

Are we punching our weight?

Our journalist **Ella Rhodes** asks whether psychology is having the desired impact, through the media and policy

Pick up today's newspaper, or go online, or turn on the radio. You will immediately be immersed in a world where psychology surely has so much to offer. An evidence-based approach to human behaviour is central to mental health, education, healthcare, employment, crime and justice. Behavioural change has been a hot topic of recent years. But as a discipline, is psychology there on the top table? Does the public really understand its full range of applications, or is it only the quirkiest studies that make it into the mainstream media? What can psychologists do to move beyond 'pop psychology' and to

communicate quality science better? Will psychology always be considered lightweight in science terms, or can we learn from individuals who have had success in getting their message across?

In a search for impact, I spoke to academics, journalists and science-media specialists for their views on what we are getting right and wrong.

The court jester of sciences?

Professor Chris Chambers was inspired to speak out about how scientists can help journalists (and vice versa) after what he described as some 'interesting' coverage of

some of the research coming out of his department at Cardiff University. Chambers also helped to set up Headquarters, the *Guardian's* psychology blog, and contributes to it regularly. Pointing to many excellent psychology bloggers – including Dorothy Bishop, Neuroskeptic, and Vaughan Bell and Tom Stafford of Mind Hacks – Chambers told me that psychology was emerging as a field that was not afraid to be self-critical in public. However, he added, psychology is still regarded by the media as the 'court jester' of sciences.

'Present something counterintuitive and novel about human behaviour and you are more likely to get a *Nature* paper and a lot of media coverage,' Chambers said. 'The problem is that most of the time such claims turn out to be based on very flimsy evidence, and academics themselves can be complicit in exaggerating their evidence to publish psychological research in high-profile outlets.'

Chambers suggested that academics should take more responsibility for the content of the press releases that report on their work: some of his own research found much exaggeration in health news originates from press releases. The study, published in the *British Medical Journal*, looked at 462 press releases from 20 leading universities in the UK and found 40 per cent contained exaggerated advice, 33 per cent contained exaggerated causal claims and 36 per cent contained exaggerated inference to humans from animal research.

Professor Chambers added that the British Psychological Society has a role to play in ensuring that its members are not pedalling pseudoscience, although he admits that detecting this can be challenging. 'Pseudoscience is often unfalsifiable, reliant on anecdotal evidence and often in a commercial capacity, and not available for public scrutiny. There are also established lists of areas of science that are categorised as pseudoscience, for example neurolinguistic programming. In my opinion, the BPS should regularly review its member charter and ensure that where members do indicate pseudoscientific interests, those members are not using the BPS to promote those interests – and, if they are, their membership should be revoked.'

I asked Chambers why he felt so strongly about this. 'It matters because psychology is a young science with a lot to say about the mind and brain, and it has a role in shaping public policy,' he replied. 'So it's vital that we engage and interact with the public effectively. To



'We aren't trained to think that we know best'

'A lot of clinical psychologists wouldn't think of themselves as experts. We take the position that the client knows best – it's at the centre of our psychological training. We aren't trained to think that we know best.' So said Sophie Holmes, Lead Consultant Clinical Psychologist for Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, speaking to us about what stands in the way of some applied psychologists speaking out about their given fields.

Holmes has been an advocate of media engagement since the start of her career, when her thesis on women's experiences of pain in childbirth attracted local media attention. Later, after extensive work with people who experienced problems with hoarding, she took part in a Channel 4 documentary *Obsessive Compulsive Hoarder*. In turn, a report she later wrote – *A Psychological Perspective on*

Hoarding: DCP Good Practice Guidelines – garnered much media attention.

Holmes said psychologists' nervousness about engaging with the media was not always misplaced, as often a journalist or documentary maker's agenda is likely to be entertainment. 'Many documentaries either fall into an entertainment or factual and science category. If you're engaging with television you need to be sure of which department a particular programme is coming from.' If a programme appears to be made purely for entertainment, Holmes adds, 'there's a role for psychologists in advising documentary makers on care and aftercare



Sophie Holmes

for people who appear in documentaries about mental health. There's also a benefit to being able to influence programmes and having a role in making them more

psychologically minded and based less on the medical discourse.'

