



**Psychological Society of Ireland**

**Presidential Advisory Group on the Public Understanding of Psychology  
(PAGOTPUP)**

**Report to the President  
3 November 2005**

The members of PAGOTPUP were: Brian Hughes (Chair), Yewande Adelaja, Berenice Carroll-Phelan, Suzanne Guerin, Sheila Kennedy, Maeve Martin, Conor McGuckin, Paul O'Donoghue, Michael Reen, Ian Stewart.

**1. Introduction**

All psychologists have an interest in promoting the public understanding of their discipline, for both principled and self-interested reasons. From a principled perspective, the potential for psychology to contribute to the public good through the provision of psychological services and the promotion of psychological research will be facilitated if as many people as possible have an adequate understanding of the discipline to appreciate its value. Moreover, given that psychology represents a useful and productive approach to the human condition, it is fundamentally the case that a broader and richer understanding of the field will contribute to a greater appreciation for the causes and consequences of human behaviour. This in turn brings forward the potential to stimulate human happiness and facilitate human well-being by providing the opportunity for personal fulfilment and promoting social cohesion.

From a self-interested perspective, it is easy to see that the demand for psychologists is reliant on an awareness of their domain. If fewer people understand psychology then fewer people will look for a psychologist.

It is a common experience among psychologists in Ireland that there is widespread public confusion as to the nature and scope of psychology as a discipline and as a profession. It is true that scientists and scholars can sometimes engage in heated debate about the epistemological essence of psychology and of its true boundaries. However, public confusion frequently relates to the very basic aspects of the field, and thus necessitates answers to elementary questions such as “What is psychology?”, “What does a psychologist do?”, and “Why should we have psychologists at all?”

The PSI Presidential Advisory Group on the Public Understanding of Psychology (PAGOTPUP) was established in November 2004 by the then PSI President, Brian Hughes. Its remit, as approved by Council, was to prepare a written report for Council containing its recommendations for the Society’s policy and practice in promoting a deeper public understanding of psychology. Membership of PAGOTPUP comprised the President, nominees of the President, nominees of the External Relations Panel, members of the Society who responded to a notice placed in the *Irish Psychologist*, and the Society’s Office Manager; and were as follows: Yewande Adelaja, Berenice Carroll-Phelan, Suzanne Guerin, Brian Hughes (Chair), Sheila Kennedy, Maeve Martin, Conor McGuckin, Paul O’Donoghue, Michael Reen, and Ian Stewart. This membership represented a geographic spread, several professional specialisms within psychology, both practitioner and academic psychologists, and members with and without experience in dealing with media and in public relations.

PAGOTPUP conferred extensively within its remit, conducting substantial correspondence. The aim of this report is to describe the outcome of its deliberations, and to summarise its recommendations.

## **2. The Public Misunderstanding of Psychology**

By comparing professional experiences, PAGOTPUP members examined ways in which psychology is misunderstood by members of the public. Experiences of encountering such misunderstandings were widespread and varied, but tended to cluster around a number of key points. A taxonomy of prevalent misconceptions is presented in Table 1. Such taxonomising of misperceptions should assist in the evaluation of the costs of poor public understanding, in the identification of target audiences for awareness raising initiatives, and the development of focused initiatives to promote public understanding.

*Table 1*

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**Subjects of common public misunderstanding related to psychology**

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- Disciplinary boundaries
  - Diversity of applied psychology
  - Diversity of psychology as an entire discipline
  - The scientific nature of psychology
  - Competences and practices of psychologists
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**2.1. Confusions regarding disciplinary boundaries**

Among the PAGOTPUP members, the most common type of misunderstanding encountered concerned the delineation of psychology vis-à-vis cognate professions, particularly psychiatry and counselling.

Among individual psychologists, interactions with members of the public frequently reveal a great deal of confusion regarding the distinctions among psychologists, psychotherapists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and counsellors. People can use these terms interchangeably or make erroneous distinctions among them.

Such individual experiences are reflected in those at the level of the professional body itself. The head office of PSI receives regular inquiries from members of the public who appear to assume that psychologists and psychiatrists are one and the same (e.g., callers who are looking for “a psychologist or a psychiatrist”). Likewise, the Society’s External Relations Panel frequently encounters similar types of confusion among members of the media.

