INTERVIEW

What makes a good experimental psychologist?

Extracts from a recording of **Frederic Charles Bartlett** speaking made in 1959 by John C. Kenna, the Society's first Honorary Archivist

Right you are. So should I start now as if I was delivering the whole thing and I'll start with the present date; right?

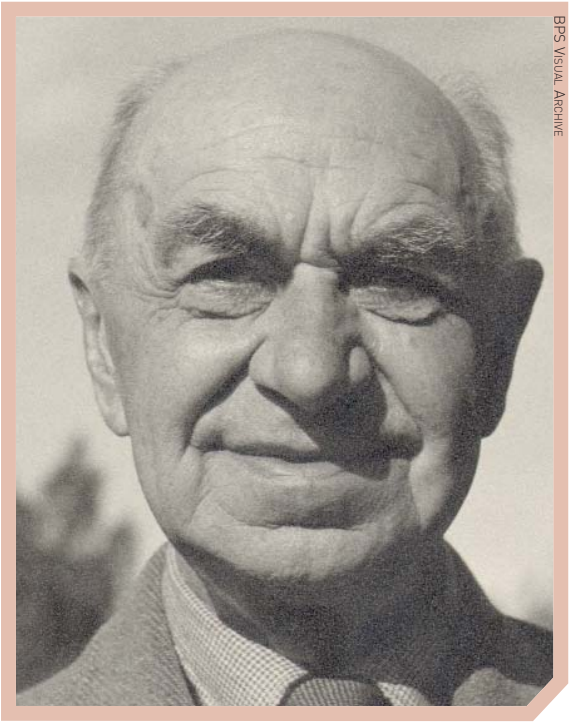
The date, at the moment, is the third of June nineteen hundred and fifty-nine. It's a lovely bright, sunny, warm afternoon and I think that I would a great deal sooner be watching the University cricket match at Fenner's against Middlesex. Cricket has been for many years one of my principal interests, and from some knowledge of cricket I think that I have gained a great deal that has been a great use in connection with both teaching and my thinking, especially in the fields of skill. However, that's not what I'm here for this afternoon.

On the fourth of March nineteen hundred and fifty-two I made a farewell speech to the Cambridge Psychological Society in which I tried to say something about the interesting events which had happened during the 20 years or so while I was a professor in Cambridge. As a sort of conclusion of my remarks on that occasion I tried to sum up what I consider to be the basic requirements for the scientific development of psychology and, because I believed then and continue to believe that to separate psychology from the psychologist is an entirely artificial procedure, to say what sort of a person I consider a good psychologist must be. Now the remarks that I made on that occasion have never been published or given any kind of broadcast status, and I don't think it's very likely they will be published in any other way than this one, but at any rate this is what I tried then to say.

One. There never has been and there never will be a good psychologist who has not got a number of lively interests outside of psychology itself. Or who fails to connect his psychological research and reflection with these other interests. Similarly there never has been and there never will be a good scientific psychologist who has not got at least some specialised training outside of psychology.

Two. The first requirement is loyalty to evidence. The evidence may be sought in unprepared situations after the manner of a great many clinicians and of many social psychologists or in technical, technologically prepared situations or it may be sought in experimentally prepared situations. So long as the scientific psychologist looks straight at what he can find and is as honest about it as he can be, I do not think it matters very much where he starts, but wherever he starts he must be prepared at some stage to make the transfer to the other cases. The man who starts with the unprepared situations must, on occasion, move over to the technologically prepared situation, especially if he becomes interested in real-life problems, and he must also be prepared to move over to the experimentally prepared situations if he wishes to be able to establish anything well founded in the way of his results from thinking.

Three. In a training period I continue to believe that the best start is with the experimentally prepared situation. Principally because it is in this that it is easiest to illustrate controlled variability, but there is no compelling reason why all experiments should be shaped to the



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reading

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The Sir Frederic Bartlett Archive: www.ppsis.cam.ac.uk/bartlett

conventional forms of the psychophysical methods. In any case the psychologist must refuse to be limited by those formalised statements of scientific experiment, which grew up with the logical methodologists of the mid-19th century. There are no psychological experiments in which the conditions are all under control; in which one condition can be varied independently of the rest, or even in which the concomitant variation of two specified conditions alone can be arranged and considered. This means that every good psychologist must be wise as well as technically efficient. It is rather a lame statement because I don't know how anybody can learn to be wise. Perhaps a way of putting it is to say that he must know where and how to look for evidence, which will enable him to advance beyond evidence and then to return once more to seek confirming evidence. There is an ineradicable clinical element in all psychological experimentation.

