

'Religion is a powerful human reality'

Ian Florance talks to **Sara Savage** about her life and work

Sara Savage was setting up a video camera for a shoot the next day when I met her at the Margaret Beaufort Institute, a theological college. She works in the Psychology and Religion Research Group at the University of Cambridge (www.prrg.org.uk), where she is Senior Research Associate. Sara is Associate Director within the applied wing of the group, the newly formed Cambridge Centre for Applied Psychology and Religion. It seemed an unusual environment to find a social psychologist. How did she get here?

'I was born in Rochester, New York and had my first career as a dancer. I started with a degree in fine arts, got lost, then turned to modern dance and danced for 12 years. During that time I also became a choreographer and a teacher. A lot of that time was spent touring – I danced in 17 countries I think – and that time resembles being in the military: strict discipline, an organised lifestyle and intense friendships.'

Why did you make the transition to being a psychologist? 'A number of reasons. I had a major kidney illness, underwent surgery and was unable to walk down the street – not exactly the ideal condition for a dancer. While recovering, I had a dream in which a voice told me to "Turn left". I'd spent years training my body; it was now time to train my mind. Touring had interested me in cross-cultural issues. I'd read some psychology. So, I became a mature student.'

By this time Sara was living in the UK and soon had dual nationality. She started studying at the Open University before moving to the University of Surrey after being encouraged by a tutor. 'While I tend to "go for it" once I have an idea or project in mind, my life and career have hugely benefited from "permission givers".'

Like many people, undergraduate psychology was not what she'd expected. 'I cried my way through statistics. But discovering social psychology was revelatory because it made me realise that

while dance is about the experience of being a human being, choreography is social psychology. Piaget was right – the first way we know ourselves and the world is through our bodies. And then that experience is shaped by social psychological processes. To my surprise I did really well in my degree. Partly this reflects what mature students bring to study. They can relate theory to real-life experiences. When attempting to build good research design they can draw on life experiences to understand why it's important.'

Sara describes another instance of permission-giving at this stage. 'Everyone else knew what they were going to do after their psychology degree. I didn't. So I went to the careers office and was helped to realise that I felt alive in the university environment.' This seems a long way from dancing. 'No, I think there are huge similarities. Exams are performances. Your colleagues are your co-performers. There's structure. You study to keep your knowledge up to date, just as you have to practise continually to hone your performance skills. Both are lives of dedication and companionship.'

Sara says her first degree gave her 'the tools to investigate my big questions – most of which circle around religious faith. I went on to do a PhD at Cambridge on the social and cognitive aspects of Christian fundamentalism.'

I asked Sara where this interest had come from. 'I had a religious experience when I was 18 and I am a Christian. My PhD led on to the theme which is central to all my work – the interplay between theological world views and social psychological processes. I've seen how the social construction of faith can make it deeply harmful, so my work is as much about that as it is about the positive aspects of faith.'

Sara's job within the research group

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resulted from a piece of serendipity. Sara's husband Mark was a chemistry teacher and researcher but decided to enter the Anglican ministry. She went with Mark to an interview at Ridley College, Cambridge. Hearing Sara's own interests, the principal suggested she meet Fraser Watts, who had just been appointed Starbridge Lecturer in Theology and Natural Sciences at Cambridge. This was a surprise since the role was expected to go to a physicist or cosmologist: Fraser is a clinical psychologist (and former President of the BPS). Sara wrote to him. The Research Group was set up soon after 1996, with an initial project to help churches make better use of psychology. Sara joined as a researcher in 1998.

'My tutor at Surrey had tried to persuade me not to combine my interests in theology and psychology; as a mature student there simply wasn't any obvious career path. But the work in Cambridge has allowed for those combinations. For a start Fraser, the director of the research group, encourages multidisciplinary thinking across all fields of psychology, philosophy, theology, science and the arts. We are a very empirical team, but open to many other disciplines along with the empirical approach.'

The Psychology and Religion Research Group has three main streams, Sara explains. 'The experimental stream researches religious cognition – for instance, concepts of God, issues to do with measurement, the impact of belief and prayer, anger at God, and the way religious meanings are made. The theoretical stream works in areas such as theological anthropology and the psychology of forgiveness. My work is centred in the practical, applied stream, though I also contribute to and receive from the others.'

