

# Twin paths from psychology

Clare O’Loughlen and her twin sister Maeve O’Loughlen on alternative routes from shared origins

Clare O’Loughlen contacted us to propose an article on working in medical research. She mentioned that her twin sister Maeve had also studied psychology, but had chosen a career in HR. This is not a stringent twin research project – in fact Maeve and Clare are involved in such studies, via [www.twinsuk.ac.uk](http://www.twinsuk.ac.uk) – but it does highlight how similar starting points can lead to very different career destinations.

### Clare’s story

Psychology appealed to me as a university subject for several reasons. I enjoyed both

arts and science, so psychology seemed an ideal compromise, combining strands of several of my favourite subjects (philosophy, mathematics and biology) and requiring skills in both numeracy and literacy. After my BSc in psychology at the University of York, I viewed the subject as a science, but one with a vital philosophical element that makes it unlike any other.

I was interested in three chartered psychologist roles: clinical, health and research. I already had some experience of research over-and-above my undergraduate coursework. At the beginning of the second year of my course, I asked if I could do any work in the department during the Easter and summer holidays. This led to an undergraduate bursary from the Nuffield Foundation to work as a research assistant on a psycholinguistics project. Throughout my course, I also regularly volunteered as a participant for departmental research, which gave me an alternative perspective to that offered by academic study.

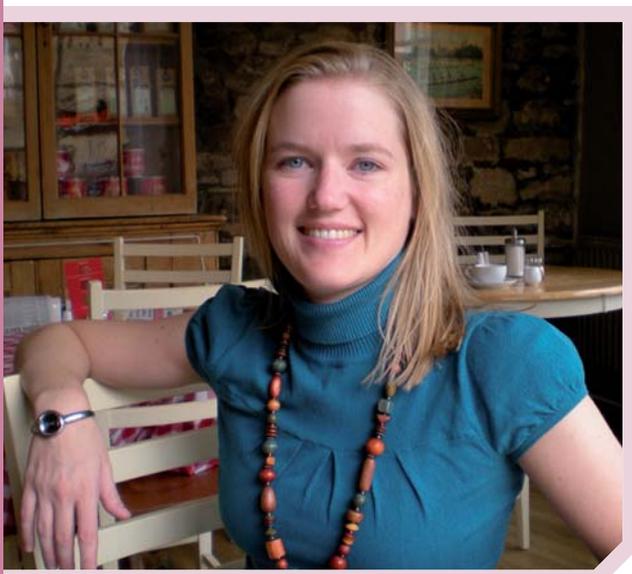
In my first year post-graduation, I worked as an administrative assistant for the North Yorkshire Health Protection Unit, a branch of the Health Protection Agency, where I learnt about health surveillance and

public health. This helped me to secure a place on an MSc in health psychology at the University of Bath. The course included a four-month university- and hospital-based placement, which introduced me to research in the NHS, and highlighted the differences and similarities compared to research in a purely academic setting. This proved an excellent foundation for future work.

Following the MSc, I became research administrator for a multi-centre Parkinson’s disease study in south Wales. Whilst this was ostensibly a low-level administrative position, it proved to be a great learning experience, and taught me that good administration is critical to successful research. The work was varied, crossing university/NHS, primary/secondary care, professional and disciplinary boundaries. It required collaboration with a wide range of partners, from academics and clinicians at differing stages of their careers, to administrators, patients, carers and volunteers. This variety is common across many clinical research roles, making the field an appealing alternative for those, like me, who prefer more structure and social contact than that provided by a purely academic post.

I moved on to become Clinical Studies Officer for the Clinical Research Collaboration in Wales (CRC Cymru). This collaboration is the Welsh branch of a recent, UK-wide development of clinical research networks by the respective Departments of Health. The networks have provided an ongoing source of vacancies for psychology graduates, including many Clinical Studies/Trials Officer posts across the UK. I helped with both commercial and academic research in three of ten thematic networks: mental health, learning disabilities and autism, and dementias and neurodegenerative diseases.

