and social background), the ‘self’ as perceived by the self (i.e. considering oneself as being like a *Big Brother* character based on how one sees oneself – the ‘mirror’) and the ‘self’ as perceived by others (i.e. considering oneself as being like a *Big Brother* character based on how others see you). Each of these fields of response will be considered in turn.

Character traits

Of all the reasons given for being most like a *Big Brother* character, the dominant response type was reference to character traits (both positive and negative). On the whole, the respondents all seemed to value the same kinds of seemingly ‘positive’ character traits, such as someone having a good sense of humour (discussed in detail later), being laid-back and easy-going, or being honest. Likewise, the respondents picked up on and criticised similar ‘negative’ character traits such as aggression, loudness, and being argumentative or offensive. Character traits were clearly seen by the respondents as being a powerful tool with which to ‘measure’ and assess which of the *Big Brother* characters they considered themselves to be most like. Indeed, of those who offered a reason as to why/how they identified with a given character, 79.6% of the heterosexual males and 90% of the heterosexual females referred to at least one character trait. Similarly, 84.7% of the non-heterosexual males and 96% of non-heterosexual females also referred to one or more character trait.

While slightly differing descriptive terms were used, the basic nature of the responses towards character traits generated a strong picture of how the audience tended to perceive (and consequently ‘characterise’) the *Big Brother* characters. Interestingly, these descriptive terms were essentially ‘neutral’ in the sense that it would be impossible to generate a list of gender-based binary oppositions pertaining to differential male and female responses towards male and female *Big Brother* characters, hence suggesting the perceived unimportance of gender.

Physical appearance

In seeking to reveal the relative importance of physical appearance as a factor in assessing ‘likeness’, we considered references to the general appearance of the characters (facial features and physique), hair cut and hair colour, and clothes or fashion sense. For the most part, physical appearance was noted if respondents perceived themselves as possessing similar attributes to the *Big Brother* characters. This tendency might arguably be said to (almost literally!) reflect the classic conception of the ‘mirror’, in that an individual seeks out someone ‘like’ them. Within the entire sample of responses, those who took exception to an aspect of physical appearance – as being ‘unlike’ themselves in some way – contradicted the pronounced trend of seeing oneself as being ‘the same’ in this respect. Within the heterosexual male sub-set, for example, only Bubble and Stuart provoked mixed responses from those who wished to make distinctions. In the case of Stuart, the only respondent to refer to his physical appearance stressed that he didn’t have anywhere near the same kind of ‘muscles’, while one respondent claimed to be ‘not as ugly’ as Bubble was, and two others drew the line at his wearing stupid hats!

Similarly, in the context of the heterosexual female sub-set, responses were fairly consistent and straightforward for all the *Big Brother* characters, except for Helen. The main issue to arise from the data was Helen's blond hair colour. It is arguable that this was one of Helen's most distinguishing features, but it is also something that has endless socio-cultural connotations. Indeed, the issue is fraught with complexity in the context of this data because it was often unclear whether the respondents were simply referring to 'blond hair' as a point of fact, or whether they referred to 'blond' in relation to apparent levels of intelligence, as a code word connoting someone who is stupid, thick, dizzy and/or dumb. There were numerous comments to the effect of: 'I'm like Helen, but I'm not as blond as she is'. This is an intriguing point to note, in that physical appearance can often act as a precursor for judgements about character and even metamorphose into a kind of character trait in its own right.

Demographics

When making judgements about 'likeness', some of the respondents did refer to age, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, class/social background, ethnicity or profession. These demographic factors might be interpreted as having varying degrees of impact and significance both to the respondents and to the wider society – an effective demonstration of the 'mirror' being tilted at different angles.

