

'You need to talk to people who are at the coalface'

Our editor Jon Sutton meets Debra Malpass, Director of Knowledge and Insight at the British Psychological Society.

'Knowledge and insight' is a new function for the Society. What is it that needs to change in the Society, and perhaps in psychology, in those terms?

In terms of the Society, we need to create a knowledge management system... not simply a repository of policies and papers, but a way of capturing who worked on a project, what was the output, what could have been done differently... It becomes a feedback loop for continuous improvement. That involves IT systems and a cultural change too, but that's the vision.

In terms of insight, in my previous role I was responsible for setting up a horizon scanning function and having people who can draw insights from across different fields. A lot of our members work in the NHS, and there's a lot of change in the psychological workforce arena. Adding insights from, say, an economist, could be helpful. When someone has treatment from a psychologist, what's the contribution to the economy in terms of sick days saved? We need to show the wider societal impact psychology has, beyond the individual.

So proving psychology's worth?

Yes, and I know a lot of people will say you shouldn't have to put a price tag on these things. But the government we have at the moment, they are focused on that sort of stuff. Our members are out there, doing very high value work, and demonstrating that in terms of quality and realistic outcomes for people becomes important. We have a role in influencing policymakers by getting some hard data.

In my previous role with the Solicitors Regulation Authority, we also used geospatial mapping: where were solicitors based in the country, and what kind of sectors and services did they deliver? That was mapped against multiple indices of deprivation: crime, health, inequality and so on. You can use that to identify a group of people who haven't got access to the services they need, and then go on to influence the Department of Health and so on.

And that's not just about 'we're the body representing psychologists, what you need is more psychologists'? It's working smarter in partnership... Applied psychologists are, in my view, becoming increasingly comfortable with 'giving psychology away', for

example by instilling a generally psychological approach amongst non-psychological colleagues. Yes, and psychologists have got a role in training up those people and making sure that what they're using is the most up to date, evidence-based practice.

In my previous role we had hard data coming in, but we also crowdsourced insights. You can use a mixed methods approach. We can go out to members and major stakeholders, and ask 'what's on your radar, what are the issues that come up for you day in day out? What are the risks that are not being addressed? How can psychologists add value?' You need to talk to people who are at the coalface. We brought that information together with an algorithm, in order to identify '10 priority risks' that we then highlighted to the profession. Doing that here can be both driven by and fed into the Society's overall strategy.

How those priorities are selected is always going to be controversial, isn't it, even when it's voted for by members at the Society's Senate. There can be a tension between ideologies / politics and science... on *The Psychologist* I'm regularly being told, 'stick to the science', which I think is a fascinating phrase. It assumes a kind of fixed definition of what science and what psychology is...

...and privileges some forms of evidence over others perhaps. I left academia 10 years ago, and have worked in various roles using a mixed methods approach. In terms of the problem you're trying to address – what's the best tool to use? If we're trying to influence the NHS about the number of psychologists required that might be quantitative data; looking at the impact of psychological therapy on the outcomes of people using those services might involve qualitative research, or a mix. It's about bringing all that evidence together and telling a convincing story.

Why did you leave academia?

My PhD was working in human psychopharmacology, looking at the effects of smoking on the symptoms of people experiencing depression. When I came to the end of it, there wasn't much research happening in the UK, so I moved to the USA and worked at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. But the US education system is very different to the UK... my son is of

British Arabic heritage, it was the height of the Iraq and Afghanistan war, and he experienced a lot of racism. We returned to the UK as I wanted to get him back in his old school.

Then I'm back in the UK, no one's doing research in this area, I'm a single mum and I need a job. I moved into the field of psycholinguistics, which I worked in for about four years and, you know, enjoyed it, and published some papers. But in trying to get more permanent roles the response was 'we don't know what specialism you are. You've got these two fields...'

I wasn't prepared to just be on a series of short-term contracts. I can remember going to a conference in New York, and it was paid for by the university, but I was so poor I couldn't afford to buy food. I thought 'This has just got to stop now'. So I started applying for research roles outside of academia. It was the best move financially, but it also allowed me to develop a whole new range of skills.

But you've kept in touch with psychology?

Yes. I worked for an exam board in the research department and as a psychometrician, and then worked at the Solicitors Regulation Authority running their research and analysis team. I kept in touch but accessing journals through paywalls was an issue. A lot of what was filtering through was around behavioural economics, actually. I do think they've stolen a bit of a march on psychology.

If you want to win a Nobel Prize, you've got to call yourself a behavioural economist...

Yes. And I did find there was a bit of prejudice against psychology. If people asked my background, and I'd say I'm a psychologist, there would be eye rolling from some people.

Why do you think that is?

Some people can have quite a narrow view of psychology, that it's about supporting people experiencing difficulties or it's just 'fluffy stuff'. Now I'm with the BPS, I'm embarrassed to say that for a while I did stop calling myself a psychologist. 'Behavioural scientist' was better received. It's interesting for us to think about the public perception of psychology, and how can we improve that.

I think it's all part of the perception of science, even amongst scientists. I often say about the BPS that it amazes me you can have two members who would even disagree on the role and importance of evidence.

When it comes to a Knowledge and Insight function, a challenge is around communication, and when we can be certain enough around the evidence to put forward a firm steer on something. Yes, you can caveat things, but does that confuse people, and reduce their confidence in what you're saying? I don't think other disciplines necessarily do that. But we do need to get better at telling the stories of evidence-based research. The Behavioural Insights



Team are very good at doing that. A lot of think tanks are good at doing that, even when the evidence from think tanks might not be very robust.

After a couple of months in post, have you got to the stage of identifying priority topics?

One of the things that I would like to explore is machine learning. It can be used to scan lots of material, you can use natural language processing to tag documents and build a searchable taxonomy. So I would be interested in doing that, to digitise our extensive archives. It would also be useful for a wider knowledge management perspective. To help people find the information they want to find more effectively.

From a lot of different member networks in the Society, climate change comes up as an area where we need to draw together the evidence base. There's been work on individual behaviour change, but can we extend that to changing structures and communities and so on. I think that's an opportunity for working together across domains in the Society. I'd like to see more collaboration across the different psychological professions and different networks. I'd also like to see practitioners and researchers working together to inform evidence-based practice and insights from practice informing research. For example, practitioners' experiences of dealing with NHS frontline workers during the Covid-19 pandemic could lead to groundbreaking research insights to increase our understanding of mechanisms of coping and resilience.