I supplemented my experience in these jobs with voluntary work – first with the Alzheimer’s Society, then the Stroke Association, and finally the National Autistic Society. I enjoyed this



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work and gained a lot of useful insight from it, but ultimately felt that direct care or treatment of those with difficulties relevant to psychology was not my main area of strength. I discovered that certain aspects of my personality – being dynamic, meticulous and hyper-organised – could be particularly useful in the right role. These traits, combined with my interest and training in psychological research, made me suited to a career as a research manager: overseeing and coordinating research without necessarily creating and carrying it out on the ground. Clinical (medical) research in particular requires such coordination and management, because it spans so many individuals, groups and institutions, and is so tightly regulated.

A particularly insightful manager spotted my enjoyment of this type of role whilst I was a clinical studies officer, and enabled me to develop it by taking on informal management responsibilities. I soon moved to the coordinating centre for all the UK clinical research networks (the National Institute for Health Research Clinical Research Network Coordinating Centre) to take up the post of Specialty Groups Coordinator. This involved coordinating 26 groups of clinical academics from across the UK, each focusing on improving the delivery of a national portfolio of research within a particular specialty. I learnt in detail about national initiatives being developed to address current issues in clinical research, such as improving delivery and streamlining approvals processes. It was a fast-paced, stimulating and challenging role that brought me in to contact with talented people from across the UK.

My current role is Research and Development Manager for three primary care organisations in the North East. The job involves collaborating with clinicians from across the region to develop and deliver clinical research, budget management, management of research staff, and some governance work. I still draw upon psychology in my everyday work – whether in assessing research proposals, dealing with difficult individuals or addressing organisational issues.

Psychology graduates are particularly well placed to work in clinical research. Whilst the primary focus of both medical and psychological research is human beings, psychology graduates tend to have a much better grounding in core research skills (including the principles of good experimental design, data analysis and research ethics) than clinicians, whose training is inevitably more practitioner-oriented. Once psychology graduates

## FEATURED JOB

**Job Title:** Lecturer / Senior Lecturer in Forensic Psychology  
**Employer:** Teesside University



**T**alking about this job on the phone, both Victoria Heckels and Helen Dudiak radiated huge enthusiasm for Teesside University, its approach and its location. 'In 2009, Teesside was the first modern university to receive the University of the Year award in the Times Higher Education awards. Our approach is reflected in the make up of our undergraduate and postgraduate psychology courses.' The undergraduate course moves from critical thinking about psychology and what psychology is, through theoretical approaches, introducing different types of psychology practice through core and optional modules. Victoria comments, 'We have particular strengths in forensic, counselling and health psychology though obviously we offer other courses.'

Finally, and most interestingly, the undergraduate course offers a very applied element. One question comes up frequently in this section of *The Psychologist*: How do students find out what it's really like to work as a particular type of psychologist? Helen comments: 'We cooperate with the police, prison services and the NHS on both joint research and teaching. This allows us to have a number of non-academic guest lecturers who can paint a picture of life in the real world. Many students enter the course with only the haziest idea of what forensic psychology involves. Sometimes they're influenced by TV and film portrayals of the role. By the end of the course they'll have a really fine-grained, realistic view.'

"We cooperate with the police, prison services and the NHS"

Helen describes the sort of person they're looking for: 'He or she will have GBC eligibility and contribute to core BPS lectures and seminars at undergraduate and postgraduate levels as well as tutoring dissertations. We've said we want someone who is research active: our courses are practical and student-centred but research-driven. Getting that balance right is essential. So, we want someone who comes with their own research interests, who's committed to using that in their work with students. In return, you get to work in a team of around 30, ranging from new academics to very experienced professors. Continuing development is embedded in the way we work – a number of staff have been supported to finish their PhDs while working in the department, for instance. And you'll get a chance to expand your teaching and academic experience: I've been here for 11 years and I was supported to complete my PhD and PGCE, participated in an academic leadership programme, ran the clinical doctorate programme for a while and now have a responsibility for quality enhancement across the school.'

Helen makes a final point: 'Middlesbrough is a town that is really transforming itself – committed to innovative and world-class regeneration. It is at the heart of a beautiful part of the country, and Teesside is a wonderful place to live and work.'

You can find this job on p.143, and with many others on [www.psychapp.co.uk](http://www.psychapp.co.uk).

learn the additional requirements and systems for medical (as opposed to psychological) research, they can combine this with their academic expertise to act as a vital link between academia and the NHS.