One notable pattern that emerged was the divide between those respondents who saw themselves as being most like a *Big Brother* character as a direct result of 'demography', and those who saw themselves as being most like a *Big Brother* character except for a particular demographic detail that did not 'match' with their own. The responses to Brian and Josh were interesting within the context of the heterosexual white male sub-set, for example, given that both characters were openly gay. While many of the respondents saw themselves as being most like Brian, sexual orientation was an issue for 13 of the 78 who gave a reason because they took great pains to stress that they themselves were 'not gay'. Likewise, 4 of the 7 individuals who saw themselves as being most like Josh distanced themselves from the 'gay thing'. Similar patterns were evident in the heterosexual female sub-set. This trend seemed indicative of the fact that 'demography' could act as a form of distinction, as much as a point of relation – a kind of 'anti-mirror' as much as a 'mirror'.

Characters such as Bubble and Paul, on the other hand, prompted more definite 'like-drawn-to-like' reasons based on demographic factors such as class/social background, in that they were frequently seen as representing 'London geezers', 'lads' or 'normal blokes down the pub'. Similarly, Dean drew positive responses for being a Brummie and a bit older than the other contestants, Brian drew parallels for being Irish and Helen for being Welsh. These qualitative responses clearly tie in with the quantitative data outlined earlier, and support the 'mirror' idea in its most fundamental sense.

Gender prompted distinctions from all audience sub-sets, with frequent reference to being most like a *Big Brother* character *apart from sex*. In the context of the non-heterosexual male and female respondents, for example, two men saw themselves as being most like Elizabeth and Narinder respectively, even though they stressed that they were 'not female', while two women saw themselves as being most like Bubble and Josh respectively, even though they were 'not male'. Here, at least, the respondents were clearly aware of gender as a differential factor, although one could

argue that because the greatest proportion of qualitative responses made no reference to gender it was largely ‘invisible’. Again, the nature of the distinctions made in the context of demographics might point at contradictions and tensions between the ‘mirror’ and the acknowledgement of ‘difference’.

Intelligence

An interesting branch of demography, tied in with the factors of social class and background, which became apparent as a distinct reason for acknowledging ‘likeness’ was the apparent intelligence of certain *Big Brother* characters. We looked at issues relating to: intellect, levels of education, apparently high and/or low intelligence. Interestingly, all references to ‘intelligence’ pertained to the apparently high levels of intellect exhibited by the *Big Brother* characters, except in the context of Helen where respondents consistently referred to her apparent stupidity. In these instances, respondents either admitted to being as ‘thick’ as Helen was, or marginally less stupid.

In the case of Helen, the heterosexual female respondents were divided in their reference to her ‘intelligence’. While 57 of the 434 respondents followed the general trend of admitting that they were as thick as she was, 12 of the 434 respondents went to lengths to stress that they were not nearly as stupid. One particularly amusing response might, however, lead us to suspect that levels of ‘stupidity’ were fairly consistent amongst those who saw themselves as being like Helen as one respondent professed: ‘(I) do pride myself with a little more interlectual (*sic*.) skills’!

One interesting and more general point to note was that there was often a positive correlation between apparent intellect and perceived social class. Dean and Elizabeth emerged as the two characters most frequently perceived as intelligent, and were additionally referred to as being ‘middle class’ or ‘well educated’ (and therefore ‘middle class’ by merit), supporting the emergent patterns from the quantitative data in relation to newspaper readership.

Concepts of the ‘self’

There was a greater tendency for respondents to assess *Big Brother* characters in terms of the ‘self’ as perceived by the self, rather than in terms of the ‘self’ as perceived by others. However, one might reasonably account for this given that many more individuals possess a stronger concept of how they see themselves compared with how they are seen by others, so ensuring a clearer basis for comparison.

