

## Little people, big questions

Ian Florance talks to educational psychologist Irvine Gersch

I met Professor Irvine Gersch at the University of East London (UEL) where he is Director of the Professional Doctorate in Applied Educational and Child Psychology. I quickly discovered he'd looked at previous 'Careers' interviews in *The Psychologist* and prepared a list of possible questions, but we ended up having a rich conversation about his real passion: how psychology can help children.

Irvine started working with children in his mid-teens. 'I did youth leadership work and naturally chose children with special educational needs to work with. I didn't particularly want to be a teacher – I'd like to go back and thank the extraordinarily insightful careers interviewer who suggested to me when I was about 18 that I become an educational psychologist. He got it spot on.'

In his own words, he 'started to fly' during his degree at Bangor. 'I'd not done well at school. After I finished my degree I saw a report on me from my school which said "this boy is not university material". I went on to do a four-year postgraduate course to become an educational psychologist at Swansea University. The whole thing came naturally. I got a job in the London Borough of Waltham Forest and stayed there for 26 years, moving up from a junior to a principal psychologist role.'

The stability of Irvine's early career disguises the energy and creativity with which he addressed being an educational psychologist. He published a lot. 'I was told by a lecturer at Swansea that you

need to publish three articles a year. If you look at my publication list, you'll see it reflects a variety of topics raised by my actual work and experience with children, and the way educational psychology's roles needed to change to be most relevant and helpful. This means being adaptive and creative and fitting the real-life context within which children and families live.'

Irvine also committed time to working on professional issues, first within the British Psychological Society and then advising on government policy. 'I felt strongly that a one-year master's degree in educational psychology wasn't enough to give new psychologists an in-depth understanding of children. In particular, it didn't equip them to really *listen* to children. Underlying everything I've done is a real desire to empower children through listening to their voices. I chaired the Society's training committee for educational psychologists, and this led to work with government on the DfEE report *On the Future of Educational Psychology* (2000). This taught me about the process of change. Working with a wonderful group of committee members who were experienced and leading psychologists, I had to engage and convince government, unions, the society and profession. We succeeded – our core training for educational psychology is indeed a three-year postgraduate professional doctorate.'

The experience also reinforced Irvine's views on the profession of psychology. 'Ultimately there are no different forms of

psychology. The word "division" in itself is an interesting word to use in this context, when we need to be cohesive.'

Irvine tells me that the landscape is changing rapidly, and that our profession needs to keep up with the changes. 'Psychologists have huge potential roles, ranging from confessor to story-teller to health promoter and, most importantly, problem solver – you name it, we use our skills and knowledge to facilitate it. Dividing us up can get in the way of these wider roles.'

In education work, Irvine is a firm believer that 'the child must be at the centre of things'. 'I was lucky when I started my job that I wasn't given a job description. I was told that my goal was "to do what's best for the children and to help" and that removed barriers. As a principal educational psychologist I wanted my team to be creative, to take risks, to draw from a variety of fields and to be pioneering, all the time applying the best of psychology to improve the lives of children and families, schools and organisations. So I set up a mediation service to deal with the many special needs legal disputes; established learning support teams to work with children with special needs; and set up a trauma service. Working with teachers and speech therapists, we also ran groups for children with speech and language difficulties and learning issues, and those excluded from school.'

At the same time Irvine completed his doctorate on what makes an effective head teacher (which included children's views of the qualities needed). This led to a head teacher and teacher mentorship scheme and a consultancy role with the National Audit Office working group that carried out research and reported to the government on poorly performing schools. 'Some of these roles are now quite common, but then were new.'

In 2002 the BPS awarded Irvine the annual Award for Distinguished Contributions to Professional Psychology for his work. 'I'm proud of what we did at Waltham Forest.'

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If you click on the '...meets' tab across the top, you will find an archive of all our more personal pieces, including our 'Careers' pages. Alternatively, just search 'careers' with our new and improved site search. The archive is complete – back to 1988.

For other Society careers resources, see [www.bps.org.uk/careers](http://www.bps.org.uk/careers).