Such a role requires recognition of the importance of both research and the protection of patient welfare, and balancing of these (sometimes competing!) priorities. The appeal of this kind of work lies in its variety – of people, topics, methods and settings. It

requires a combination of scientific rigour and the art of dealing with people, and so is attractive to those who are neither arts-nor science-focused – such as psychology graduates. Challenges of working in the field include a widespread lack of recognition of the importance of good administration and management to successful research, which can lead to an undervaluing of the role; and the fact that, as neither a clinician nor bona-fide academic, one can be under-appreciated from both sides!

### Maeve's story

When I chose to study psychology, I knew that I didn't intend to become a therapist. I thought I didn't yet have the life experience or emotional maturity. It was more a question of matching a subject to my interests. I was a generalist. Like Clare, I didn't think of myself as particularly arts- or science-minded though I was particularly interested in biology, philosophy and the human sciences. Right from the start I thought psychology could be used in a wide range of jobs. In fact I even put that in my application for my degree course.

Most of my education was in English when I did a Baccalaureate at a European School, in Brussels. Like the rest of my peers, I wanted to study in an English-speaking country and experience living somewhere outside of Belgium, so I applied to universities in both the UK and Ireland. Although I was born in Brussels, I have Irish nationality, so I was keen on doing my studies in Ireland, but in the end I chose a course in the UK.

You could do several different psychology degrees at Sussex, in both the arts and science schools. I did mine in the School of Biological Sciences. I was

surprised at some of the content: animal behaviour, and memory and perception for instance. I expected more on psychotherapy. Overall the approach suited me. In the second year I chose some modules in the Arts school: consumer and economic psychology, for instance. I wrote an essay on how couples make economic decisions. I also became fascinated by the psychobiology of addiction and neuropsychology.

I somewhat regret not having learnt more about psychotherapy techniques: I think they can enrich coaching, which is something I would like to get more involved in later on in my career. In fact during my degree I attended a series of extra-curricular workshops in systemic therapy. It looks at relationships between people rather than inside processes and can be used with families and organisations. I found that fascinating.

After my degree, I mainly considered marketing and human resources, although I was worried about the amount of administration there might be in HR. I worked for a while as a PR consultant, but wasn't convinced it was exactly what I wanted to do. I didn't enjoy writing press releases for products I didn't feel a lot for. But I did enjoy corporate

communications when they were about something I did care about: social and environmental policies for instance. During my master's degree in management at Bath I studied all the main areas of management, and chose to do my thesis on corporate social responsibility. I was looking for a vocational qualification which would increase my employability and give me the skills I needed to work in an entrepreneurial environment.

It wasn't easy to get a job at first. I applied for both management trainee positions and HR jobs in Belgium, and also the UK and Ireland. In the end I got a temporary job in the recruitment department of Eurocontrol, a public sector body which controls air traffic over Europe. Then I moved to Virgin Express which merged with SN Brussels Airlines to become Brussels Airlines while I was employed there.

Virgin Express's HR team was small, dealing with 750 members of staff. The



## Speaking the language of learning

**Michelle Kendel**, a second-year undergraduate at the University of Reading, spoke to *The Psychologist* about how her background has influenced her interests

**I**'m Norwegian by birth but my dad was a director at ADRA – an international development NGO – so we lived in lots of places, including Pakistan. But we were most often based in Norway and England – my parents have settled here now – and we spoke English at home. I speak two languages and am quite fluent in both, so I have a natural interest in bilingualism.

I've also never forgotten a story my mother read to me as a child about a child

in hospital. The child's fear when going through medical treatment must have really affected me. My mother may have chosen that story because she is a registered nurse, and her experiences must have influenced my interest in physical health.

Reading books by Torey Hayden, the US author and special educator was a huge influence in deciding me to study psychology. I worked as a nursery assistant and have also taken certificates in

counselling for depression, paediatric emergency first aid and child protection. All of these have given me invaluable experience.

I researched university courses carefully. When it came to it, I was surprised at how much I enjoyed neuropsychology, relating parts of the brain to particular functions. I also found sports psychology very relevant – its emphasis on the relationship between anxiety and poor performance maps exactly on to my interests. I suppose I'm really concerned with children's non-verbal communication, and therefore CBT will be of less use than techniques such as art and music therapy. I am on the lookout all the time for techniques that can be adapted to the children I'm interested in. I pick up ideas



team was made up of a payroll manager and several payroll assistants, a recruitment manager, and a trainer. My role was to develop and extend the existing HR services. I did exit interviews; created a repertoire of job descriptions and competency maps, and introduced a coaching programme for young managers. Seven managers followed the programme, and once a month my

manager and I would give a talk on a management topic – usually after reading as much as I could lay my hands on about the area – followed by a discussion. This really developed team culture. It was very effective. I also helped with certain payroll tasks and was deputy to the recruitment manager when she was on leave.