Two further interesting phenomena emerged from an initial ‘sweep’ of the qualitative responses, with implications for perception of the ‘self’ in relation to the ‘mirror’ phenomenon. Firstly, many respondents often interpreted ‘liking’ and ‘being most like’ a *Big Brother* character as being one and the same thing (something already apparent in patterns that emerged from the quantitative data). In other words, if they liked a particular character for whatever reason, they were also likely to see themselves as being most like that character. This might well be a case of ‘like choosing like’ in the sense of the ‘mirror’ – seeking out a similar individual and forming a bond with them. Alternatively, one might seek out individuals perceived to be ‘like’ oneself as a form of ego-boost, whereby a recognisable and ‘likeable’ trait in

one person can be transferred to the self as being equally 'likeable' (particularly in the eyes of others), illustrating the concept of the 'magic mirror'.

Secondly, a number of respondents talked about themselves as being most like not just one but a composite of more than one *Big Brother* character. That is to say, the respondents tended to pick and choose a selection of different character traits and behaviours, as exhibited by more than one character, seeking to build a picture of how they saw themselves. A (heterosexual) male respondent, for example, when giving a reason as to why he saw himself as being most like Paul, commented: 'I'm more like a cross between Brian and Paul. Like Brian, I can be funny, serious and caring. While like Paul, I can handle pressure without letting it get me down and I never let my head get too big when being complimented'. Similarly, a (heterosexual) female respondent commenting on Elizabeth noted: 'I am torn between Elizabeth – because although I stick to my beliefs I can also be a very calming influence, Amma – because I find it hard to talk about my true feelings and although loud I'm quiet around louder people, and Paul – because I'm vain'. This tendency to 'identify' with more than one *Big Brother* character points at the fact that seeing oneself as being most like someone is highly complex and very much down to how individuals perceive others (often in the context of or in relation to themselves).

Humour

An interesting factor came into play in relation to the 'self' or more specifically the 'social self', across all viewer sub-sets, which was consistent and universal reference to the importance of humour. We found repeated patterns of response while looking at the abundance of references to: sense of humour; being humorous; being fun/ny; being a joker, prankster, trickster, entertainer or comedian; being witty or 'a laugh', or being comical and amusing, which also feeds back into the importance placed on positive character traits (*cf.* Cann & Calhoun 2001). Probing deeper into established research in relation to humour, we began to realise that it intersected the key factors addressed in this chapter – gender, sexual orientation, popularity and power – in direct relation to the 'mirror' phenomenon.

Humour is an essentially positive feature of social interaction; it is something that we are drawn to, where being able to laugh with someone is affiliative. A shared sense of humour demonstrates a common point of view and outlook on life, becoming an integral part of what is termed 'in-grouping', creating micro-boundaries and marking as 'other' anyone outside that group. Indeed, humour is central to the formation of interpersonal relations (Cann, Calhoun & Banks 1997). Within the broader research on humour and its various social functions, the classic gender pattern is seen to emerge (see, for example, Lundell 1993). In the context of a mixed-sex social group, men are more likely than women are to prompt laughter from both men *and* women within that group (Provine 2000). This can feasibly be explained in terms of an unspoken power relation amongst genders, where men are granted the 'licence to be funny' based on their perceived social status (a trend echoed in research on humour in the workplace, where the all-powerful boss is guaranteed to prompt more laughter to jokes than a mere worker would – see Coser, cited in Provine 2000: 29). With this theory in mind, one might reasonably argue that the male *Big Brother* characters would prompt more laughter from or be perceived as more humorous by the

('masculinised') audience simply because they were male and not necessarily because they were more entertaining than their female counterparts.

The situation for women is complex, in that more laughter will be apparent in single-sex groups, where women interact with one another in the 'feminine' context, than would be socially 'allowed' in a mixed gender group with its established male-biased power dynamics. Female humour, as found cross-culturally and in studies of female stand-ups (Provine 2000), falls into two categories – political and self-deprecating – where the latter is arguably more apparent in the domesticated context of *Big Brother* and arguably more acceptable to both genders because it is less intimidating and outwardly challenging. In light of this, Helen was the clearest demonstration of self-deprecating humour during comical declarations about her own stupidity.

