

A good nose for learning

Ian Florance interviews **Miles Thomas** about his varied career and what brought him to educational psychology

I contacted Miles Thomas about an interview when I stumbled over his website www.winepsych.com. How did he get involved in thinking about the links between psychology and wine? 'It's all the *Psychologist* Editor's fault! When I was on the Psychologist Policy Committee, Jon Sutton's excellent advice was to write about what you're interested in. Hence my 2008 *Psychologist* piece 'On vines and minds'. It has led to some really wonderful opportunities, but I have to make sure I don't get too distracted from my professional role as an educational psychologist.'

I reassured Miles that I wanted to concentrate more on his role as Academic

and Professional Tutor on the professional doctorate for trainee educational psychologists at the Stratford campus of the University of East London (UEL) and his work as an educational psychologist in a London borough.

We begin with some background. 'I was born in West Germany but moved to London when I was one, and then to Brighton. I think family experiences strongly affect psychologists' thinking and approach; having three younger brothers and sisters when I was in my twenties certainly influenced my interest in child development. Books were also important. My first degree was in English and American literature. I was fascinated by post-war US writers like Saul Bellow and John Updike, among others. A major theme of their work is unpacking the psychology of masculinity. Poets like Lowell, Plath and Hughes also reflected intellectuals' continued interest in reflection and analysis. I wrote my dissertation on humour in the work of Martin Amis. My work now is underpinned by a belief that it is healthy to have fun and that humour is a very useful defence mechanism when things get tough. There is also a very clear link between my love of stories and my increasing interest in narrative therapy and narrative analysis in my work. I guess for me, it all comes down to useful questions and useful stories – the ones we tell ourselves and others.'

Miles took a year out during his degree, working in Brighton then on a farm in Southern Ontario. 'Those were

my Ken Kesey years! I lived with Native Americans and learnt a lot about myself, and culture, in what was a slightly lawless environment. But I went back to finish my degree and did a number of holiday jobs like picking strawberries and working on building sites.' After his degree Miles went to Madrid, learnt the Berlitz language teaching method and then taught English in Seville. 'I loved teaching, and that experience led directly to my role at the university today. I had a lot of free time. The Seville school was over-staffed for a start-up, so I had time to see the local football team, Real Betis, and to go to festivals. I boxed and climbed with Spanish friends and did my best to learn the language and explore the country. I would have liked to stay there but had to move to London to earn some money.' Miles got a job as a typesetter in a City print organisation, printing Japanese bond offers. By the end of the time in that job he was running a desktop publishing part of the company producing various trade titles.

Throughout our conversation, Miles evinced huge energy and curiosity. I suggested that the repetitive and structured jobs he took, like tobacco and strawberry picking and typesetting, might have served as a balance to his inquisitive and action-oriented nature. 'One summer I had a job cleaning bricks and I got immense satisfaction at seeing the required pile of very clean bricks at the end of the day. So, maybe there is some link there – the need to balance enthusiasm with structure...'

'We forget how resilient people are'

The other thing that struck me is that Miles had, so far, not mentioned an attempt to train in psychology in a conventional way. 'During my job in typesetting I got more and more interested in what motivated people. Various personal events led me to start seeking a vocation and, psychologically, to own myself. With hindsight I think



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I was, for various reasons, living a damage narrative and needed to outgrow that. I think our society has lived in misery too long, forgetting how resilient human beings are. I think that's a very positive message for psychologists.'

Miles was able to work part-time in print and publishing and completed a postgraduate conversion course in psychology at London Guildhall University.

'Anyway, as I mentioned earlier I'd loved teaching so my next move was to take a PGCE at Bath, where I was hugely influenced by Jack Whitehead's view on action research. Then I taught at a South London school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Most had been excluded from schools and experienced a range of extreme social challenges. Many were emotionally resilient despite this and were doing their best to get by.'

