'Be brave, psychology needs you!'

Cary Cooper tells Gail Kinman about his efforts to change occupational culture through wide dissemination of psychological theory and research

You are a world-leading expert on the subject of stress at work, but you didn't originally intend to be an occupational psychologist. How did this happen?

My ambition was to become a tax lawyer – I was studying economics and management at UCLA and started doing part-time social work. What I was exposed to when working in deprived areas in Los Angeles influenced my whole life. The level of poverty and misery I encountered made me seriously question my career plans, and so I got interested in behavioural science and social psychology.

Who were the psychologists who originally inspired you?

Marie Jahoda and Carl Rogers were my main influences. During my MBA I was involved with experiential training, known as T-groups, where people learned about themselves through problem solving, role play and personal behavioural feedback. In those days, teachers and social workers (or anybody who worked closely with other people in a management or caring role) did T-group training to discover how their behaviour was perceived by other people and help them improve their interpersonal relationships and communication skills – they were very powerful experiences! Carl Rogers came to visit us, as UCLA was a leader in T-group training, as well as the National Training Labs at Bethel, Maine. I didn't find Carl inspirational as a person. In fact, I found him to be strangely emotionless – he didn't reveal much about who he was. Yet it was his 'ideas' that inspired me and a whole generation of 1960s psychologists.

After my MBA I moved to the UK to do PhD research at Leeds University with Peter Smith, who later became a Professor of Social Psychology at Sussex University. When Peter moved to Sussex, I moved with him and the Department was headed by Marie Jahoda. Even though I was only there for a year, Marie had an extremely powerful influence on me intellectually and personally. She was very non-hierarchical and encouraged deep intellectual debate; she would bring her staff together at lunchtimes and everybody, from PhD students like me to senior academic staff, was expected to discuss a study or a book they had read that week. I was also impressed with Marie's social values – she did some very formative work that highlighted the destructive psychological impact of unemployment on individuals and communities. When she researched this issue in the 1940s/50s, she spent several months living within the communities that she was studying. When I started researching people's behaviour at work, Marie's strong social conscience was very influential in informing my belief that research should be used to help and improve the wellbeing of individual workers, organisations and the communities they live in.

Moving on to your own work, you are exceptionally prolific. You have published around 120 books and over 400 research papers and have collaborated with hundreds of people. You are a full-time academic, the Director of a large and thriving consultancy and a former government, EU and UN adviser. You also work extensively with the media and travel the world to give talks and lectures. As a passionate advocate of work–life balance, how do you manage to maintain balance in your personal life?

My family life is very important to me. I have been married twice and have two children from each marriage. During my first marriage, I really concentrated on building my career and probably didn't give my older children as much time and attention that I should have done. I realised this when the marriage broke up, so I decided that things would change in my second marriage. I became much more focused on my family life – I learned how to say 'no' and made sure that I went home at a reasonable time.

Funnily enough, I soon learned that creating time boundaries instead of working 'all hours' made me more, rather than less, productive. I became much more focused, and a far better academic manager, as I had to find the time to invest in my family. I still work long hours but start at 7.30 and finish at 4.30 and have strong boundaries between my work and home life.

Sometimes I make compromises though. For example, I really enjoy working with the media. If a journalist calls me up at night or when I am on holiday to request an interview I will invariably do it – it only takes five minutes of my time after all. My family doesn't always appreciate it! I do draw the line at reading e-mails during holidays though.

You have written about the benefits of mobile technologies in helping us work more flexibly, but they can also allow work issues to intrude into our personal life. How can organisations manage e-mail more healthily?

Organisations have begun to recognise the benefits of controlling employees' access to e-mail, not only to protect work–life balance and employee health but also to encourage face-to-face communication and team-building. A couple of years ago I did a TV programme that involved going into an IT company that provided facilities for social housing organisations, where the CEO had serious concerns about his employees' use of e-mail – they never talked to each other, sent e-mails to colleagues in the same office, and wrote and read messages after 9pm. He realised that this was bad for his business and bad for their health, so he volunteered to participate in an experiment for one working week. We stopped employees from sending e-mails to anyone in their building; instead they had to have face-to-face conversations with their colleagues and deliver files by hand rather than via attachments. They were also forbidden from accessing their e-mails at home for the duration of the experiment. Initially, employees thought they would be unable to keep this up, but they did and their lives were transformed. We came back into the organisation on the Friday night and the whole working atmosphere had changed – people were talking to their

> "employers are going to have to transform their long-hours culture"

colleagues, and they were talking to their kids when they got home instead of spending their evenings checking e-mails. We had originally planned to take their phones away and considered closing down the server, but in the end we didn't have to take such drastic action, as people actually wanted to make these changes and now have a better work–life balance.