Holmes spoke of the support she received from the British Psychological Society, whose Comms team put her in touch with Professor John Oates, who leads the Media Ethics Group. He offered

support to her as well as her Trust. She said: 'I can't rate the advice I was given highly enough. I don't know if I would have been able to get through the process without his support.' For example, Holmes

refused to film the client's therapy in the Channel 4 documentary – despite his approval. 'I held my ground on that issue, I didn't want to use the client to "sell" psychology, and I was able to talk it through with John Oates. He knew about Ofcom ethics and the processes involved in making a documentary.'

Holmes suggests encouraging psychologists to engage with the media when they are trainees. 'Students should consider including bullet points at the end of their work suggesting three ways it may be broadcast on local radio. We need to get the message out there. The public's interest in mental health and psychology is immense, and if we don't speak out we end up with potentially unqualified people giving comments with an aim to be famous. There are many worrying examples of that in the media.'

paraphrase Fiona Fox, director of the Science Media Centre, "the media will do psychology better when psychologists do the media better".'

How can psychologists do the media better?

Ed Sykes (Science Media Centre) told me that psychology stories make it into the mainstream media quite easily compared with other sciences, but he agreed with Professor Chambers that we should be sure to showcase our most rigorous research. He said: 'If you're working on something important and you are proud of your science, then tell your press office and tell the BPS press office – take the time to prepare and you'll end up with more accurate coverage as a result.'

Sykes concedes that many scientists have been put off speaking to the media, either for fear of being judged by colleagues or potentially broadcasting the wrong message. However, he feels that with a greater emphasis for researchers on public engagement now is the time to become more media savvy. 'Psychology experts need to stand up and get involved. If they don't weigh in when issues are being misrepresented, or if they

don't take the time to engage when an important story is about to break, then millions of people may be misled. When shoddy science is allowed to claim the headlines, trust in the entire field gets eroded.'

Julia Faulconbridge, a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Chair of the British Psychological Society's Faculty for Children, Young People and their Families, said problems psychologists face when trying to engage with the media could potentially be overcome. 'The BPS needs a bigger set-up to deal with the media, and more support... It could be an idea to have a spokesperson from each Division or Section who is trusted to deal with the media with some training... there needs to be less centralisation and more autonomy. Psychology should be much more out there in the world.'

Claudia Hammond, a psychology graduate and presenter of BBC Radio 4's *All in the Mind*, emphasised the role psychology could play in policy if it had better exposure. She said where policy makers include psychology in their work it often comes via economists (see also box, 'An image problem?'). 'Policy makers won't even realise that there are psychologists out there doing relevant

research, and even when they do, it's not easy to find out what consensus from research is, if they don't have access to specialist psychology journals.' Hammond would like to see the day when researchers included on their websites the top three policy implications of their own work. She added: 'Sometimes researchers will say that it's hard making definitive recommendations until more research has been done, but policy decisions are being made right now. If we want psychology to have an impact, psychologists need to be prepared to say what decisions they would make now if they were in charge, based on the best evidence we have so far.'

When I spoke to Lead Policy Advisor for the British Psychological Society, Dr Lisa Morrison Coulthard, she agreed with Claudia Hammond that key insights from psychology were often not fairly acknowledged as such. 'There is greater recognition of the contributions of psychological science to a wide array of societal concerns – the Research Excellence Framework of 2014 highlighted this. But again a lot of "psychological" research is often labelled as another discipline – neuroscience, vision science, infant health, for example. So the impact for psychology can be lost.'

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Dr Morrison Coulthard said that as long as the discipline does not speak with a united voice there will be barriers to having impact. 'It's no wonder that psychology is not as widely recognised as it could be when it is not portrayed as or understood to be psychology, and positions or views are not consistently conveyed as from psychology or from the BPS,' she added. Morrison Coulthard suggested a 'perceptions audit' for psychology and the BPS would be welcomed, to find out what needs to be done with respect to different target audiences.

