

Public services

Dame Joan Harbison talks to Ian Florance about a career in supporting the needs of vulnerable groups

In November 2008 the Northern Ireland government announced the appointment of Dame Joan Harbison as the Older People's Advocate. How did a sometime teacher and educational psychologist develop a role in public life that led to this appointment? What fuelled her journey from teaching in a secondary school to advocating for older people on issues of concern to them? How has her psychology training shaped her contribution to the various roles she has held?

'I studied psychology briefly at undergraduate level, and it did inform my teaching. I taught for nine years in a secondary school where, unusually, the senior staff worked closely with special educational needs children. I developed an interest in special needs issues and went to a London conference on autistic children. Not to put too fine a point of it, I was blown away by a contribution from a Dublin-based psychologist, Ingo Fischer, who described how he used psychological techniques with non-communicating and autistic children.

'At that time my husband Jeremy was working as a clinical psychologist (under John Graham White, who was a great influence on both of us), having changed from economics to psychology in his first year at Queen's University, Belfast. I became fascinated by the work that psychologists did. On the principle of 'if you can't beat them, join them', and with a bit of bullying from the late great George Seth, I signed up to a master's in educational psychology.'

Following the course, Dame Joan worked for two years as an educational psychologist in the 1970s

and ruefully (but nostalgically) comments, 'Things were very different then. We had the luxury of working one-to-one with children. My teaching experience was invaluable, and I really believe we made a difference to children's lives. This became the basis for the professionalism of today's educational psychologists.' After two years 'in the field' Dame Joan started lecturing at Stranmillis College of Education, Belfast. This provided her with the best of her two worlds: psychology and teaching. She developed courses for practising teachers working with children with special educational needs and for teachers doing youth work in schools. She worked with a sociologist colleague on patterns of absenteeism, the effectiveness of small schools, innovative ways of working with pupils from severely disadvantaged backgrounds and early years education.

Dame Joan comments: 'My entire career has demonstrated to me the importance of each one of us as an individual, and that to succeed we all need to be treated as individuals.' This realisation led directly to a developing interest in equality and human rights issues, which was fuelled by her husband Jeremy's increasing involvement in public policy research within a research unit in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. He very quickly realised that his degree in psychology provided him with skills and insights that made a significant contribution to his work in policy research. Over the years he recruited many psychology graduates who are now in senior positions in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, demonstrating the transferability of the skills of research into and analysis of human behaviour.

Dame Joan and Jeremy were Chair and Secretary of the BPS Northern Ireland

Dame Joan Harbison with Archbishop Desmond Tutu at a University of Ulster graduation dinner

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Branch over a period of some 14 years – ‘probably for too long, but we loved it and believed passionately in the role of psychology in understanding and improving the lives of individuals. The Society allowed us to be involved in some groundbreaking events, particularly a series of seminal conferences on children growing up in Northern Ireland during the period of the Troubles. It was exciting and stimulating. Recently we had occasion to go back and look at the work reported in these conferences and recorded in books I edited and were amazed to track the influence that psychological research has had in a variety of ways on the development of policy in Northern Ireland.’

The next stage in Dame Joan’s career saw her become involved in public service. In 1984 she was invited to become a member of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. There were 36 members, representing many different social and political viewpoints. Dame Joan says that she learnt a lot about group dynamics and how and why arguments are presented in certain ways. ‘I learnt to read non-verbal signs and identify the areas where differences were irreconcilable and those where compromise was possible.’ She believes that her psychological training was an important factor in her ability to contribute to the board’s agenda. Dame Joan was very hands-on on the board and chaired a variety of committees, appointments panels and grievance and disciplinary procedures. She comments: ‘Psychology has fundamentally shaped my management style. I believe that if you have some understanding of human psychology you understand what “management by walk-about” really means. It’s finding out the good things people are doing and reinforcing that behaviour, rather than checking up on what people are not doing and criticising them. I have tried to nurture a culture of appreciation wherever I have worked.’

During the 1980s Dame Joan worked with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB): a very necessary and significant organisation in a society that was then experiencing anything between 10 per cent and 20 per cent unemployment and serious civil disruption, depending on location. Understanding the links between disadvantage and behaviour again proved a useful tool in contributing to the work of the CAB.