What caused him to train in educational psychology? 'The educational psychologist at the school I worked in, used to come into work on a motorbike which looked pretty cool. But what really impressed me was a conversation I had with him about a pupil with whom I'd had a good relationship which seemed to have decayed. The more I talked with Shane about this the more I realised he was using a psychological framework to analyse the situation, and that fascinated me. I later came to understand that he was using a solution-focused approach. This has become key to my own research and practice.' Later, Miles started asking me questions then stopped and said, 'Sorry, I think another reason I and other people take up psychology is that we're naturally nosy. I love questions!'

'I believe in inclusion'

'So, I decided I wanted to apply for a master's in educational psychology, which was the professional training route at that time. The four courses in London were at University College, the Institute of Education, the Tavistock Clinic and the University of East London. They all had different approaches to the subject from very scientific and analytic to very classroom-based. I chose UEL because it seemed to take a very socially committed and pragmatic view of the subject. It seemed to me to be about making a difference. That appealed to me. I am pragmatic in tutoring students. I want them to own their own practice and be the best psychologists they can be. We concentrate on strengths rather than deficits, on the students' own interests rather than some predetermined criteria.

We're not creating a specific type of psychologist but a diverse range of psychologists that reflect diversity in society. Evidence-based practice is central to this. Good psychologists evaluate the effectiveness of what they do; they know what they're doing and what the rationale for doing it is. There's another aspect of this approach to teaching and tutoring. Just as we need to be aware of and address power imbalances between psychologists and their clients, we have to address the same thing between students and academic staff. I am interested in problem-based learning where the tutor is a facilitator in the learning process. My fellowship of the Higher Education Academy was a direct result of developing this innovative approach to learning on our programme.'

Miles is not only a tutor but a practising educational psychologist with responsibility for a small patch of schools. 'I see children every week, working in one primary and two secondary schools. A number of beliefs inform what I do. I think part of my role is to be hopeful for kids, especially the most disadvantaged. I also believe in inclusion, that local schools should strive to effectively meet the needs of all the children in their community. It's all about school ethos. I'm not the sort of psychologist who exclusively searches for the cause of a condition inside a person. Environmental and social factors have to be taken into account. I try to be mindful about the way in which disability is constructed. Our society has a strange fixation with making people disabled rather than removing barriers that disable them or changing the social conditions which maintain "illness". The debates around the new DSM are well overdue and could really herald more progressive and empowering ways of working with clients.'

I tell Miles that when I worked for a major test publishing company in the early 1980s, educational psychologists' jobs seemed to be narrowing to becoming the gatekeepers for educational provision and budgets. They tested children and stigmatised them. Many found this a terrible diminution of their role. 'Yes, in that model money was attached to a particular child, a move which was often justified by the identification of a particular "condition". The authority I work in convinced some parents to give up statements so that the school could use resources more flexibly. It was a brave experiment, but this year new legislation will redefine the statutory process. Hopefully this will empower parents and schools, but it still looks like a

predominantly deficit model. Local authorities, along with the welfare state and unions are being dismantled and the nature of our work is inevitably changing. This provides threats and opportunities with more psychological services having to tout for work. But I think there are reasons for optimism about educational psychology. We're trying to produce psychologists who can find employment and funding in many new places. There are more opportunities now to offer training and therapy in a school context – mindfulness and positive psychology are just two examples of movements which have influenced schools and which psychologists can introduce to both pupils and staff. Schools are commissioning much more directly.'

Are there other issues, more generally, that you feel about the practice and teaching of psychology? 'At UEL we cross-pollinate amongst the applied professional psychology doctorates. We are grouped together and we teach on each other's courses. We see ourselves as practising applied psychologists who are helping others to start practising in ethical and evidence-informed ways. Our clinical and counselling colleagues also recognise the limitations of deficit models, and we draw upon similar theoretical and conceptual frameworks. That model, reducing the barriers and divisions which are historically based on the buildings in which psychologists practice, is something the profession as a whole could learn from.'

I just can't resist asking...

