



The  
British  
Psychological  
Society

# **The Leveson Inquiry Culture, practice and ethics of the press**

British Psychological Society submission to  
The Leveson Inquiry

December 2011

## Introduction

This submission is sent as part of module one of the Leveson Inquiry. However, it also contains information about ethical issues which may also be considered during module four of the Inquiry.

The British Psychological Society welcomes the evidence submitted by the Science Media Centre (SMC) on 5 December 2011<sup>1</sup>. The Society is closely linked to the SMC and many of the experiences and views expressed in their document convey concerns shared by this Society.

Over many years we have worked to develop a good working relationship with journalists to ensure that evidence-based psychology is communicated to the media to help inform the wider public. We echo the statement in the SMC submission that much of the coverage is accurate and balanced due to the skill and dedication of the specialist science and health journalists employed in the national press.

Members of the British Psychological Society have undertaken training to improve the communication of their science by developing their media skills. This ensures that our psychologists understand how the media works, what information is needed and think about how covering a particular story can help or hinder the bigger picture of public understanding. From the hard-hitting articles on new research to feature stories on specific psychological issues, and perhaps even to more traditional Agony Aunt-style columns, the print media has influence and shapes public understanding and awareness. When the press gets something wrong it can be devastating for those involved and confusing to the wider public.

We support the general issues (section2) of the SMC submission. In particular we would emphasize the points about headlines and the unfortunate sensationalising of research.

## Sensationalising psychological research findings and insensitive reporting

Of course in many fields of science and in psychology in particular, there are a number of viewpoints. In many ways to suggest that there is only one right answer or viewpoint can over simplify an issue. Due to the basic rules of print (and broadcast) media – i.e. limited time, space (and for some general reporters) limited appreciation of the complexities, this is an issue.

Headlines about psychological research have often been overly sensational and potentially insensitive. This extends to even the highly sensitive topics psychologists research such as psychological disorders and their treatment.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/pages/publications/index.php?showAll=0&showSeries=21>

### **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**

For example, the Daily Mail has on several occasions referred to the developmental disorder ADHD with headlines including 'Naughty Child Syndrome Costs Taxpayer £170m'<sup>2</sup> and another 'Does ADHD really exist?'<sup>3</sup> Whilst psychologists themselves debate the nature of ADHD, referring to the disorder with such sensationalist headlines is highly likely to cause distress to those diagnosed with ADHD.

The former article stated that "there are no medical tests for ADHD. Instead, children are diagnosed on the basis of their behaviour and questionnaires". This statement shows a lack of understanding of the diagnosis of psychological disorders, which typically are assessed using interviews and a range of standardized psychological instruments like questionnaires. Statements like these have the potential to a) harm the individual with a disorder and their families, and b) convey confused messages about psychological disorders to the general public more broadly in the absence of an evidence-based discussion. This is a particularly sensitive issue because it is well established that individuals with psychological disorders find the stigma attached to mental health difficulties makes their symptoms worse and harder to recover from<sup>4</sup>.

### **Depression**

Depression is another example of a psychological disorder that is frequently insensitively captured in headlines. For example an article was published in 'The Sun' last year entitled '24 hours to beat depression'<sup>5</sup>. The article proceeded with suggestions of activities to boost mood over a 24 hour period from shopping to having a tea-break. While the article may have had a light-hearted focus, it is very likely it would be upsetting for those with a diagnosed disorder of depression. It could come across along the lines of the 'pull yourself together' style of thinking and be potentially damaging to those who have been diagnosed with depression who are likely to have complex needs.

An article published in the Daily Mail entitled 'Depression? It's just the new trendy illness!'<sup>6</sup> told sufferers with the disorder to 'get a grip girls'. Here again is an example of insensitive reporting and such a combination of sensationalist headlines and insensitivity in relation to depressive symptoms has the potential to be highly distressing to those diagnosed with depression. In general, there seems to be an awareness that the reporting of suicides should be done with care in an effort to avoid copy-cat occurrences. The same sensitivity needs to be applied more broadly to psychological issues.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-375455/Naughty-child-syndrome-costs-taxpayers-170m.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-190390/Does-ADHD-really-exist.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-a-z/S/stigma-discrimination/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/woman/health/health/3210961/24-hours-to-beat-depression.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1278510/Depression-Its-just-new-trendy-illness.html>

## Damage to personal lives

Psychology is the scientific study of people, the mind and behaviour. One of the issues that concerns members of our Society is the psychological well being of individuals. The Leveson Inquiry has heard several hours of evidence from those with a high media profile whose reputation or personal lives may have been damaged by press coverage. We would reiterate the point made by the SMC (page 7) that this is not just an issue for celebrities but can impact on anyone. Many of the examples of potential harm brought to our attention concern programmes on broadcast media like: Boys and Girls Alone (Channel 4 2009), Horizon – How violent are you? (BBC 2009), Britain's Got Talent (ITV 2009). However, often these programmes provoke many column inches in the general print media and this perpetuates inaccuracies and the potential for harm and further disregard for individual well being.

