

Life in perpetual motion

Ian Florance talks to Fiona Price about putting a background in psychology to use in diverse settings

The majority of psychological undergraduates work outside mainstream applied and research psychology. Does psychology help them? Does initial training disappoint? What does training prepare or fail to prepare them for? What sort of jobs do people who are interested in psychology excel at?

Fiona Price was heralded as 'first woman of finance' in *Harpers & Queen* and has received three national business women's awards. She'd also rowed for Wales and competes in endurance horse racing.

I ask Fiona about her background. 'I come from a Jewish family, one in which education was seen as a means of getting on. It sometimes seemed as though I was in perpetual motion with school and all the extracurricular activities.'

Fiona spent a year in Australia before university to work at an 'extreme' outward bound centre for teenagers. Why did she choose psychology to study? 'I was interested in people and human behaviour. My grandmother was a psychologist, and the subject seemed to be a catch-all which met my interests.' And did it surprise you? 'It seemed like a waste of time then, but I thought the same thing about the MBA I did straight afterwards. I found higher education too theoretical, formal and uninspiring.'

'My psychology course was too divided up into discrete units – cognitive, perception, developmental, etc. All psychology degree courses should teach practical skills. It would be useful if there were also a compulsory element in all

higher-education courses that taught vital life skills too, such as dealing with stress, money, health and nutrition and coping strategies. The proverbial shit will hit the fan at various times in your work so it's best to be prepared! One of the key things that marks out "successful" people is how they manage themselves. Although I didn't see the value of a psychology degree, it was at the beginning of a never-ending quest to understand people, our life and times, the world we live in and the world beyond – a journey which is both personal and applied.'

Fiona does acknowledge an upside to university. 'It gave me the opportunity to follow all sorts of interests. I joined the riding and skiing club, and was captain of the boat club. After the undergraduate degree, I came to London to study for an MBA at City University as an excuse to train with the GB rowing team. This led to me competing in the 1986 Commonwealth Games for Wales, winning the Home International in a coxless four and taking silver twice at the National Championships in a coxless pair.'

Towards female empowerment

'Doing a condensed, one-year MBA was a tough period in my life. I was training three hours and cycling up to 20 miles a day, burning the midnight oil to write essays and studying for exams. I was the only student who hadn't been in a workplace and that was a distinct disadvantage. I came out of the course knowing two things – I was "maths

phobic", and almost certainly unemployable.'

Fiona speaks of wanting to create her own experience. 'This was in '83 and there was no outplacement structure. I didn't want to go into a bureaucracy... I wrote letters to companies and got nowhere before applying to one of those cheesy "Be Your Own Boss" adverts. It involved selling financial products. It was challenging. The starting point was approaching my own friends and trying to sell to them. But I quickly got recommendations, found I was good at it and worked hard and enthusiastically. I also realised that the financial sector was a very unethical place and saw an opening for services which were professional and empowering.'

After three years Fiona had been promoted to branch manager, but decided to leave and do her own thing. 'I raised what was then a lot of money and in 1986 set up as an independent financial adviser firm in Covent Garden, with a partner and around 10 staff'. Going into the finance sector seems an odd career choice for someone who described herself as maths phobic. 'I could understand the numbers if they were applied, if they related to something real in someone's life. That's one of my characteristics: I found it easier to learn about psychology in the real world rather than the theoretical approach of a degree course.'

One of the shocking aspects of finance that Fiona had identified was its inherent sexism. 'The early and mid-1980s saw the start of women's business and professional networks throughout the country, and in London particularly. I was a member of many of these and meeting so many successful women confirmed a number of the things I'd begun to think. Many of them were scared of numbers and finance, as I had been. Most men talked jargon, thinking they knew more than they often did – women favour plain English and create an environment which empowers others rather than reflects their own sense of self-worth and ego. So I started to gain a lot of women clients

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through these networks, and was increasingly motivated by creating female financial empowerment through independent financial advice. So I decided to set up entirely on my own to focus on this market.'

Over time Fiona found herself doing more and more media work. 'Anybody seriously involved in the media understands that they have more chance of success if they offer a total package – up to writing an article for a journalist or providing both questions and answers on any given subject for a TV or radio researcher. This strengthened my interest



Fiona Price

in plain English. And I became more and more fascinated in the media and in particular in broadcast.' Among many other activities Fiona founded a professional network for women working in the financial sector, supporting around 1500 members nationwide and running an annual national award.

'After 18 years I sold the business, which then employed over 30 people. I really wanted to be in mainstream TV on the presenting side, but despite pitching many ideas it seemed to be a closed world. So I built my own site called Diva Biz and interviewed around 80 leading British businesswomen on camera. Web was an alien business to me and I didn't know enough to make it work financially – it may have been impossible at that time! So I was headhunted to be MD of the fledgling Horse and Country TV, which led me to mothball Diva Biz.'

