

# 'Everyone can benefit from thinking psychologically'

Ian Florance meets some 25-year-old psychologists as *The Psychologist* celebrates its 25th birthday

As *The Psychologist* turns 25 this month, we thought it would be a good time to talk to some psychologists who have shared our journey. A call on our Twitter account (@psychmag) for 25-year-olds to share in our celebrations brought a good response, and I heard their stories about their first 25 years and what they think is in store for them and the discipline in the next.

But first, let's meet our 25-year-olds:

**Alan Bowman:** 'I'm a trainee clinical psychologist at Teesside University, currently placed in a specialist child and adolescent mental health service. I split my time between clinical practice and academic work.'

**Amy Boyson:** 'I am in the fourth year of

my undergraduate psychology degree at Plymouth University, having completed a professional placement in a stroke rehabilitation unit.'

**Manpreet Dhuffar:** 'I am in the final stages of my PhD. I am conducting DSM-5 field trials at UCLA, presenting at public lectures, working as a CBT therapist and setting up a private practice.'

**Susanna Martin:** 'I'm a research officer in the Psychology Department, University of Bath. I am working on a project which manages and explores the dissemination of a large multidisciplinary and multi-partner project, and exploring research ideas.'

**Lucy Stevens:** 'I am a trainee clinical psychologist at Teesside University while finalising the write-up of my MPhil thesis.'

My first placement is working with an older adult client group.'

**Rebecca Wheeler:** 'I've just finished my Masters of Research in Psychology at Sheffield Hallam University, and I'm looking for a funded PhD place. In the meantime, I'm working as an Associate Lecturer and trying to gain more research experience.'

**Kayleigh Whyles:** 'I'm in my third year of an interdisciplinary PhD project at Plymouth University, examining the impact recreational visitors have on rocky shores. I do additional teaching and marking.'

## How did you get interested in psychology?

Reasons for getting interested in

psychology are as varied as the issues it addresses. As a teenager Kayleigh 'wanted to go into animal training, specifically training marine mammals'. 'But I chose to study psychology for the animal behaviour aspect. I discovered environmental psychology which brought together both my passions: the environment and psychology.'

Rebecca's starting points were people. 'My A-level tutor Sandeep was so enthusiastic, and spent time with me out of class discussing the places psychology could take me. She's the reason I went on to study it at university. Once I was there I was taught by a few amazing tutors who really inspired me.'

Alan's interest in psychology began when he started reading about body language. 'As a teenager I was convinced that you could read minds through nonverbal cues. I developed an interest in therapy and interpersonal interaction, prompting my decision to take psychology at A-level.' Susanna was hooked by the sleep section of a psychology textbook her brother lent her, while Lucy became fascinated by a talk about Milgram's obedience experiments at a Sunderland College open day. On her A-level course Amy became 'interested in how we are all basically the same yet behave in such vastly different ways'. 'Why is this? Little did I know at the time at just how big of a question this was...'

## Was studying psychology what you expected?

Rebecca's experience is not uncommon. 'A-level psychology can give some false expectations of studying at a higher level. I expected more Freud and less stats.' Lucy echoes this: 'I was surprised at the amount of statistical analysis, something that was covered in less detail at A-level. Before starting his A-levels, Alan's view of it 'could be described as "pop psychology" – hypnosis, mind reading and Derren Brown-style illusions. I was very surprised by how scientific the subject was and how much overlap it had



advertise

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You will find 'featured jobs' amongst the ads, starting this month on p.58.

For more vacancies, see the Psychologist Appointments site at [www.psychapp.co.uk](http://www.psychapp.co.uk).

Recruiters can post online only from just £750, and at no extra cost when placing an ad in print (where prices start at just £500).

For more information, contact Giorgio Romano, Senior Sales Executive, on +44 20 7880 7556 or [giorgio.romano@redactive.co.uk](mailto:giorgio.romano@redactive.co.uk).

Next deadline for recruitment advertising is 16 January for the February issue.



with other disciplines such as biology. I loved the variety and the uncertainty of each topic. Psychology is an immature discipline relative to other sciences and there is a vast amount of unexplored territory. Being a part of a discipline so early on in its development is a very exciting prospect.'

Susanna was 'taken aback by how broad psychology was', something which Kayleigh echoes: 'I learnt about social systems one moment, neural structures in the brain the next. I couldn't get bored.' Amy sums this up well: 'I didn't really know what to expect when I started my A-level. I hadn't realised there were so many different areas of psychology!'

### Have your interests changed?

After taking A-level psychology, Manpreet decided it was something he wanted to pursue. 'I created a 10-year map and have adhered to it the best way I possibly can. As an undergraduate, I specialised in abnormal psychology and then took an MSc in Addiction Psychology and Treatment which further fuelled me to pursue this field.'