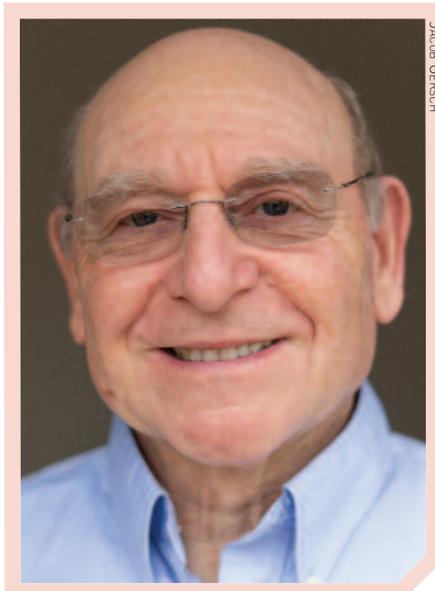
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As Irvine starts on the story of the second half of his career, eloquence gives way to slight embarrassment as he related what he described as a weird experience. 'I was on holiday and was talking to someone who did not know me, but insisted on making three predictions in a rather mysterious tone. The first prediction was that I would help children in a wider area than one local authority. The second was that I would become interested in spirituality and philosophy. And the third was that I would become a professor in a year. Despite my scepticism, they all came true.'

Irvine became Director of Training for Educational Psychologists at the University of East London in 2000. This seems an odd move for someone so committed to working directly with children. 'I felt I was still making a difference. Every educational and child psychologist, whatever specific role they have, affects children at different levels – through work with individual children or, training others, changing systems, advising schools, or through affecting school, local authority and government policy. But UEL also appealed to me as an entrepreneurial university, in the best possible sense – there seemed to be a scope and open-mindedness here. As a professor, I can think outside the box and say even more crazy things than I normally do!'

Irvine started studying early thinkers and mystics. 'Psychology has missed out through largely ignoring early – and later – philosophers, and is the poorer for that. Psychology tends to dismiss spiritual writers, and that's also a big mistake. From my point of view this reading began to challenge the view that children are not able to answer big questions about meaning and purpose. Is that true? I and my students started to study this and, lo and behold, of course children can. They're totally at home with the big questions that go back to Socrates, Aristotle and others, and they can answer them very lucidly and with amazing insight.' This work has so far led to two publications: *The Little Box of Big Questions* [see [www.smlworld.co.uk](http://www.smlworld.co.uk) and [www.thepsychologist.org.uk/volume-26/edition-4/reviews/](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/volume-26/edition-4/reviews/)] and *The Little Box of Big Questions 2* [see [www.thepsychologist.org.uk/volume-29/february/reviews/](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/volume-29/february/reviews/)]. Each comprises a series of cards designed to promote (as it says on the tin!) 'philosophical conversations with young people.' Irvine tells me 'Children think and say, and can do, wonderful things. If only we could just harness their ideas, the world might be a better place.'



JACOB GERSCHLAGER

I had been intrigued that Irvine listed one of his interests as spiritual listening. 'I define spiritual as that which deals with the animating or vital drive. It may be religious or not. So, in a sense the little boxes are to do with spirituality. But I was initially criticised that I was slipping in religion under a disguise, so I tend to talk about philosophical conversations and philosophical listening. In fact, I'm rather proud that we've had feedback on the little boxes from people of all religions and those with none, and all of them found the boxes to be relevant and useful, with none finding anything objectionable to their beliefs. This is not surprising, because our tools raise questions, thus leaving children to find their own answers and to make plans. And I've just finished a coaching course and hope that soon we'll be able to do a box of big questions for adults.'

Some years ago Irvine stepped down from his role as a programme director for the initial training programme for educational and child psychologists to take over a course for practising educational psychologists who wanted to upgrade their MSc to a doctorate. He now works at UEL 50 per cent of the time. 'I also work with my son who has a mediation company dealing with SEN and other issues. We work with about a third of local authorities in England. I also mentor colleagues within the university and external clients.'

It seemed a good time to talk to Irvine about what the future looks like for psychology and for students entering the profession. Just as well, then, that one of his many interests is futurology. 'First, I hope people working with children will understand just how very different individual children are. Sometimes we treat them as too similar. And we need to listen more than ever to what they say,

and then use this information to inform planning and action.'

Arguing that the debate as to whether psychology is an art or a science is 'beside the point', Irvine says 'we must be open to external influences. Insights of spirituality, philosophy and the performing arts, for instance, will make us more creative thinkers. We need to be as creative as any artist but with one major difference – once we've had those new thoughts we must evaluate them through the tools of psychological research. We must measure the effects of what we do. Evidence-based practice is fundamental to applied psychology. We're different from disciplines like philosophy because our thinking and analysis are not ends in themselves: they are aimed at action. We could be at the beginning of a new stage in psychology in which we cover more diverse areas, but in which divisions and specialisms converge. There will be much more cross-over between public and private work, and new psychologists must expect and plan for portfolio careers.'