A passion-led business

All the way through the interview, Fiona stressed the importance of what she terms 'passion-led businesses'. It's clear that for her this is not a meaningless piece of jargon. Caring intensely about what you do – whatever that may be – leads to

certain ways of behaving, not least a desire to communicate what you do to as many people as possible and a commitment to learning how to do things rather than relying on others.

Fiona describes equestrianism as her 'guilty secret' for a long time, but the TV job seemed to give her an opportunity to turn her private passion into business. 'But I didn't believe HCTV could make it work as a 24/7 Sky channel at that time. I felt web was the way... So, having said I would never set up my own business again, there I was raising money for yet another start-up. I launched www.horsehero.com in 2008 after 18 months of preparation.

'I've always loved the part where you sit down with a blank sheet of paper and start developing an idea from scratch. I'm less good at maximising the business success in its mature phase, a number of years along the line. Financial returns are not my main priority. Making a difference to people's lives is. I also have a low boredom threshold.'

Fiona describes the technical side of making videos of top equestrians working with their horses as 'challenging', but some five years after launch, she has made around 900 videos. 'While filming and editing seems a very different skill to anything I've done before, I wrote and edited hundreds of articles in my first career, so I was used to reducing content to its most succinct form.'

Does your interest in psychology translate into your interest in animals? 'Yes, people and animals are a complex puzzle of mind, body and soul. Also, animals live in the moment and mirror your mood, which is always educational! My interest in equestrianism is part of my personal voyage of discovery. Currently, I compete in the sport of endurance riding, racing over distances of 120K in a day, so the challenge of preparing yourself and the horse for that is very focusing.'

Underlying everything is Fiona's desire to answer the broader questions in life. 'I got interested in spirituality at the age of 17 when I went to Australia for a year out. I loathe anything evangelical... organised religion takes away the power of individuals to do their own thinking. So I've created my own eclectic approach to spirituality.'

Fiona wrapped up our interview saying something extraordinarily valuable. 'You spend the first 10 years of your working life learning more about what you don't want. And the majority of your lessons come from your failures and mistakes rather than your successes. If you are prepared to tackle them, you'll find your own path.'



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A uniformed clinical psychologist in the British Army

Captain Duncan Precious gives his personal reflections on a unique role (found through these pages!)

The Army is only as good as its soldiers, so mental well-being is as essential as physical fitness. As a military clinical psychologist your aim is to reduce psychological distress, and to enhance and promote psychological well-being by the systematic application of knowledge derived from psychological theory and research. It's your job to provide professional psychological assessment and treatment to those who need it as part of a military multidisciplinary mental health team both in the UK and overseas. Clinical psychologists are more than psychological therapists: you will use your research competence to critically evaluate research publications and, when required, design and carry out applied research and audit. Your specialist clinical skills and experience will give you the edge when supporting your mental health colleagues and others through provision of clinical supervision and training.

In July 2012 the British Army opened its doors to clinical psychologists becoming commissioned officers. These posts were advertised on *The Psychologist* jobs website www.psychapp.co.uk and I applied with a sense of curiosity and intrigue. After a long and uncertain 12-month selection process, I had the privilege of becoming the first commissioned clinical psychologist in the British Army and at present remain the only uniformed clinical psychologist across the whole of the UK military. These are my personal reflections on the role and my time in the post so far.

Becoming a uniformed clinical psychologist

The first stage of the recruitment process was attendance at a two-day acquaint visit at the Army Medical Headquarters Camberley, at which I was given a full briefing and introduced to the infamous Army Personal Fitness Test. I then travelled down to Westbury to complete the Army Officer Selection Board (AOSB). This was a three-day formal selection course, a requirement for any potential army officer. The AOSB tested me in every way imaginable and took me

completely out of my comfort zone. It highlighted my strengths and weaknesses in a way I have never quite experienced before. Indeed, one of the main objectives was to evaluate my ability to cope under pressure, which it certainly did.

Several months later I attended the Army Interview Board. This was a more familiar interview process, involving a number of senior officers from different strands of the British Army. Following successful interview I was offered a commission as a Captain after completion of the Professionally Qualified Officer's Course at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. This was an 11-week course that equates in essence to the final term of Regular Army Officer Training. It taught me military skills, tactics and strategy, military history, leadership and command responsibilities and tested my physical fitness and mental resilience throughout. I then spent a month at Defence Medical Services Training Group, Keogh to complete my Entry Officers Course, which was a specialised medical training course.

Role

During my first year in a busy Department of Community Mental Health at Catterick Garrison, my main effort has been getting up to speed clinically. To put it in perspective, if we were to use a stepped care model then we cover primary care right up to step five (specialist/inpatient services). Therefore, the variety of work is immense. Moreover, due to a number of different factors, for example, the demands of military service, the constant moving around of personnel and some of the barriers to help-seeking, the constant challenge of engaging and keeping people in therapy is a critical task.