Psychologists working in clinical settings often encounter clients who have previously been seen by practitioners claiming expertise and training in psychological areas but who it turns out are not actually trained in formal psychology. A number of such practitioners describe themselves (inaccurately) as counsellors or psychotherapists. It would appear likely that the wide availability of such services under the guise of psychology, psychotherapy, or counselling, contributes substantially to public confusion regarding the boundaries of the actual professions.

Sometimes the confusion surrounding the boundaries of psychology is related to specific aspects of the organisation of the profession in Ireland. Given the openness of Ireland to international cultural influences, many Irish residents’ perceptions of the role of psychologists are shaped more by professional realities in countries such as the US and the UK than they are by the profession here. For example, in a society where many people’s primary source of information on psychological matters is either the Internet

or imported television shows, the role of psychologists in the prescription of medication can become confused given the context of differing international legal regulatory standards in this area. Secondly, it appears to be the case that whatever understanding exists among the public about the role of psychologists generally, there is very little awareness about the distinctions among professional specialisms (e.g., clinical psychology, counselling psychology) or among applications (e.g., educational psychology, health psychology) of psychology in the Irish context.

Such boundary confusion is not confined to disinterested members of the public, but can often be detected in official state documents and reports. For example, it is not uncommon for documents concerning child and adolescent mental health services to include references to such services as “child and adolescent psychiatry” as a synonym. In addition, it is not uncommon for psychologists to receive inquiries about possible referrals from other health professionals (e.g., GPs) that betray a lack of understanding of the various specialisms within our profession.

## **2.2. Confusions regarding the diversity of applied psychology**

When people are aware of psychologists (and psychology), they often appear to assume that psychology retains a far more narrow focus than is actually the case. Predominantly it is assumed that all psychologists work in a psychotherapeutic context (whether this is as a clinical psychologist, counselling psychologist, or psychotherapist).

Where other specialisms are recognised, they are often assumed to be psychotherapeutic nonetheless. For example, educational psychologists and organisational psychologists often encounter the stereotype that their roles are focused on psychotherapeutic interventions within their particular work domains (i.e., providing psychotherapy to students or workers). As such, much of the actual range of competences that comprise educational or organisational psychology remain unacknowledged.

The psychotherapist stereotype also afflicts areas such as forensic psychology and sport psychology, but perhaps to a lesser extent given that there appears to be a greater acknowledgement of the roles of these specialisms in the detection of crimes and the motivation of athletes, respectively. This is somewhat ironic, given that so few psychologists actually work in either of these areas in Ireland. Public awareness of forensic and sport psychology may owe more to public interest in crime and in sport, rather than to a direct awareness of professionals working within these specialisms.

However, even with regard to those specialisms in psychology that are clearly related to mental health concerns, there remains a good deal of confusion as to what these psychologists actually do. For example, it is often assumed by members of the public that all clinical psychologists and counselling psychologists are psychoanalytically oriented. There is little

appreciation of the different schools of abnormal psychology, or of the extent of the divergences between their representative philosophies.

### **2.3. Confusions regarding the diversity of psychology as an entire discipline**

Notwithstanding the complexity of potential confusions among (and within) the various applied specialisms of psychology, it is noteworthy that there is a lack of awareness of the fact that “pure” psychology is an empirically based academic discipline that stands independently of its applications. In other words, most members of the public are aware only of psychology’s potential “professional” applications; they remain largely unaware of the core areas of understanding that comprise the field (which, according to PSI’s guidelines for the accreditation of undergraduate degrees, are: biological psychology, social psychology, personality and individual differences, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, and research methodology).

This is particularly troubling in that it is consistent with an “ends” rather than a “means” focus on psychology, which is by definition shallow. As an example, the public’s (often grudging) respect for medicine as a profession is bolstered by an acceptance that much of its worth stems from a scientific understanding of the human body. However, when the public sees applied psychology in the absence of its pure psychology basis, the fillip to its reputation that would be afforded by its true depth is lost.