And how, briefly, did Miles get interested in the psychology of wine? 'It started when we used to go to South of France a lot and when I go somewhere I like to immerse myself in the local culture. We toured vineyards and met incredibly passionate winemakers. I became fascinated with the way in which context can influence our enjoyment of wine. I also bought a house in east London because I wanted my kids to have more space and to make my commute shorter. It had a cellar and it seemed silly not to use it for something a bit more fun than coal...'

At which point I'll draw a veil over whether we explored the cellar and sampled its contents or not...

I Miles Thomas's book *Wine and Psychology: How We Think About the Wine We Drink is due to be published by Wiley-Blackwell in 2014.*
*Ian Florance's ebook, *A Glass Rope*, is available now.*



Social psychology in the lion's den

Jackie Abell is Reader in Psychology at Coventry University and Director of Research for the African Lion and Environmental Research Trust, based in Livingstone, Zambia

If you visit the savannahs of Africa you expect to see lions. However, the chances of doing so are rapidly diminishing. In 1975 there were around 200,000 lions roaming around Africa. In 2012, that number was estimated to be around 32,000. Other reports suggest this figure may be as low as 16,000 (tinyurl.com/b98f9g7). The African lion (*Panthera leo*) is currently classified as 'vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List. If this trend continues, the lion will be extinct within the next 40 years, which will have fundamental consequences for Africa's ecosystem. In response, a range of conservation initiatives are under way to conserve and restore wild lion populations. Conservationists don't necessarily agree on how to do it, but they do agree that we need to act fast to protect this globally iconic and important African predator before it disappears.

Conserving the African lion could be regarded as a problem for the biologists

and the environmentalists to solve. However, if we consider why numbers of wild lion populations are declining, we begin to see why social psychology and other disciplines should get involved. The human population of sub-Saharan Africa has seen a rapid increase from 229 million in 1960, to 863 million in 2010. It is anticipated that it will reach 1.75 billion by 2050. Consequently the African lion finds itself living cheek by jowl with its human neighbours. Its habitat has decreased and fragmented, and its prey base diminished. The subsequent intensification of human-wildlife conflict, as man and lion compete for space and resources, has led to the swift decline of this species. Yet, here's the rub. Conservationists are asking some of the poorest communities in the world, who rely on subsistence farming and their livestock, to tolerate living alongside those lions that remain, and to help increase lion populations. How

sympathetic would you be to a species which threatens your family and your livelihood? Where money is scarce, conserving a dangerous predator is not going to be high on the political and cultural agenda. Unless people benefit from living next door to lions, they will not conserve them. So, conservation of a species is not simply about the animal we're trying to protect, but is also a social, cultural, economic and political issue. Now we begin to see why psychologists and social scientists are needed to offer their skills and knowledge if we want the lion to continue its reign.

So how did I get into this? Well, yes I've seen *The Lion King* and the opening song gave me goose-bumps (is it just me?), but it was more than that which brought me to Africa. I'd always wanted to work with big cats, but I didn't recall ever being taught about conservation or cats in my psychology training. I'd been taught the works of Henri Tajfel rather

than George Schaller. As well as frantically catching up on my reading of Schaller's 1972 book *Serengeti Lion*, I also read two things which prompted me to think about how social psychology might be useful for conservation generally and of the African lion particularly.

The first was a 2009 *American Psychologist* paper by Alan Kazdin on psychological science's contribution to a sustainable environment, in which he asked psychologists why they were so reluctant to contribute to resolving one of the biggest problems of all – environmental degradation and the loss of biodiversity. As he rightly points out, this is a truly multidisciplinary issue. I thought he had an important point, and one that spoke directly to my subdiscipline of social psychology. Social psychologists are perfectly positioned to apply their knowledge and methods to better understand the human factors that facilitate and hinder protection of the environment and biodiversity. Social psychology finds itself under increasing pressure to apply its methods and knowledge to the real world. What bigger real-world issue is there than the environment and the protection of biodiversity?