The most illuminating issue relating to the apparent importance of humour, however, might help to cast light on the seemingly universal appeal of Brian as alluded to in our earlier review of the quantitative data (cf. Cann & Calhoun 2001). Essentially, Brian epitomised the gay stereotype as an 'unthreatening honorary woman', offering a view of the male world in a non-male way. He clearly played up to his role – as cast by the other *Big Brother* characters and stressed by the respondents who spoke of his exuberant 'campness' – and performed the essentially 'feminine' humour role of non-political self-deprecation. This is where an explanation for his universal popularity is likely to lie, in that Brian's humour was satisfying for both males *and* females (in and out of the house), in that he proved non-threatening to the men and on a par with the women, ensuring that it would be difficult for anyone to actively object to or pull against his presence.

Conclusion

We began by outlining the 'mirror hypothesis'—that viewers will tend to relate favourably to those onscreen who are either *like themselves* (the mirror) or who represent what the viewer *would like to be like* (the magic mirror). Our statistical analysis showed that the attraction of onscreen characters for *Big Brother 2* viewers did seem to be related at least partly to the extent to which these characters reflected some key demographic features of the viewers themselves (age, ethnicity, social class and sexual orientation). However, there was a marked departure from this pattern in relation to sex: while the underlying pattern was sustained (usually most viewers were drawn to onscreen characters of the same sex), significantly more female viewers were prepared to relate to an other-sex character onscreen than male viewers were (a pattern which had been noted before in the research literature).

Our qualitative data supported the mirror phenomenon, with viewers being drawn to those who were in some ways like themselves. However, viewers themselves rarely referred to demographic factors and focused primarily on the assessment of (positive and negative) character traits. Given the high levels of statistical significance in the quantitative data, what appeared to be happening was that most viewers were not aware of the importance that (a significant number of) viewers attach to the demographic reflectivity of the mirror—in this sense, viewers seem to think in terms of looking through a window rather than into a mirror. Of course, we are seldom conscious of the extent to which our attitudes or behaviour conform to social trends, and we routinely think of ourselves as largely autonomous individuals.

As for those female viewers who favoured male characters onscreen, the reasons they offered did not reveal any distinctively different traits that they admired in these males. If female viewers are indeed 'more flexible' in favouring other-sex characters onscreen, then they do not seem to be conscious of this. There is, of course, often a gap between what people say (as a conscious process of articulation) and what they do (in relation to how they routinely behave). Perhaps, as Mulvey (1988: 72) suggests, 'trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second Nature*'. While our data strongly supports the phenomenon outlined in the literature—that females are more likely to relate to an opposite-sex onscreen character—it does not go very far in explaining it. However, it can be seen as part of the 'magic mirror' phenomenon: a desire to 'be like' may, as some of the theorists suggest, represent a desire for some of the power accorded to males in patriarchal societies—most obviously, in this case, the desire for the power of popularity. Both 'the mirror' and 'the magic mirror' relations between the viewer and the viewed seem to be a largely invisible phenomenon but this invisibility may increase rather than reduce its significance (Chandler & Griffiths 2000). We all live in a highly gendered social world where the 'masculine' is the unspoken 'norm' for both males and females.

Liking is evidently related to *seeing oneself as most like* and *wanting to be like* (we cannot, of course, establish the direction or strength of causality from survey data). In the extreme example of the eventual winner, 72.8% of those who *wanted to be like* Brian (1084/1488) also *liked* him and 72.7% of those who *saw themselves as like* him (558/768) also *liked* him. We have referred only in passing to the problematic concept of 'identification', which in our own usage has been no more than convenient shorthand for 'seeing oneself as most like'. However, we should note that the three inter-related factors we have discussed have frequently been treated by researchers as indirect measures of a process of viewer identification with onscreen characters (typically in filmic narrative). Whether or not viewers 'identify' with those onscreen, it seems that they may at least sometimes be seeking those onscreen who are in some sense a reflection of themselves. While the 'mirror' may be largely invisible, for some viewers at least, their relations with those onscreen are intimately involved with their own sense of identity.

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