A related problem emerging from the popular perception of psychology as an exclusively applied discipline is that the majority of students entering psychology degree programmes are of the view that they are about to undertake a training in applied psychology. Ironically, the opposite is in fact the case: for sound ethical reasons, professional applied skills (such as counselling or psychometric testing) are not included in undergraduate training. The impact on the profession of this widely held misperception among students seeking to enter third level psychology courses (or indeed among those who avoid psychology because they believe it is not something that would interest them) is difficult to compute, but presumably negative.

### **2.4. Confusions regarding the scientific nature of psychology**

Somewhat related to the misconceptions regarding the status of pure psychology is the widespread confusion regarding the academic nature of the discipline. Like all academic subjects, psychology has benefited from a long history of academic scholarship, which inherently makes it a rationalist, determinist, empirical field. This is the case whether or not psychology is approached from a humanities/liberal arts perspective (e.g., leading to a BA degree) or from a “hard” science perspective (e.g., leading to a BSc degree). However, from the deliberations of PAGOTPUP, it is apparent that the public perception of psychology is often skewed toward the instinctive or mystical, rather than the empirical.

One way in which members of PAGOTPUP found this to be manifest is in the area commonly referred to as “pop psychology.” Pop psychology aims

to convey information to consumers (most of whom will have no background in formal psychology) both concisely and expeditiously. Given the restrictions inherent in such parameters, the nature of pop psychology demands that its content be focused more on the “bottom line” of application (e.g., self-help advice) than on the laborious evidence-gathering and empirical debate that might justify one application over an alternative. As such, when reading pop psychology it can often be difficult to tell which advice is supported by evidence or experience and which is not. In turn, it can then be difficult to distinguish well-meaning psychologists who are trying to communicate complex concepts with lucidity, from charlatans who are trying to commercially exploit a vulnerable readership.

However, there is an ethical onus on psychologists to avoid such difficulties (e.g., the PSI’s Code of Professional Conduct requires psychologists to clearly distinguish facts from opinions in their public statements). Presumably, it cannot be healthy for our discipline if there is a perceived boundary-confusion between psychology and charlatanism.

Often the failure to acknowledge its scientific basis reflects a flattering view of psychology among the public, but one that is overly optimistic. In essence, people are not always aware of the limits to psychology (and the consequent limits to its applications); people can hold a naïve assumption that psychologists “have all the answers.”

## **2.5. Confusions regarding the competences and practices of psychologists**

Stemming perhaps from confusion regarding the scientific nature of psychology is a range of misperceptions regarding the abilities of trained psychologists. These generally fall into two categories, which might be referred to as “generic” and “professional”.

Among the generic abilities commonly misattributed to psychologists is the ability to read minds or, at the very least, to be so well versed in nonverbal communication as to be able to infer a person’s inner thoughts from his or her outer appearance. As well as posing the threat of mild embarrassment (or, more likely, tedium) for individual psychologists, this misconception may have a serious adverse influence on the credibility of psychology as a profession.

Among the professional abilities often misattributed to psychologists is the ability to make swift (if not immediate) diagnoses of mental health or educational problems. This misperception can be especially damaging, as when it becomes apparent that a diagnosis may take some substantial time to arrive at, a client may lose his or her initial enthusiasm and become disillusioned with the psychologist. Similarly, it is commonly assumed that psychotherapy is something that an appropriately trained psychologist can simply “deliver” to a client, rather than something that might involve a commitment by therapist and client to a joint process.

Sometimes clients hold an opposing, but nonetheless damaging, view regarding the length of time involved in diagnoses. Rather than expect an immediate result, some clients expect a psychologist to delve into the minute details of their personal histories and interpersonal relationships, unnecessarily opening cans of worms in their lives unrelated to their presenting problem. Because of this misperception, clients may not fully participate in therapy or may just avoid it altogether.

Finally, there appears to be little awareness (among either the public or fellow professions) of the competences of psychologists in academic and service-based research domains, and of the fact that the training of psychologists equips them to contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions and to the assessment of service needs.

### **3. Some Costs of the Public Misunderstanding of Psychology**

Apart from professional vanity, there are several reasons to be concerned about the levels and nature of public (mis)understanding of psychology. Such misunderstandings carry direct costs both to the profession and to society at large.

#### **3.1. Costs associated with disciplinary-boundary confusion**

The inability of the public to identify the specific professional boundaries around psychology necessarily implies that they will be less likely to value the profession above others. In the language of marketing: when consumers see no difference between a psychologist and another professional, this evidences a lack of adequate product differentiation. Accordingly, psychologists will find it increasingly difficult to compete in the service-provision marketplace.

