

Read all about it

What do you find newsworthy about psychology?

Psychology and journalism are natural bedfellows, because psychologists seem to need publicity in a way that solid-state physicists don't. We are the single biggest greedy audience for 'pop' psychology that you could imagine. Some of the stories that I've been most pleased with have been achieved with the help of the BPS. When the Hillsborough disaster happened I rang up Stephen White [Publications and Communications Directorate Manager] in a panic and he gave me three names. Two were out but the third one I rang was a man whose expertise was not only in the psychology of crowd movement and flow, he was actually a Sheffield Wednesday fan. It was wonderful, I got more useful information about how these things are in some way inevitable in certain conditions... I couldn't have made it up. The great thing about talking to the most media-savvy psychologists is that you not only couldn't make it up, you get better stuff than if you made it up.

Do you think that's common knowledge amongst journalists?

My advice to young journalists who are desperate is 'if in doubt, ring the BPS'! If you held the Annual Conference in August and not in April you'd get even more attention – there are buckets of stories but nowhere to put them.

When Piper Alpha blew up in the North Sea, I thought 'I wonder if there's some way I can get into this', because it wasn't really a science story. But then I thought 'I wonder what it's like living on a bomb? Does it affect you psychologically?' I rang Cary Cooper and said 'Do you know anything about working in the North Sea?' and he said 'I've just got 500 questionnaires from oil workers'. He proceeded to extemporise in a way that made our jobs easier and probably advanced the public understanding of the complexities of these things as well.

The effervescent psychologist is great for us, and we're great for them. Unlike, say, dendrochronologists, psychologists are prepared to put on an act for the media – or they're invited to. But just the fact

JON SUTTON met Tim Radford, Science Editor for The Guardian.

that we've experienced 'the psychologist as performing seal', their very existence has made some people take aspects of the science more seriously. We have people being serious and thoughtful, or indeed light-hearted and frivolous, about divorce, sex, drugs, at regular intervals. Even at its

Richard Dawkins'. And that would be a bad thing?! It's still a very weird attitude.

I think the ability to express yourself clearly and plainly cannot be academically bad for you either. It means your students will listen to you, it means politicians will listen, and it means your dean will listen to

you. None of these people will listen if you talk jargon. You look back at scientists whose public and scientific record says great – like Zuckerman, Medawar, Haldane, Rutherford, Einstein – and you find that when required to address the rest of the planet they did it in words of one syllable, with utter clarity and usually terrific command of oratorical style. They actually understood how to make people listen. And what is learning for if you're not going to get people to listen to it?

Within the discipline 'media-savvy' often seems to be confused with 'trivialising'.



most clownish, psychology makes other science reporting a bit more grown-up.

So what exactly do you mean by 'media-savvy' psychologists?

I've spent years working with earthquake experts and volcanologists on how you make the public more aware of these dangers – there is no point being a disaster scientist unless you're warning people about disasters. But quite a lot of them run up against this problem, that if they're seen as media aware then somehow they're not quite the thing. I remember someone saying 'But if we did that we'd all be like

Words like 'glib' and 'facile' and 'shallow' – aim for them! That way people are likely to understand you. Trivial is wonderful. People forget that the reason they got interested in their subject was because they were attracted by something striking, gleaming – like a magpie seeing a piece of rhinestone and half-inching it. It's only after, when you get interested in the subject, that you might think 'that wasn't that important after all'. The point is it got you in there. I actually think we use trivia as an anchor or a marker for memory. It's nearly always important, just not in the way you think it is.

I get the feeling scientists often get rewarded by journal editors for dressing up trivia in jargonistic language.

I once asked Richard Dawkins if he could understand the biology papers in *Nature* and he said 'Not most of them'. This is partly necessary. It's quite clear that a publication like *Nature* is addressing little groups of people who are only interested in the forefront of their own fields, it's not addressing the rest of the human race at all. It doesn't intend to, and the carefully framed language of a scientific paper seems designed to discourage anybody else from reading it. But they don't have to be written like that. On the 100th anniversary of Roentgen's discovery of X-rays it was quite weird seeing his paper and realising that anyone could understand it. I just find that a lot of the language that academics use – not science, academics generally – may have been selected to conceal how little they're saying.

Is it easy for you to access psychology stories? What are the best sources?

The best source will always be the BPS. Although, I don't always look at the press releases that turn up, because I don't know if they're medicine or whether anyone can do them. And they're often 'Goon show' stories – they're either findings that you think 'how could you possibly not know that anyway?', or they're findings that aren't as simple as the psychologists would have you believe.

