

# Psychology in the press 1988–1999

**T**HE BPS celebrates its centenary this year, a fitting juncture at which to explore the relationship between psychology and the public. The history of this relationship is longer than a hundred years: at the beginning of the last century, psychology had already come a long way from its roots. In its 'long past' (Farr, 1996) psychology had been entwined with philosophy. Yet by the late 1800s psychology had met a crossroads, one fork leading to the spiritual psyche, the other to scientific methods and aims of debunking (Burnham, 1987). Henceforth psychology was not only concerned with communicating the substance of research, but also with secularisation: severing 'spiritual' psychology from the canon of scientific activity.

The First World War boosted the popularity of psychology (Burnham, 1987); the public were turning to psychology as a substitute for superstitious dissections of the soul (Rapp, 1988). From the 1920s psychology has, with peaks and troughs,



**SUSAN HOWARD and MARTIN**

**BAUER** look at the roles psychology has taken on in the mass media.

remained in the public sphere. It has been conceived of as science, but also as quackery, as an expression of common sense, and as the antipathy of common sense (Harré *et al.*, 1985). This article will consider what an analysis of press coverage of psychology says about our public image. The content of popularised psychology may not always be what psychologists would wish, but does it reflect society's needs?

### Psyche in the media

The analysis of psychology in the mass media may tell us how the general public represent psychology. Editors and journalists function as gatekeepers,

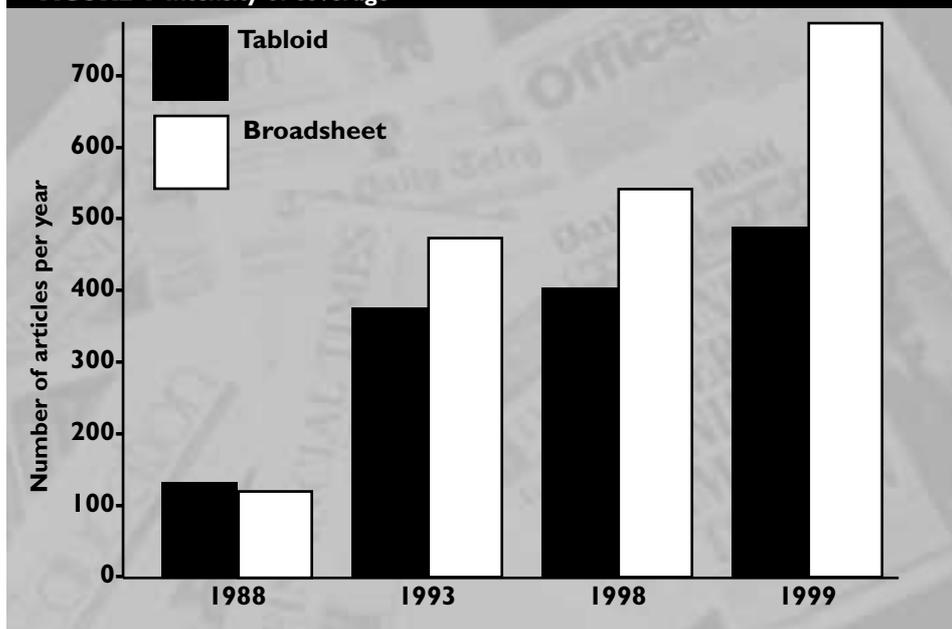
selecting stories on behalf of their readers; it is reasonable to assume that they are not misjudging their audience, otherwise nobody would read their papers. Moreover, monitoring psychology in the media provides a gauge to measure the success of the Society's public relations, and a lens through which to examine the concerns of society in its wider sense.

Since the 1980s the BPS has been collecting articles from the British press based on the presence of the word 'psychologist', and on references to 'The British Psychological Society' or to its journal titles. These articles are made available to the Science Media Monitor at the Science Museum in London. From this source we have developed a database of selected national newspapers (*The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *Daily Mail* and *The Mirror*) and lifestyle magazines (e.g. *Cosmopolitan* and *Esquire*), and report here on the intensity and slant of coverage from 1988 to 1999.

Figure 1 shows the intensity of copy in the selected newspapers, depicting an increase in coverage of psychology in selected years from 1988 to 1999. The interest of the national press in psychology is growing. By 1999 we could expect, in any of the newspapers, three or four articles a week referring to psychology, compared with one or less every week back in 1988 – a fourfold increase. A comparison with general science coverage shows that the increase in media attention to psychology is far greater than the increase in attention to science overall, which roughly doubled during the 1990s (Bauer, 1998, 2000).

