



MEDIA

'Media' is the page of the Society's Press Committee. This section of *The Psychologist* aims to promote and discuss psychology in the media. If you would like to comment on a recent newspaper article, TV programme or radio broadcast involving psychology, if you have tips for others based on recent experiences, or if you know of a forthcoming programme or broadcast, please contact the 'Media' page coordinating editor, Harriet Gross (Chair, Press Committee), on H.Gross@lboro.ac.uk.

What we do and don't do

EVERY single member of the BPS will surely be able to provide a cogent and lucid description of what it takes to be a psychologist in whatever shape or form, but I'm still not sure that the general public know. This was recently highlighted by the tragic case of the mentally ill man who was released by a Mental Health Review Tribunal, and who then proceeded to murder his pal and eat his brain. Not surprisingly, the furore was further stoked by the revelation that the professionals who allowed him to be released were seemingly operating under some arcane set of laws. Now where, I hear you ask, do psychologists feature in this sordid tale? Well, of course, they do not, but unfortunately the public at large are often under the misapprehension that it is our good selves who make these seemingly rash and dangerous decisions.

I know this because I was the unwitting victim of general public spleen-venting whilst appearing on a phone-in on BBC Radio Wales. I wasn't on talking about the mentally ill, psychopaths, medical law or indeed cannibalism, as I know nowt about such things. No, there I was ready to talk about some research conducted by one of my PhD students concerning the fact that females appear to find deeper male voices more appealing. There I was armed with an interesting set of facts, a bit of common

sense, plenty of media experience under my belt, and some cautionary thoughts in case a certain attractive yet squeaky-voiced football superstar was mentioned (he was).

It turned out that the radio researchers had located a suitably gravelly-voiced member of the general public to comment on our research, no problem thus far, I explained our findings and then sat back. Gravel Voice then fired off a broadside rant of epic proportions, firstly calling our research 'silly' and announcing that it was a complete waste of taxpayers' money. OK, heard those before, responded politely, no sweat! Then, I and my entire profession were lambasted for our sin of releasing psychopathic cannibals into society on a fairly regular basis. My protestation that

humble psychologists had no such powers, and that medical doctors and psychiatrists were in fact the guilty parties, cut no ice with him. Nor indeed, it seemed, with the presenter.

A word of caution then for those of you about to appear on the radio. Ask the production team if anyone else has been asked to comment, who that person is, and if they have an agenda that might be at conflict with your own. Forewarned is forearmed! That still leaves us with the problem of ensuring that the general public are fully conversant with psychology and what psychologists do. The only way is to continue to educate the public and the media about the roles that psychologists do play and the roles that they do not play. I fear that we still have a fair way to go.

Nick Neave

WITH health a key issue in all the political parties' electioneering, it is perhaps surprising that mental health aspects of healthcare provision appear to be bottom of the pile when it comes to the political agenda. The media also plays its part, focusing on physical rather than mental health, for example when reporting the outrage of patients waiting months for treatment. BBC Radio 4's *You and Yours* programme discussed these issues and asked: Why is it that mental health doesn't arouse the same public support as physical health? What can be done to alter the public's perceptions of mental health in the UK?

The discussion focused on the damage of the media's stigmatised view of mental health patients and the belief that nothing can be done. The programme reported on the See Me campaign, funded by the Scottish Executive as part of its National Programme to Improve Mental Health and Wellbeing. A key component of this is the power that psychological understanding has in informing the media and public to help change the mindset from exclusion to understanding. The debate included how psychological research can help provide a more positive view of mental health matters and demonstrate that understanding of mental health care should be a central part of all health care.

Amid growing concern about the side-effects and over-prescribing of antidepressants, *The Guardian* presented a more positive view of mental health in an article about the benefits of exercise in treating mild or moderate depression, and about how psychology can inform healthcare professionals on providing alternative treatments and reducing stigma.

Jeremy Horwood

Press Committee

Media Training Days 2005

Monday 9 May 2005

Monday 26 September 2005

Monday 5 December 2005

All Media Training Days will be held at the Society's London office at 33 John Street.

The days will include:

- news writing
- snapshots of the media
- media releases
- interview techniques

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