Kayleigh was interested in animal training, but realised that she 'actually wanted to study human rather than animal behaviour, specifically its consequences for the natural environment'. 'Consequently, I am now happily exploring the area of environmental psychology.'

Rebecca is quite clear that her interests have changed. 'Definitely! I started out wanting to be a child psychologist. A very supportive tutor helped instil my love of research and my project has triggered an interest in how social factors influence cognitive processes.' Amy's change of heart has a partly personal basis. 'I wanted to be a criminal profiler under the influence of American TV shows! Now neuroscience is the way for me. My time spent on a stroke unit during my placement year confirmed how fragile the brain is. In Stage 2 of the degree we also touched on diseases such as Parkinson's, Huntington's, etc. I have personal experience of dementia in the family, so being able to understand how the brain works I may be able to help in the quest to find a cure for such conditions.'

Susanna is keeping her options open. 'I was going to train as a secondary school teacher. I may yet do that, but in the meantime I am enjoying my research.' And Lucy is similarly flexible about the future. 'I feel I could see myself in most fields at the moment. I guess being open-minded is a great way to start the

Doctorate in Clinical Psychology course. And maybe my interests will change once again after the next three years!'

Alan explains why this flexibility is increasingly necessary. 'I'm less rigid in my ambitions. The recession changed a lot, meaning there are fewer jobs now and increased uncertainty about job prospects in the future. We need to be flexible and ready to accept change, so I'm trying to keep an open mind.'

### What do you want to be doing in 25 years' time?

Alan has 'no idea and wouldn't like to guess', and Kayleigh sees many possible avenues. Others want to be successful, and better at what they've set out to do. For Lucy the journey is important. Manpreet and Amy hope, among other things, to have achieved senior academic positions and to have published more in their areas of interest.

But 25-year-old psychologists understand work-life balance. Susanna would like to have reached a good stage in her career, and have a family as well as a job. 'It is important for me that my life is not just about work, so wherever I am in 25 years I hope it is flexible enough to still have a life!'

Rebecca raises an issue that might be on a number of people's minds: 'In a more personal sense I think I'd like to have a family, and to be finally seeing the back of my student loan! That's the ideal anyway.' Perhaps Alan sums it up best: 'As long as I'm happy that's the important thing!'

### What will psychology look like in 25 years' time?

Our respondents seemed to think long and hard about this question, and their answers are worth quoting in some detail.

Kayleigh: 'Environmental psychology will develop further and be recognised as a fundamental aspect of the subject. It has the potential to inform a diverse range of initiatives, from shaping persuasive pro-environmental messages to facilitating behaviours by land use management.'

Amy: 'Psychology affects everyone. In 25 years' time it will still be a part of every industry. I don't think any one particular field will progress more than the others since we already accept that every aspect of psychology affects all others. It is likely that we will see a more cohesive picture with people from all the subdisciplines working together to find the answers to questions.'

Alan: 'Psychology should grow and keep varied. However, societal and political pressures (research budget and

mental healthcare provision cuts, demographic trends, etc.) will ensure certain areas advance faster than others. Psychology may shift in years to come to mirror the issues raised by an older population.'

Susanna: 'Psychology will become broader and relate to wider aspects of everyday life. It will gain respect if psychologists ensure the reliability and validity of their results. Future activity will focus on new forms of communicating, living and collaborating, as well as understanding behaviours to improve lifestyles and health.'

Rebecca: 'It will have a higher public profile. It seems everyone has an interest in it, however vague that interest may be. The emphasis will be on explaining why particular events occur or certain behaviours are shown. Technological progress will lead to advances in experimental psychology, and particularly in neuropsychology. It's going to be exciting to see where this leads. Social networking will affect research dissemination. If funding decreases, psychology may take its lead from more arts-based endeavours and use crowd-sourced funding to meet research costs.'

Lucy: 'Neuropsychology will continue to develop and technological advances will improve imaging techniques and computerised assessment methods. Psychology and psychiatry have the potential to merge if NHS cuts and changes in commissioning continue because of economic advantages. For example, most community mental health teams employ both a consultant psychiatrist and a consultant psychologist. By combining the disciplines here the NHS could save a lot of money. I also expect the NHS will not look the same it does now. There will be a lot more cost-effective (but perhaps less individualised) treatment initiatives, like IAPT. Psychologists will become a lot more like business people to get work that was once directly referred to them.'

Manpreet: 'Psychology will continue along the path that it has followed for the last 25 years. Constant developments in technology have further enhanced our understanding of psychological and behavioural disorders and they will help us understand more in the next 25 years. It would be nice to see more psychologists working with police forces to reduce the time spent on hunting for criminals.'