An infatuation seems to have developed

**FIGURE 1** Intensity of coverage



between psychology and the print media; possibly propelled by the activities of the Society press office after the appointment of a full-time press officer in 1989, possibly as part of the zeitgeist. Should psychologists rejoice? Perhaps not yet, as the notion that 'the only thing worse than bad publicity is no publicity' sits badly with academic or professional ethos. We should not leave the topics that invite references to psychology unexamined.

### What is said of psychology and how

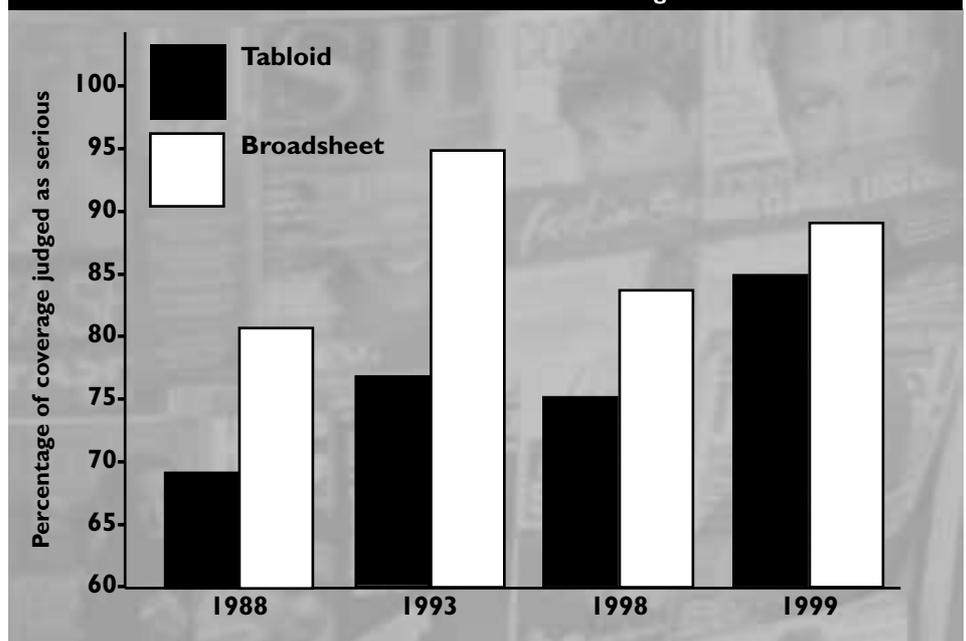
In a content analysis of a representative random sample from our database, we categorised the 'tone' of articles as either 'serious' (e.g. literal or solemn) or 'humorous' (e.g. ironic or jocular). Intra-coder reliability on a subsample of articles, over an interval of six weeks, was 90 per cent agreement.

References to psychology in the daily press are traditionally ironic; for some writers, Society conferences have served as a source of jokes. For example, a news snippet entitled 'Automatic pilot' (*The Guardian*, 25 May 1999) is dubious about psychological expertise. Referring to a symposium, the article comments: 'Since the majority of pilot errors are ones of decision-making, the shrinks recommended that the onboard computers should be designed to accommodate human error. Well, that's that problem sorted.'

Yet Figure 2 shows how the proportion of serious coverage has inflated over the years. While broadsheets generally treat psychology more soberly than the tabloid press, the gap is closing. By 1999 about 85 per cent of the total coverage is judged as serious. That psychologists and their work are taken seriously seems like good news, but further analysis reveals a more complex picture.

Using rhetorical analysis, we looked in more depth at a corpus of articles (not restricted to our database) from May 1999, a month of intense coverage. A rhetorical analysis reveals the language, images and arguments used in relation to psychology and psychologists (Leach, 2000). In our corpus we identified four genres of psychological reportage: 'The cost of material gain', 'Violence and a discourse of blame', and two elaborated below: 'Science or superstition?' and 'Gossip'. Some of the articles could feasibly be included in more than one genre, but the genres provide a broad frame for the description of themes that arise in the popularisation of psychology.

**FIGURE 2** Seriousness of tabloid and broadsheet coverage



**Science or superstition?** Psychology is rhetorically portrayed as scientific in 'God's in your cranial lobes' (Raj Persaud, *Financial Times*, 8 May 1999). A cartoon shows a man in a white coat, wearing a cranial helmet out of which protrude religious symbols; a giant hand (God?) adjusts the helmet. The subheading describes how the article aims to detect 'whether part of the brain is designated for divine experiences'. Medical and literary allusions are sophisticated (the posterior superior parietal lobule and Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*), and five references to research programmes and findings are provided, conveying the reliability of the author's deliberations.