Dame Joan was a founding member of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority where her interest in rights, and her application of psychology came together to address hugely difficult ethical

FEATURED JOB

Job Title: Assistant Psychologists

Employer: Mental Health Services Directorate, Rampton Hospital

Assistant psychologist roles are gold dust to psychology graduates who wish to go on to qualification training [see also p.627]. In this issue, Rampton Hospital in Nottinghamshire is advertising a variety of roles with very specific qualifications and experience required to apply. Ilona Kruppa, Clinical Director and Lead Psychologist in the Mental Health Services Directorate, says: ‘We’re very picky. We offer very wide experience, an excellent record of our assistants getting on to courses and a challenging environment, so we want the right people. We have to screen 200 initial applicants so we’re clear about what we’re looking for.’

Rampton is one of the three high-security hospitals in England and Wales. ‘Our patients are referred from the prison service or from medium-security prisons, sometimes at remand stage, sometimes when they’re serving sentences. There are around 360 employees in the directorate of whom eight are psychologists. The balance has changed. Whereas once we predominantly had a clinical background, we now have pretty well equal expertise in clinical and forensic, with some of us having dual specialisms. This reflects the ultimate destinations of our assistants: about half of them go on to clinical training, half to forensic.’

Ilona is very clear on the range of experience on offer. ‘I can dimly remember my own assistant post: I spent a lot of time doing initial assessments with the Wechsler scales! Here, assistants get involved in risk and initial assessment but also in therapy on areas such as assertiveness, depression and anxiety; obviously this activity is supervised. Perhaps the richest experience involves our specialist group treatment programme where we deal with issues such as substance misuse, anger, violence, arson and sex offending among others.’

Ilona’s first piece of advice to those applying is to ‘read the advert! Some people don’t even seem to do that. Next, read the employee specification form and build your application round the need to show that you meet the criteria this lays down. If you’ve done this you’re far more likely to get through to interview and, perhaps, to a job which will challenge you and give you many professional skills you need.’

Once in the job there is an induction programme and training on specific skills for a challenging environment. ‘We teach people motivational interviewing,’ Ilona says. ‘This is particularly important here where we have very resistant patients who don’t want to be here and aren’t interested in seeing a psychologist. So, keeping patients engaged is crucial. You have to use your skills and knowledge in a way appropriate for the individual patient, not in a one-size-fits-all expert approach.’

Ilona admits to some frustrations about the assistant psychologist positions. ‘Because we’re so successful in placing assistants they come here, get trained, do good work and, in a year, they’re gone. Forensics stay around for longer and, at times, we’ve thought about offering two- to three-year contracts but have shied away from it. It’s good to see people move further in the profession but we’d like to keep the better assistants here for longer.’

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questions. ‘Human fertility is a challenging issue where you have to understand not only different peoples’ viewpoints but the emotional trauma underpinning them. The people receiving the fertility treatment and those providing it were equally involved and passionate about the subject, but as the regulators the authority members had to take a very balanced approach and above all keep the focus on the rights of the child.’

She was also a member of the General Dental Council, which regulates the

dental profession in the way psychology professionals are now regulated. ‘It is crucially important to have a significant input from service users on any self-regulating body.’

Having retired from teaching in Stranmillis College – by this time, a constituent college of Queen’s University, Belfast – Dame Joan was appointed the Chief Commissioner of the first unified Equality Commission in the UK in 1999. She had an exciting six years in that post trying to address all areas of equality and

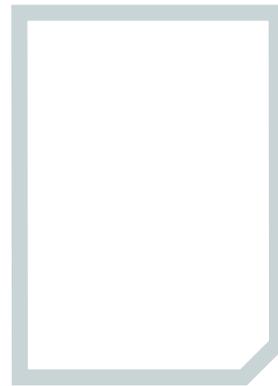
shift the emphasis from religious and political equality to an inclusive agenda covering nine categories: gender and marital status, age, race, disability, sexual orientation, those with and without dependants, as well as religion and political opinion. It was a challenging position, and one that used all her skills of tact and diplomacy, together with an understanding of group identity and affiliation, and individual differences. Once again she feels her background in psychology was a significant factor in any success she had in the post.