Sara describes her first five years within the group as focusing on 'the church as an organisation, and pastoral theology'. Her publications include books on psychology for Christian ministry, a study of the world view of Generation Y, the church as an organisation, and the Beta course, a multimedia pastoral care course which interweaves psychology and theology to address real-life problems; she is also Chair of the British Association of Christians in Psychology. She emphasises one aspect of her work: 'As I say, I'm a believer and study positive issues within faith, and try to improve what churches do. But I'm very aware of and concerned about unhealthy religion. Social psychology is a good tool to examine where religion goes wrong, and to help people make choices when bad religion closes those choices off. I see myself as

FEATURED JOB

Job Title: Head of Research and Product
Employer: Lane4

'We wanted to innovate the way we undertake research', says Becky Karver, HR Consultant at Lane4, who provide organisational development services to a wide range of blue-chip organisations. 'Research is very much a part of our heritage, and we pride ourselves on delivering evidence-based and practical interventions for our clients. This role has been created to improve our research capability. We're looking for someone with a strong network in the wider research community, who can create partnerships with leading academic institutions which will benefit both the university and Lane4.'

The advertisement mentions the need for a PhD in the field of psychology. Is there any particular area you want candidates to specialise in? 'Lane 4 was founded by Olympic Gold Medallist swimmer Adrian Moorhouse MBE and leading sport psychologist Professor Graham Jones. It is named after the lane in which Adrian won his gold medal. We specialise in high performance at individual, leadership, team and organisational levels. As such, we're incredibly driven by sport and performance psychology but we would also be interested in individuals from other psychology backgrounds, like occupational psychology for example, providing they identify with and have an expertise in the area of high performance.'

"We're looking for someone with a strong network in the wider research community"

Becky talks about the role less in academic terms than in personal and experiential ones. 'Whilst this person may undertake some research him- or herself, the majority of the role will focus on creating a bridge between research theory and real-life business application. That's why we've brought research and product together into one role. He or she will supervise research teams; work alongside our consultants to productise our research; and ensure Lane4 is abreast of current business, OD and talent management trends as well as the latest academic thinking. The ability to build relationships with senior researchers at leading academic universities will be critical. Finally, our values are very important to us and they're about integrity, care, learning, quality and enthusiasm. This person must embody them, be able to communicate flexibly and have very high-level people skills.'

Will the successful applicant need hands-on-consultancy experience? 'We wondered about that, but we think it's more important that they have experience of driving innovative research which delivers applied outputs. Whilst they need to understand the issues involved in applied work, direct experience is not necessary.'

'This job will directly contribute to our business goals in the long term, so we're looking for someone who can both create strategy aligned to business goals and deliver that strategy. The ultimate outcome is a much higher research and academic profile for Lane4. We've started building that. Now we want to strengthen and extend it.'

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neither sceptical nor starry-eyed – I'm a critical friend. That's why 9/11 and 7/7 had a huge impact on my work. My colleague José Liht and I agreed that religious radicalisation, evident across faiths, poses a real challenge to security and social cohesion. We had to do something about it.' As a researcher can you actually do anything about these issues? 'The most ethical intervention is understanding. If you show understanding you can help other people.'

So, Sara and her colleagues started

intensive research into fundamentalism, and religious radicalisation, including Islamist radicalisation, but with an eye to radicalisation within other faiths as well. 'This work has combined many of my interests. During my PhD I saw the impact of low levels of integrative complexity (IC) in action among both Christian fundamentalists and 'extreme' liberals. Peter Suedfeld's concept of integrative complexity is a measure of the degree to which thinking and decision making recognises multiple viewpoints. It

has two components. Differentiation looks at how far people perceive the validity of different perspectives when considering a complex social issue, and the values that underpin these. Integration examines how far people are able to weave together those different perspectives into some kind of overarching schema.’

There are decades of robust research showing a relationship between the level of IC with the outcome of intergroup conflict: one famous study examines the integrative complexity of decision makers during the Cuban missile crisis. How has Sara used this kind of analysis? ‘I’ve worked with 30 bishops applying IC to moral disputes – through them we hot-housed the skills needed to raise integrative complexity. It became clear to my colleague Eolene Boyd-MacMillan and me that this core life skill is something that can be learned, and natural resistance to doing the hard work of IC can be overcome.’

‘While mainline religions do have the resources to enable high IC, simplified

versions of any ideology, including religious ones, display low levels – there is an active effort to avoid acknowledging the validity of other viewpoints. As you would expect, the real problems arises when you get into the very low IC, binary, black-and-white way of thinking – we are good, they are bad; we are right, they are wrong. This low IC is evidenced on both sides of the radicalisation question – recruiters seek to produce low IC in their

“It’s been a wonderful four years of interfaith dialogue”

hearers, in those who may be vulnerable to being radicalised. On the other hand, we demonstrate low IC when we view such others merely as “fundamentalists”, “terrorists” or “radicals”, without trying to gain a deeper understanding.’

