

'After a lecture I'd feel high'

Ian Florance talks to **Mark Griffiths** about a prolific career in teaching and research

Mark Griffiths, Professor of Gambling Studies, gave us a deeply felt interview about his route into psychology, the rewards of teaching and how psychology can communicate its findings.

It seemed worth covering a couple of basic issues. What is his core area of research? 'Behavioural addictions: excesses not involving drugs. In my view the difference between a healthy enthusiasm and addiction is that healthy enthusiasms add to life whereas addictions take away from it.'

And what's your view of gambling? 'I'm often seen by some members of the gaming industry as anti-gambling. I'm not. I'm against child gambling and would describe myself as "pro-responsible gambling". When I play fruit machines it's research, but I do occasionally play blackjack and roulette for fun.'

Having got those out of the way, the question 'How did you get into psychology?' set off a string of memories of Mark's family life in Loughborough, and how that influenced him. 'I was the eldest of four children: we were all about the same age so we all vied for attention in different ways. One sister became an actress for instance. You can argue that my brother used crime to get attention. It took some time for us to realise that he was involved in petty theft not because of a drug problem, which might have seemed the obvious explanation, but because he was a problem gambler: he played fruit machines.' So that was an obvious influence on your later interests? 'Ninety per cent of third-year project students choose essay and topic subjects that reflect something that's personally affected them. That's a good thing: it means they're enthusiastically engaged and can relate research to real life.'

'My father was unemployed and we were poor; we were part

of the free school meal brigade. Our parents brought us up very strictly until our early teenage years, then placed responsibility firmly on our shoulders. They didn't judge us. The basic message was "You can do what you want with your life", as long as we were prepared to pay the price.'

'In retrospect I'm fascinated how four children from exactly the same background turned out so differently: my brother spent time in a young offenders establishment, I ended up being an academic; two were heavy smokers, two of us have never touched a cigarette.'

Mark's bids for attention focused on educational achievement. 'I was seen as academically minded from a very early age. Before me, no one in my family had even got an O-level. In that context, everything I did seemed like a success. Originally I wanted to be a biochemist but I reacted against my fascination with hard sciences during A-levels when I did maths, physics, chemistry and biology. So, quite apart from unconscious influences from my family, another reason I started to study psychology was I thought it was anti-science. At the time I only really knew about Freud. And I thought it wouldn't get in the way of my real reason for going to university – to get a job as a journalist on *New Musical Express*.'

'I probably ate too many curries'

Mark did his first degree at Bradford University: 'I didn't choose it for the course reputation or the quality of the tutors. I needed the cheapest possible place to live with good Indian food – which I loved – and cultural diversity.'

During the first year Mark worked on university radio and the student paper so there was no real time for coursework. He managed to get through his first year exams after being threatened with the loss

jobs online

www.psychapp.co.uk is now open to all. Advertisers can now reach beyond the prime audience of Society members that they reach in print, to include the many other suitably qualified individuals online.

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Please help us to spread the word. Recruiters can post online from just £150, and at no extra cost when placing an ad in print. For more information, see p.604.

The screenshot shows the psychapp.co.uk website interface. At the top, it says 'Psychology appointments'. Below that, there are several job listings with details like 'Job Title', 'Location', and 'Salary'. A testimonial box in the center reads: 'We were really pleased with the high number of responses and would definitely subscribe again: it was good value for money. In fact, I've been back to the site several times.' To the right, there's a 'Society member? Join now!' button. At the bottom, there are logos for 'PULSE', 'PRIORITY', and 'LIFE'.

of his grant. 'Allowances were made for health problems – I was developing an ulcer, probably from eating too many curries!' In the second year he got into bad habits. 'I used to work 48 hours at a stretch without sleep. I was editing the student newspaper, coupled with the course work that counted towards my degree.'

He finally fell in love with psychology. 'I don't think I'm unusual in that. The first two years of a degree are a slog through a basic curriculum. As you move to the end of year two and the beginning of year three you get freedom to choose your topics'. Mark researched the female orgasm and his first conference paper was 'Vaginal orgasm – Fact or fiction?' at the beginning of his third year. His undergraduate project on hypnosis and ideational conditioning was graded as first class and subsequently led to four publications.

