

'I've never made plans... I just follow my interests'

Ian Florance meets **Ciarán O'Keeffe**, aka 'the parapsychologist'

I recognised Ciarán O'Keeffe from his website photograph as he entered a coffee shop in Marlow, Bucks. We settled down and I mentioned that I was surprised by his website's address: www.theparapsychologist.com. He smiled. 'I suppose if you use that word to describe what you do, people often look at you strangely and change the subject.' But Ciarán is more than a parapsychologist. We discussed his investigative psychology training and research, his clinical experience, the influence of a childhood interest in ghost stories and approaching

phenomena sceptically but not cynically. It's not possible to cover everywhere Ciarán has lived and the different jobs he's done but, to begin at the beginning...

'I was born in Norwich to a Swiss mother and an Irish father. I lived in Norfolk, Somerset and then High Wycombe.' Why did you do your undergraduate studies in Washington? 'Well, I'd been a classical pianist since the age of four. My interest in music and performing is a continuing one. I did Maths, Physics and Music at A-level and became interested in sound recording.

I applied to a number of UK colleges but ended up attending a Liberal Arts course at a small Maryland Liberal Arts College, double majoring in Music and Psychology.' Why the focus on psychology? 'I was interested in the psychology of performance, though I knew that I didn't really have what it took to make my living as a musical performer. My other enduring fascination is parapsychology.' How did that interest start?

'I grew up reading ghost and horror stories, at a time when people like Clive Barker, Peter Straub and Stephen King were bestselling authors, but I also delved into earlier Gothic writers like Poe and Lovecraft. There was also an upsurge in films and TV based round the supernatural at the time – Arthur C. Clarke's *Mysterious*

Worlds and the *Ghostbusters* films.'

Ciarán wanted his undergraduate dissertation to deal with his interest in parapsychology, but his tutors felt that was outside their area of expertise, and in the end his supervisor came from the Institute of Parapsychology (now the Rhine Research Center).

In the US Ciarán had been encouraged to get experience in some sort of clinical setting. 'One summer I worked in a psychiatric unit at Amersham Hospital. When I came back to the UK in 1994 after my degree, I became very interested in nursing. I worked in psychiatric nursing at Lewisham, Hither Green and Wycombe General. I had been thinking about doing a PhD and I was considering my next academic step and qualification in the background. I taught English in Spain for a while and it was there that I finally decided to "go for it". I applied for master's and got on the Investigative Psychology course at Liverpool.'

Ciarán tells me how investigative psychology originally focused on offender profiling but then developed a more systematic, scientific basis for all psychological inputs into criminal work, including investigation processes and legal aspects. 'For instance it looks at how police make decisions or draw inferences from information. David Canter was running the Centre for Investigative Psychology at Liverpool when I was there.' Ciarán describes getting involved in a lot of research during the course, 'into areas such as the geo-spatial behaviour of serial killers, the psychology of fraud and the role of hypnotism in the legal system. But I was known as having this "weird interest" in parapsychology, the "Fox Mulder" of the unit. I started to research the language of psychics and mediums.' That seems a big jump from his course. 'Not really, I was struck by similarities between the language psychics use and that used by profilers. They're both emotionally loaded and ambiguous yet beguiling. My master's thesis looked at psychic detectives and their narratives.'



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Before talking about his later career I wanted to ask Ciarán some more general questions about his interests. How does he typify what he does? 'I'm an applied psychologist with an interest in a number of areas ranging from those covered by forensic psychology to parapsychology.' As we touched on at the beginning, it must be difficult to get your interest in parapsychology taken seriously. 'Yes, the word causes people to recoil. Some people say "It's full of frauds and fakes, why bother?" Others assume you're a "true believer", maybe even a practitioner. But if you look at the academic history of parapsychology you'll come up with a definition of the area which is something like the scientific study of the paranormal. I'm a sceptic. I shouldn't need to say that, because I'm a scientist and that's what scientists are. They question; they test claims. Let's say someone has what appears to be a hallucination in a reputedly haunted house. Do we ignore it because to most people it seems obvious what's happening? In fact plenty of "respectable" studies address the phenomenon of hallucinations since they might begin to explain why an illness happens, how you can treat it, what causes hallucinations. You might find out something about the way visual and cognitive systems work. You might even find out a particular instance wasn't a hallucination at all. I'm a sceptic not a cynic, though people in the media often assume I'm cynical.'

Ciarán points out that he uses a particular methodology to investigate these phenomena 'but there are cases, for obvious reasons, that are difficult to investigate in the laboratory. You have to go into the field to study the effects of the emotion and fear that participants feel when presented with phenomena they find impossible to explain or have learnt to react to in a certain way. My methodology is stringent but, since parapsychology draws in a rich variety of professionals – from historians and linguists to physicists and sociologists – you tend to be exposed to varied ways of approaching an issue. Increased acceptability of qualitative methods of research has helped here.'