The Society has advised production companies that approach us at the early stages of programme development to speak to our psychologists about the psychological well being of programme participants. When this working relationship has been established it has been broadly successful - from Castaway 2000 (BBC), to Big Brother (Channel 4).

## Ethical issues

As we know, ethical standards should be observed in the care and protection of all who appear in the media spotlight. Some people appear as a result of their occupation, some people attract media attention following a personal tragedy or newsworthy event in which they may have been involved; and often, of course, others seek media attention in the hope of becoming 'celebrities' of some sort or another.

As a general rule it is accepted that people who willingly, directly or indirectly, expose themselves to media publicity e.g. those who enter into the world of reality television programmes, must be presumed to accept the consequences of such exposure. This is, however, subject to several qualifications, at least in respect of those who unlike 'celebrities' cannot be expected to be aware of all of the possible consequences of media exposure. Crucially, participants should be able to give fully informed consent which involves the following:-

- a) they give such consent in the light of comprehensive information of possible consequences
- b) they have a level of understanding and can anticipate the possible negative repercussions of publicity
- c) they are not psychologically vulnerable.

Because of considerable problems experienced by people exposed in the media, the British Psychological Society has issued advice to psychologists who may be advisors to production companies and broadcasters. Despite this, experience suggests that often, while participants give consent they do not fully appreciate the consequences of their participation - particularly participants in reality television programmes who find themselves the focus of news coverage. They are often unaware of the possible effect on their family members, some of whom may find themselves exposed because of minor misdemeanours in the past. There can be intense activity over the smallest item of interest.

These problems represent wider and often unrecognised implications of participation in programmes from competitive ones like 'X Factor' and 'Britain's Got Talent', to documentary style programmes relating to life choices and life-styles, or living with particularly difficult conditions. It appears that a search for stories about the participant or the participant's family often becomes the focus of considerable and provocative media activity. Personal criticism of the participant is a common occurrence and there seems little regard for the potential hurt to participants and their families. Somehow, they and their families - who importantly have not given informed or indeed any consent - become 'fair game' for some sections of the press. It should be noted that some newspapers have also been instrumental and sometimes helpful in voicing and drawing attention to fears relating to the treatment, humiliation and criticism of participants in competitive reality programmes, particularly children and those who appear to be particularly vulnerable.

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy examples of thoroughly unpleasant and potentially damaging press attention is that of Jade Goody who, while seeking fame in a reality television context, found herself pilloried in the press. Additionally, it was reported that her father abandoned Jade when she was a toddler. Despite the fact that this happened when she was young, his imprisonment for drug offences was publicised. Some of the press found some of the criticism hard to bear with the Guardian objecting to the levels of criticism of Jade in extensive and unpleasant articles in the Sun (an illustrative list of headlines is found at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7928199.stm>.) Perhaps the realisation of the extent of the criticism and potential hurt was instrumental in Jade's later success. While some may hold the view that Jade was responsible in that she willingly participated in Big Brother, courted publicity and ultimately made a successful and lucrative career, there would have been much distress involved in her rise to fame; was she aware of the potential repercussions of participation, was she 'fair game'? Is anyone in the media spotlight fair game? Notably, her family also sued the press after her death in relation to the publishing of photos of the burial, (see <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=44508>).

It might also be worth mentioning that professional child actors are also not immune to damaging critical publicity which does not take age or vulnerability into account. For example, some have been criticised in a manner that is humiliating and embarrassing. Aside from creating personal distress this would have the potential to be used by other children to bully. Most notable recently has been criticism of the child actor who played Ben in EastEnders. (<http://www.metro.co.uk/tv/829659-eastenders-stars-lucy-beale-and-ben-mitchell-axed-for-bad-performances>)

It has to be acknowledged that despite the above concerns relating to potentially damaging treatment of reality television participants and 'celebrities', newspapers, magazines and programme makers have as their main priority circulation and viewing figures which, in turn, requires them to reflect the interests, enthusiasms and desires of the reading and watching public.

The Society has published information for TV production companies <sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/bps/press-centre/psychologists-tv-programmes/psychologists-tv-programmes>

The Society frequently receives requests for expert commentary on psychology-related topics. As media engagement, and the accurate portrayal of information, is such an important activity, we maintain a database of expert 'media-friendly' psychologists who can be contacted by those working in the media. All of these individuals are actively encouraged to uphold professional standards when working with the media or participating in media productions. Specific guidance<sup>8</sup> has been developed which builds on the Code of Ethics and Conduct<sup>9</sup> developed by the Society to provide helpful guidelines for researchers, teachers and practitioners of psychology. This code is built upon four basic principles:

- Respect (valuing the dignity and worth of all people)
- Competence (working within their levels of skills and training)
- Responsibility (avoiding harm and the prevention of misuse or abuse of their contributions to society)
- Integrity (valuing honesty, accuracy, clarity and fairness in all their interactions).