One of the themes of our conversation was the amount Mark writes: for journals, magazines, books and newspapers. 'It's been said I'm addicted to writing. I'm not, but I do get reinforcement from it. It's been part of my work since I was an undergraduate and as we speak I've got close to 30 papers in press. My productivity has greatly increased since '96. Before that I tended to be sole author of papers: since then I've tended to work in teams. I also love helping students get published, if they have done good work but need a bit of help getting it written up in the best way. Every year I try to help at least one third-year student get their project published.'

Mark came out of his undergraduate course with a first class degree. 'That seemed miraculous, but I will say I attended every lecture during my third year and the cohort of 19 people in third-year psychology were close and enthusiastic. But I had no idea what to do until a few of my tutors suggested I do a PhD.'

Mark applied for three PhDs and finally chose to study at Exeter University, where he was on an ESRC Linked Studentship. 'The subject was pre-defined on adolescent gambling. One supervisor wanted me to take a laboratory-based, operant conditioning approach since another successful PhD project had adopted it. But this was 1987 and to me that approach seemed very 1950s. Fruit machine gambling was in the media but there was no research on it. So I set off on that. It taught me that if you want to be heard, you don't have to jump on a bandwagon – you can create one.'

His brother was pivotal in introducing him to people and places he'd never have

FEATURED JOB

Job Title: Assistant Psychologists

Employer: Helen Allison School, Meopham

Assistant psychologist jobs are much sought after. Here are two at an independent school, operated by the National Autistic Society, which provides education and care for 70 children and young people and residential care for 17 students. If you look at the advert on p.609 you'll see that it covers a huge range of psychological applications from assessment and curriculum planning to research.

Jaap Erasmus, the Senior Educational Psychologist, is very precise about the sort of person they're looking for. 'We need a great team player and someone who's prepared to graft, to really work with children, young people, parents and other professionals. In return we offer real support and encouragement to move on to the next stage of your career. We have a good track record: two people in the past five years have gone in to clinical courses and one person is going on to the fast track initiative to become a social worker. The next move from these roles doesn't have to be into one of the standard psychological specialisms. But why not talk to Claire Hosie, who is moving from an assistant psychologist role to a PhD course in educational psychology?'

Claire did her degree in pure psychology at Reading and wanted to apply it. 'I had worked as a support worker in a residential autistic school and as an outfield worker before taking this assistant post.' Claire describes a hugely varied workload: 'assessment; classroom observation; behaviour management; work in the classroom, and the residences. I'm also involved in an international research project on the social navigation of autistic people. So, it's been a busy year. I've learnt the reality of applying psychology after learning about it academically. Communication is a key part of that; communication issues are a huge issue in the client group we work with but you also have to explain and listen to parents and other professionals.'

Does the school give you support to move on? 'Absolutely. They genuinely want you to progress so they give you the opportunity to acquire new skills and get involved in new experiences. I've been on a number of training courses and the research project has been very valuable.' Jaap Erasmus comments: 'I think that encouragement has helped people go on to a wide spectrum of different careers.'

The advert mentions non-social hours. 'It's not a huge burden, but it's important that the assistant psychologists see staff and the children and young people in residential environments where behaviour might be very different from that displayed in more formal classroom settings. It helps people get a more rounded, accurate picture of what's going on.'

Jaap also emphasises communication skills. 'These positions work closely with speech and language therapists and occupational therapists, so there's real opportunity to get used to working with other approaches to an issue, to hear other people's views and express your own in appropriate ways.'

You can find this job on p.609, and with many others on www.psychapp.co.uk.

"I've learnt the reality of applying psychology after learning academically"

found himself. 'He picked up my first book and said to the family, "Look, here's my life story." That's not quite true, but my brother was pivotal in developing my interest and helping me with my initial research.'

'I knew academic life was for me'

Mark's experiences as a PhD student have influenced the whole of the rest of his career as a psychologist. 'Within six

months I knew academic life was for me. There was nothing not to like – apart perhaps from marking! It gives flexibility. You can choose the research you do. I love teaching – I was teaching in my first year as a postgraduate. I also published as much as I could: about 20 papers came from my PhD data.'

During the first year of his PhD he attended every BPS Section conference and continued to give papers. 'I don't think I ever thought I wanted to be a particular type of psychologist. There's

obviously a lot of pressure to do that now and specialise early in your career.'