Interesting! Some organisations expect their employees to be available 24/7, and there are inevitable costs for wellbeing and job performance. What can employers do?

There has to be a culture change. Like computers, human beings need to be rebooted and spend time recovering from work demands. The only way to do this is by setting boundaries – as reading e-mail is addictive, people may need some initial help to accomplish this. If you go on holiday and you read a work e-mail about a problem that can't be resolved until you are back in the office, you have ruined your holiday. You are going to worry about that problem the whole time rather than relax and forget about work. Some organisations drive their employees hard and have unreasonable expectations of their availability. Although evidence for the negative impact of long working hours on health and job performance is overwhelming, some employers fail to see this. Nonetheless many large companies are realising the advantages of allowing employees essential 'down-time', and are making changes and developing guidelines for e-mail usage. Liverpool City Council was the first organisation to stop employees from sending e-mails to colleagues in the same building, and many others are now following their example. A number of multi-nationals are experimenting with shutting down servers outside core business hours, and ATOS is even attempting to make the company an e-mail free organisation! An investment bank that I had worked with and that was previously notorious for burning people out, now tells their employees not to access e-mails over the weekend unless they are working on a big international deal.

Of course changing behaviour has to be driven from the top and apply to everyone without exception – if senior managers send and read e-mails out of hours then more junior employees will continue to do so. The success of e-mail management initiatives in large organisations should trickle down and inspire small companies to make changes. The younger generation are not prepared

to work as hard as their parents – they want to 'get a life'. So employers are going to have to transform their long-hours culture and realise that working hours are not synonymous with commitment or effective performance.

Last year, the right to request flexible working was extended to all employees regardless of the reason. You were instrumental in making a case for this change.

My Foresight project 'Mental Capital and Wellbeing' presented a cost and benefit analysis to the government that made a strong financial case for extending the right to request flexible working. There is strong evidence that it boosts productivity and motivation, reduces absenteeism, and helps companies retain top talent. Although both men and women need time to engage in their family lives and fulfil their responsibilities as well as do their work, very little was known about men's experiences of working flexibly.

With Working Families and colleagues from Lancaster University, we completed a project that examined this issue, which was funded by the Lottery Fund. We looked at men who had taken up flexible working options in two large organisations – one in the public and one in the private sector. We found that men are less inclined to apply for flexible working and are more likely to be rejected if they do. Even if their employers allow them to work flexibly, they are typically seen as less committed with serious implications for their career prospects. Nonetheless, we found that men who work flexibly are generally less stressed, perform better and have better work–life balance; they are also more

committed to their employers and have a better relationship with their colleagues.

You have done a great deal to highlight the ways in which occupational psychology can improve the wellbeing of employees, which, in turn, can increase the profitability of organisations. Your work has been widely disseminated in journal articles and books and the media. Why do you think it is important for our work to reach the wider population?

I still consider myself a scientist, and love doing hands-on research, but I think it is crucial to get our message out to as many people as possible. You can write an article for a top-rated journal and probably only a handful of other academics will read it – but most people watch TV, listen to the radio and read newspapers and magazines. I particularly enjoy writing books, as you can reach more people that way, and also have the space to expand and develop your ideas.

A research article is around 20 pages, uses very technical language and focuses on one narrow topic, whereas a book may be read by many thousands of people and has more chance of making a difference to people's lives and influence policy. Most research papers add a little piece to the puzzle, but they are not in themselves very significant. A book can bring together other people's ideas and have a real impact in the world. It is unfortunate that it is only the journal articles that really count for academic promotion and the REF!

What advice do you have for young researchers to get their message out there to the widest possible audience?

Don't be afraid to talk to journalists or to broadcast, or to attend non-academic, practitioner-based conferences. Think through how your work might influence policy, and engage with government and other professional bodies to change not only policy but also the practice of your discipline. Translate your research into books, monographs and other more widely read outlets so that you might influence behaviour change in the wider world. Don't let the academic establishment force you to publish only in 4* journals – although that should be part of the academic mix; there are many other outlets that can influence policy, practice and the public more generally. Be brave, psychology needs you to take the field beyond the confines of a handful of journals.