At the end of his master's course, Ciarán cooperated with Professor Laurence Alison to organise a one-day conference discussing the similarities between psychic detectives and profilers. James Randi, the magician and high-profile sceptic, gave the keynote and Richard Wiseman, Professor of the Public Understanding of Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire also spoke. 'Richard had also done a study of psychic

detectives. He suggested I do a PhD which extended the study of language used across all parapsychological practitioners. I got about 50 per cent of my funding from a big sceptics society in the USA.'

Ciarán first got involved with the media during his master's course, 'but even more so during my PhD. I helped out with Richard's laughter lab. In fact I announced the result of the research project to find the world's funniest joke to the world's media. I was dressed up as a chicken at the time!'

While doing his PhD, Ciarán also kept up his interest in music by doing research into infrasound, sound below the cusp of human hearing, investigating it in the context of two concerts at the Purcell Room, Royal Festival Hall (see also 'Big picture', November 2011: tinyurl.com/d3e8cdw).

'After my PhD I lectured in criminal psychology and parapsychology at Liverpool Hope University and also spent some time working in France. I still have an unpaid research associate position at the Université de Toulouse, but I'm now employed at Buckinghamshire New University.'

I ask Ciarán how easy it is to get funding for research into areas like miracles, possession, mediumship and exorcism. 'There are a number of organisations devoted to sceptically examining these phenomena who are prepared to fund them in a very small way. Writing popular books generates some money, and appearing on TV programmes such as Living TV's *Most Haunted* and *Jane Goldman Investigates* provides further funding that I can put in.' The latter income stream can be controversial. 'Yes, I was involved in quite a firestorm when I was reported as questioning the veracity of a particular popular medium. I had to stress that I find out the facts, report them and let readers and, in certain cases, viewers decide. But media work has also helped grow my research participant pool.' Some psychologists are very suspicious of working with the media. 'You do get misrepresented at times but you don't have to be taken over by it. It can be just one part of what you do and can have huge benefits for your work and for the institution you're working in.'

Given his openly sceptical attitude I wondered why people who claim to have paranormal powers still agree to work with him. 'For some it's a way of finding out about whatever ability they think they have. For others it's a badge of credibility to have been examined by a scientist, whatever the outcome. They

tweet the event straight away.' Presumably there's also a fundamental ethical challenge for you in a lot of what you do. 'Yes but again I try to take a scientific approach. There are some things that happen every day which you know are damaging to others and where you have to intervene. But take the case of someone who is claiming to get messages from a person's dead spouse. Is that harmful? We assume it is, but we really don't know. We need to research the effects. Of course if it's deliberate fraud there's no denying it is harmful and deceptive, but we're also dealing with someone's belief in mediumship and the afterlife. You can see a parallel with various religions. Yes, religious beliefs could be used to exploit the vulnerable, but some research suggest that such beliefs genuinely help certain people in specific ways.'

Ciarán also gets involved in field reviews of haunting experiences. 'I come across cases where amateurs have gone in to a house and announced "You've got an evil spirit here". At its most extreme this could trigger untreated psychosis. I've actually drafted some ethical guidelines for investigations into haunting.' This issue of untrained people who can do real damage is obviously important to Ciarán. 'There are about a hundred parapsychologists trained to an acceptable level. It's a small field.'

And what are Ciarán's plans? 'I've never really made plans. Who knows what's round the corner? I've always followed my interests, and seen where they've got me. I still keep my toes dipped in music. I'm very much entrenched in the investigative psychology and parapsychology areas, and I expect I'll remain there. In many ways there's more acceptance of the areas I work in than there was 10 years ago.'

This takes me back to why I wanted to interview Ciarán in the first place. One of the ways psychology has impinged more on the public consciousness is through figures like Derren Brown; and Hilary Mantel, the Booker Prize-winning novelist, has written on parapsychology (one of her novels is a penetrating study of a medium). Most recently, I'd seen an episode of the TV series *Lewis* depicting psychological students investigating the claims of mediums (with murderous consequences, given the programme). When I told friends I was interviewing a parapsychologist they expressed real interest. When I summarised Ciarán's very reasoned account of what he does they were fascinated and surprised. Ciarán's work reflects wider, contemporary interest in the work of psychologists.

Counselling psychologists working with children, young people and families

Counselling psychologists are increasingly taking up positions in the NHS and charitable sector working with children, young people and families. Counselling psychologist **Dr Ioanna Petropoulou** shares her experience of working within a charitable organisation and **Deborah Kemp**, a trainee counselling psychologist, tells us about her role within a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

I worked for the Domestic Violence Intervention Project's children's therapy service at Stephen's Place Children's Centre, between the years 2011 and 2012. DVIP was founded in 1991 as a charity which offers a specialist service to individuals affected by domestic violence. Within five different teams, DVIP offers: risk assessments, specialist interventions for perpetrators of domestic violence and associated support services for women (additional services for the Arabic-speaking communities), supervised contact services, parenting assessments, therapy for children affected by domestic violence and specialist interventions for young perpetrators and their families/partners.