#### **3.2. Costs associated with confusion about the diversity of applied psychology**

A similar argument applies at the level of specific applications of psychology. It is difficult to conceive of a groundswell of public support for the expansion of services within a given subfield of psychology if the public is unaware of its specific areas of usefulness (or of its existence).

It is perhaps notable that where public controversies do exist regarding the availability of professional services, they usually relate to professions whose focus is relatively concrete, tangible, and (perhaps) narrow when compared with psychology. Political pressure to redress shortages in fields such as speech and language therapy and physiotherapy owes much to a clear understanding on the part of the body politic as to what these services involve. Psychology's breadth and the weak understanding of its various subfields makes it difficult to attract public support for the exertion of similar political pressure on government to improve services or training opportunities in our discipline.

### **3.3. Costs associated with confusion regarding the diversity of psychology**

Confusion regarding the full gamut of psychology as a discipline will necessarily moderate the experience of students of psychology, as well as the intentions of potential students. A failure to appreciate the breadth of psychology amounts to a stereotyping of the field. Given that stereotypes are initially convincing but ultimately misleading, it is probable that many students' initial enthusiasm will wane over time. Further, it is inevitable that some would-be students will avoid psychology for invalid reasons. Assuming that psychology serves the public good, confusion on this point is costly in that it fails to ensure that the most outstanding individuals have the opportunity of seriously considering psychology as a career.

### **3.4. Costs associated with confusions regarding scientific psychology**

A conflation of psychology with non-scientific areas of practice undermines the argument that psychology is useful precisely *because* it is scientific. At the very least, a discipline that claims some scholarly basis will be seen by most people to be more valuable than a discipline with none. When the scientific nature of psychology is confused, it occludes the distinctions between psychology and charlatanism.

### **3.5. Confusions regarding the competences and practices of psychologists**

Confusions regarding the abilities of psychologists can trivialise the discipline, or can cause clients to become unnecessarily disillusioned with the wide-ranging, but ultimately finite, capacities of psychologists.

## **4. Target audiences for understanding-enhancement efforts**

The range of misconceptions outlined above suggests that "one-size-fits-all" efforts to raise awareness of psychology are likely to be only marginally effective. Indeed, it is obvious that the concept of "public understanding" is misleadingly generic; there are multiple types of public understanding to be considered. One way of conceiving of this multiplicity, which has practical utility, is to consider the various audiences at whom awareness raising efforts should be directed. The deliberations of PAGOTPUP have isolated the following.

### **4.1. The general public**

Notwithstanding the wisdom of targeting specialised audiences, it is clearly important to seek to address a global public audience with initiatives that enhance their understanding of psychology as a discipline. Such an audience not only represents the potential "consumers" of psychology, but also represents the society-based information network through which much of the understanding and misunderstanding of psychology circulates.

#### **4.2. Allied pressure groups**

Some members of the general public are involved in (or else are particularly sensitive to) single-issue pressure groups and campaigns. Members of the public concerned about psychological issues such as suicide, addictions, special educational needs, bullying, and so on, will be especially motivated to receive information on psychology and psychologists, and so generically designed public understanding interventions may be sub-optimally focused for such audiences.

#### **4.3. Allied professionals**

Experience suggests that allied professionals are often quite amenable to psychology as a profession or discipline, but that their receptiveness to it is tempered by a lack of understanding across most of the areas identified above. Given that allied professionals have existing network contacts with psychologists, successful initiatives to improve understanding ought to capitalise on these relationships. It should be noted that although important in relation to psychology in the health services, the targeting of initiatives to allied professionals should not be exclusive to health settings. Educational psychologists, organisational psychologists, and academic psychologists also occupy work settings that are characterised by a high degree of interaction with other professionals.

#### **4.4. Government departments and state agencies**

As psychologists working for the state can testify, it would be a mistake to assume that organisations of state which are ultimately responsible for overseeing psychology training, service availability, or funding (including research funding) are sophisticated in their understanding of what psychology involves. However, given the oversight roles they occupy, initiatives to improve their understanding should be designed specifically with their organisational perspective in mind.

