



# Still in love with psychology

**M**ISDIAGNOSED as having 'chronic depression' by the psychiatric establishment; he almost died while having ECT. Described by the *Financial Times* as one of the 'rebels' in a boardroom battle, he lost the company he'd grown over 25 years. But in 2001 his portrait hung at the National Portrait Gallery; he's been described as a 'genius'; and he has started a new firm that's already challenging his former organisation.

I met Peter Saville at the Institute of Directors, a poignant location; last time he was there he was ousted by the board of SHL Group, at that time the most successful occupational psychometric test publishers in the UK. His connection severed, he was legally prevented from speaking to former friends and colleagues at SHL. In contrast to then, when he was ill, grossly overweight and sluggish, he now looks fit and trim, bursting with energy. He eats little as we talk, a flood of information and experiences pouring out.

He is a man in love with psychology, who passionately cares about its application in the workplace. He is feverishly up-to-date with the global research literature on selection and assessment, and seems to know nearly everyone in the field; he provides me with a reasoned and researched synthesis and set of predictions about the field, and he talks animatedly about his new products. But this is not an *Annual Review of Psychology* article – the more interesting story is, as ever, human, and psychological.

Despite dyslexia, he was a working class boy who did well academically, with an Honours degree from Leicester, an M.Phil. and then a PhD. He joined NFER (then and now the premier publisher of educational tests), rising to become at 27 their Chief Psychologist in the Test Division. Spotting an opportunity in the commercial psychometric market for relevant (non clinical) tests related to industry he thought about setting up a psychological consultancy producing relevant instruments. 'Our only real competitors were the NIIP in its final days – I went to talk to their Director, in Wimpole Street. They had a range of tests – "what sells best?" I asked; "We're not in

**RICHARD KWIATKOWSKI** interviews Peter Saville.

trade" was the haughty reply – they obviously just didn't know.'

Peter and Roger Holdsworth together started up Saville and Holdsworth Limited (SHL) from a small bedroom in his house, and the obligatory garage, in 1977. SHL became the most successful psychometric publisher in the UK, with numerous offices worldwide.

When we talk about his premature departure from his own company Peter is still amazed at the behaviour of the SHL board. 'I was sacked for disagreeing with the board. I refused to support the removal of Roger.' He says that 'when it came down to a vote virtually every member and

these issues were not being addressed seriously enough.

The combination of severe illness and having your life's work suddenly taken away might have been the end of the story, but it wasn't. 'With the help of a neurologist I carried out research on myself. The psychiatrists were wrong; it wasn't depression, it was physiological and hormonal. I had a tumour on my pituitary; endocrine function should have been checked. I also found that medical treatment that I'd had as a child had damaged my brain stem.'

Saville believes that this link between childhood medical treatment and later

neuroendocrine function is something that far more psychologists should be aware of. Later he e-mails me a statement from Lesley Parkinson AFBPsS, '...Professor Kropotov using specialised brain scans has now shown that you have damage to the top of the neck, probably from whiplash, football and rugby injuries, but worst of all from prolonged swinging from the neck for pseudo-scoliosis as an infant of six months – abuse which was barbaric and pre-verbal... On the diagnosis of "depression", I am astonished, even alarmed, that you were

given such extreme treatment as ECT...' He quotes the recent *Psychologist* article [[www.bps.org.uk/wjo7](http://www.bps.org.uk/wjo7)] about ECT and talks volubly about his own experience where he had to be resuscitated when something went seriously wrong. He is still in almost constant pain because of the damage to his spinal cord, but shrugs it off when I ask him about it.

He's passionate about psychology, he's passionate about helping children (his partner is a senior social worker in child protection), and he's passionate about his new firm, Saville Consulting. Using 'leading edge technology' he tells me they've developed 'a raft of unique instruments, validated by rational a priori hypotheses, on large samples.'

He talks about 'parallel supervised



ex-member of staff voted for us, but the institutional shareholders voted against.'

'I had previously resigned as Executive Chairman, because I became ill. I was ill for 10 years, wrongly diagnosed with depression, I'd had everything SSRIs, tricyclics, MAOIs, ECT; everything failed. It was hell on earth. I went up to 280 pounds, they tried lithium, they tried everything, I became a zombie. My energy used to be enormous and suddenly there was nothing.'

Ejected from SHL, he was left to pick up the pieces. Later invited back as 'President' by SHL, he refused. He cites what he saw as a lack of innovation, and his concerns over the use of unsupervised testing on the internet, which he felt would inevitably lead to cheating; in his view

versions which safeguard against the possibility of cheating from internet delivery', and how 'the tests can provide a fairer profile of scores for the older applicant' – a very important issue that many occupational psychologists have long been concerned about, and which has been given new urgency with the recent introduction of the Age Discrimination Act in the UK; older people tend to be more accurate, but not as fast, so overall scores don't tell you much about cognitive style. He's keen on including an ethical dimension in selection, of having expert systems reports that are clear and comprehensible to the users, and of providing truly cross-cultural tests.

As he tells me all this, his memory is impressive, his grasp of the literature assured, his continued enthusiasm astonishing. He talks, and he talks, and he talks; it feels like someone who's woken up after 10 years and is urgently trying to make up for lost time. If I were a competitor I'd be concerned.

Of course I have to ask him how he

accounts for his success and his resilience. And, of course he has an answer. 'I love psychology, and having dyslexia I think has helped me to spot patterns. I've worked with some brilliant people... What else? Energy, enthusiasm, bloody mindedness; I'm very competitive. Like many entrepreneurs I have a go, take calculated risks, I learn, and I listen.' Peter was recently listed as one of Britain's top entrepreneurs by *Enterprise* magazine.

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Any final thoughts? 'SHL grew from 2 to some 1300 people, we worked hard, we were proud of what we did. Businesses using psychology should be run by psychologists. I'll never float my company again.' He pays for lunch and he's off.

How does he come across? Very much as he did before his illness; fiendishly

bright, quick, full of energy, proud of the achievements of his team, opinionated, sometimes brash, scientific, quick to cite names and dates, quick to give credit, intensely loyal to his friends, data driven, enthusiastic, but perhaps more reflective than he was. A deep love of psychology, its insights, methods and people comes up again and again. A lunchtime meeting was hugely enjoyable, but frankly a touch exhausting. He is remarkably open, and there seems to be no 'side' to him at all. What you see is what you get; take it or leave it. But he clearly inspires enormous affection and respect; Binna Kandola, now one of the foremost occupational psychologists in the UK, has publicly called Saville a genius.

His photograph was in the National Portrait Gallery during the Society's centenary year because he had received the annual BPS Award for Distinguished Contributions to Professional Psychology. When we nominated him for that award we little knew the extent of his personal trauma. Welcome back, Peter!