

EDGAR ANSTEY

A true pioneer of Occupational Psychology whose influence made itself felt on the world stage at a time of crisis



Edgar Anstey was born in Mumbai in 1917, but was only three when both his father and his baby brother died of cholera. His mother, Vera, subsequently brought him back to Britain, along with his older sister. Vera Anstey then embarked on a distinguished career as a lecturer at the London School of Economics, while Edgar was brought up by two aunts in Reigate, Surrey.

Edgar eventually won a scholarship to Winchester College, and then another to King's College, Cambridge, where he graduated with a double first in maths and psychology.

When WW2 broke out, he enlisted in the army, but after 18 months of active service, he became one of the first psychologists to be drafted into Government service and was moved into various roles where his psychological training could be used. Given that there were only a handful of psychologists with 1st class honours degrees in the UK at that time, this is perhaps not surprising!

This was the start of a civil service career that stretched until his retirement, a career in which he acted as a trail-blazer in the application of psychological research findings and methods to a whole range of issues within the public service context. In the final stages of his civil service career, he was the Chief Government Psychologist – holding a higher grade level than any psychologist had achieved at that time.

During WW2, Anstey became chief constructor and validator of army selection tests in the Directorate for the Selection of Personnel. He also was one of the team who was involved in the formulation and running of the War Office Officer Selection Boards (WOSBs). The latter were recognised as especially innovative – the first proper and recognisable use of what we now know as the assessment centre method.

After the war this was adopted as the model for Civil Service Selection Board (CSSB) fast stream graduate entry scheme and then widely applied in many organisations both for recruitment and to identify leadership potential amongst existing staff. Anstey later became the Chief Psychologist of the CSSB itself and was influential in the switch from using traditional written exams for selection to using the assessment centre method.

His pioneering research – culminating in a 30-year follow up study published in the Journal of Occupational Psychology in 1977 - would show just how superior the AC method was in predicting future performance and career progress. In this same period, his book on psychological testing, published by Nelson, was one of the earliest in the UK in this field.

It was also during this post-war period that he completed a PhD at University College, London, under the supervision of Sir Cyril Burt.

Perhaps the most striking example of Anstey's work came during the 'cold war' period of 1958-64, when he was a member of the War Office Joint Inter-Services Group for the Study of All-Out Warfare (JIGSAW) working under the direction of the chief of the defence staff, Lord Mountbatten, and Sir Solly Zuckerman, the department's chief scientific adviser.

The purpose of this group is aptly described in its title, and Anstey's role within it was to use his psychological expertise to assess the likely impact of nuclear warfare on the population.

Its work was of course Top Secret at the time, and even now some of it is still classed as Restricted. A full and excellent account of the JIGSAW group, its work and its impact can be found in Professor (now Lord) Peter Hennessy's book The Secret State.

(Dr Anstey also made two public contributions on this subject to the BBC Radio 4 series marking the 40th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 2002).

Although he participated in all the work of JIGSAW, Dr Anstey's own distinctive and highly original contribution (made in collaboration with his colleague Allan McDonald) was to make a careful scientific study of the effects of saturation bombing on civilians in WW2, and to extrapolate from that to the nuclear scenario – in other words, he was focusing on the effects on survivors and their subsequent behaviour.

He was able, though this analysis, to arrive at a formula (based on the percentage of social infrastructure destroyed in a given period) which predicted the point at which social

functioning would completely breakdown. This formula was sufficiently robust to hold up when applied to numerous examples drawn from WW2.

Applied in a nuclear war context, it had significant implications not only for civil defence policies and planning, but also for defence policy as a whole. This work, along with all the JIGSAW conclusions, was presented to the British Defence Board and, as Prof Hennessy's book attests, had a very considerable impact on their thinking and on future UK policy.

However, there is another way in which Dr Anstey's work may have exerted influence of truly global significance.

By coincidence, the JIGSAW team happened to be in Washington at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis of September/October 1962 during which the confrontation between the USA and the Soviet Union brought the world to the brink of full scale nuclear war. A strong body of influence amongst the US military took a very hawkish approach and urged President Kennedy to make a pre-emptive nuclear strike against Russia.

At precisely this time, Edgar and one of his colleagues made informal presentations of their breakdown studies to members of the US Military Joint Staff. The US military had of course considered casualty rates likely to follow a nuclear exchange, but they had not recognised or quantified the impact on survivors. Anstey's work – and his passionate presentation of it - showed them that even with just a secondary Russian nuclear response to an American first strike, the consequences for the surviving US civilian population would be devastating and lead to complete societal collapse.

How much this stayed the hand of the hawks amongst the US military we will probably never know, but it is certainly possible that the input from Anstey and his colleagues at this most crucial moment exerted a sobering and perhaps cautionary influence that prevented the cold war from becoming hot.

The later years of Anstey's career in the Civil Service were perhaps less dramatic but nonetheless very influential.

He was Director of the Behavioural Sciences Research Division (BSRD) of the Civil Service Department from 1969-77, and was heavily involved in the implementation of many of the Fulton reforms of the Civil Service. In particular, he was a long-time advocate of performance appraisal, and he was a member of the team responsible for formulating and implementing the first civil service-wide appraisal scheme.

His work on this subsequently acted as a model for many other public sector bodies both in the UK and overseas. Under Edgar's leadership, BSRD as a whole became quite a large group of nearly 20 OPs who did pioneering work across a wide range of OP areas, some of which (very unusually for the time) was sponsored by Civil Service Trade Unions as well as management.

Edgar was a member of the Occupational Psychology Section of the BPS and a founder member of the DOP. He was always interested in new approaches and methods, and had some surprising sides to his character – he could readily recite passages from Goethe's poetry and was an avid reader.

Edgar was independent minded and passionate about what he believed in, a combination that perhaps did not always go down well with those above him, which might explain why, scandalously, he was not given one of Whitehall's honours at the end of his 36year career in the Civil Service in 1977.

His retirement was an active one, not least in terms of his involvement in politics and his love of surfing!

Edgar died in 2009 at the age of 92, leaving behind a life-long and wide-ranging legacy of contribution to areas of great national significance (often in ways which required innovation and forward thinking) that few occupational psychologists can match.

Professor Clive Fletcher

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