#### **4.5. The media**

The media will inevitably be involved, directly and indirectly, in a good deal of the understanding and misunderstanding of psychology. Experience suggests that there is substantial scope for improvement in the way in which the media reports on psychology as a profession, on the consumers of psychology, and on the subject matter of psychology. Bearing in mind previous experiences of PSI's External Relations Panel, it should be recognised that the media as a profession are continuously receptive to briefings by psychologists and appear ever keen to enhance their understanding of the specialist areas on which they report.

#### **4.6. School students**

There are at least two reasons why school students represent a separate sub-audience to which particular initiatives should be directed. Firstly, school

students are the main source of students for third level psychology courses, and are therefore the source of our discipline's regenerative potential. Given the large amount of information in circulation designed to apprise school leavers about different career options (much of it emanating from professional bodies), the value of informing this group about professional and disciplinary issues appears well recognised. Secondly, school children can represent a vehicle for the promotion of the understanding of psychology among the wider public, by being an easily accessed group with immediate links via parents and families to the community at large. There is also a sense in which it can be seen as valuable to inform members of the public about psychology while they are still young, prior to their exposure to the extensive misinformation that appears to circulate widely.

#### **4.7. Psychologists**

Psychologists represent a perhaps unexpected target audience for efforts to promote the public understanding of psychology. However, there are three contexts in which attention may be directed at psychologists themselves. Firstly, undoubtedly some psychologists fall foul of some of the misconceptions about their discipline outlined in Table 1. Secondly, in the era of Continuing Professional Development, it is incumbent on professional bodies to keep (or help to keep) their members abreast of emerging developments in their discipline, so that their understanding of it is maintained at a sophisticated level. And thirdly, it would appear that many psychologists seem to underestimate the extent, and the potential damaging effects, of the public's current misunderstanding of psychology. Part of the endeavour to enhance public understanding will be to inform psychologists themselves of the pertinent issues concerning public understanding, and to involve them in awareness-raising as ambassadors for their discipline.

### **5. Modalities of understanding-enhancement efforts**

The variety of misconception and target audience suggests that a number of different ways of improving public understanding of psychology can be considered. The following represent those identified by PAGOTPUP.

#### **5.1. Leaflets and pamphlets**

By far the most commonly suggested format for understanding-enhancement efforts was the production of appropriate leaflets, pamphlets, or fact-sheets. It seems true that such leaflets remain extremely common despite the potentially elaborate alternatives offered by our multimedia technological age. For example, many of our sister professions invest much energy (and finances) in the production of information leaflets, presumably having considered various other options. The prevalence of leaflets (as would be evidenced by the vast number of leaflets relating to professional services and health concerns available in the public waiting areas of health-care institutions) would imply that members of the public would be very familiar with such a format. Indeed, it might be the case that psychologists appear

“less professional” in not having leaflets of their own to contribute to this paper milieu.

The notion of a “pamphlet” may represent something more substantial than a leaflet. Such a product may be used to represent some of the detail required to reach particular target audiences with relevant information. For example, the enhancement of understanding of psychology among state agencies may not be adequately addressed through a simple leaflet.

## **5.2. Web-based information**

Where leaflets are produced, it is necessary in the modern era to make such materials available online. For PSI, this would mean that all leaflets should be downloadable from the Society website. The PSI office currently has the facility to create brochure-style documents in this manner.

This of course draws attention to the possibility of enhancing public understanding by offering exclusively online information. A thorough and comprehensive information store, easily navigable and referenced to a Frequently Asked Questions section, would appear to be a basic minimum requirement for a modern professional body. Compared to paper-based media, the associated financial costs and problems with in-built obsolescence are minimal.

It is likely that members of the public who are motivated to proactively seek out information on psychology will check the PSI’s webpage in the first instance, perhaps never contacting the Society directly. The likelihood that the Society’s webpage will be encountered and remembered may be enhanced by modifying its current domain name. The current domain name is Society-specific and based on a five-letter acronym, making it difficult to intuit. Some organisations opt for a more thematic (rather than organisation-specific) domain name and avoid acronyms, in the belief that memorability will thus be increased (for example, the Irish Heart Foundation uses “irishheart.ie”).