Another main component of my role has been preventative, and I have sought opportunities wherever possible to promote mental health education and training. One positive area has been the

development of mental resilience training within the military, and this is an area I am exploring further with research.

What am I first?

I have been asked by many clinical psychologists 'What are you first, a psychologist or army officer?'; I reply 'Both'. Indeed, I have found it possible to step in and out of the roles in different situations – to effectively wear two hats. In the words of George Kelly I have not felt as though I have been slot rattling between two polar opposites.

During my military training I had to step out of the role of being a clinical psychologist, as first and foremost I was being assessed on my potential to be an army officer. However, I was able to retain a sense of autonomy and competence by using

skills that I have developed as a psychologist, such as problem solving, reflexivity, flexibility of thinking, interpersonal skills and relationship building. I also used many of the psychological skills I teach in therapy in order to cope with the stress, pressure and demands of training.

In contrast, in my clinical role, I am first and foremost a clinical psychologist and where possible leave the military etiquette at my door. I imagine that inside my therapy room it works like most therapy rooms up and down the country. In a similar way I have also been able to apply the leadership and personal skills I developed in my officer training to enhance my role as a psychologist.

It has not been all plain sailing and there have been some ethical dilemmas to negotiate, in terms of confidentiality and the occupational requirement. However, it has been possible to resolve these through supervision, consultation with my military colleagues and personal reflection. Of course, I am not blind to the fact that on operations the potential ethical dilemmas are likely to increase significantly... I will be more firmly placed in my officer role and there will be

"Wearing a uniform has meaning. There are no two ways about it."



Captain Duncan Precious

far less black and white, and a whole lot more grey.

One of my other main reflections has been the extent to which the military identity has influenced my thinking, behaviour and emotions. Wearing a uniform has meaning. There are no two ways about it. Once you put it on you become part of something, part of an organisation's ethos, history, culture and way of life. There is a very strong identity associated with being in the military and during my time in phase 1 and 2 training I definitely internalised the military culture and set of standards and values that so strongly underpins it. Perhaps, due to the fact that I am a psychologist, but also because I remain in a unique role, I have reflected a lot on the influence of culture and organisational and individual identity within the military. Indeed, having worked as both an MOD civilian trainee clinical psychologist and uniformed clinical psychologist, I feel that being in uniform has given me greater insight into the military mind-set, culture

and identity and has enhanced my clinical work considerably.

Highs and lows

Militarily speaking, one of the most rewarding experiences was the time I spent at Sandhurst. I have fond memories of this and made some lifelong friends. It held true to everything I had heard and read about this prestigious and impressive institution. It lives and breathes history, tradition, pride and excellence. Since then, my proudest moment has been to pass the extremely arduous and physically demanding pre-parachute selection course and earn my paratrooper wings to enable me to serve alongside the elite parachute regiment.

The low point was the amount of time I spent away from home in my first year of training. In 2013 I was away for over five months. My wife was pregnant, also looking after our two daughters and working full time. She had it much harder than I did at Sandhurst, and this gave me

an insight into what military personnel have to contend with on operations. I had not experienced such a profound sense of homesickness before, and I am not sure I could ever get used to being away from home for this long. Trying to focus and concentrate, whilst always in the back of my mind thinking about what was happening at home and how my wife was coping, was a difficult experience. Ringing home and finding out when things were going wrong, I felt helpless in being unable to do anything about it... it made it seem as though I was shirking my responsibilities as a husband and father.

Future focus

Most NATO countries have regular or reserve uniformed clinical psychologists in at least one branch of their armed services (Army, Navy, Air Force). In relation to our closest English-speaking allies, the United States Military and Australian Defence Force have well-established psychology corps. The US have uniformed clinical psychologists across all three of their armed services. The influence of the uniformed clinical psychologist reaches more than just a clinical role as they are deeply embedded within their chain of command. They also have unique occupational roles, completing psychological screening measures and assessing personality, intelligence, aptitude and mental well-being in order to select personnel for highly specialised roles. This highlights some of the potential areas for development of uniformed clinical psychology in the UK Armed Forces.

It is a time of unprecedented change within UK defence with the significant reduction in the size of the armed forces. Change creates a degree of uncertainty when it comes to the longevity and sustainability of a new role. Nevertheless, the priority for me remains: to make a difference to the lives of the people that walk through my door and, on a wider level, to establish and demonstrate the unique role uniformed clinical psychologists can play in the firm base and on operations.

In sum, the last two years have been packed full of variety and challenge. I am incredibly proud to be applying my trade in support of our brave service men and women, and to have experienced the opportunity to be part of something very exciting and historic for my profession. We are recruiting more uniformed clinical psychologists, and I can honestly say, in terms of the variety, challenge and opportunities that I have experienced, it is an incomparable setting to work in.