In more recent years Dame Joan has served as Chair of Age Concern, Northern Ireland and on the board of Age Concern, England. She has recently been appointed Older People's Advocate until legislation is enacted to establish a Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland. These appointments have brought her full circle from the beginning to the end of life. She feels a strong identity with the age group she now represents, as she is an older person herself and has had a wide experience of the issues that affect older people.

Since her appointment the credit crunch has really taken hold and older people are feeling its chill more than

most. 'They are asking questions: Can I afford to eat and heat? What will happen to pensions in the present downturn? How long can I stay independent and look after myself? How do I get from A to B? Am I safe in my own home? How can I prevent becoming lonely and isolated? These are not just questions for older people to ask but for politicians and the rest of society to address.' With any luck, Dame Joan points out, 'we will all be old someday. The longer older people remain independent and able to look after themselves the less time there will be for them to need support.'

'In the midst of conflicting demands the voice of older people can get lost. I don't have the statutory powers I hope the Commissioner will have but I can influence debates and make representations on behalf of older people, whether it is on transport, social care, health or ageing well. I can also learn from other places and use the knowledge



'In the midst of conflicting demands the voice of older people can get lost'

to support the arguments on behalf of older people here in Northern Ireland.'

It is obvious that as an older person Dame Joan is extremely busy but still thoroughly enjoying life, and between business commitments still makes time for travel with her husband. They have just returned from a holiday that started in Singapore, from where they cruised back to Southampton.

She is very ready to acknowledge the importance of psychology in everything she has undertaken. 'I sometimes think we don't grasp how central psychology is to so many different areas. Our profession still does not communicate that fact effectively enough. Psychologists can contribute substantively to debates as well as facilitating the process of discussion, agreement and planning. We can be central to good policy making. I believe studying psychology has made me the person I am and has underpinned everything I have done and am doing.'

Looking after the future

Phoebe Holland on valuable experience gained through a mentoring scheme

I'm a second-year undergraduate psychology student at the University of Leeds. The real world is looming and I'm conscious of the need to gain experience in different fields, so I know what's out there and can develop my CV. I was therefore enthusiastic when some students promoted Access Academy, a university volunteering organisation that runs several schemes in schools in Leeds.

A scheme called Mentoring Looked After Children caught my attention. 'Looked after children' are in the care of their local authority, either in a children's home or in foster care. I am interested in forensic psychology and have a

particular interest in children who have difficult upbringings, which may lead them in to the world of crime. This scheme offered the opportunity to gain experience of working with a young person who may not have had the best start in life. At the same time, I felt I had a lot to offer through the knowledge I have gained from my degree.

The mentoring scheme pairs a volunteer with a looked after child. They then spend two hours a week together, concentrating on homework. After attending a couple of training sessions on working with children and young people and what it is like to be a looked after child, I felt ready. However, nothing prepared me for just how

challenging this role would be.

I was paired with 'Harry', a secondary-school student who refused to write anything because of his poor spelling ability, and who dealt with life by playing computer games for hours on end. I was expected to help him with his homework and encourage him into further education. At first I had no idea how I was going to be able to help Harry with his homework when he only brought his iPod and some drum sticks to our sessions.

I began by attempting to use revision guides; he reacted with anger and frustration. I realised that this strategy was a waste of time and a negative start to our relationship. After seeking help from my personal tutor (a developmental psychologist), I realised that

the best tactic was to focus on things that he was interested in rather than forcing him to do work that he did not want to do. We have since been working on a project about rock bands where Harry is using the computer to create a presentation that is designed to encourage me to like rock music. This has put him in a position where he wants to tell me all about his favourite bands, while

developing the reasoning skills to share his enthusiasm. After a few weeks, his fear of writing started to diminish and he has managed to create some slides on PowerPoint. We have established a good relationship; he now feels safe when he asks for help.

This may seem like very minor progress, but is actually a breakthrough. I had been so

"Mentoring schemes offer important experience for many career paths"

Getting that assistant psychologist post

The *Alternative Handbook*, produced by the Society's Division of Clinical Psychology, shows that a high percentage of successful applicants for places on clinical doctorate courses have previously worked as an assistant psychologist. However, such positions are scarce. Graduates greatly outnumber vacancies, so competition is fierce. How can you increase your chances of getting a post and then make the most of it? These tips come from my own experience as a healthcare assistant in a CAMHS setting, from clinical psychologists and other graduates.