My main responsibilities as a counselling psychologist at SPCC included offering therapy to children affected by domestic violence (DV), as well as conducting assessments and follow-up meetings with their mothers, and offering supervision to trainees. However, often my responsibilities extended much further than the typical clinical role of a counselling psychologist.

The vast majority of carers bringing their children for therapy at SPCC were female survivors of domestic violence, perpetrated against them by their male ex-partners. These women were often in the middle of court proceedings and sought guidance in order to deal with practical issues, such as contact with the perpetrator and safeguarding. When there was no assigned social worker or DV support worker for the family, it became part of my role to offer the relevant guidance and to signpost mothers to the appropriate services. In addition, mothers

were often affected by their own traumatic experiences of DV and were thus referred to other professionals for psychological support. This included referrals for parenting courses, DV awareness courses and individual or family therapy. Finally, several consultations with mothers were arranged in order to offer guidance on parenting skills and to discuss any other issues that came up during their child's therapy.

Regular contact with other professionals, such as school teachers, social workers and GPs, was also an important part of the work at SPCC. Very often during the course of therapy, disclosures were made by either the child or the mother, and child protection issues needed to be dealt with immediately. Therefore, close collaboration with social services was vital in order to keep the child and the family safe.

From a therapeutic point of view, the complexity of working with trauma and abuse requires a more holistic/integrative approach from the therapist that responds to each individual child's needs. This is particularly relevant to counselling psychology's critical stance towards a 'one-



Dr Ioanna Petropoulou, Counselling Psychologist, Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP), Stephen's Place Children's Centre (SPCC)

size fits all' approach. Within this service, I worked from a child-centred/play-therapy framework with strong psychodynamic underpinnings. This framework takes into consideration the conscious and unconscious power and control dynamics of DV. Play allows the child to enter a space in which he/she can process inner conflicts and approach relationships with significant others, from a psychologically safer distance (Bromfield, 2003). Above all, the aim of therapy was to facilitate the child's trust and the formation of a robust therapeutic relationship. This is particularly vital when

working with children exposed to DV, whose sense of trust and safety towards adults has been damaged.

This was one of the most challenging but, at the same time, fulfilling and exciting experiences of my career as a counselling psychologist. When the dynamics of DV are re-enacted within the therapy room, the therapist may often be left with the same emotions of powerlessness and despair that the child felt when he/she was exposed to an all-powerful, violent parent. Supervision and support from colleagues played a great role in helping me to hold those tensions and to be able to offer a safe and containing therapeutic space to children. By the end of my work at SPCC, I was deeply moved by the changes that I saw in these children and their carers.



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Deborah Kemp, final-year trainee counselling psychologist placement, Newham Child and Family Consultation Service (CFCS), Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

My work placement as a trainee counselling psychologist at Newham CFCS was part of a counselling service for adolescents that was an adjunct to the Family Therapy Team. I was encouraged to bring all of my therapeutic knowledge and skills to the table. This included my experience of working within child placements that were primarily play therapy-focused and drew from person-centred and psychodynamic theories. I also drew from my cognitive-behavioural therapy and integrative adult-work experience. I needed to be able to adapt my approach to working with adolescents, bearing in mind their level of cognitive understanding and the developmental concerns of the age group such as peer relationships and identity formation.

At Newham I benefited from working within a multicultural environment and being part of a large family therapy team. Along with learning how to integrate more of a systemic and narrative focus into my work through supervision, I was able to take part in a family therapy training team and to form part of a reflecting team (Anderson, 1987) working with families. There were also opportunities for me to undertake initial assessments and to co-work with other therapists during family therapy sessions.

There was a strong multidisciplinary and inter-agency feel to the work at Newham CFCS. The system surrounding each case was carefully explored and risk-assessed. There was an emphasis upon effective communication with families and agencies supporting the young people and families and a focus upon information-sharing and accountability.

Through this experience I developed

a greater appreciation of the need for flexibility within services working with children, young people and families. It seemed to be helpful to look at a range of options and to decide whether families were suited to family therapy interventions, or whether supportive counselling work for individuals, alongside family therapy or separate from family therapy was most beneficial. I found that holding and supporting families within the Family Therapy Team provided a multifaceted overview of the needs of each member of the family within the family context, in comparison to the perspective gained from viewing individuals in isolation.

Conclusion

Counselling psychologists offer a unique contribution to therapeutic work with children, young people and families. This incorporates a flexible, adaptable and child-centred approach to therapeutic work. Counselling psychologists recognise that the unique, subjective experience of the individual is paramount and that well-being is fostered through the development of a therapeutic relationship. This approach, alongside a pluralistic stance, enables counselling psychologists to manage and respond to the multiple perspectives inherent in the work, as attention to communication, networking and collaboration is so fundamental for affecting change and supporting children, young people and families.

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