It is worth mentioning here that while Persaud practices primarily as a psychiatrist, he has a degree in psychology and is famously associated with it. In this context those concerned with public relations should be pleased with the association and what it tells us about the popularisation of psychology. In this article, as in several others in the corpus, psychological ideas have been included in the trusted ranks of *science*.

However, another view of psychology is in sharp contrast to that of 'scientific psychology'. It is possible that the increase in coverage of psychology may be due to its hanging on to the coat-tails of new-age activity and theology. Graumann (1996) discussed how psychology lost its 'soul' in exchange for the trappings of science, but in fact it is sometimes difficult to tell whether popular newspapers regard

psychology as a branch of science or as a mystical contribution to social existence. Moscovici (1988) wrote of how psychologists miss the spiritual and 'very ancient beliefs' that dwell 'in a zone of darkness shrouding most of [men's] thoughts and relationships' (p.244). But psychology in the popular press draws on both worlds: the 'respectable' and the mystical.

In the *Daily Mail's* 'Dream Doctor' column every Saturday, readers send in a description of a dream for analysis by psychologist Sarah Dening. There are no marks of 'ethos' affiliating her with a professional body or institution and the structure of the column reads more like a tarot reading than a clinical consultation. From their shared cultural memory, journalist and reader understand the magical qualities associated with dreams and the interpretation of their symbolism. The delivery of the column is intimate – Dening addresses very personal issues that she understands to be at the root of the dream. Also a stylistic clue informs the reader that psychology is related to the supernatural: the column is at the centre of Jonathan Cainer's weekly astrological horoscopes!

So it is clear that the popular press taps into the psychology of illusion, dream and the personal and private, as well as the crisper, clearer vision of science. In 1969 Gustav Jahoda hoped that psychology could facilitate education and eliminate superstition. However, it seems that instead of undermining superstition, psychology

has been partially admitted to the territory of the supernatural, a shift in meaning that is common in the popularisation of science (Lessl, 1985).

**Gossip** Gossip takes two forms in the popular press: public and private lives. For the sake of brevity, we shall discuss only the former. The gossip surrounding celebrities, their actions, appearances and our obsession with them make up a large proportion of the corpus.

'Epideictic' arguments are described in the canon of rhetoric as those which attribute praise and blame. Celebrities are apparently regarded a proper targets for this

evaluation. Roland White's 'Too much Ginger whine' (*The Times*, 9 May 1999) describes Geri 'Ginger Spice' Halliwell as self-obsessed. Interestingly, White suggests that 'psychologist Oliver James' should interview Geri about her father, although in light of the article written by James in the *Daily Express* (see below), this seems inadvisable.

Bouhoutsos *et al.* (1986) decry the exploitation of human misery for entertainment and perhaps caution is prudent; often, arguments send mixed messages to those whom they attempt to support. In 'Take a look at the real Geri...' (*Daily Express*, 5 May 1999) Oliver James

confirms his view that women are more depressed, even those women who 'have it all'. Having discussed Geri Halliwell's fragility at length, James concludes that she has 'sold her soul' doubly – through her involvement with the Spice Girls and the making of the autobiographical documentary. He expresses pity for her, but also writes: 'Television is a medium which often makes mediocre people seem talented. It can also make average people look more beautiful than they really are.' Ouch!

The mixed message and the epideictic argument are also employed to delve into weight problems of the stars. In 'Hungry

## CONTRIBUTING TO QUALITY

PAM BRIGGS, *the Society's Honorary Press Officer, comments.*

**T**HE first section of Howard and Bauer's article presents a statistical analysis of the coverage of psychology in the mass media that demonstrates three positive trends: (a) a steady growth in the coverage of psychology in the period 1988–99; (b) a steep rise in the number of articles in the broadsheets, as compared with the tabloids; and (c) a steady improvement in the seriousness of the coverage in the tabloid press. Howard and Bauer ask us to be hesitant about accepting these statistics at face value, and in the second half of the piece they analyse a corpus of articles taken from May 1999. The authors identify four genres of psychological reportage, but due to pressure of space only elaborate two (arguably those most likely to cast psychological knowledge in a bad light). Their approach is valid, but I would like to add some comments from the perspective of the Society's press office.

Within two of their themes – 'Science or superstition?' and 'Gossip' – the authors describe a number of specific contributions by psychologists in depth. However, virtually all the 'psychologists' mentioned (Raj Persaud and Oliver James included) are not members of the Society. This means that they have been cited by the media in spite of, rather than because of, the work of the Society's press office. So what other psychological presence was evident in the media in May 1999?