- | NHS application forms detail desirable experience with particular client groups for particular posts. Read these carefully and show how you meet the *specific* requirements.
- | Your employment needs to provide you with further development opportunities in an area you are interested in. If the organisation employs psychologists you'll be able to learn from them and the contacts may be invaluable later.
- | Moving around too much can look negative on doctorate applications. It's better to be picky than to take any job that's offered and then have to change.
- | Make sure you have graduate membership of the BPS. Many jobs require membership. It also gives access to a host of useful articles, research and advertised graduate jobs.
- | Be prepared for interviews, by generating potential questions (forums such as <http://forum.psyclick.org.uk> and www.psychforum.org.uk are useful), referring to the person specification (common areas assessed are knowledge of CBT,

your knowledge of your dissertation, and how your previous experience is relevant to the role), and developing strong, specific reasons about why that particular organisation should employ you, in that particular job with that particular client group.

- | Ask for feedback. It's important to understand how you come across and why you didn't get a job so you can improve.
- | Make the most of any post you get. Study the psychological models and interventions it uses. Look at any relevant research. Try to understand colleagues' different roles and approaches. Much psychological work takes place in multidisciplinary environments, and understanding and valuing other professions' contributions is an important professional skill. Development is not just about gaining more psychological skills and knowledge; it's about acquiring the wider skills of work – interpersonal and team-working skills and communication, for instance. You need to become a reflective practitioner.

Finally, a lack of motivation can reduce the quality of your applications and performance in interviews, and getting turned down for jobs can seriously demotivate you. So keep anything that reminds you that you are good enough! Attempting to secure an assistant psychologist post is a frustrating experience, but the process is an essential, brilliant learning curve.

Cheryl George

desperate to make the sessions productive that I missed the point that Harry is disengaged from education and disheartened about learning. Through my own persistence and investigations, I discovered more suitable methods to help him. Having consistent relationships with people who actually take an interest in you is much more important to a child in care than succeeding in school. Once a good relationship has developed you can start to help them succeed.

What can I give?

Sometimes I leave the sessions in despair, wondering if there is any point in the time we spend together. But then I realise that I am giving him a valuable gift: my time. Working with Harry has given me an insight into the extensive challenges facing people who work with similar young people day in and day out. These children require

enormous amounts of time from professionals and many require constant help, attention and care. For my part, I am encouraging a young person in his education, but perhaps more importantly for Harry I am *choosing* to spend time with him, not doing so because I'm being paid for it or because I have to. These boosts of confidence are crucial to such children.

What have I gained?

I have had to think actively about ways to engage Harry so he can have fun and gain something from the time we spend together. Seeking help from people with extensive experience of working with children gave me opportunities to consider different methods that would move Harry away from the computer games and on to writing things down. I have realised the importance of getting to know the child or young person you are working

with in order to adapt your methods to suit his or her needs. The scheme allows me to demonstrate my commitment and reliability, which will be important in any future job. It's been eye-opening to apply my knowledge from educational psychology lectures to a real situation. I have an improved awareness of the backgrounds and difficulties that are faced by children with whom educational psychologists work, and have begun to apply techniques to address these.

What next?

Access Academy highlights some of the diverse jobs that involve working with children. The experience of working with one individual has helped me develop my interest in forensic psychology, though Harry is not a young offender. My next step is to gain experience working with children who have become involved with various types of

crime, a route that is often attributed to difficult upbringings. My mentoring experience has provided me with a starting point to work with other challenging children who have various problems.

Mentoring schemes offer important experience for many other career paths, the most obvious being educational psychology. For people not wanting to do a master's after their undergraduate degree there are alternative options to help children in care, from working in social care, to setting up projects or schemes that give extra support to Looked After Children in Schools (which is similar to this mentoring project). I would highly recommend this type of experience for anyone planning to work with children.

| *The project leader on the mentoring scheme is Kaya Barker – to find out more, contact her on barkerk@hotmail.com*