However, the availability of online resources will not completely achieve the objective of enhancing public understanding on its own, as its success will be contingent on the enhancement of awareness of the Society itself. For example, members of the public who are not informed regarding the boundaries between psychology and, say, psychiatry will not necessarily consult the webpage of a psychological society for clarification.

## **5.3. Public lectures**

The holding of public lectures on psychology offers a relatively low-cost but potentially fruitful way of addressing a number of target audiences, especially those who may not be reached via electronic or paper modalities. The PSI used to organise such a series of public lectures a number of years ago, suggesting that the concept may usefully be revisited. Some consideration should be given to the various types of public lecture that

might be possible; for example, lectures on mental health issues would be very different to lectures on the latest scientific research. In addition, the Society would be under an obligation to ensure that such events would take place around the country.

#### **5.4. Exhibitions**

The notion of an exhibition, of exhibition stands, or of an “open day”-type event could be invoked to access particular target audiences such as school students or other professions. For example, PSI may seek to maintain an exhibition/information stand at the annual conferences of professional bodies for other (allied) disciplines.

As regards reaching the general public, there would appear to be several opportunities for psychology to be represented at larger scale events run by other organisations. For example, such events might include the Young Scientists Exhibition or the *Irish Times* Higher Options Conference (the annual exhibition, held in Dublin, aimed at helping school-leavers choose courses at third level). As well as reaching delegates, it is notable that these events attract a considerable degree of media coverage. The fact that such exhibitions are well-established national events should offset the risk of the Society appearing as though it is inappropriately “touting for business” on behalf of the profession.

It would appear unlikely that an exhibition organised by PSI devoted to the promotion of awareness of psychology would be successful as an independent enterprise, as there would be no clear incentive for participation in it by members of the public. However, some publicity-raising cultural events could be organised to coincide with special occasions, especially those relating to milestone anniversaries of the profession and/or the Society itself. It can be noted that during its centenary year, the British Psychological Society organised a number of such events across the UK, involving major arts bodies and institutions (e.g., art exhibitions at major galleries). The relationship between mental health and artistic work is very ingrained in the public imagination, and so it is possible to conceive of such events being organised around a wide range of arts and media. Admittedly, PSI is some way off its own centenary celebrations (due in 2070!); however, it is perhaps worth noting in this regard that the Society celebrates its 40th birthday in a little over four years’ time.

#### **5.5. Press Officer**

Currently, the Society’s External Relations Panel does sterling work in liaising with the media. In most cases, such liaisons relate to specific once-off events, either controversial events of a newsworthy nature on which the views of psychologists may be sought or events run by the Society itself (such as the Annual Conference). The Society’s role with the media could be expanded to incorporate a more proactive initiation of press contact throughout the year. Many large organisations retain a Press Officer whose job involves the production of weekly press releases (on both generic and

organisation-specific topics) and their circulation to the media. Another role required of a Press Officer would be to monitor press coverage of the Society and of psychology generally (the PSI office currently collates such coverage from national newspapers), and to actively respond to misinformation. This would be difficult to organise within present Society structures, where the External Relations Panel relies solely on members working in a voluntary capacity. The recruitment of a salaried Press Officer, or the incorporation of related duties into the role of existing Society staff members (who would require specific training in this regard) may be fruitful in addressing the understanding of psychology through the media.

## **5.6. Press articles and other media contributions**

A concerted effort could be made to secure regular columns or sections on psychology in the national media. Most national newspapers produce weekly or monthly health and education supplements, which frequently carry articles on psychological themes. Similarly, most also run regular sections on science. It would not be inappropriate for PSI to act as an agent in approaching national newspapers offering monthly columns from a named psychologist contributor.

Specialist industry periodicals, such as magazines whose circulation is restricted to a given profession (e.g., the *Irish Medical Times*), or similarly specialised websites (e.g., [irishhealth.com](http://irishhealth.com)) may also be approached in a similar manner.

Finally, a similar effort could be made to apprise other media (e.g., television and radio) of the availability of psychologist contributors. The Society currently maintains such a list, and offers media training to members, but this is used only in response to inquiries; the Society does not (as yet) approach media proactively in this regard.

All such initiatives are reliant on the availability of suitable psychologist contributors. The location and vetting of suitable contributors may be the more difficult element of this tactic.

