

Wilbraham, Susan ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8512-0041> (2025) An interview with...Dr Sue Wilbraham. British Psychological Society website .

Downloaded from: <https://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/8912/>

Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

provided that

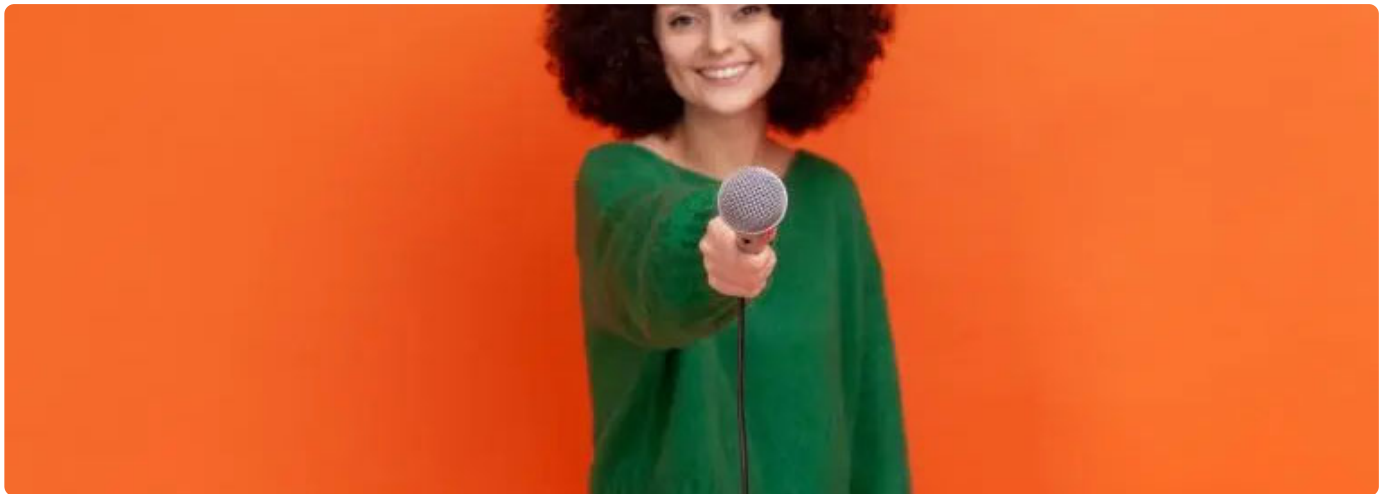
- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
- a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

You may not

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing insight@cumbria.ac.uk.



BPS updates, Climate and environment

An interview with...Dr Sue Wilbraham

From studying mental health and wellbeing in higher education environments to the benefits of open water swimming, Dr Sue Wilbraham (pictured below) outlines her background, research interests and her pathway into environmental psychology and membership of the EPS.

06 May 2025

Share this page



1. Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your career to date?

I'm a senior lecturer in applied psychology at the University of Cumbria, and am programme leader for our online MSc Psychology: Environment Health and Wellbeing.

I completed my psychology degree as a mature student and then undertook a PhD which explored **individual differences in student stress**. Although initially I was interested in understanding how people respond to stressors, I subsequently reflected that I would rather understand how to reduce sources of stress and create environments that support wellbeing.

Over the following years I sought to research health and wellbeing topics and have explored educational settings as well as sport and exercise. I expanded my research in education settings by studying the impact of teaching and learning on mental health of staff and students; I volunteered to collect data as part of the development of the University Mental

COOKIE SETTINGS

Health Charter and, with my fantastic coauthors, published a number of papers about wellbeing in teaching and learning. I also began researching topics in sport and exercise, seeking to understand more about social influences, barriers to participation, and experiences of being active.

Alongside my research, I taught on our BSc and MSc programmes; teaching on the MSc in particular was a great catalyst for me because it made me want to become more active in protecting the environment. I became the University College Union (UCU) environment rep for University of Cumbria and started talking more to colleagues across the university about their research.

