



Unanswered questions...

The Island
Channel 4

The Island centres on 13 men stranded on a remote Pacific island with only basic equipment, a day's supply of water, and each other. The premise of the show, orchestrated by leading survivalist Bear Grylls, is to uncover whether man has lost the evolutionary ability to survive in difficult situations due to the influx of technology in recent years.

While the initial idea is not particularly different to its predecessors, such as *Shipwrecked* or America's *Survivor*, what sets *The Island* apart is the complete lack of any noticeable assistance from trained professionals; even the camera footage is pioneered by the castaways themselves. While this gives viewers a rare opportunity to gain a reasonably undistorted account of how relationships are formed and bonds are made in the most bizarre, and often dangerous, of situations, there were aspects of episode one that couldn't help but leave you wanting more. A majority of the air time in the first hour was spent showing the viewer the different struggles the men faced with the very basics of survival, such

as lighting a fire. Very little air time was given to how leadership roles were formed, and whether they were as a result of a democracy or an alpha male asserting his dominance. Footage such as this might have given the episode the depth it seemed to be lacking.

Ultimately, the cast knew their time on the island wasn't going to spiral into a reconstruction of *Lord of the*



Flies, and at any time they could leave, so whether constructed reality shows like *The Island* will ever fully capture the extent to which these modern men retain a primal instinct to survive still remains unanswered, though it is definitely worth watching the remainder of the series to see how the cast develop.

I Reviewed by Alice Hobbins
who is at the University of Worcester

feeling almost nauseous and quietly smouldering. As the author presents it, in the commercial world we are automated all-consuming robots, not human beings. It may make you want to give up TV and social media, or instead just be more wary when shopping and online. With a wry smile I did note two things whilst reading. First, given the topic of the book, both websites provided for his work and further reading are incorrect; and second, the scrap of paper I absentmindedly used as a bookmark happened to be a 'clubcard' voucher from that ubiquitous supermarket. Ah, the all-pervading power and presence of advertising.

I Nicholas Brealey; 2013; Pb £14.99

Reviewed by Kate Sparks who is a self-employed Chartered Psychologist

...Would we survive?

Dr Howard Fine, who acted as consultant psychologist on *The Island*, 'reviews' his own involvement. A full version of this piece is available online at www.thepsychologist.org.uk.

Aside from making for a voyeuristic experience for the viewers, this programme offers a unique opportunity to showcase an almost laboratory environment to observe survival through adversity – with the exception that the castaways could choose to withdraw, and were somewhat safe in the knowledge that they will be 'saved' from this challenging environment after 28 days of captivity.

As a clinical psychologist with an interest in post-traumatic stress disorder and resilience, I was tasked with offering psychological screening for the potential castaways prior to being deployed into such a hostile environment. This included screening interviews, mental health reviews and personality profiling to consider the robustness of the individuals and risk management. Further support involved monitoring of adaptation or failure to adapt to the hostile environment at the individual level, and identifying individual behaviours that support adaptation or that were counterproductive to support adaptation, as well as being on-call to offer direct support should this be required. On the return from the island, opportunities for debriefing and reverse cultural shock were also offered. Prior to being involved in this project, I was grateful to be able to consult with Professor John Leach, a SERE psychologist (survival, evasion, resistance & extraction), who shared his expertise and guidance on survival psychology [see also his article for *The Psychologist*, tinyurl.com/leachjan11].

The group who applied for the project were self-selecting and quite heterogeneous. This diversity could be seen as equating to a survival scenario (shipwreck or airline crash), with a broad spectrum of individuals, with their only commonality being the drive to get from A to B, to survive from day 1 to 28. Whilst not your typical reality television characters, the Islanders most generally were considered to be relatively robust and open to new challenges (a positive resilience trait), hence their motivation to apply in the first place.

Observing this group of castaways over the series may offer a further view of the psychodynamic survival pattern of behaviour following a disaster incident, pre-impact, impact, recoil and adaption. We may further examine how personalities change in order to try and meet social expectation, goals, or social roles required to survive. Within the survival scenario, the Islanders may adapt to fit with the social norm, and may take on stronger traits in order to survive. Similarly, as the days pass, the group will be adapting to their situation and environment, and the group dynamic will evolve to help meet these needs, and work together to tackle any challenges and problem-solve. In order to achieve this, the group will be expected to progress through Tuckman's (1965) stages of group development, Forming – Storming – Norming – Performing. Based on the size of the group, it may be able to function without requiring any formal organisation, hierarchy, or specific alpha male or group leader. The extreme environmental conditions and organic group may challenge such expectations of group development. We may therefore have an opportunity to identify the unfolding psychological phases of behavioural adaptation and survival, at an individual and group level.

Should this social experiment be replicated or re-commissioned, it would be fascinating to take on an experimental design, profiling longitudinal changes consequent upon individual experiences. Reflecting on our own academic and professional knowledge and experience, would we be able to psychologically resource ourselves to adapt and remain resilient? Would we be able to influence the dynamic on the island to enable a group to perform? Ultimately, would we survive?