## **5.7. Media guidelines**

As well as liaising personally with the media on specific issues, it may be useful for the Society to issue reporting guidelines on psychology and pertinent topics. Part of the confusion surrounding psychology relates to inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the reporting of professional and scientific psychology and mental health issues. Faced with similar problems, a number of organisations issue reporting guidelines for circulation among the media. For example, lobby groups on disability regularly produce guidelines concerning the use of appropriate terminology in media reports, the description of abilities and disabilities, and the impact of referring to a person's disability when it is not relevant to the main points being reported. It seems likely that at least some inaccuracies in media reports on psychology could be lessened by similar guidelines.

### **5.8. Public Understanding “Tsar”**

To a great extent, the production and distribution of materials, the organisation of events, and the integrated overseeing of the Society’s efforts at enhancing the public understanding of psychology will produce an associated workload. Assuming that the Society’s current efforts could be greatly enhanced, this associated workload is likely to be additional to that currently sustained by the Society’s staff and/or the President, Council, the External Relations Panel, or other voluntary contributors.

Although the presentation of information to the public has traditionally been the purview of the External Relations Panel (headed up by a Public Relations Officer), it could be argued that the enhancement of public understanding of psychology goes beyond the remit of “public relations.” As such, the job of enhancing public understanding of psychology is not one that currently falls to any particular member or employee of PSI. Accordingly, it appears necessary to create a position within the Society for an individual to oversee the Society’s efforts in this regard.

This Public Understanding “Tsar” could (and possibly should) sit on the External Relations Panel, although it would be important that the role of promoting the public understanding of psychology is not subsumed into other activities to the extent that it disappears from view over time. In order to obviate such an eventuality, the Panel itself could be reconstituted and renamed in order to include the objective of enhancing public understanding of psychology. An alternative approach would be to constitute a separate voluntary group within the Society devoted to public understanding issues and chaired by the Public Understanding “Tsar”.

Whichever approach is taken, it would also be necessary to ensure that such a function is adequately resourced and integrated with the Society’s management structures. To meet such objectives it would be necessary to formalise a Public Understanding (or perhaps a “public education”) budget; and to consider ways in which the Tsar could work with Council (perhaps occupying a new officership within the Society).

## **6. Some samples from other organisations**

Many of the issues under consideration have been looked at by psychological societies and psychologists elsewhere. Furthermore, other professions have had to deal to some extent with enhancing public understanding of their disciplines. As such, it seemed appropriate to investigate what other organisations have achieved in this regard. Some of the materials reviewed by members of PAGOTPUP, and which were deemed to be of a high quality, are outlined below.

### **6.1. Information leaflets, pamphlets, etc.**

The American Psychological Association offer a number of highly informative information leaflets on mental health issues (e.g., “Change your mind about mental health”) in a section of its website called “APA Help Center”, at <http://www.apahelpcenter.org>.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists offer a series of useful information leaflets called “Help is at hand”, offering advice on seeking help with mental health problems. These can be retrieved from <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info/help/>.

In Ireland, some individual psychologists or psychology departments have produced leaflets and pamphlets for their own use. For example, the Psychology Department, Community Care Clonmel, have produced a professionally designed and informative 20-page booklet on ADHD for parents. Psychologist Helen O’Neill has produced a leaflet for child clients called “Going to see a psychologist.”

Some clear and explicit but yet very informative leaflets on issues for which therapeutic services might be required is available from the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists, at <http://www.caslpa.ca/PDF/fact%20sheets/>.

An example of how a professional body provides effective information on the nature and scope of its discipline is offered by Speech Pathology Australia, at [http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/library11\\_FactSheet.pdf](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/library11_FactSheet.pdf).

A similarly impressive range of leaflets on occupational therapy is available from the British Association of Occupational Therapists/College of Occupational Therapists, at <http://www.cot.org.uk/public/promotingot/marketing/leaflets/intro.php>.

An example of the way in which an organisation can provide useful information on its own activities has been produced by the National Association for Intellectual Disability in Ireland (NAMHI), available from [http://www.namhi.ie/pdf/intel\\_disb\\_causes.pdf](http://www.namhi.ie/pdf/intel_disb_causes.pdf).