It was a great introduction to the full spectrum of HR tasks. I was also involved in the integration of the two sets of staff when Virgin Express became Brussels Airlines. They had very different cultures and I found myself increasingly going back to my psychology studies in that period, particularly in facilitating coaching programmes for managers appointed to new, more senior positions following the integration.

I moved to a major Brussels bank. I hadn't especially targeted the banking sector – I simply applied because it looked an interesting job. I found myself in a very specific company culture. The bank is the result of a large number of mergers and takeovers, and many of the staff have been there for 20–30 years. There are both positive and negative aspects to that. Although it's quite an insular world, it's also a very socially

responsible company, and the staff are very loyal. Some of the staff's jobs are being computerised, which is a problem if the staff have a low level of employability. The bank is very proactive in trying to increase the employability of its staff so it can offer them other positions within the company.

I work within technology, operations and property services on talent management. In more service-oriented industries like banking and insurance it really is a war for talent: acquiring talented people, developing them and keeping them. I've helped to develop a retention toolkit and worked on supporting our HR business partners in talent review activities like succession planning.

I have learnt that if you want to work in Belgium it helps if you speak English, French and Dutch, and you need to be good at compromise. In HR in particular, you also need a mix of soft and hard skills. It's important to be able to listen actively, to influence others and to be flexible. But you also need to have specific knowledge in areas such as tax and employment law, for example, to establish credibility. You need to be good at figures as well because you're going to be involved in quite complex calculations if you're planning manpower needs or calculating salary budgets.

Some HR roles have links with psychology and psychotherapy, but not all of them. The difference is that HR is set in an organised corporate environment and requires a balance between employee and employer interests. HR activities are set in a financial or performance-related context, and its activities are driven by these constraints. Most applied psychologists, on the other hand, have a fundamental loyalty to the person in front of them. You need to create trust with that person. An HR person needs to create trust both with employees and with employers, a loyalty to both sides.

One of the difficult aspects of working in HR is that to be a successful mediator between an employer and its employees, you can't be seen to have friends at work. There's perhaps one exception: the managing director's secretary. He or she knows everything that's going on in the company, and doesn't usually pose a threat to anyone.

One area where psychology and HR overlap is coping with the stress caused by change. In organisations this often results from mergers and acquisitions, which are becoming more frequent. But coping with the stress of change is a skill that is useful in all areas of life, not just at work.

from almost every module on the course and, if I spot a useful idea, talk to tutors and lecturers about it. Like a lot of undergraduates, I've found the amount of statistics involved surprising. I don't really like the research part of the course, but I can see it's essential to underpin the theories I'm being taught, so whether I enjoy it is rather by the by.

I never thought I'd become an academic – my aim was always to work practically with, probably, 5- to 10-year-olds. Clinical psychology looked a good route but is competitive and difficult to get into. To work with the children I'm interested in, I'd have to step outside the core tasks of an educational psychologist. Chartership takes a very long time. At the moment I'm thinking about qualifying as a play therapist. I had a holiday job as a play worker for the NHS in Reading and, like music therapists, play therapists are much more in demand in hospitals, charities and clinics.

Funding courses is a major issue for

students. It's difficult not to let work and study interfere with each other – better if they are complementary. I did a search for selective mutism and came up with AACT for Children, a new registered charity aiming to encourage children who have difficulty communicating to use IT. I contacted them, got an interview with Ken Carter, their founder, and am now acting as a project officer. I can do the work anywhere, which is marvellous. I'm doing lots of things, but focusing on research into international theories of and

approaches to selective mutism and other anxiety states that affect children's speech and language skills.

On your course you learn what you think is the best or right way to do something. Specific situations need more varied responses. You also learn that while professionals have a certain sort of knowledge, parents, clients and non-professionals have different, but equally valuable, kinds of knowledge.'

I'm lucky to have a job and course that support each other so well. But perhaps you have to work and plan hard to get lucky!

"I'm on the lookout all the time for techniques that can be adapted to the children"