I discovered many of my colleagues had shared interests in exploring the relationship between wellbeing and outdoor spaces, and consequently in protecting the environment. The University of Cumbria has a number of campuses, including one in beautiful **Ambleside**; our appreciation of the natural landscape promotes care and concern for it.

2. Can you tell us a bit more about the research you do at the University of Cumbria and how this relates to environmental psychology?

My work on mental health and wellbeing in higher education has included exploring the **dilemmas we face in assessment practice, the importance of social relationships for students, the complexity of supporting independent learning**, and **the importance of looking after staff wellbeing**.

Then, after a late ADHD diagnosis, I became more engaged in supporting disabled staff in universities. It became clear to me that the physical environment was having a significant impact on the health of staff and students and so my work now has an added emphasis on environmental psychology.

With my coauthors I have collected data about the impact of **university built environment on wellbeing**; preliminary findings highlight the importance of factors such as heat, light and soundscape in creating spaces on campus that are conducive to work, green spaces to encourage physical activity and relaxation, and social spaces that encourage interaction and enhance feelings of belonging. University staff and students often compared working on campus to working remotely where they had more control over conditions; we were therefore able to respond to a recent parliamentary call for **evidence on home-based working**.

Alongside this, I have been working with peers I met through the **National Association of Disabled Staff Networks** (NADSN) to understand the experiences of disabled staff in higher education; we launched a national survey to better understand how we can realise **the inclusion of disabled employees in universities**. As this work progresses, we aim to highlight good practice in creating accessible and inclusive spaces in HE.

In a sports and exercise context, I have been working with University of Cumbria colleagues to investigate experiences of open water swimming. Our study on **women's perspectives of**

open water swimming (OWS) sought to understand why the sport is attracting so many women.

Participants told us that social connectedness, support and belonging were highly valued, that OWS was empowering and enhanced their self-esteem, and that blue spaces were associated with a range of physical and psychological benefits. We are following the women's study by exploring disabled swimmers' experiences of OWS; preliminary findings of this research indicate that the multi-sensory nature of swimming is uplifting for swimmers and that immersion provides relief from a range of symptoms. Our participants describe OWS as vital to their wellbeing and therefore both accessibility and water quality degradation are huge concerns.

3. What are you most proud of from your career to date?

I was recently commissioned to undertake an evaluation of a community intervention for loneliness and social isolation in Barrow-In-Furness. The project, called **Furness for You**, was funded through the Department of Digital Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) **know your neighbourhood fund**.

My participants were really open and trusting with me, and I gained some important insights about loneliness interventions in community settings. Beneficiaries frequently described how they felt anxious about attending social groups, but calm environments and quiet activities could help them manage feelings of overwhelm while they met new people and slowly established trust.

In my evaluation, which I anticipate will be published by DCMS soon, I was able to highlight the important work the Furness for You partners have been doing in addressing psychological, practical and economic barriers to engaging beneficiaries. I feel that my report is compelling and will be impactful and I'm proud that my work has the potential to make a difference.

4. What are you hoping to get from becoming a member of the Environmental Psychology Section?

I joined the section because I really want to be part of an environmental psychology community, I'd love to have more informal opportunities to interact with others and hear about their work. It would be wonderful if we could support each other, especially those at the start of their careers. I'd also like to be able to develop connections across the UK (or internationally!) that would support research collaborations and funding applications. Network meetings might be good if there was an appetite.

I think it's important for us to consider how we can take collective action to address emerging issues, and how we can work together to raise the profile of environmental psychology to engage a wider audience. Personally, I'd like for us to have an online seminar series, or podcasts, with short presentations of research or coverage of current affairs. It would allow us

to promote members' work and I'm always telling my students to escape their desks and listen to something interesting while getting some fresh air.

5. And finally, if people wished to connect with or contact you, how would they best do this?

It would be great to hear from other members! I'm on [LinkedIn](#), and have recently joined Circle but am still getting up to speed! My email is Susan.Wilbraham@Cumbria.ac.uk and my University of Cumbria staff profile is [here](#).