### **6.2. Posters**

The Australian Psychological Society offer some well designed and modern posters aimed at raising awareness about the services of psychologists in a non-stigmatising and lightly humorous manner. These can be retrieved from <http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/>.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry produce a “Glossary of Mental Health Poster”, available from [http://www.aacap.org/about/glossary/AACAP\\_Glossary.pdf](http://www.aacap.org/about/glossary/AACAP_Glossary.pdf).

### **6.3. Media guidelines**

An effective example of media guidelines for an area related to psychology is available from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, at <http://www.afsp.org/education/recommendations/5/1.htm>. (For interest, the National Union of Journalists [which is UK-based but putatively includes Irish journalists] have prepared brief information on reporting mental illness, available from <http://www.nuj.org.uk/inner.php?docid=422>. It would appear possible that these could be improved upon.)

## **7. Some suggestions regarding specific materials**

PAGOTPUP members were invited to offer suggestions of specific materials that PSI could usefully produce in seeking to enhance the public understanding of psychology. Such materials could take the form of leaflets/pamphlets, online materials, or both. These suggestions are intended to merely give a flavour of what could be produced and their variety draws attention to the wide-ranging scope of public education.

### **7.1. Generic materials**

In attempting to address disciplinary boundary issues, it seemed appropriate to suggest material under the heading “What is Psychology?” It may be appropriate to specifically target the question under such titles as “Psychology and Psychiatry: What’s the difference?” More specific materials could describe specialisms within psychology, and address possible confusion regarding the scientific basis of psychology.

### **7.2. Specific materials**

Many specific materials could relate to issues for which the services of a psychologist might be required. Of particular relevance would be consumer guides to psychological services, perhaps tailored to specific problems (e.g., “What is ADHD?” or “What is depression?”) or to specific groups (e.g., “A child’s guide to psychology” for child clients and their parents, “Why study psychology?” for school-leavers, or “Psychology and the Public Interest” for research funding agencies).

### **7.3. Society materials**

It would appear that most professional bodies have detected a need to prepare materials that explain their own functions and services and so consideration may be given to producing material under the heading of “What is PSI?” As well as referring to the professional training and work of psychologists, such material might serve a useful purpose in advertising the role of PSI in managing misconduct procedures, insofar that such procedures will be of greatest effectiveness if they are known to and understood by the public at large.

The wide-ranging task of enhancing the public understanding of psychology makes it undesirable for PAGOTPUP to specify precisely what materials should or should not be produced, and in what modalities. The selection of specific materials will need to be based on an evaluation of need and urgency, and a subsequent prioritisation of objectives.

## 8. Conclusion

It is probably the case that public misunderstanding of psychology can never be fully addressed, and that the promotion of public understanding will be a permanent function of PSI. This report has attempted to comprehensively categorise the ways in which psychology can be misunderstood, the costs associated with misunderstandings, the relevant target audiences for awareness raising endeavours, and the ways in which such endeavours may be delivered. In relation to the latter point, some examples from other organisations have been identified as well as some putative suggestions as to particular issues that could be the subject of initial efforts.

It is the opinion of PAGOTPUP that the public understanding of psychology is a genuine issue of concern. As well as seeking to meet its mission to promote psychology as a pure and applied discipline, PSI has a moral obligation to the wider community as well as to its members to promote sophistication and minimise ignorance. It could also be argued that the value of the Society's other activities – for example, the accreditation of training, the operation of conduct procedures, the maintenance of a Society register, the lobbying of Government on legislation – will ultimately be undermined if the public at large is confused as to what psychology is or what psychologists do.

Therefore, as a potentially higher-order function of a proficient professional body, the promotion of the public understanding of psychology warrants serious operational attention. PAGOTPUP recommends that this function be recognised within the administration of the Society, and that it be appropriately resourced. Whether this be by the appointment of a Public Understanding “Tsar”, by the constitution of a relevant standing committee or unit, or by the incorporation of this function within existing structures; and whether this function be spearheaded by salaried employees or by Society officers; are both matters for Council to determine.

**It is the conclusion of PAGOTPUP that to allow the current low levels of public understanding of psychology to continue unaddressed would represent a marked failure by the Society to protect its members' interests and to promote the public good.**

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