I asked whether the relationship between policy and research work both ways: does legislation have an impact on the types of research being done? Dr Morrison Coulthard replied: 'There is an increasing need for policy proposals or changes to existing policy to be evidence-based. But by the



Professor Fiona Gabbert and her colleagues have organised fascinating public engagement events – including a murder mystery evening

same token we need to be quicker as a discipline to react to emerging policy areas, and ensure that some of the

commonly held assumptions are tested in order to inform policy development in those areas.'

An image problem?

Professor Adam Grant (Wharton Management Department, University of Pennsylvania) is an organisational psychologist, but he reports being introduced 'at least once a week as a behavioural economist'. Writing for the LinkedIn ([tinyurl.com/zpz42rf](https://www.linkedin.com/company/tinyurl.com/zpz42rf)), he pondered why so many psychology studies are presented as behavioural economics in the media. Are behavioural economists doing more interesting work than psychologists? Are they simply 'hotter'? After rejecting such hypotheses, Grant moves on to other potential explanations.

Grant suggests that people often think psychology simply points out the glaringly obvious, but he gives examples of experiments that point out the opposite of what we may assume to be 'common sense'; 'Ellen Langer and her colleagues found that if you ask to cut in front of people in line at a copy machine "because I'm in a rush", 94 percent say yes.

If you give no reason, only 60 percent say yes. But if you give a bogus reason, "because I have to make copies" 93 percent say yes. The use of a logical "because" is enough to trigger a mindless yes, even though the information that follows provides no new information,' he writes.

Grant also presents another hypothesis: that behavioural economics is viewed as more rigorous than psychology. He suggests that while people see economists as super-smart number crunchers, psychologists are seen as varying versions of Sigmund Freud. He concludes: 'Psychology has come a long way since Freud, but the brand hasn't caught up. The new psychological science of the mind and behaviour is based on randomized, controlled experiments with measurable



Professor Adam Grant

behaviors as well as fMRI and physiological data. Ideally, we'll start rebranding psychology as a source of interesting, rigorous ideas. Alternatively, [Daniel] Kahneman proposes that when it comes to formulating policy, we should stop drawing major boundaries between fields and just call ourselves behavioral scientists.'

Can a social science ever truly punch its weight?

Is psychology as a whole sufficiently weighty to have a big impact? In a letter to *The Psychologist* published in 2015, Phil Banyard (Nottingham Trent University) suggested that psychology had never had its own 'Big Bang' moment, and perhaps lacked the testable theories and influence of other sciences. Could this be why it may not have the impact via the media and policy that many would like to see?

Banyard stated that despite the 'bluster about science' and millions of pounds in grants, psychology had never really come to any huge or important understandings about the subject we study – ourselves. He wrote: 'A standard definition of psychology is "the scientific study of people, the mind and behaviour". So what are the headline discoveries about people, mind and behaviour? And do these findings match up to the discoveries of the other sciences?'

He said the central issue with psychology was the way in which we develop knowledge in the field: while other sciences have testable theories (such as Einstein's theory of general relativity), psychological theories do not produce predictions that can be tested in

this way. 'When it comes to knowledge in psychology,' Banyard wrote, 'we are not so much uncovering it as inventing it.'

However, Banyard concluded that we should perhaps look to different types of impact. Speaking of a 1969 talk by George Miller to the American Psychological Association he wrote: '[Miller] seemed to come to the same conclusion. He argued that we are looking in the wrong place if we are waiting for the great discoveries and applications to appear. He suggested that the revolution will come in how we think of ourselves.'

A different approach

Perhaps taking this approach – one based largely on self-insight – demands a more personal perspective. I spoke to Eleanor Longden about how she shared her own experiences of hearing voices and learning to

live with them in a fascinating TED talk which has now been viewed more than three million times (see tinyurl.com/jj455s5). Since that time Longden has not only gained a PhD in psychology but has been on numerous lecture tours in the USA and Australia. She told me about engaging with the media in a truly unique way.

After struggling with increasingly threatening and abusive voices, Longden discovered the Hearing Voices Movement, founded in 1987, which sees hearing voices not necessarily as a symptom of mental illness but as something that can be coped with and understood. This theory allowed her to learn to live with her voices and was the basis of her TED talk.