When BPS members interact with the media they are actively encouraged to uphold professional standards in three ways.

- Respecting the dignity and autonomy of contributors and other people (obtaining valid consent from contributors, promoting fairness and sensitivity in portraying individuals and groups, and advocating for the protection of the rights of people who are vulnerable or of limited capacity).
- Supporting high standards of integrity (maintaining scientific standards of accuracy and evidence and advocating coverage of a diverse range of views and fostering debate).
- Being socially responsible (recognising that media production exists within the context of human society and has a potential for great influence and considering possible risks and seeking to minimise them while maximising benefits).

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/ethics-standards/ethics-media-information-members/ethics-media-information-members>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/code\\_of\\_ethics\\_and\\_conduct.pdf](http://www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/code_of_ethics_and_conduct.pdf)

## The system of redress

In June 2009 the Daily Telegraph misreported a story about psychological research concerning rape. The press release for the research was headlined "Promiscuous men more likely to rape" (appendix 1), the news in the Telegraph read:

### *Rape Triggers*

*"Women who drink alcohol, wear short skirts and are outgoing are more likely to be raped, psychologists at the University of Leicester claimed. They asked 101 rugby and football players to imagine various scenarios and found that all three factors had a bearing on whether men would force a woman into sexual intercourse".*

This was a misreporting of the research. The researcher was not only concerned about her professional reputation but was even more concerned about the feelings of women across the country who may have been victims of rape. On this occasion we supported the researcher to speak to the Daily Telegraph reporter, and a full correction and apology were printed. The system worked very well on that occasion. There was no need to contact the Press Complaints Commission (PCC). However we would support the SMC view that there should be a change to the PCC rule that states that only an individual scientist can complain about an inaccurate story. The scientific community must be able to make complaints about inaccurate articles which damage the public interest. This would allow professional bodies, such as the Society, to support their members more fully.

More routinely individual scientists have been concerned about the accuracy in the reporting of their work and in particular the over-simplification of evidence and conclusions.

## Recommendations

The British Psychological Society calls on the Leveson Inquiry to consider the following recommendations:

- Support the recommendations submitted by the Science Media Centre (page 9 of their document).
- Encourage newspapers to consider the psychological implications of news and features, both for the individuals involved and for their wider readership. The guidelines published by the British Psychological Society (mentioned on pages 5 and 6 of this submission) are available for this purpose.

**About the British Psychological Society**

The British Psychological Society, incorporated by Royal Charter, is the learned and professional body for psychologists in the United Kingdom. We are a registered charity with a total membership of almost 50,000. Under its Royal Charter, the objective of the British Psychological Society is "to promote the advancement and diffusion of the knowledge of psychology pure and applied and especially to promote the efficiency and usefulness of members by setting up a high standard of professional education and knowledge".

We are committed to providing and disseminating evidence-based expertise and advice, engaging with policy and decision makers, and promoting the highest standards in learning and teaching, professional practice and research. The British Psychological Society is an examining body granting certificates and diplomas in specialist areas of professional applied psychology.

**Contact :**

Lucy Chaplin, PR Manager  
The British Psychological Society  
48 Princess Road East  
Leicester LE1 7DR





Appendix 1

# News Release

48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR

Embargo: 00.01hrs Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2009

## Promiscuous men more likely to rape

Promiscuous men are more likely to force women in to sex.

This is one of the findings of Sophia Shaw and colleagues from the University of Leicester who will present their research at the British Psychological Society Division of Forensic Psychology Annual Conference today, Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> June, at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston.

First, 101 men aged between 18 and 70 completed questionnaires regarding their sexual history, personality and aggression. They were then asked to imagine themselves in different scenarios with one woman but varying her dress, how much alcohol she had drunk, how assertive she was and how many previous sexual partners she had.

Men who considered themselves sexually experienced were willing to coerce the woman to a later stage in the scenario than those with less sexual experience. These men also reported that they found resistance from a woman sexually arousing.

Alcohol, however, had the opposite effect than predicted, with participants more likely to coerce women who were sober rather than drunk.

Sophia explained: "Previous research has suggested that women are more likely to be raped by someone they know, yet they fear rape by strangers more. This study was concerned with examining the factors that lead men to have a greater likelihood to commit rape in scenarios involving a woman who was an acquaintance."

"We can see from the results that sexually experienced men are more likely to coerce women in sexual situations; even more so if they believe the women to be sexually experienced."

The conference is being held at the University of Central Lancashire from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> June. The full programme is available on the Society's website <http://www.bps.org.uk/DFP2009>

Ends

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: XXXXXXXXXXXX

Date: 18<sup>th</sup> June 2009

Ref: PR1630