

What has The Psychologist ever done for us?

Ian Florance follows up some of his 'Careers' interviewees

The Psychologist, like the Roman Empire, seems to have been around for a very long time. As this issue shows, our long life reflects constant refreshment and reinvention. But as Monty Python's *Life of Brian* asked of the Roman Empire, what has *The Psychologist* ever done for us?

To focus on one element in the magazine, more than 200 psychologists have answered questions about what it's like to be a psychologist in our 'Careers' interviews. What happened to them? By taking an hour or two out of their working days, did they find unexpected outcomes and benefits?

Some psychologists are slightly defensive (or 'nervous' as Elizabeth Stokoe commented) when approached by the media, even *The Psychologist*. Yet many interviewees found the process valuable in itself. Catriona Morrison told me: 'It is always an indulgence to talk about yourself, but reflecting on my career path set off some thoughts: how did I get here? Is this where I want to be? In fact, I'd say it was more useful than most of the staff development reviews I've had in the various universities I've worked in!' Jackie Sykes also suggested that it 'gave time to reflect' and this can sometimes lead to firm resolutions. Almuth McDowall discovered that she missed teaching occupational psychology, and speaking to me made her determined to get back to it. Kim Stephenson backed up these views: 'It was interesting to be able to look at myself.'

For Elizabeth Stokoe, the interview 'provided a "taking stock" moment, in terms of what I'd achieved so far in my career – and even think that words like *achieve* and *career* might apply to me. It made me think a lot about how best to communicate what I do – which is fairly opaque to lots of psychologists – in the most effective way.'

Reactions to the interview

Of course, people can be equally nervous about the reactions to their interviews once they're printed. Some of the interviewees (Funke Baffour and Elizabeth Stokoe, for instance) commented that very few of their friends are psychologists or read *The Psychologist*. But others had different stories. Catriona Morrison told me that she 'got universally positive feedback. Indeed, I think some of my friends/colleagues weren't aware of what I had been doing, and were surprisingly complementary.' 'I got lots of e-mails and feedback – all positive', said Jackie Sykes.

Roy Childs raised an issue a lot of us face. 'My friends and family always ask what I do and don't really get it... so it was nice to give them something which explained my work and thinking.'

In other cases, the reaction has been varied. 'I got my leg pulled about being in the media – very good-naturedly. People at conferences come up to me having read the interview, which was really nice' (Almuth McDowall).

Kim Stephenson argued passionately for the relationship between psychology and finance in his

interview. He was perhaps surprised by the lack of reaction from psychologists themselves. 'I made a couple of interesting contacts with other people who were in that edition, one of whom was an educational psychologist who gave me some useful ideas for communicating ideas with under-16s. And I had one contact from somebody who'd studied psychology, who I'm now working with on various education and charity projects... Any (other) comment I've had – and it's all been favourable, along the lines of "that's really interesting, I don't see why more people don't do it, I must get your book" – has been from business people, charity workers, et cetera. Not a single psychologist.'

Did the interview open any doors?

Elizabeth Stokoe's experiences are worth recounting in full. 'This was the unexpected and amazing thing about the interview... It led to real career-changing things. I was approached by BBC Radio 4 *The Life Scientific*, who found me via *The Psychologist*... As a massive Radio 4 fan, I was absolutely thrilled, but also again to be given the opportunity to talk on a serious science programme. So my research and biography got a 30-minute dedicated programme, alongside the likes of Brian Cox, Peter Higgs and Richard Dawkins. After that, academic life changed quite a bit! I had huge interest from professionals of all kinds – from salespeople to medics and other academics, and so on, which generated lots of research partnerships and the interest kind of snowballed. From there I did a TEDx talk in Bermuda, was invited (three times now!) to talk at the Royal Institution, I won a WIRED Innovation Fellowship, had loads of invites to give guest speaker lectures (from *Tatler* magazine to the Gas Board!).



Catriona Morrison said that being interviewed 'set off some thoughts'

Just recently I was back with *The Psychologist* as part of the Wellcome Trust Hub at Latitude Festival. So that interview really changed my academic life, and gave conversation analysis a public platform it would never have had otherwise.'

Stephanie Davies also was invited to give talks internationally and, if you read her initial interview, you can see why she'd be a real success as a public speaker.

Other outcomes related to careers. According to Catriona Morrison, 'it helped to recognise my standing – at least as I put it across in the interview! I'm sure it was helpful in me getting a more senior university job, as Professor and Head of Department, having been a Senior Lecturer.'

Susan Golombok felt it got 'the work of the Centre for Family Research in front of psychologists with different backgrounds', and Almuth McDowall mentions 'opportunities for outreach work, usually more than I can meet'. As for Jackie Sykes, although she couldn't identify direct outcomes she said there may well be 'an indirect link to book sales'.

What else happened?

A number of people I speak to link to the interviewees on their websites or in proposals tenders. Stephanie Davis explains. 'Coverage in *The Psychologist* strengthens positioning... It has more weight than many publications, particularly given that I'm in an unusual area of work.'

For Cordelia Galgut, whose interview appeared fairly recently, 'It's too early to evaluate if it's had an effect, but it was important professionally and personally. It is interesting to see my life and professional journey to date down in black and white.'

Catriona Morrison raised interesting points. 'What I particularly liked about the article is that it was quite personal too, and presented me as a rounded human being, with more to it than it just being a job. I am sure this will help aspiring psychologists to feel like they don't have to be super-human in order to achieve a career in psychology... what I think was additionally really helpful was the occasional tweeting by @psychmag to keep it visible and in the public domain. Articles in a monthly publication will be read once and forgotten – I think what the magazine is doing with keeping articles live is a really good idea.'

Funke Baffour reports that her interview 'resulted in a number of young, black women contacting me to suggest I'd inspired them to try to pursue a career in psychology'.

Kim Stephenson makes a very practical point: that getting the view of a neutral on his work 'helped with setting out brief biographies, pen portraits for articles and other communications'.

A summary

Of course this is only a snapshot of 15 years of 'Careers' interviews. We have not yet looked at the effect of the articles on readers: for instance, have they helped undergraduate and in-training psychologists in their decision-making? The application of psychology has never been more important in national and international policy, even in entertainment and the private lives of many people. In addition to models, theories and robust research, the stories and biographies of psychologists and the psychologically trained could help to increase this influence. But for now, it at least seems that being interviewed offers benefits to the interviewees, not least increased opportunities to communicate their ideas and work to a diverse readership.

To read these and other careers interviews, see www.thepsychologist.org.uk/meets



Funke Baffour inspired a number of readers to pursue a career in psychology



Roy Childs said it was nice to give friends and family something that explained his work and thinking

Might you have an interesting story to tell about your career path, the highs and lows of your current role or the professional challenges you are facing? **If you would like to be considered for a 'Careers' interview** in *The Psychologist*, get in touch with the editor Dr Jon Sutton (jon.sutton@bps.org.uk). Of course there are many other ways to contribute to *The Psychologist*, but this is one that many find to be particularly quick, easy and enjoyable.