He sees psychology as needing to follow an external agenda. 'What are people worried about? How can our profession help or address these issues? Fear of terrorism is a major concern in society – how can we help not just society in general but children and parents with their undoubted fears? We have a proactive role here, seeking to pre-empt rather than cure.'

To be even more futuristic, Irvine thinks we have a role in dealing with new technologies and the impact they will have on children and adults. 'What will psychology's role be in an era when artificial intelligence and augmented reality develop? Brain implants, self-conscious machines and robots, are all predicted in my children's lifetime. Surely psychology has a role in coping with these developments?'

And finally, what does the future hold for Irvine. 'I would like to record some of my experiences, lessons from life, my personal and professional journey – perhaps as a podcast for my grandchildren. Luckily one of them is a film maker, and my daughter a theatre director.'

Since he'd prepared his own answers, I can tell you that Irvine would have been a pilot if he hadn't been a psychologist, and his favourite film is *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. 'I love that film because the British Major taken prisoner simply refuses to accept his role as captive, and ultimately takes charge. Nothing could diminish his attitudes and sense of justice.'

# Twists and turns from Wales to Canada

Tracey Herlihey on the importance of persistence and networking in finding that 'dream job'

**W**hat do you want to be when you grow up? It's such a simple question, one that you have likely been asked or asked others countless times.

If you had asked 11-year-old Tracey this question, she would have told you she wanted to be a police officer when she grew up. 14-year-old Tracey wanted to be a lawyer. 16-year-old Tracey wanted to be a forensic scientist. But 16-year-old Tracey didn't select the appropriate options at A-level, so 18-year-old Tracey wanted to be a forensic psychologist. You might have noticed a theme in what I aspired to be, so you might be surprised to hear that 31-year-old Tracey from Cheshire is a Human Factors Specialist at the University Health Network in Toronto, Canada.

So how did I get here? What got me interested in psychology? And, did I ever grow up?

I first considered psychology when I was selecting my A-level courses at college. I remember going to the open evening and picking up a purple leaflet with one of those black clip-art stick figures that were so popular back in the late 1990s. The stick man was scratching his head and the text next to him read – 'Why do people think they're teapots?' I didn't know, but it was enough to make me want to find out. As it turned out, I still don't know why people think they're teapots, but I know a lot more about other stuff that I find to be just as interesting.

When selecting universities I was set on studying forensic psychology, but based on very good advice from my college tutor I decided to pursue a more general degree and specialise later on. I was excited to be accepted at Cardiff University for their Applied Psychology 'sandwich' degree (now renamed to 'degree with professional placement'). My plan was to spend the additional year working overseas in a forensic psychology placement. Forensic placements were coveted (and still are!). I reached out to potential supervisors overseas without any luck. While I was excited to be offered a forensic placement not far from Cardiff, I had to make the decision between my passion for forensics and my desire to spend time overseas. Overseas won. I applied to a number of different types of placements and was offered an occupational psychology placement in Australia and a research assistant position

at York University in Toronto, Canada. The position in Canada offered a monthly stipend, so I opted for the research position so I could afford to come home for Christmas. Little did I know that this seemingly flippant decision would go on to have the biggest impact on my career.

I finished my 'sandwich' year at the Centre for Vision Research in Toronto. I enjoyed the research and so upon

returning to Cardiff for the final year of my undergrad I opted to pursue a PhD. I had hoped to pursue my PhD in Canada (to return to my boyfriend, now husband), but unfortunately that wasn't meant to be (since my international applications were unsuccessful). Instead, I stayed in Cardiff and spent three fun

years investigating the visual guidance of walking. After finishing my PhD I emigrated to Canada. I had spent the last year of my PhD frantically writing, collecting data and applying for postdoctoral fellowships that would enable me to return to Toronto. I hadn't really considered other career options at this point. A postdoctoral fellowship seemed like the next logical thing to do. I landed myself a fellowship in cognitive neuroscience at the University of Toronto. This was quite the switch from my visual guidance of walking work, but it allowed me to continue with some patient research I had been trying to do on the side during my PhD.

As the end of my two-year fellowship approached I found myself asking the same question – what did I want to be? At this point, I knew three things: (1) I wanted my PhD to be recognised; (2) I did not want to go back to school, and (3) I wanted to stay in Toronto.

