

'There's a real danger of silos - the key is the Branches'

Some psychologists are past masters at the 'portfolio career', thinking about and applying psychology in hugely varied places. Ian Florance met husband and wife team Barry and Ann Cripps, at the Society's London offices, to draw on their huge experience.

Psychologists, like many other professionals, face fundamental changes in the length and shape of their careers and, for that matter, their lives. Rather than the conventional three-stage life (education – work for one organisation – retire), many psychologists are building portfolio careers: working in different areas; mixing research, training, writing and practice; having relationships with a range of organisations – private and public, for-profit and not-for-profit.

Barry Cripps is in his seventies, but when I asked him about his present work he gave no indication of slowing up. 'I'm a verifier with the Society's Psychological Testing Centre. I train. I work in performance psychology, a term I invented 20 years ago – and have recently renewed an involvement in applying performance psychology to archery. I'm editing a book, *Psychometric Testing: Critical Perspectives*, and I edit the *South West Review* for the Society's South West of England Branch.' Ann is Assistant Editor of the *Review* and they work together, at home in Exeter, organising a huge range of tasks.

'I thought my PhD was in education'

Barry grew up in West London and at school 'my big heroes were the PE teachers. I was very sporty: captain of rugby; the first pupil to score 100 in shooting; I set school records in pole vaulting and took part in gymnastics and swimming. The two masters had been at Loughborough so I went on to do a PE diploma at Loughborough College.' Barry worked in teaching and 'was at Dartington Hall School for 20 years. I began an interest in why teams win or lose. So, despite my teaching duties and having to run a boarding house I decided to do a PhD at the Open University.'

I wondered how Barry made the leap from teaching sports to studying psychology. His route was not conventional. 'I thought my PhD was in education; I only realised I was on a psychology course when there was a meeting of prospective PhDs and the tutor asked all the psychologists to follow him. When I didn't move he specifically indicated that I should come. It was a PhD in social psychology, which I soon



realised fitted exactly with my interests. A sociological perspective addressed team performance whereas psychology illuminated the individual. My PhD was about professional football team performance, and it took me nine years part-time to complete.'

Just before he finished the course he was made redundant by the school and faced the future with no job and an interest in a new area. One of the principles of Barry's career is that he networks, and that opens opportunities. 'That was a frightening period. But I was already teaching psychology at the Open University; they had a quid pro quo in which they'd reduce the fees if you taught. That teaching required me to mug up on a lot of subjects very quickly – for instance I quickly trained in key psychometrics and became something of an expert on the subject. I also taught at the OU Business School and on the Executive MBA in Cranfield. I joined the Society's Division of Occupational Psychology and I picked up a number clients. I'm quite proud that I helped instigate the Faculty of Psychology in Management of the CIPD.'

Too many cowboys?

Barry describes himself at this stage in his life as 'very much a generalist', but he started to specialise more, combining his psychology and PE training. 'My middle

daughter was an archer and at 16 was in the British team. My late wife and I drove her to events and the team asked me what I did. When I told them, they asked me to do it for them, so I combined individual and team work on both physical and mental fitness.’ Although he didn’t attend them, he worked with the archery team over a period of four Olympic games, the last one being Barcelona in 1992. What did his work involve? ‘There were five squad weekends a year at Lilleshall National Sports and Conferencing Centre. I complemented fitness work with mental preparation for competition. I developed a system called 5BX – five basic psychological exercises. These are relaxation, breathing control, concentration, mental rehearsal and confidence-boosting.’

As his interest in this area grew, Barry wrote to *The Psychologist* in 1990 asking if any members wanted to form a Section in the Society. ‘I got a huge response and asked each person to donate five pounds to help with arrangements. I was told, politely, that was not the way things were done and the Society took over the funding, but the Section and eventually the Division of Sport and Exercise Psychology was formed. Ann drove it. She’s a completer-finisher.’

Ann points out the importance of having a real organiser if you are going to set up your own business or become self-employed. ‘I’d worked in the Inland Revenue so I was well-used to being organised, dealing with finance. I’m not a psychologist and when I met Barry I mistakenly tried to impress him by displaying my very small knowledge of Freud.’ Barry and Ann agree that if you’re trying to do a variety of academic and practitioner roles, ‘you haven’t got time to understand everything and you probably won’t initially be able to afford a full-time PA. Understanding finance and ensuring the correctness of legal issues and contracts are critical.’

Barry is obviously committed to developing performance psychology. ‘I’d had a dream of there being a career position of Chartered Sport and Exercise Psychologist. The situation had always been complicated by the existence of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES), of which I was also a member. There are – to put it bluntly – too many cowboys in the area. I wanted a Division of practitioners whose interventions were evidence-based and who had a strong ethical code. I think we’ve achieved that. The Division now has approximately 400 Chartered Psychologists.’ In 2008 Barry was the first winner of the Distinguished Contribution to the Field of Sport and Exercise Psychology Award.

Should people who work with performers always be Chartered Psychologists? ‘No, not necessarily. But they must be ethical and they must use techniques that are evidence-based. They must be able, for instance, to explain the underpinnings – theoretical or stringently

evidential – that underlie a technique, rather than just say “Well, it seems to work”. In the end a lot of what we do as a profession is to do with relationships. If your relationship with the client is based on power, then your intervention won’t work.’

Barry has also worked with other performers – film and TV actors and opera singers. ‘The performance issues are the same: taking control before going onto the stage or into the field; understanding what causes nerves. I’ve worked with pool players and golfers to address the yips.’ Do you have to have done what your clients do? ‘No. I’ve never been an opera singer! 5BX is generic.’

Psychology in the pub

Barry has been very involved with the Society for some time. Would he encourage others to get involved? ‘As I see it the BPS is a learned society and contains thought leaders. It knows more about psychology than I do. It can help us explain what we do to the public – because

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most people don’t understand what we do.’ Ann commented that there are still too many rules in the Society, and Barry feels there is still a practitioner-academic split in the profession, ‘and different Sections and Divisions simply don’t talk enough to each other. With 250-odd subsystems in the Society there’s a real danger of silos. The key is the Branches. In the South West of England Branch, we have

3000-plus members from every Division, in every sort of job. We bring them together and engage the public through Psychology in the Pub sessions: we’ve held them in Bath, Guernsey, Bristol, Exeter, Plymouth, Jersey and many other places. For the future, I’d like to see the Branches resourced better and taken much more seriously. Of course, other networks are important, but I reckon Branches address some of the integration problems we have.’

We didn’t have time to talk about Barry’s writing career in detail, though the book he wrote with Mark Cook, *Psychological Assessment in the Workplace*, has always been an invaluable resource in my own work.

I finally asked him what advice he’d give to someone considering psychology as a profession or who had just started on their career. ‘Focus on what you’re best at. Don’t ignore the past of the subject – read the works of the greats. Don’t concentrate on what Division you want to belong to or what type of psychologist you want to be: think about who you want to work with. Avoid bandwagons – and you can do this by waiting till some research evidence becomes available. However altruistic you are – and it’s important that you are – you have to earn enough to live.’

And a final thought? ‘Oddly enough I think I’m just beginning to do my best work.’