The intensive research work is currently informing projects that focus on raising integrative complexity in the religious domain. ‘We plan for these projects to be rolled out in schools for all young people, and also to faith groups, particularly younger members.’ Sara and

her colleagues have also developed a professional development course for newly qualified imams which is being delivered by London Metropolitan University. She is quite specific that this is not an attempt to replace one belief system with another. ‘It’s not telling people what to think but providing the skills and the right environment for them to see multiple perspectives and arrive at win/win integrations. We’re facilitating a core life skill that enables religious people to reclaim what is rightfully theirs. The approach is ethical and I’m proud of that.’

It must have been a challenge to get to know Muslim culture. ‘It’s been a wonderful four years of interfaith dialogue. I’ve learnt about the wisdom of other faith traditions. It’s confirmed my view that, despite popular contemporary polemics, the great religions are not simplistic but are highly integrative and complex ways of viewing the world. In particular, I’ve enjoyed talking with Muslim religious leaders. The ones I’ve met love the whole idea of integrative complexity. As they point out, their own rigorous training concentrates on examining different texts, traditions and

From A&R man to assistant psychologist

Nick Taylor on different roles and the benefits of voluntary experience. As told to Ian Florance.

I’ve taken a tortuous route through work and study. I originally went to Manchester University to study history and economics. I was trying to avoid doing music, since my family was so involved with it. But I was drawn in and took a music degree. My rebellion failed.

My degree was in classical music – I wrote my long essay on the use of Gyorgy Ligeti’s music in Stanley Kubrick’s films. I can remember, though, sitting in a café with a friend who was studying psychology. I made a gesture. She explained it. I thought ‘What a fascinating subject.’

For about six months after completing my degree I did two jobs to earn money to travel. The first was theatre work. While I was doing this an advert came up for a support worker at MIND. I read the job

description and felt that it was something that I would be able to do well. One of my sisters has Down’s syndrome and this has been a huge influence on my life and thinking. I’ve had to be one of her advocates, and I am sure that growing up as one of her siblings has had a huge impact on my personality. One of the jobs at the theatre related to helping children with Down’s syndrome participate in mainstream drama classes.

But, I wanted to travel and for six months I travelled round India, southeast Asia, Nepal among other places. When I got home, an old school friend introduced me to his record label. This led to me being an A&R man for a small record label for seven months. I got cynical. For a while it put me off the very thing I loved – music. I realised that the work

with MIND was by far the most enjoyable thing I’d done so far. I was in a best friend’s living room looking into potential roles working in the field of mental health when I made up my mind. I announced I wanted to be a psychologist. This was a surprise to both of us, though my mother is training to be a social worker and my sister as a speech and language therapist, so there’s always been that strand in our family.

I discovered I could do a diploma in psychology at Cardiff. As I had done no psychology during my music degree I had to do a conversion course at Oxford Brookes. It was only when I was at Brookes that I realised that I would have to complete a doctorate to become a psychologist.

To fund both of these courses I went back to working for MIND but this time in three different services – a drop-in day centre, a residential care home and as a sleep-in support

worker in independent clients’ houses. During this time I also volunteered with the Samaritans. I learnt a lot through these experiences.

Cardiff blew me away. I didn’t realise how much statistics was involved, but I enjoyed this side of it too. I got obsessive about psychology. I read everything I could. But I suppose the downside of the courses was that if, at the end of them you’d asked me ‘What does a psychologist actually do day by day?’ I couldn’t have answered.

I thought I’d find an assistant psychologist job quickly. Many job applications later I realised this was more than a bit naive. I got in touch with a local psychology service, Hereford, and volunteered for an honorary assistant job. You get some much-needed experience while waiting, and hoping, for a paid job advertisement to come up. I ended up working for two

viewpoints and through ‘courteous disagreement’ and consultation, finding nuanced integrations. The issue for them today is exercising their high-level skills in a way that can relate to modern Western society.’

