

UNACCUSTOMED as I am to watching television, it was with some diffidence that I agreed to review *The Human Conspiracy*, a programme that is part of a series intended sporadically to bring the latest scientific developments to your fireside. My experience while watching reminded me of those of a wealthy friend who always insisted on travelling first class. He had been brought up to believe that the most terrible goings on occurred in the second class and on the only occasion when he ventured to pass into that part of a ship, his worst expectations were confirmed. He wandered down a gangway and seeing an open door, entered a cabin just in time to cut down a passenger who had attempted to hang himself, doubtless driven to desperation by conditions in steerage. Whether this programme is typical of the BBC or whether it represents an isolated attempt at self destruction, it is not for me to say.

The programme consisted of a series of fragmentary episodes loosely organised around the theme of how men and women get to be the way they are. Viewers were shown psychologists in Belgium posing an impossible problem to a prisoner to assess his reactions, although just how this would help to determine whether he should be released was not made clear. A sequence showing a schizophrenic and her identical twin in Bergen led up to the misleading statement that "for schizophrenia it's two-to-one environment versus genes"—Ladbroke's please note. Malnourished children in Mexico were presented to demonstrate that starvation can lead to irreversible losses in intelligence. Liberian children have difficulty with mathematics, although their mothers are not surprisingly better at judging the amount of rice in a bowl than American college students. X-ray pictures of a foetus in the womb showed that babies are sensitive to their environment long before they are born. This sequence was duly followed by a picture of a baby being born but we were not told what this illustrated. We were then treated to innumerable shots of babies breast feeding, crying, following objects with their eyes, and, of more interest, howling at the sight of three simultaneous images of their mothers.

The second half concentrated on social interactions. Ron Moody donned a long nose to demonstrate that people tend to shun actors wearing false noses. Boys are more aggressive than girls, probably because they have more testosterone: so bring on a male chimpanzee displaying; and to illustrate that self-sacrifice is not merely a human virtue, why not have some soldier ants sacrificing themselves in defence of their queen? Robert Trivers discussed

the concept of reciprocal altruism which purports to explain why it is that men can be kind to people outside their immediate family: "if you scratch my back I'll scratch yours and therefore we shall both live to propagate our genes". Shots of poor whites in Pennsylvania and of Maori children illustrated the problem of being a member of a group whose identity is threatened, and the Trobriand islanders

Missing connections

The Human Conspiracy (BBC2, Saturday, December 6) set out to investigate new discoveries and theories about our personal and social behaviour. N. S. Sutherland here reviews the programme with some reservations. The still below shows presenter Caroline Medawar.



were held up as a society free from class hatred and loneliness, and in which man's status depends on how much he gives not how much he takes, although how anyone gets enough in the first place to go on giving was never explained. Finally, war scenes were used to depict the idea that loyalty to a group may result in savage cruelty to out-groups, and the programme ended with the thought that "More than brotherly love, it's courtesy that makes the world go round".

Miss Caroline Medawar was the com-mère and very school-marmish she was: she gave the impression of having learned her lines carefully by heart and it is not clear whether her stilted intonation arose through failure to understand them or because she wished to dissociate herself from their silliness: she should perhaps be given the benefit of the doubt. The male commentators were more fortunate since they were spared the embarrassment of actually having to appear. Much of the visual material had little to do with the intellectual content and on the principle of shooting whatever moves, shifts to new locations were frequently accompanied by shots of motor cars.

I appreciate the difficulty of devising

a scientific programme intended for a general audience. The most successful attempts, to my mind, have been programmes introduced and informed by a single scientist with sufficient charisma to project his own personality: one example is the late Professor Korner's excellent series on molecular biology. Even where the contents are rather scrappy, as in Bronowski's *Ascent of Man*, the glimpse of an individual mind at work does something to provide a sustaining connection. I suspect that the producers of *The Human Conspiracy* have underestimated the intelligence and staying power of a general audience: a programme that concentrated on a single theme and made explicit the conclusions reached and the research methods used would surely be more gripping than one that makes a series of disconnected points none of which are developed in depth.

Moreover, the practice of taking all the examples from ongoing research is misleading, and gives the viewer a spurious impression that he is being presented with new conclusions: we were given no hint that research on in-groups and out-groups has been under way for many years and I could not grasp what new findings were expected to emerge from much of the current research shown. By limiting the programme to such research, the producers lose the opportunity to choose the study that best proves a point, where that study, as is usually the case, has already been completed. Finally, there can be no excuse for perpetrating scientific howlers. It was argued, for example, that since homosexuals cannot transmit their own genes, they only survive because they are of use to their immediate kin. There is, however, no evidence whatsoever that homosexuality is an inherited condition, and the argument is therefore vacuous.

I realise that the programme was not intended for readers of *Nature* and the writer, Nigel Calder, once claimed to follow Faraday in thinking that the "generality of mankind cannot accompany us for one short hour unless the path is strewn with flowers". This patronising remark captures the spirit in which the programme was devised, but even if it were true, some effort might have been taken to provide garlands in a healthy state of bloom rather than dead or wilting blossoms. I personally would have preferred a few brambles to relieve the bland and cosy monotony, typified by a sentiment expressed by Professor Jerome Bruner: "Isn't it clever of Nature to arrange that play like most other things in life doesn't work unless there's some fun in it". Ugh. □