

## **HOW OCCUPATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY HELPED SCUPPER THATCHER AND THE POLYGRAPH: A LESSON IN EXERTING INFLUENCE AT THE RIGHT TIME**

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To tell this story, I have to first take you back to the middle 1980s, when OP within the BPS was represented by two bodies. There was the DOP, which was still relatively new and quite small, and the OP Section, which was much (several times) bigger in membership. The Section was essentially the scientific interest group within OP – one did not need any qualifications to be a member, other than interest! But the Section had the major responsibility for running the annual conference (and other events) and made enough profit from it for membership of the Section to be free. I was Chair of the Section committee in 1984, which is when the events about to be described took place.

The background to this relates to the Government Communications Headquarters, invariably referred to as GCHQ. It was probably less well known then than it is now, but GCHQ is the third main arm of the UK's intelligence services (along with MI5 and MI6), its headquarters being based in a huge complex at Cheltenham. Essentially, it is involved in collecting signals and communication intelligence – which involves code breaking, electronic surveillance of phone messages (e.g. of terrorist suspects), gathering radar signatures of weapons and defence systems of hostile foreign countries and so on. It employs a staff of thousands, many of which are computer scientists, mathematicians and linguists. Over time its size and importance has grown. Not surprisingly, during the cold war it was a primary infiltration target for the KGB, whose greatest success in this respect was a man called Geoffrey Prime. Over a decade, he was their 'mole' and provided them with a huge amount of top-secret information. When he was caught – not initially for his spying but for his paedophile activities – the severity of damage he was seen to have inflicted was reflected in the 35-year jail sentence (plus another three for his paedophile offences) he was given late in 1982.

This case, justifiably, caused great alarm, and an urgent desire to improve security at GCHQ. It was something the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, took a personal interest in. She was keen, as was the US equivalent of GCHQ, that the polygraph be used to screen GCHQ applicants and employees. The polygraph, as most of you will know, is the 'lie detector'. It measures a number of physiological variables such as blood pressure, pulse, respiration, and skin conductivity while the individual under investigation answers a series of questions. Some of these will be neutral but some will bear on the incidents or actions under suspicion. In theory, dishonest answers will produce physiological responses that differ from those associated with honest replies. Although quite widely used in the USA (and often represented in various US movies and television series), it was not used in any significant degree in the UK – and that is still the case.

The issue of whether the polygraph should be used became quite widely aired in public

during 1983-84, not least because the GCHQ Trade Unions were opposed to it. The BPS OP Section committee thought that OP was uniquely well placed to offer a view on this – the polygraph was after all a method based on psychological principles and being proposed here as a method of assessment and selection – and that our view should be represented. We knew already that there were serious grounds for concern about the validity of the polygraph, specifically that whilst it might correctly identify a majority of those telling lies, it also had an unacceptably high false positive rate i.e. it also marked as liars a lot of people who were telling the truth! This was subsequently proved by a trial of the polygraph in MI5 where 37% of those tested were ‘detected’ as security risks, though none of them had been shown to be such before the test was taken or were found to be so after it!

As Chair, I sat also, on what was then called the Scientific Affairs Board of the BPS, and put the OP Section’s proposal to them, as we had envisaged that any view we expressed would be branded as a BPS initiative. Moreover, there was a pressing need to put our views forward quite quickly, as the House of Commons Select Committee on Employment made it known that they were going to review the question of using the polygraph and we wanted to ensure that the BPS input to this review was timely. To my consternation, the Board rejected the proposal. Why? Because it felt it was premature, and that – wait for it – a conference should be called to debate the issue! You can guess how long this might take, and it seemed likely we would ‘miss the bus’ completely. So the OP Section committee decided to act independently, and one of its members (now Professor) Vic Dulewicz volunteered to do the literature review and draft our report. This he duly did with splendid speed and thoroughness, and the Section Committee submitted it to the Select Committee in good time for their deliberations.

Did it have an impact? Here we can turn to an excellent recent comprehensive and detailed history of GCHQ written by Professor Richard Aldrich of the University of Warwick, where he reports (p. 433) –

“...the House of Commons Select Committee on Employment took a close look at the Polygraph with experts from the British Psychological Society. They were scathing, and dismissed the machine as useless...”

There is a learning point in this episode that is still relevant for the DOP today. One of the main reasons I think the Scientific Affairs Board were reluctant to act quickly (they did, incidentally, have their conference/seminar about a year later, when everything had moved on and nobody was listening) was a fear of psychologists disagreeing in public – not something that has ever worried physicists, economists, medics or umpteen other experts - and so retreated into their comfort zone and calling for more research, as ever! The OP Section was able to respond quickly and in an effective way by, essentially, going it alone. It used the evidence to hand, presented it professionally and made itself heard. I would suggest that this is a good model for the DOP in future – it should increasingly act independently and have the confidence in its own body of knowledge and expertise to seek to exert influence in its sphere of interest without letting the inherent caution (not to mention the bureaucracy) of the BPS

hold it back.

*Reference* Aldrich, R J (2010) **GCHQ** Harper Press, London.

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