Sara says that her work raises many wider issues. ‘We happen to have started working with faith communities but the approach can be applied in many arenas of life. Before 1989 we lived in what appeared to a binary world with two main centres of power. The Berlin Wall collapsed, but we still use binary cognitive models in our complex multifactorial world. Human beings seem to search for binary oppositions – terrorists vs. civilisation; “fundamentalist” atheists vs. “fundamentalist” believers; political right vs. political left; arts vs. science. This is understandable because these binary oppositions enable you to belong to an ingroup, feel certain about the rightness of your cause, and create for yourself an instant drama and meaning.’

‘Of course sometimes the last thing you need is to integrate different perspectives. Low IC is sometimes necessary. When your life is in danger it

tends to focus the mind. Your brain will automatically switch to survival mode. But we often react to perceived threats to our values or our ingroup prestige as if our lives are at stake. Raising IC means transcending our fight/flight/freeze reaction. It enables us to transform conflict at many levels – from the personal to the international level. High IC can be taught, but it’s not a simple cognitive trick. It’s an intense emotional, relational and physical exercise, requiring meta-cognition.’

I contacted Sara originally because I wanted to discuss how psychology was practiced among UK Muslim communities. Over the past year, a number of interviewees have mentioned religion and spirituality as client issues. So, I asked Sara, what reaction does she get from other psychologists when she describes her work, so outside the usual categories of psychologist? Sara answered that she doesn’t get any uniform reactions but went on to explain: ‘There’s a psychological dimension to every aspect of human life. Religion is a powerful human reality. It goes way back in human history and still has a huge influence,

even in secularised European society. In my view, secularisation has impoverished certain understandings – you can’t understand much of history or culture unless you have some knowledge of theology and religious practice. We’re missing something important if we don’t seek to understand religion, to improve the well-documented positive effects of faith and to ameliorate the damage when it goes wrong. But, as I say, there are other fields where IC can be of help, in schools, within personal relationships, with politicians, and that sets our agenda for the future.’

Just before I left the Institute, Sara introduced me to her colleague José Liht, who comes from Mexico. ‘We’re working on these projects together. I love working in teams. Academia tends to ascribe work to individuals. But most of the work we do here is collaborative. I think that’s a good model for psychology – people from different cultures, with different beliefs and different knowledge and skills working together to address a significant issue. In a way, the research group is an attempt to put integrative complexity into action.’

services in this capacity – an adult integrated community learning disabilities service and an older adult service. During this time I worked closely with the head of psychology from the Hereford adult service on the successful cross-service IAPT bid, helping particularly with the specialist services aspects. This was a great experience because it introduced me to IAPT initiative, the individual roles within the MDT, and the different services in the county.

I’m now a paid assistant psychologist in both these areas. I love the variation and benefits that come from working in more than one service. These include firsthand experience with more than one client group and seeing the different psychological roles. It is interesting to see some of the similarities and differences between these roles.

I carry out psychological and neuropsychological assessments using an array of tools. I have some therapy cases with the older adults service, though of course those are supervised. I’ve also worked

with behaviour that challenges services in the adult learning disabilities role.

I’m enjoying working with a range of different professionals – I have a lot of contact with psychologists, trainee clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and speech and language therapists, for instance. I take my hat off to social workers!

I’m also trying to develop my research skills so now, in addition to my two paid roles, I am working as an honorary research assistant psychologist with one of the county’s adult services looking at how well it provides a facilitative environment for recovery. It is a fascinating subject and work!

Ultimately I would like to get

a place on the clinical doctorate course, but I know it’s a tough battle to get in. I’m interested in a number of things. I’ve become fascinated by the different

therapeutic approaches. I’ve read about the pioneers of therapy and I now want to go back to their firsthand writings. I’ve started an Introductory Practitioner in Cognitive Behaviour Approaches course at

Birmingham

University. And I want to gain more experience working with different client groups. I have enjoyed working with older adults. I’m 26 and I suppose I still feel I’ll live for ever. These clients are teaching me things about loss and ageing. I worried that working with learning

disabilities might be emotionally hard due to growing up with a sister with Down’s but it has actually been really rewarding and fulfilling. I would love next to work in an adult service, an eating disorders service, a health service, a child and adolescent service.

My voluntary work has been invaluable. It gives you a better idea of who you want to work with, what areas of the discipline appeal to you, how it really feels to work in a particular way and how both psychologists and the NHS actually work. In a sense I feel that nothing I have done is irrelevant to this career path – I often find myself drawing on things from my family life, my musical past and my outside interests.

I have also come to really value peer support. In Hereford we have set up a local network of assistant psychologists and we meet on a monthly basis. We have organised training sessions and speakers, and we would welcome any students if they want to join.