Four. I have come to believe strongly that once an initial training period is passed it is far the best to consider first the technologically prepared situation from which advance can be attempted to the unprepared situation, or return can be made to the experimentally prepared situation. There are two primary reasons for this. First, it is a guard against both doing experiments simply because they are likely to yield easy or easily manipulated results or because they are what a lively laboratory imagination is able to invent; and secondly, because the technologically prepared situations deal essentially with operations, activities and items of behaviour which are laid out in a succession with a direction and an inherent order.

Five. A good psychologist has to be able to distinguish strongly between problems of process, which are causal, and problems of structure, which are analytic and descriptive. In particular the statistics adequate for the latter are not sufficient for the former.

Six. It is my view that a psychologist who is really going to get anywhere must respect human behaviour. Not only in the sense of considering it a worthwhile subject to study, but in the much more important sense of being willing to reject flippant and cynical views or at least of regarding them as a not very serious kind of sport and of believing that human beings are fundamentally decent.

Seven. Since there is hardly any human interest which… is not tied up with psychological science, and since every one of them tends strongly to develop its specialised methods and its appropriate language, there is very little hope for a psychologist who is not prepared to become an effective collaborator. This means that he must be able to give and to take incisive criticism without losing his respect either for himself or for the people and the views that he may try to upset. He has to be tolerant, but not indecisive, to be ruthless, but not unfair, to be honest about his assumptions as he is about his evidence, to ask questions when he doesn't know and to hazard answers when he is convinced that he does, to give credit where credit is due and not to be too much worried if it seems to him that others do not always return the compliment.

I want to see a generation of psychologists who can stand alongside the best of all the other scientists, not making any pretence to having discovered the master key to all knowledge, seeking the authority, not of rank or of position, or of title or even of bumptiousness, but only of that part of truth which in patient research they are able to find. Provided he satisfies these conditions, I believe that it is possible for anybody to become a good psychologist. In what particular directions he turns will depend, of course, upon his particular technical equipment or lack of it and upon his other interests. Whether he is also, what is called, clever doesn't seem to me to matter very much. Perhaps it is a good thing if he is a bit clever.

This piece has been transcribed and abridged by Julie Perks, Staffordshire University. The full transcript and the original recording are held at the Society's History of Psychology Centre, London (www.bps.org.uk/hopc).

Sir Frederic Charles Bartlett

1886 was a momentous year for psychology because it was the year that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* allowed James Ward to define our subject as a distinct scientific discipline. It was also the year that Frederic Bartlett was born. He later cited Ward's famous article 'Psychology' as a major influence upon his decision to study the subject (Bartlett, 1961). Bartlett graduated BA in Philosophy in 1909, MA in 1911, was made a fellow of St John's College, Cambridge in 1917 and in 1922 became the director of the Psychological Laboratory in Cambridge.

In 1931 Fredric Bartlett was awarded the first chair in Psychology at Cambridge University. He was nominated as a fellow of the Royal Society in1932, but more importantly he also published his highly influential book *Remembering* that year. This book revolutionised our understanding of how people recall memories. No longer do the majority of psychologists believe that remembering is a consultative process that retrieves facts from an immutable record. Bartlett showed us that memory involves, at least to some degree, a reconstruction of events (Richards, 2010).

Bartlett was prolifically productive. His published work amounted to some 200 titles drawn from a mixture of academic and applied experimental Psychology.

Before the Second World War his papers and books were more frequently academic where as his post War output suggested a greater interest applied Psychology. In 1945 he took over the directorship of the Unit for Research in Applied Psychology (APU), which later became the Cognitive and Brain Science Unit. It had been established by the Medical Research Council only a year earlier with Kenneth Craik at its head, but after the latter's sudden death, in a tragic cycling accident, Bartlett stepped in. In 1948 Bartlett was knighted for the work he had done, on such topics as fatigue and visual perception, with the RAF during the Second World War.

Sir Fredric Bartlett was president of the British Psychological Society 1950/51. He also retired in 1951, but this was not detrimental to his productivity. He continued to carry out experimental work, give invited lectures and speak at conferences. Moreover a considerable proportion of his literary output occurred post retirement. During this period of his life he wrote two books, some 41 papers, eight book reviews, four obituaries and contributed either forewords or chapters to a further 15 books, written or edited, by other people. He died on 30 September 1969, aged 82.

People who knew Frederic Bartlett remember a man, with an enquiring mind, whose fascination with all aspects of psychology was equalled by his interest in the diverse aspects of society at large. His contact with people outside academia imbued him with stimulating ideas, which he enjoyed sharing with students and colleagues alike (Broadbent, 1970). He was one of the pioneers of experimental psychology in this country, and he blazed the trail vigorously, infecting others with his enthusiasm.

Julie Perks