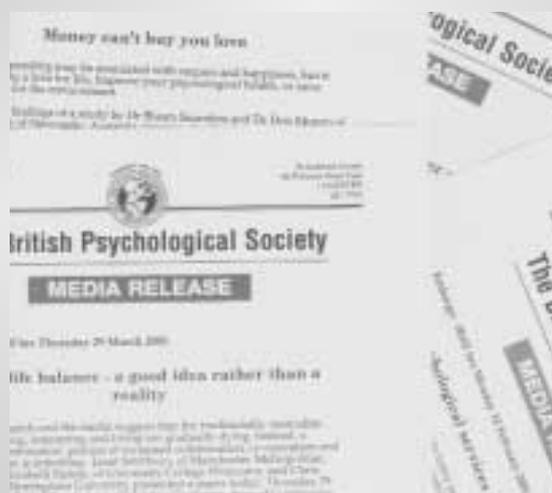
Using their online search engine, I looked at the psychology content of *The Guardian* for that month. I uncovered eight articles that either asked for an extended comment from a psychologist or were driven by psychological research. Three articles were

concerned with occupational issues and included comments from psychologists Sandi Mann and Cary Cooper (structuring the working week, working from home and work/life balance). Two articles were crime-related – one on the motivation of terrorists who act alone (with a comment from Cary Cooper again) and one on court judgments in child-abuse cases. A further article described the behaviour of fans (with a comment by Sandy Wolfson). Two final reports gave extensive coverage to original psychological research – with the first a piece on computer use in girls and boys (describing work from Karen Littleton and others), and the second describing research on work patterns, stress responses and degree classifications at Cambridge University.

For me, the striking thing about this coverage is that it genuinely reflects the kind of psychology that is promoted by the Society, not least because these psychologists are likely to have been recommended by the press office. It gives me some reassurance that coverage within at least one broadsheet is reasonably representative of psychologists' work. Undoubtedly there is a tremendous amount of trivial, gossip-related psychology in the press – and I have seen some awful articles in my time – but it is the statistics presented in the first half of this article that have a genuine story to tell, and it

is one of steady improvement from a press office perspective.

As for the future, there are new pressures on 'media' psychology. Huge numbers of people are turning to the internet for advice, and that advice is often unregulated. Millions watch 'reality TV' with its cohort of psychological advisers. The media of the future may not look too much like the media of today, but the Society could have an important role in contributing to its quality, rather than its degradation.



**Society press releases can encourage representative coverage of psychology**

for Hollywood' (*Cosmopolitan*, May 1999), Anita Chaudhuri describes actress Calista Flockhart's shoulder blades as 'knives' and other actresses are described as having 'stick-like arms and bony...legs.' Ironically, clinical psychologist Deanne Jade is quoted as saying that she has seen 'actresses destroyed by vindictive comments about their weight'; psychologists' quotes are incorporated into articles that are gossipy, even spiteful.

The genres identified in the rhetorical analysis were integrated into a systematic content analysis of the representative sample from our database. We classified articles into six thematic categories (Mind Work, Crime, Fame, People, and Self), with articles not fitting into these categories classified as 'Other'. Considering the error variance in our estimates (+/- 3.8 per cent for proportions of 20 per cent), there is little difference between the themes, each attracting between 10 and 20 per cent of the copy.

Comparing across time and papers, we find certain thematic clusters. A consistently

large amount of copy emerges from summing the themes 'Fame' (celebrities), 'People' (interpersonal relations) and 'Self' (personality analysis). This cluster, mirroring in content the rhetorical genre of

### '...psychologists' quotes are incorporated into articles that are gossipy, even spiteful'

'Gossip', peaks with 71 per cent in 1998's tabloid coverage, featuring less in the broadsheet press, but rising with time. The two types of newspaper tend to converge towards the preferred tabloid topics as the century comes to a close. This leaves us with a double convergence: over time, tabloids become more serious in tone (as shown in Figure 2), and broadsheets increasingly report on topics traditionally associated with populism. In other words, we find more gossip, presented more seriously.

'Mind' (intelligence, learning and

education), 'Crime' (crime and violence) and 'Work' (careers and jobs) are independent. There seems to be a standard level of 'Crime' copy of 5–10 per cent, except in 1993. Subjects related to Work are receiving more copy in both types of outlets. Topics related to 'Mind' are declining in the tabloids, increasing in the broadsheets. Most 'Other' themes occur in the broadsheet press, reflecting a wider range of topics covered.