In 1988 Mark's supervisor let him organise a conference on adolescent gambling. 'I enjoyed talking to the media but I learnt an important lesson. I was doing an interview with the Press Association. At the end of the interview they asked me what was the worst case of fruit machine addiction I'd come across. I mentioned a case of a 17-year old who had tried to kill his mum with a baseball bat to feed the addiction. The next day it was on the front page of the *Daily Mirror* ('Kiddies who'll kill to bet') and in all the tabloids. I was deluged with calls and the slot machine industry were very angry. I was naive. I didn't understand the media at that point. However, once it had blown over, I was in journalists' files as someone to contact about any gambling stories.'

At times, I suggested, Mark seems to have been quite strategic in planning his career. 'Obviously you do your best to get where you want, and I do set myself very specific targets. One of my longer-term aims was to be a professor by the age of 35 years, and I was delighted when I achieved it. But I don't plan in the way you're told to by academic mentors. If you asked me what I'd be working on in a year's time, I wouldn't be able to answer, because every day I am exposed to new ideas, new subjects and new approaches. A lot of my research has been very opportunistic.'

The story of how Mark got his first lecturing job shows this opportunism.

'My father was dying at the same time as I was applying for jobs in 1990. I had an interview at Plymouth University for an academic post in occupational psychology. I knew next to nothing about occupational psychology and decided I should go and see my dying father instead of attending the interview.

However, my father insisted I go. I went, was probably perceived as rather arrogant and, unsurprisingly, didn't get the job. I jumped on a train straight after the interview but my father died 15 minutes before I got there. I felt really guilty, especially as I was only doing the interview for experience. That summer I wrote up my PhD and then a call came out of the blue from Plymouth offering me a one-year temporary post. Though I have no belief in anything "supernatural", my father's insistence that I went for the Plymouth interview got me on the academic ladder.'

'I found teaching almost drug-like'

In his first year at Plymouth, Mark became a 'teaching drone' and was given

all the teaching that other lecturers didn't want – especially teaching psychology on vocational courses. 'You work all the time, reading up on a topic then giving lectures to police inspectors, podiatrists, midwives and other paramedical professionals.

I found teaching almost drug-like: after a lecture I'd feel high. I was 23, younger than most of my students, but I discovered that if you're passionate about what you're talking about, people will listen. In the second year it was suggested I drop some of the vocational lecturing. I insisted on continuing. The first year had been hard slog; now I wanted to use that material again.

I also wanted to understand how the students that I taught worked in their day-to-day lives. For example, the health psychology that I was teaching to podiatrists was based on medics. Much of what I taught needed contextualising for different professions. When teaching non-verbal communication you need to realise that podiatrists can't maintain eye contact when they're looking at a bunion!

After five years at Plymouth, there was a freeze in promotion so Mark looked elsewhere for employment. He was offered three jobs in eight days and was tempted by Southampton University,



Pathways into occupational psychology

A recent Division of Occupational Psychology event addressed some timely career issues

How do occupational psychologists practise? What routes are there into the industry, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of working in respective areas such as academia, consultancy and government? These questions and more were addressed by an informative and engaging Division of Occupational Psychology 'Pathways' event in February.

It was a timely event for a couple of reasons. First, MSc

students are increasingly concerned about career prospects after graduating: there are even fewer roles on offer after the recession, and high competition. Second, experienced OPs are seeking new opportunities within OP or related roles due to redundancies or lack of freelance work.

The speakers at the Pathways event were Professor Fiona Patterson, Kajal Ruparell and Fiadhna McEvoy, all

occupational psychologists at different stages in their career. The speakers all talked about their current and past roles, the advantages and disadvantages of their current role and how they entered the industry. Helen Baron, who facilitated the event, helped to answer questions from the audience in relation to freelance work as an OP.

The event helped to dispel a popular myth that not getting into an OP role soon after graduating from an MSc constitutes failure. The majority of OP graduates gain experience in related areas such as recruitment and HR

before embarking on a career as an OP and subsequently becoming a fully qualified OP.

Occupational psychologists can practise in a number of areas, such as consultancy, central government, local government, retail, academia and freelance. The speakers represented some of these sectors and talked candidly about the highs and lows of work in their respective fields.

Kajal Ruparell talked about her experience of working for a talent management consultancy in London. She started her career in recruitment and worked her way to a senior role.

which had a good reputation and people he knew. Nottingham Trent was a small department with less of a reputation. 'I got good advice from a mentor who said I would be a small fish in a big sea at Southampton but could be a whale in a puddle at Nottingham Trent!'

