

Who's your favourite TV psychotherapist?

Sinéad Rhodes on the risks of the media's generic view of psychologists

In a recent *Guardian* column (<http://ow.ly/4TGQW>), Marina Hyde, discusses 'the media shrinks who are messing with your minds'. The article proceeds to discuss the work of a number of 'psychotherapists' who appear on popular TV programs from Geoffrey Beattie on *Ghost Hunting with Katie Price* to Graham Stanier on the *Jeremy Kyle Show*. Mention is also made to the 'father figure of them all', Raj Persaud, who was a regular commentator on the ITV *This Morning* show.

Hyde ridicules these 'psychotherapists' for commenting on the mental health of members of the public using generic phrasing. These include Geoffrey Beattie's reference to Katie Price as 'somewhat eccentric' and comments Jules McClean made about Katie Melua's mental health which Hyde describes as 'a remote diagnosis of the singer'.

Indeed as pointed out by a commentator following the article, the BPS specifically directs members not to speculate on the mental health/state of people in the press and on television (www.bps.org.uk/MediaEthics). Recent BPS guidance (November, 2010) drawn up by the Media Ethics Reference Group requests psychologists to 'refrain from public comment on the behaviour or psychology of identifiable individuals where there is any risk of offence, distress or any harms'. The BPS however cannot police psychologists within the media but instead provide guidelines and training to ensure they maintain best practice in their

media engagements. Ultimately psychologists have a moral rather than professional obligation in terms of their behaviour in this area.

While Hyde's comments seem overly snidey she may have a point. Many psychologists avoid media engagement



for a multitude of reasons, and journalists often secure comments from a limited pool of those who in contrast like to converse with the media. An example of this limited pool was discussed in the December 2010 issue of *The Psychologist* in relation to an ADHD study that examined the genetic basis of the disorder. The individual concerned, who regularly comments on childhood issues in the media, misinterpreted the study findings but still attracted substantial press attention. This was a clear example of non-expert commentary leading to an inaccurate interpretation of research findings. While at one extreme there are

psychologists who avidly avoid the media, and at the other extreme those willing to comment on topics they are not expert on, there are also a considerable number of psychologists who are willing to engage with the media solely in relation to their area of expertise. The BPS indeed have a media database with over 700 professional psychologists listed who are willing to converse with the media in relation to their research expertise. Psychologists who are approached by the media to discuss a topic they are not expert in can of course show a professional approach by referring the journalist to a more appropriately expert colleague.

Another issue the article raises is the use of terminology to refer to psychologists within the media. As noted in comments following the article the columnist bands together what actually represents individuals from different professions under the banner of 'Psychotherapist'. Hyde uses this term to refer to psychologists (Geoffrey Beattie), psychiatric nurses (Stanier) and psychotherapists (Derek Draper). This columnist is by no means alone in this regard; there is a popular assumption within the media that psychologists are a homogeneous group.

Hyde's generic references to professional psychologists seem especially ironic of course given her own harsh comments concerning their generic responses to the media. This may serve as a warning note for those psychologists who engage with the media to ensure the journalists they converse with are aware of their particular professional affiliation. The issue of appropriate professional representation is of significant concern to the HPC and BPS. Indeed, there are now protected titles under HPC regulations.

This article is not written to discourage psychologists from speaking to the media but instead hopes to encourage them to engage with the media in their area of expertise. As the Society's own Press Committee guidance states, once we accept that interacting with the media is not a perfect science and that as human beings are involved there will be mistakes, it is clear the benefits outweigh the possible risks.

contribute

The Media page is coordinated by the Society's Media and Press Committee, with the aim of

promoting and discussing psychology in the media. If you would like to contribute, please contact the 'Media'

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