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A portrait of Anne Cooke, a woman with short, curly, reddish-brown hair, smiling at the camera. She is wearing a black V-neck top and a silver necklace with a large, geometric, metallic pendant. The background is a plain, light gray.

Anne Cooke is a Director of the Doctoral Programme in Clinical Psychology at Canterbury Christ Church University, and current British Psychological Society Practitioner of the Year. The award recognises her work bringing psychologists and service users together to produce good-quality public information, including the Society's public information report *Understanding Psychosis and Schizophrenia* (now revised – www.understandingpsychosis.net) and in fostering constructive public debate about mental health.

'As public intellectuals, it is possible to be both polite and radical'

Anne Cooke

One formative experience

When I was growing up, my grandmother lived with us. She was unhappy in various ways and went into hospital from time to time. I used to watch TV with her in her granny flat, and she always said what a difference it made that I was there. I realised how powerful it is just to be with and listen to someone in distress.

One 'sliding doors' event

A conference in Bristol in 1993. It was organised by the Psychotherapy Section of the BPS and was called 'Meaning and Madness: Psychotherapy and Psychosis'. At the time I had recently qualified and was working in an acute psychiatric ward and community team. Most of the staff were brilliant, but I constantly wondered, and still do, whether the psychiatric system often does more harm than good, and how things could be different. Even though on an individual level staff were often very compassionate about the horrendous events and circumstances that many people had experienced, the power of the system often seemed to reduce things down to a simple narrative of 'illness requiring medication, by force if necessary'. This simple story locates the problem firmly in the individual and risks ignoring the events and circumstances of people's lives. I often wondered whether by imposing this narrative and its associated interventions – mainly drugs – we were re-traumatising and re-victimising people who had been through horrendous experiences.

At the conference I met other psychologists who were asking the same questions and, for the first time, survivor activists. I learned that there was a whole alternative movement in mental health, with a different way of seeing things. I started to question the notion of 'expertise' in this context and to see the value of a 'not-knowing' approach.

One proud moment

The launch event for *Understanding Psychosis* in 2014. I came back from being interviewed on the *Today* programme to a hall filled with (among others) many of my personal heroes from the mental health world. My partner, parents and siblings all turned up too. Best moment of the day was probably when Professor Sir Robin Murray said that he wished the Royal College of

Psychiatrists had written the report! More recently, I was overwhelmed when colleagues nominated me for the Practitioner of the Year Award. I still can't quite believe it.

One thing you would change about psychology

Our deference and unwillingness to rock the boat. As academics and clinicians, we have privileged access to information that the world needs and that could make a profound difference. For example, when I speak to journalists they often express surprise to hear that the idea of mental illness is just one way of conceptualising certain experiences and that there are no blood tests for 'schizophrenia' or 'depression'. I think we often keep our critiques to ourselves for fear of offending our more conservative colleagues. But critiquing ideas is not the same as criticising or attacking individuals, as heroes of mine like Mary Boyle have so ably shown, and as I hope my Twitter conversations demonstrate [follow Anne on @AnneCooke14]. As public intellectuals, it is possible to be both polite and radical.

One thing that organised psychology could do better

Be seen! Be part of the public debate. I'm fond of misquoting Edmund Burke: For damaging ideas to flourish requires only that those who know better remain silent. Psychologists have the potential to help change society's whole approach to the things we care about, but we need to get over our ivory tower preciousness, our worry about what our colleagues will think, and get involved in the public debate – on local radio, on social media, and in policy. For many of us this is why we belong to the BPS – to join together and make a difference in the world. But current Society structures and policies often seem designed to prevent rather than facilitate that. We urgently need to find a way to galvanise 'people power', to capitalise on members' ideas, passion and energy and to be proactive about being included in policy forums.

One thing that you would change about psychologists

Apart from being too reticent and inward looking, we have a tendency to focus too much on what goes on inside people's heads and too little on the events and circumstances of their lives, despite what we know from research about the central importance of the

environment. Clinical psychologists in particular see every day the effects on psychological wellbeing of our current toxic social and political environment. I think we have an ethical responsibility to point that out and work to change it. I have huge respect for colleagues who do that, for example those active in Psychologists for Social Change. In the current context, being politically neutral is no longer defensible.

One book

Psychology Mental Health and Distress, edited by John Cromby, Dave Harper and Paula Reavey. A pet hate of mine is undergraduate courses on so-called 'abnormal psychology' (have a look at the hashtag #abnormalpsychologyinthebin on Twitter). Why do we feel the need to 'jump ship' to medical explanations when it comes to psychological distress? Why, as psychologists, do we still attribute distressing or confusing thoughts and feelings to mysterious 'mental illnesses' rather than trying to understand them psychologically? This is the kind of thinking we tried to challenge in *Understanding Psychosis*. *Psychology, Mental Health and Distress* is the first undergraduate textbook to take a consistently psychological approach.

I should also give an honourable mention to Peter

One inspiration

Richard Bentall, for his ground-breaking research, his willingness to articulate what science has to say about important public debates, and his ability to use wit to make important points. I wish I'd written 'A proposal to classify happiness as a psychiatric disorder'.

One alternative career path you might have chosen

I did! My first degree was in language and literature and I wanted to be a journalist or BBC producer. After graduating I worked in TV for a while. When my fledgling TV station closed down I was forced to think again. I'm glad I did, and recently I've been able to combine the two.

One thing that makes me laugh

A Fish Called Wanda. I'm laughing even thinking about it and I haven't seen it for years.

One thing I am proud of

Sorry, I need two. My amazing family (my partner Bruce and my children now aged 15 and 12), and *Understanding Psychosis*. It wasn't easy getting 24 authors to agree (including 13 professors with strong opinions!), but we managed it, and I'm proud of the result. Now we need to get its messages out there so they make a difference.

One prized possession

Sorry, I need two again. The first is my electric bike that I use for commuting. It's over 15 years old and used to have a big child seat on the front. In my 20s I lived in Utrecht in the Netherlands, and ever since I've had the cycling bug. Don't get me started on urban design or sustainable transport. My partner mends bikes, so you should see our garage. My other prized possession is my beach hut – actually it belongs to Hastings council but we've had it for 10 years

and I love it. Talking of Hastings: I like living in eccentric places. I moved from Brixton to Tunbridge Wells but it wasn't eccentric enough for my taste. So now I live in an eccentric Sussex village near an eccentric town (Hastings) and it suits me great. My most popular post ever on the local Facebook group was an artwork I own which says: 'Keep Hastings Weird' (see www.sassylukeartworks.com). The village also has tendency to flood so my house is on stilts. Really.



Kinderman's *Prescription for Psychiatry*, which I helped edit. It's controversial for sure, and I'm not hugely keen on the title, but I applaud Peter's attempt to outline in everyday language a truly psychological approach to mental health and wellbeing, and the radical implications for what services should look like. He even suggests taking mental health care out of hospitals.

Society benefits and services at a glance

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Our members in mind...

The Membership team attended over 30 conferences and events throughout England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales providing information about member benefits and criteria for membership.

Launched online graduate membership applications (November 2016) – over 4000 received and processed since launch.

Held our first 'Focus Group' with Graduate Members (April 2017) – a good opportunity to meet with members to discuss their experiences and talk about future developments.