You've worked on most sections of the paper. Which do you prefer?

The arts page is much more fun than science, because when you ring up an artist, a poet, a director, an actor, a film-maker, they never say 'Well I'm not really the right person to ask old boy, I really think you should ask Professor so and so', like scientists always do. Scientists suffer from this absurd humility: 'It would be immoral for me to answer this question when so and so is the acknowledged master of the field, and unfortunately he won't be back for three weeks, but can you try him then'. If you ring up a poet or novelist they have some glib but immensely quotable phrase ready for you immediately: scientists tend not to.

Has that changed over recent years?

Science has got a lot better. Partly because people like me and Stephen White have been banging on about it. We could now make careers out of exhorting people to get to it. But there is still a lot of science that

is not inherently interesting. All the stuff that falls into three main questions: Where does the universe come from? Where does life come from? Where do we come from? You always get those stories in the paper.

Where does psychology fit into that?

Where do we come from? It isn't always about a caveman called Ug. The stories people love are the ones like 'Why are women more conscious of things under the bed? Could it be that we slept in trees when we were ape people?' It's nice to actually ask why we are as we are, which suggests that it must be something then which has pushed us in this direction rather than that. All the psychology that people like most probably falls into that category. Of the other sort I couldn't even tell you what that is, because I suspect we never write about it. Even things like perception, a big subject about 15 years ago, was really saying 'How does the brain work and how did it get to work like that?'

'At the basest level, psychologists are saying there's nowt so queer as folk'

You've been Science Editor on *The Guardian* for 10 years now – has the appetite for psychology changed?

No, there's always been an appetite. You're the sitting ducks of journalism. Is it interesting and exciting and thrilling? Then we'll use it. Does it make the psychologist look stupid? Then we'll use it. It is odd that psychologists can do no wrong. Whatever they do we're there for them, we recognise something in the story. At the basest level, psychologists are saying there's nowt so queer as folk, and nowt so queer as folk has served journalism very well indeed. We like the WIN factor, 'well I never' stories. Psychology is likely to produce them either ironically – 'Well I never, teenagers are sullen and resentful, gosh' – or 'Well I never, teenagers are much more intelligent, caring and concerned', etc. All experiments with babies are wonderful. You don't even have to have a picture, just the idea. I loved the one where someone tried to test babies' sense of spatial engagement, so they made them all sit in their nappies facing a wall and then they sneaked behind the wall and pushed it forward, and of course before six months the babies didn't react and after six months they fell over backwards! It was very nearly *Monty Python*.

Do you think you could pick out the psychologists who have been on our media training course?

No. Funnily enough when I say 'media-savvy' I'm not talking about the ones who have simply learnt the basic art of saying in a sentence what their inclination would be to spin out to 800 words of carefully crafted paragraphs. I'm talking about the ones whose view of the world corresponds with our view of a story. Guy Cumberbatch for instance, Cary Cooper, Richard Wiseman, names that nobody inside the business would be surprised at. They're people that actually ask themselves questions that other people think 'Ooh! I want to know the answer to that'.

Journalists are not that different from scientists. Imagine you have a research institution with a director and a budget and a mission statement, you have these bright, active young researchers who get given a project or have to identify one for themselves, they do a literature search, and then they frame a hypothesis, and then they start testing it, and then they consult with the director to decide whether or not it's worth going ahead with this one, they make sure no one else is working on it, they get on with it, they come up with an answer, and assuming it's an answer that's worth writing a paper about they write the paper and then they submit it to peer review and then it gets published – that process is exactly the same in a newspaper as in a lab. The difference is that when you're doing science it takes as long as it takes: eight months or eight years, it doesn't matter. On a newspaper, everything that I've described starts at eleven in the morning and finishes at nine at night. But all that does is concentrate the mind. If you said to scientists I want the answer by Thursday, many of them would give you the answer by Thursday. If you said Hitler is going to invade on Friday you'd get the answer by Thursday, and during the Second World War that happened rather a lot.

So time is not the important thing. The main difference is that it's quite possible for a scientific paper to have clout just by existing: no one has to read it. The guy's got a paper to his name, he's fulfilled his norm. It's on the CV, the grant application, it's out there to be cited. It's doing work without ever being read. In newspapers if nobody read the story there would be no point in writing it. We take it for granted that we've got to be right, but by God we've got to be read otherwise we're not there.