Longden told me she was inspired to share her experiences as a means of transforming the abuse she had experienced into the basis for social action, adding: 'I've been harmed by many people who have never been held accountable for it. That can be intolerable, but although I may not have been able to find justice in the legal sense it's another avenue for pursuing it.'

Longden, who works as a postdoctoral researcher, said there were many good examples of psychologists engaging well with the media, but that more could be done. She suggested that her area of interest, clinical psychology, needed a strong critical and political focus. 'It's not just about maladaptive schemas and cognitive dysfunctions, there are fundamental issues of abuse, social injustice, oppression and trauma. These are pervasive factors which are literally

driving people mad, and pathologising individuals deflects attention away from that. This kind of distress happens in a context and there's a real risk of sanitising madness, clustering it into abstract symptoms and syndromes.'

Clinical psychology, Longden said, should not be removed from social reality. 'I do think psychology has a moral, ethical and professional responsibility to raise its voice and challenge social systems of injustice. There's a risk of over-professionalising psychology in academia. I'm part of that institution as a research scientist but it's important, while recognising the valuable role of research, to try not to be too rarefied about it.'

In looking for alternative routes to engagement and impact, I also came across the Forensic Psychology Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London, which opened in September last year. Unit director Professor Fiona Gabbert and her colleagues have organised fascinating public engagement events, including a murder mystery evening, and are already seeing the research at the unit sparking debate and potentially impacting on policy.

Gabbert made the interesting point that psychology does not have a standard audience any more. 'This makes it difficult to know what the audience want. Some are drawn to the hard science, while others want to be drawn in to more accessible, entertainment-based forms of engagement, and shown the relevance of research to their own lives. The type and tone of public engagement events is particularly important to consider now! As psychologists we shouldn't rule out true interdisciplinary collaborations with our colleagues in the arts to help satisfy some of these demands.'

Gabbert said the forensic unit had been active in engaging with groups outside the immediate research community, including working with Amnesty International and the College of Policing. She said recent work within the unit, particularly a new Structured Interview Protocol, has sparked interest among police forces and the International Criminal Court. She added: 'Myself and colleagues in the unit have run training courses in how to use the protocol to maximise the information gained from witnesses and victims. This kind of engagement is something we strive for in our research. We can maximise impact by developing collaborative working relationships with practitioners and policy makers from the outset. It's only by speaking with practitioners about what the key issues are for them, that we can ensure our

academic research addresses "real world" problems.'

What can we do about it?

Striving for the 'right' sort of coverage, appealing to the general public while holding on to scientific rigour, all in the context of increasingly stretched resources... that's a heavyweight challenge. From all those I have spoken to the defining message is one of not being afraid to stand up for, and speak out about, research, while taking responsibility for how one's work is covered. It seems many are calling for greater levels of bravery – in identifying oneself as an 'expert', a word that makes many academics cringe, and joining together in an attempt to speak with one voice as a discipline.

But perhaps we shouldn't beat ourselves up too much. Although psychology may be yet to fully punch its weight, when I spoke to Dr Tom Stafford (University of Sheffield) he pointed out that psychology is not the first science to be in this sort of bind. Speaking of the parallels between early geology and psychology, he said: 'On the one hand they [geologists] could only distinguish themselves if they said something new, such as that the earth was millions of years old, rather than thousands. On the other hand they found it easier to be accepted, and funded, if they pandered to popular prejudices, such as that the earth was in fact only 6000 years old. This tension between being able to get attention for ideas that fit with existing beliefs, but that ultimately degrade the value of the discipline, is exactly the one psychology faces today, I believe.'

Stafford said that the discipline has a dilemma: 'The media are keen to report psychology, but they are most keen when psychology just confirms common sense, our prejudices or suspicions – things like "bullies grow up to be unhappy adults". Everyone has an opinion on psychology, which is great in terms of engagement, but it can be a double-edged sword in terms of conveying nuances, or findings which don't conform to people's expectations.'

Over to you... Is psychology punching its weight? What does true "impact" look like, and how is it best achieved through the media and policy work?

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