### If you could change one thing about psychology...

It's not surprising that most of our 25-

year-olds focused on changes in teaching and training. Kayleigh wants more field work: 'In many marine biology classes, students in different disciplines engage in more hands-on work both in the laboratory and in the field. It would be nice for students to get more opportunities to explore different research techniques such as brain scanning as well as witnessing psychology in clinical or industrial settings.'

Lucy's earlier suggestion that psychiatry and psychology might merge is reflected here: 'I think it is important that psychologists, particularly in clinical psychology, should know a little bit about medication and potential side-effects, as these can present in very similar ways to symptoms of mental illnesses.'

Interviewees in earlier 'Careers' sections have criticised the emphasis on academic publishing pressures. Rebecca makes a related point: 'I'd like to change the pressure to publish... or the fact that only significant results typically gain publication. I think null results can still be really interesting! Data falsification scandals have damaged the reputation of psychology slightly, but I think the focus

this has brought into our research practices is ultimately a positive. After all, it's better for everyone involved if we push boundaries with research, but remain totally honest about our findings.'

Manpreet emphasises something I think all our 25-year-olds would agree with: 'To have more professionals teaching and presenting psychology with enthusiasm like my undergraduate lecturers did.'

Alan, Susanna and Amy make much wider points which link to their views of how psychology will develop. Alan suggests: 'We all use psychology without knowing it. I think everyone can benefit from thinking psychologically, not just those people who receive therapy or study psychology. Perhaps it should be taught in schools as a core subject? We learn about our bodies in primary schools. We are even made to take part in physical exercise to stay fit. Surely it is just as important to learn about and take care of our minds?' Susanna sees the teaching implications of this: 'Subjects are becoming increasingly cross-disciplinary, and psychology needs to respond to that. Psychologists work in a range of fields

and it isn't always appropriate to publish through psychological channels.' For Amy, 'If everyone had an understanding of why we all behave and think the way we do then perhaps we wouldn't see so much conflict, violence, wars, poverty, etc. If we have any hope of breeding greater understanding and acceptance then the teaching of psychology should become part of everyday life and part of the school curriculum in every nation. I do hope that didn't sound too much like a World Peace speech, but I do think it would help.'

### How do you think the BPS ought to change in the future?

Recognition of more applied subdivisions such as environmental psychology; giving more muscle to the profession; making it easier to maintain membership after a degree; and offering more free conference places to students for networking were some of the suggestions. It was even felt that more articles like this one, reflecting the views of younger and trainee psychologists, would help. But I'd like to quote Rebecca's answer in full.

## Towards 'work readiness'

Leanne Alston on her work with Remploy

**M**y path into employability was paved more by accident than design. Growing up, I was fascinated by offending behaviour and fancied that I would become a Criminal Profiler or Forensic Psychologist, and so I planned to gain relevant experience working with offenders.

After graduation I applied for work in Local Authority secure units and Young Offender Institutes. I began in education as I had lost the battle for one of the few highly sought after Assistant Psychologist positions within Her Majesty's Prisons. I resolved that getting a 'foot in the door' was beneficial as long as I made the most of every opportunity once inside.

Education is compulsory for all young people in custody, and is not met with any joy by those

who rejected their learning years ago. However, with nowhere else to go, education becomes a forum to explore skills, qualifications and experiences which pave the way for a crime free future. I moved from Learning Support Assistant to Information, Advice and Guidance Officer, ensuring that skills and qualifications gained in custody could be transferred and applied upon release. Without positive guidance and support, the inmates would quickly fall into old habits once the prison gates closed behind them.

In many cases my best efforts failed, as I saw the same faces returning through the gates time and time again. For some, life in custody was an occupational hazard whilst for others, tragically, it was better than life 'on the out'. I did not

let it phase me; I gave the inmates the tools to succeed, it was up to them when to use them.

Shortly after starting a Masters degree in Psychology, I was made redundant but quickly obtained an Assistant Psychologist post working in forensic psychology. I conducted psychological assessments of people involved in court proceedings and learnt a great deal about psychometric testing and formulation of client difficulties. Unfortunately after two years I was made redundant again and in my need to secure employment quickly I drew on my experience in custodial employability to obtain a role as an Employment Advisor at Remploy.

Remploy is an organisation that was set up after the end of



Leanne Alston

the Second World War to ensure that injured ex-servicemen had sustainable employment in factories. It is a company with an inspirational mission statement, '... to transform the lives of disabled people and those experiencing complex barriers to work by providing sustainable employment'. For more than 60 years, these factories have offered employment to people with

'I think the biggest change that needs to happen within the BPS is actually the engagement of more student/postgraduate members. I joined the BPS within the last year while I was doing my Masters, mainly to get the discounted Cognitive Section conference price! I was really nervous of attending a full BPS conference (rather than the PsyPAG conference), but really needn't have been! It was a really great few days, surrounded by some amazing researchers, and I thoroughly enjoyed myself. But until I was encouraged by a former tutor to attend, I assumed that the conference might be a little above me. I'm not sure why I thought that, but I don't think it's an uncommon view among students. I'm not sure how, but I think it's quite important to alter this, and to encourage students to take a more active role, and realise that the BPS is for us too.'

