

**BRITISH PSYCHOLOGY  
IN CRISIS**  
A Case Study in  
Organisational Dysfunction

*Edited by*  
**David Pilgrim**



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## About the editor and contributors

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**Pat Harvey** was an NHS clinical psychologist for over thirty years, managing a large psychology and counselling service. She helped set up the Lancashire training scheme for clinical psychologists, taught professional issues on the course, and was an examiner for the BPS Diploma. She served as a Mental Health Act Commissioner from 1983 to 1986, and was elected and served as chair of the BPS Division of Clinical Psychology 1997–1998. After retiring in 2002, she left psychology and obtained a master's degree in fine art printmaking and practised as a visual artist. Having retained BPS membership, she joined with others in 2020 to question the organisational and policy directions of the Society and runs the critical commentary Twitter account @psychsocwatchuk.

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## Editor's preface

This book is a case study on organisational dysfunction. At the time of writing, there is much evidence that the British Psychological Society (BPS) is in crisis, as will become clear in the pages to come. 'Crisis' is an over-used word, and it may suggest a transitory period of acute disturbance, soon to pass. However, the problems in the BPS are neither temporary nor recent. They are longstanding, going back decades. They involve ingrained cultural norms of a poorly governed, opaque, and anti-democratic organisational structure.

At some point, these norms would inevitably culminate in corruption, which has been the case here. That corruption has involved both financial gain and the abuse of power. To date, the conditions of possibility for this outcome have not been dealt with honestly by its leadership, nor have they been reformed sufficiently to prevent a recurrence of the problems addressed in this book.

Although we focus on the structural fault at the centre of the BPS, which encourages a lack of transparency and prevents independent public scrutiny, those filling leadership roles have frequently capitalised on this fault, not sought to correct it. We are looking here at the ambiguous question of the relationship between structural determinants and

the role of personal agency, in explaining the degree to which human organisations are commendable or condemnable.

Although the BPS is a charity, it is not run in the public interest and its Board of Trustees are not independent. Although the BPS is purportedly a scholarly organisation, it has failed to uphold some basic expectations of academic probity. It is fair to say that is neither a learned, nor a learning, organisation. More recently, censorship has become normalised by its managers and those controlling its published material. Propaganda and 'spin' from new managers-for-hire, with no loyalty to academic values, have sabotaged traditional expectations of freedom of expression.

Although the BPS is purportedly a membership organisation, it has been characterised by the poor involvement of ordinary members. The latter have often been kept in the dark about what is happening at the centre of the BPS, and when they have expressed their concerns, they have been ignored, palmed off, or sent into the long grass of an arcane complaints process. If they have complained 'too much' or too vociferously, in frustration (in the view of the Society's leadership), then they have been accused of harassing BPS staff.

Although the BPS offers the outside world the confident expectation of balanced and inclusive advice about public policy matters, its poor governance has created opportunities for policy capture. The latter has failed to represent the full gamut of evidence and debate about policy topics and, in doing so, at times this has placed the public at risk of harm.

Some elected as president for the Society have made genuine attempts to rectify the obdurate systemic problems of poor governance. Those efforts have met resistance, and the reformers have been punished, left frustrated, or been expelled because of the threat they have posed to the reactionary beneficiaries of mismanagement. Many presidents have made no such efforts, but simply been complicit in the norms of organisational dysfunction which they have encountered. The bottom line has been that individual presidents, whether reforming or complicit, have made little or no difference to the ingrained dysfunction that has now become an existential threat to the BPS.

The BPS is by no means an isolated example of a poorly governed organisation today. However, what makes it an unnerving example,



for anyone new to it, is the fact that it is called a *Psychological Society*. This might raise the reasonable public expectation of an organisational culture characterised by honesty, rationality, and reflexivity. The public might, quite understandably, expect a particularly high standard of personal sensitivity and insight from such a named organisation. Sadly, to date, this has not been the case. If we have here an expectation of 'physician heal thyself', then we are still all waiting patiently for that promise to be fulfilled.

The organisational failures listed above are explored in the book, borne of the experience of those campaigning to reverse them. The authors are not nihilistic; all, bar one, are longstanding members of the BPS and genuinely look for evidence of remediation. They would like their criticisms to be taken seriously as a resource for corrective feedback, even though they are travelling more in hope than expectation. However, it may be that the rot in the organisation has gone too far.

A wider consideration is that single disciplines are no longer a credible source of authority to solve the challenges facing humanity in the twenty-first century, as the end of the Anthropocene looms. Maybe claims of disciplinary imperialism, common in the twentieth century, are no longer fit for purpose today. The world is in particular need of interdisciplinary cooperation, in a spirit of humility and transparency, from its scholarly contributors. As will become evident in what is to come in the book, neither of these required features come easy to those seeking to preserve the status quo in the BPS.