'I divorce you on the grounds of computer mania'

Mark is acknowledged as an expert in the psychology of gambling but by 1992 he was getting somewhat jaded by the subject. 'I started getting interested in video games. But a real turning point came when I gave a paper at a BPS annual conference on technological addictions – a term I made up – which covered addictions to TV, video games, fruit machines, etc. At the press conference someone asked me about this new thing called "the internet". I commented on it in relation to one of my case studies and next day's headline in the *Daily Express* was "I divorce you on the grounds of computer mania". Despite the sensationalist coverage, the THES rang me and asked if I would write a serious 2000-word article on the subject. This article paved the way for a research grant in the area.'

During the course of our talk, Mark referred to his 'notoriety'. What did he mean by that? 'I talk to the media. I write my own press releases, run my own PR

campaigns and train other academics in media relations. This has sometimes got me into trouble and there was a time in the early 2000s when I was in a list of the top ten quoted academics in the UK. In retrospect, I probably became a bit of a "rent-a-quote". I drew back from that and now talk and write about issues that stem entirely from my research. However, it's a pity that many psychologists and academics are hostile to the media. My contact with the media has actually stimulated research, for instance into internet addiction and adolescent scratch card gambling, areas where there's interest but precious little hard data. I think there's a more general point here. Some of the people I admire – Adrian Furnham and Cary Cooper are examples – write a lot, interact with the media and are extremely serious about their thinking

and research. Some people might be critical of that high profile. I'm not.'

And teaching is a constant. 'One of my proudest moments was receiving the BPS Teaching Excellence Award

in 2006. I carry out research on my own teaching. If I find a new technique I use it, research it and write up the findings. People have a blinkered view of what teaching is. Of course it can be lecturing in a university; but it can also be writing an article for a paper, scripting a video, supervising. One of my studies is now

"I was in a list of the top ten quoted academics in the UK"

included on the Psychology A-level syllabus and I've written chapters in a number of A-level textbooks. I'm really proud of that, even though it was one of the most difficult things I've done. I take my hat off to people who can write textbooks. I couldn't. And there are huge enjoyments from seeing the results of good teaching.'

You've said you don't know what the future will bring. 'I have ten things on the go at any time and I love new challenges. For instance, I've just been asked by the Department of Health to be on their Expert Working Group on Sedentary Behaviour, Screen Time and Obesity. Then there are things outside psychology. I used to publish poetry but haven't had as much time over the last six or seven years. And my songwriting seems to have dried up!'

So, what would you say to someone who was considering an academic career? 'Find an area you're fascinated by, that may have some personal resonance and in which you feel you can make a lasting contribution. Work hard but keep an eye open for opportunities. Don't be scared of non-academic outlets but do learn about them. Academic life is more varied than some people think, but teaching and research – and the relationship between them – are symbiotic in the university system. For me, doing applied research where your research actually means something to those outside the academic system is the most important reason for doing what I do.'

She learnt to work with a range of clients from different sectors, built her commercial awareness and introduced psychometric testing to recruitment processes. This experience helped Kajal to leverage her experience into a consultancy role. As Kajal did not have direct experience of working in consultancy, she made the decision to take a pay cut when she moved in that direction. Within two years she gained her chartership and was subsequently promoted to a senior consultant role.

According to Kajal, the upsides of working in consultancy are variety of work and development opportunities. Designing selection processes

for central government organisations, and leadership development programmes helping middle managers, has meant developing a range of skills. The downsides are long hours, extensive travelling, and the pressure of managing numerous projects at the same time.

Fiadhna McEvoy spoke of her experiences as an OP since joining local government last year. Early in her career she undertook an international internship as part of her MSc project and was subsequently recruited to an assistant OP

position in a London-based consultancy firm. Over the following two years she was promoted to a consultant role and completed her chartership. Her career goal of working as an internal OP was fulfilled when the opportunity to work in an organisational development role for a large local authority arose.

By highlighting a number of key projects, Fiadhna gave a flavour of possible OP activities in local government, such as assessment and development, organisational restructuring, coaching and culture change.

"MSc students are increasingly concerned about career prospects"

She also described the overall structure of the council along with the vast complexity of the services delivered. Together these provide a stimulating, diverse OP work environment. For example, her projects cut across many occupational areas, ranging from waste management to legal services. Throughout the talk, Fiadhna recounted her differing experiences of public and private sector environments, focusing on work-life balance, variety and culture.

The feedback received from the first Pathways event was very positive. To let the DOP know what events you would like to see in the future, e-mail dopme@dop.org.uk.