Our assumption of a confined number of themes seems to match the data. Over the last 12 years we identify some trends. However, 'earthquake' events may lead to fluctuations. The Bulger murder accounts for heightened interest in 'Crime' in 1993, with the papers preoccupied with reasons for and consequences of the murder. Psychologists were consulted to respond to a seemingly heartfelt national sense of crisis. To be a figure of trust in this circumstance is a mark of growing faith in psychology, conferring both kudos and responsibility. Overall, however, we note a sense of *fin de siècle* hedonism emerging

## HANDLE WITH CARE

HALLA BELOFF calls for your views on behalf of the Investigatory and Ethics Committees.

**A**LTHOUGH it became a slogan of the Society only for its centenary year, 'Bringing psychology to society' has long been an aim for many of us. After all, the application of research is the basis of many projects. What better way to do this than by responding to telephone enquiries from journalists wanting comments on breaking news stories or issues they are covering in a freelance piece?

The trouble is that journalists are not looking for a cautious analysis in general terms, based on empirical studies, or indeed the conclusion 'we don't know'. Immediate quotes from a named 'authority', personalised to a named individual, are what their editors seem to demand. The temptation to respond is obviously high. One may well make a general comment, based partly on evidence, partly on common sense, which is received by the journalist with flattering awe. But an off-the-cuff comment has sometimes led to serious concerns. The risks are many, and recently there have been complaints to the Society's Disciplinary Board about psychologists' expressed views.

The greatest hazards clearly surround the interpretation of some particular individuals' actions, motives or feelings. This seems to be the most exciting topic for journalists, and understandably so. Clearly if one could make an analysis it would be because one knew the person of interest – that is, had been treating them. But has consent for some free comment been obtained? If not, then one would be breaking confidentiality. If one has no inside information, how can one give the specific explanation the writers want?

Even in terms of general description around the popular questions, whether it is body-piercing (a favourite topic, it would

seem) or extra-slim women, it is important not to go beyond one's sphere of competence or the available evidence. Yet while general comments may please a reporter, they are likely to be much less popular with colleagues.

Some newspapers are cavalier about accuracy, seeming to get one's opinion out of a hat. Even the context of a quotation may damage its content, and newspapers are unlikely to allow a psychologist to see copy before publication. If a correction seems necessary, a personal letter to the editor giving the details may produce some curb on that reporter for the future.

Given these difficulties and the serious potential for bringing psychology into disrepute, is it best to say nothing? Some psychologists certainly think so; but if you don't, the Society's media guidelines are a vital tool (see *Being Interviewed: Guidelines, Hints and Tips*, and *Hitting the Headlines* (1993) by White *et al.* Both are available from the Society's Leicester office).

If you do speak to the media, there is nothing wrong with proceeding with caution. A refusal to comment can be put in courteous terms, and you can ask for time to think about an issue and call back. Alternatively, have the names of some expert colleagues in related fields to hand. And finally, try to keep comments on a positive note – then we could indeed 'Bring psychology to society' to good effect.

The Society's Ethics and Press Committees have set up a joint working group to review the advice that is currently available to members who deal with the media. Any revised guidelines will be advertised in *The Psychologist* as soon as possible. If members have any comments or suggestions they should contact Andy Burman ([andbur@bps.org.uk](mailto:andbur@bps.org.uk)) at the Leicester office.

as a general theme: the popular press recruit psychology into the drive for gossip, both personal and public, providing further avenues of escapism.

**Fair exchange?**

The increase in media interest in psychology suggests that faith in psychologists is increasing or that the public relations activities of the BPS are

bearing fruit. In response to national crises such as the Bulger murder of 1993, psychologists are asked to provide comfort, understanding and hope for prevention of such crises in the future. In this context psychology is clearly regarded as an authority. However, trust is not necessarily granted because of psychology's scientific status, but possibly because in the public mind, psychology is affiliated to the

religious desire for an explanation of 'evil'. And although psychologists are consulted about harrowing events, the reverse characteristic of psychology in the national press in the 1990s is that it contributes to frivolity, gossip and what one might describe as a prurient desire for insight into the lives of celebrities.

Psychology has been granted greater attention in British public life over recent years, an increase that by far exceeds the general increase in matters scientific in the media during the 1990s. However, despite 100 years of purposeful debunking, popular psychology is still fulfilling the public need for spiritual guidance and diversionary gossip. What remains is an uncomfortable problem for psychology and its professional representatives: is increased public attention a fair exchange for assuming the twin mantles of priestliness and prurience?

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