The second was the 2009 book *Conservation Psychology* by Susan Clayton and Gene Myers. The authors propose that if we want people to do anything about the environment and biodiversity we need to ensure they give a damn. Giving a damn is what social psychology is about. It's what makes us social. Whether it's helping one another, measuring and changing attitudes and behaviours, assessing and combating prejudices, understanding human social cognition, the role of identity, or even trying to reduce conflict and aggression, social psychologists have occupied themselves with the conditions under which we will give a damn and how that impacts upon society. We have developed an array of scientifically rigorous techniques to investigate such complex social phenomena. In conservation, we can examine the conditions under which we will give a damn about a species other than our own. And so in 2010 I began my journey and volunteered for ALERT, a conservation charity that adopts a responsible development approach to protect and restore African wild lion populations, to find out for myself how I could contribute. In 2013 I was offered the position of Director of Research.

ALERT is involved in multidisciplinary research that includes animal behaviour, changing attitudes towards predators, education and

awareness, facilitating communities in finding more sustainable ways of living, helping local people find non-lethal solutions to problems with predators, empowerment of women, and the provision of adequate health care. My role is to ensure this research is carried out with scientific and ethical rigour and to analyse, scrutinise and publicise our findings. Most importantly of all, our research must be working for the benefit of people and wildlife in Africa. The responsibility and scale is substantial, but so are the rewards.

There is no such thing as a typical day for me. I could be writing a survey or interview schedule to assess the attitudes of a community or Park operatives towards lions, helping conservationists to design a pilot study to implement non-lethal methods to prevent human–wildlife conflict, or analysing field data to see whether a pride of lions is able to hunt adequately to sustain themselves without human intervention and is sufficiently well-bonded. I've recently been applying social network analysis (widely used in the social sciences to examine human relationships) to understand associations and cohesion within a lion pride. Some lions are more socially connected than others, which is crucial for bondedness and cooperation within a pride. On the other hand, I may be in meetings with lion experts to discuss conservation strategies for lions, tracking wild lions that are causing problems for local people, contributing to the organisation



Local people of Livingstone join in the World Lion Day parade, 10 August 2013

of a lion awareness initiative for local schoolchildren, or helping a field biologist work out incentives to discourage farmers from grazing their livestock inside a national park that contains predators.

What I have realised is the value of quantitative and qualitative research methods training we receive as social psychologists, as well as our knowledge about human behaviour. To put the principles of Leon Festinger's cognitive

dissonance theory into practice or to see and understand how availability heuristics, confirmation biases and false consensus can operate as an obstacle to conservation, is not only useful but is a constant reminder that social psychology is based in the real world. Effective conservation demands community cooperation. A community must feel part of a conservation effort, and it must work for them. Positive attitudes and behaviour towards conservation can occur within a community when the benefits received are appropriate for them. Gordon Allport famously stated that attitudes are the most indispensable concept in social psychology. In conservation, they are crucial.

There are challenges of course. As with all science, people have different ideas about how things should be done. Conservation is no exception. However, that debate should always drive things forward not backwards. There are other challenges too. Working in a foreign country with unfamiliar cultural traditions is a steep learning curve. Luckily I am surrounded by local people who can advise and steer me in the right direction. Working with local people who have local knowledge is crucial if you want to be able to work effectively here. In parts of Africa, administration and bureaucracy can feel painfully slow and inefficient at times. Technological resources can be difficult to get hold of. But for all that, Africa is a beautiful continent with incredible people and wildlife, and I love it.

I have aspirations for the African lion and my discipline. For the African lion, I want to see its numbers restored. I want this magnificent animal to roam free from persecution across Africa, as nature intended. Conservation is controversial. When it's the lion, it's doubly controversial. The lion is a global symbol, so emotions can run high when dealing with such an iconic animal. For social psychology, I want the discipline to become a little less anthropocentric. I'm not asking that we all march into conservation (although it would be fantastic if some did) but that we focus more on the relationships we have with other living things. The social world is bigger than ourselves. We have much to contribute to the fight against environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity, and we have much to offer conservation efforts. I also hope that social psychology is recognised for the valuable discipline it is, and is allowed to roam free and do what it does best: understand the complex social world we live in.