

Formal complaint about Professor James Coyne's behaviour

Professor James Coyne is a clinical and health psychologist based in the US who is well known on social media for his abrasive and attacking interactions. On his website <https://www.coyneoftherealm.com> and on social media, Professor Coyne claims the following affiliations:

- Professor of Health Psychology at University Medical Center, Groningen, the Netherlands, teaching scientific writing and critical thinking.
- Visiting Professor, Institute for Health, Health Care Policy & Aging Research, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.
- Emeritus Professor of Psychology in Psychiatry Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania.

He also claims on his website to be a blogger at [PLOS Mind the Brain](#).

Following the publication of his recent blog claiming that experiences classified as what he calls 'ostensible' sexual abuse can be a 'positive, liberating experience', which aroused widespread shock on social media, a group of us wrote the following letter of complaint to the University of Groningen and copied it to the University of Pennsylvania and Rutgers University:

We write, as a matter of deep and urgent concern, to make you aware of the behaviour of one of your colleagues, Professor James Coyne, who holds the position of Emeritus Professor in your Department.

For many years, now, Professor Coyne's behaviour on social media has crossed the boundaries of common decency, and could be characterised as bullying, harassing, offensive and defamatory. Of particular concern is Professor Coyne's misogyny; with examples of him using language such as 'bimbo' and 'bitch' about professional women on social media.

Professor Coyne's unacceptable behaviour became public knowledge when several national British newspapers reported that leaked emails showed that he has referred to a male academic colleague as a 'disgusting old fart neoliberal hypocrite' and had told a female colleague 'Let's get all this backchannel bullshit into the open, you ol' sleazebag' (The Times; <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/scientists-trade-insults-over-myalgic-encephalomyelitis-me-study-slk0cv5lj>; Daily Mail online; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-4749208/Angry-scientists-throw-insults-regarding-flawed-study.html>)

Matters became even more serious with the publication of a blog on 15.11.17 titled: 'Stop using the Adverse Childhood Experiences Checklist to make claims about trauma causing physical and mental health problems' (<https://www.coyneoftherealm.com/blogs/mind-the-brain/stop-using-the-adverse-childhood-experiences-checklist-to-make-claims-about-trauma-causing-physical-and->

[mental-health-problems](#)). Purporting to be a critique of an assessment tool for traumatic events such as abuse, domestic violence and emotional neglect, the blog made the astonishing claim that behaviours fitting the definition of sexual abuse can be a 'positive, liberating experience.' Coyne's actual words were: 'There is so much ambiguity in endorsements of (ostensible) sexual abuse. Maybe it was a positive, liberating experience.' He elaborated thus: 'What if the "perpetrator" is the 20 year old boyfriend or girlfriend of a 14 year old?... Arguably, the event.....could actually be quite positive.'

As a group of mental health professionals, survivors of abuse and senior workers in related fields, we hope it is abundantly clear that sexual abuse is never a 'positive, liberating experience'. We also hope it is not necessary to point out that a sexual relationship with a 14 year old is illegal, and that the situation in which an older person has persuaded the younger one that they are in a caring boyfriend/girlfriend relationship is a very common abuse scenario. We trust it is obvious to you that Professor Coyne's stated views are not only deeply offensive, but utterly irresponsible given his professional status, and a clear breach of professional ethics.

We regret to tell you that Professor Coyne has responded to widespread horror on social media about his views in his traditional unacceptable style. He has directed these comments in tweets about the numerous professionals and survivors of abuse who have protested: 'moronic', 'what a low lifer', 'a sleazy troll', 'another appalling sleaze troll'; and so on. He has also stated that Professor Kinderman is 'a real asshole', a 'pompous buffoon', a 'puritanical classist prig' and 'a moralistic cloistered white prude' for raising the issue. Meanwhile, his history as a convicted domestic abuser has come to light and now appears to be common knowledge (https://cases.justia.com/michigan/court-of-appeals-unpublished/20030424_C232981_53_232981.OPN.PDF?ts=1396125300).

We understand that Professor Coyne has been the subject of formal complaints in addition to ours. We are frankly appalled that no effective action has been taken, and that Professor Coyne is still in post. You may be aware that his recent behaviour is causing outrage on social media, with numerous angry and horrified comments on several Facebook websites, including the UK Clinical Psychology Facebook group, and on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/clinpsychlucy/status/931154076162777088>). Since his grossly unacceptable conduct has already been exposed in the national UK press, we are astonished, among other things, that you are prepared to risk the reputation to your University of continuing your links with a man who continues to behave in this manner.

We ask you to act urgently and decisively on this matter and to inform us of the outcome.

In an immediate and strongly-worded reply, the Chair of the Department of Psychiatry, Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, described Professor Coyne's behaviour as 'reprehensible'. She regretted the 'abuse' that colleagues had been subjected

to and joined us in condemning his *'appalling'* language and actions. We welcome this statement and believe it reflects well on the Faculty.

The Chair also clarified that *'Dr. Coyne has not worked at the University of Pennsylvania since 2013 and we do not anticipate any relationship with him in the future.'*

The Dean of the University of Groningen also expressed condemnation of Professor Coyne's *'continuing unacceptable behaviour.'* The Dean said that a second letter had been sent to Professor Coyne about his professional misconduct on social media, along with a *'strong request'* not to present himself as a current employee of the university.

The University of Rutgers has no mention of Professor Coyne on its faculty list.

We understand that Professor Coyne has been asked to step down from his role as blogger at PLOS. He is not currently registered as a practising clinical psychologist with the state licensing board of Pennsylvania.

As of 13th Dec 2017, his website has not been altered in accordance with the University of Groningen's request, and nor have the additional inaccuracies been corrected.

Given this appalling history of misrepresentation, harassment, abuse and criminal behaviour, we advise people to be extremely cautious in their interactions with Professor Coyne and very sceptical about the accuracy of any blogs, articles or claims by him, either personal or academic.

Professor Richard Bentall, Professor of Clinical Psychology, University of Sheffield.

Dr Jacqui Dillon, Chair, Hearing Voices Network England.

Dr Alec Grant, Independent Scholar in Narrative Mental Health.

Dr Lucy Johnstone, Consultant Clinical Psychologist.

Professor Peter Kinderman, Professor of Clinical Psychology, University of Liverpool.

Dr David Pilgrim, Visiting Professor of Clinical Psychology University of Southampton.

Dr John Read, Professor of Clinical Psychology, University of East London.

Dr Akima Thomas, Clinical Director of Women and Girls Network and West London Rape Crisis Centre.

Jo Watson, UKCP Registered Psychotherapist.