### **The Psychologist and me**

Since it's *The Psychologist's* 25th birthday we also asked what the magazine meant to our 25-year-olds.

Several of our pundits were apologetic

that they were too busy to read anything more than material for their courses. But a number explained how *The Psychologist* had influenced them. Lucy finds she 'skips to the book reviews first. I bought *Psychosis: Stories of Recovery and Hope* after reading about it and it was a very good read. I like the fact that recommended books are often memoirs of people's experiences, or real-life case studies, which I find valuable in understanding more about mental illness.' Amy saw 'an advertisement for a post-graduate open evening at King's College London Institute of Psychiatry. I decided to attend to see what their Neuroscience MSc was all about. I decided studying in London wasn't for me but the course definitely was so I am now looking for the same course at other non-London institutions.' Alan finds it 'useful to read articles that aren't in my area of speciality as it helps remove professional blinkers'.

Manpreet has 'subscribed to *The Psychologist* since 2006. 'It keeps me

updated on new research. It's also influenced me to attend many conferences, and I was also inspired by advertisements for jobs, new courses and for participating in research studies. *The Psychologist* has had a big impact factor in the progress of my research in the last four years.'

Susanna enjoys the Research Digest and says: 'I am impressed with the Twitter account, as that is the reason I found out about the 25th birthday.'

Looking forward she sees the opportunity for 'a more interactive web version'. Alan also sees the future in digital versions: 'apps for smart phones and tablets allowing access to digital copies and renewing subscriptions'. [See *The Psychologist* website for member access to digital versions.]

But, at the risk of blowing our own trumpet, lets leave the final word to Manpreet. '*The Psychologist* itself is brilliant.'

A special thank you to all the contributors for their enthusiastic and thoughtful answers to our questions.

"Everyone can benefit from thinking psychologically..."

disabilities and multiple barriers. Sadly these factories are no longer profitable and many of them are facing closure which will result in thousands of redundancies of people whose needs are so profound they are unlikely to find work again.

Remploy have nationwide offices facilitating employment support under the auspices of the 'Work Programme' designed to work in partnership with the client to overcome initial barriers to employment and maintain support even after they find work. Those who have been unemployed for more than a year are referred to Remploy by the Job Centre.

A recent quarterly employment review stated that there are 14,700 unfilled vacancies in a variety of fields including construction, retail, administration and hospitality in the Leeds, Bradford and Wakefield cluster. The imbalance between unfilled jobs and high rates of unemployment suggests that there is a lot more preventing people from working

than simply a lack of job opportunities.

Whilst some customers only require a few 'tweaks' to their CV and some interview practice, others have more complex needs, such as lack of work experience, no ambition, low confidence, low self esteem, substance misuse issues, physical, emotional and psychological health conditions. Minor difficulties can be effectively overcome by implementing some in-house support while more serious issues are referred to local specialised services. This means that each customer's journey is unique, with no regimented markers to achieve. Whatever the variables, the outcome is the same – to support that person to a state of 'work readiness'.

Problems arise when customers consistently fail to attend their appointments, usually due to lack of motivation to work. Some people view the Job Seekers Allowance as an alternative to employment and

ultimately their entitlement. This mentality can transcend generations, and it is then that I wish I had had further training in cognitive behavioural techniques to challenge their very rigid outlook.

My background in psychology naturally guides my line of questioning towards exploring the causes of behaviour by understanding a person's psychodynamic history. Whenever possible I try to apply theory to practice, particularly during interviews when I am conscious of the nature and direction of my questioning as well as paying attention to verbal and non verbal cues. I also draw on my skills as a reflective practitioner to evaluate my interactions and I use motivational techniques to encourage my customers to explore their ambitions and achieve their potential.

I am keen to work with people who have complex mental health problems, substance misuse issues and criminal lifestyles. My natural

instinct is to spend quality time with these people, exploring their issues and if appropriate conducting psychometric tests to inform my clinical judgment. However, a shortage of time, limited funding and a target driven market prevents this level of intervention.

There are aspects of my job that are very interesting and the lives of many of my customers are fascinating. At Remploy I have the chance to gain an insight into a diverse client group, their lives and the impact of the current economic crisis.

Any people-orientated role is enhanced by the principles learnt in studying psychology. All of my work experiences have provided an opportunity to use my knowledge of human behaviour. Yet my desire to pursue a career squarely within Psychology is undiminished. My work experiences have led me to wish to learn more about mental health and I am now looking for research opportunities or doctoral training in clinical psychology.