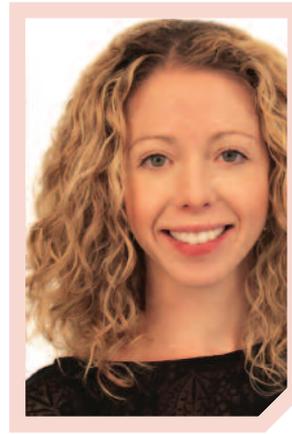
I considered a number of different career options and spent many months conducting informational interviews, attending networking events and skills workshops, joining 'Meetup' groups and

sending out applications. I considered careers in academia (why not? It's the next logical step), teaching (I had always enjoyed teaching during my PhD and then as a sessional instructor during my postdoc), management consulting (make lots of money), marketing or market research (what do you do with a PhD in psychology?), and project management (ditto).

I interviewed at worldwide management consulting firms and multinational technology corporations. Most interviews (and there weren't very many) were unsuccessful, some were, but there was often a roadblock (e.g. funding cuts) at the last hurdle, or timing issues (I was unwilling to move at the time I was offered a position). I was frustrated by the lack of recognition of the skillset I had developed over the course of my PhD and postdoctoral training. Many positions requested work experience but did not recognise the additional years spent in academia as such.

While attending a project management workshop I met a fellow Psych PhD and we got talking/ranting about the move from academia to industry. This is how I learned about the world of user experience (UX) research and a grant designed to help academics make the transition to industry. This impromptu conversation was a real turning point for me. I started to look into UX roles and applied for the grant (offered by Mitacs, an agency funded by the Canadian government). I landed myself a six-month fellowship that contributed to my salary at a small start-up UX firm. During my fellowship I took on a second sessional instructor role teaching psychology and design. The goal was to build on my skills learned in my new UX design role as well as continuing to expand my skillset as a teacher. Once my six months were up I was ready to move on. I had enjoyed my first step into industry, but realised that UX was not for me.

At this point I had learned that I loved applying psychology. The part of my UX role I enjoyed the most was collecting and analysing research data and, based on what we know about people, making



recommendations on how to improve the usability of products. The part I did not enjoy was the lack of impact: projects included improving a website that tracked parcels and restructuring a professional services firm's intranet to make things easier to find (yawn!). And so I found myself pondering again... what did I want to be?

I had been attending seminars hosted by the Human Factors Interest Group at the University of Toronto for some time and had recently attended a 'careers' luncheon. This is where I learned about my current company. I e-mailed one of the managers directly and asked for an informational interview. I wanted to learn whether my skillset would be appropriate and what I could do to improve my chances of moving into the field of human factors (I had previously been told I would have to complete a master's degree in human factors if I wanted to move into that field). The phone call went well, but the company had recently hired a number of summer students and a full-time employee so wouldn't be looking for new employees in the near future. This was in

April 2013. In May I received a message through LinkedIn asking if I would be interested in interviewing. I started my role as a Human Factors Specialist in July.

Why the long story? I hope it highlighted that there are many twists and turns in figuring out 'what you want to be when you grow up'. There are often many failed applications hiding in the shadows of successful ones, but these are often not talked about.

I hope it provides some inspiration and shows that there is light at the end of the career search tunnel. Each time I hit a roadblock, time spent reaching the block was not time wasted. Failed interviews were great practice. Poor career choices helped me figure out exactly what I did not want to do and what I enjoyed doing. Informational interviews helped me make some great contacts and perfect my résumé. I certainly hope that outlining the road to my current career provides some motivation to keep trying and adapting, because eventually you will find something that fits.

If I were to offer some advice it would be to network, network and network some more. I didn't get my current job because I applied to a posting on the company's website. The same goes for my previous job and my postdoc before that.

If networking in person isn't your thing, I get it, it isn't mine either. I did this a few times and it didn't work for me, so I did one-on-

one informational interviews instead. These worked much better. People were helpful; I found if they couldn't help me themselves, they would point me in the direction of someone they knew who they thought could.

Don't expect to find your dream job immediately. As you gain experience you will learn more about yourself, your interests, and your talents. From there your idea of your 'dream job' will evolve with you. And, when you finally do find a role that fits you, be prepared to give back and help others as I'm sure many will help you along your way.

"Poor career choices helped me figure out what I did not want to do"

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**Deadline** - 13/06/2016



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**University of Wolverhampton**

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**Salary** - £33,574 - £47,801 pa

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**Deadline** - 27/06/2016



### Chartered Occupational Psychologist

**Symbiotics Performance Solutions**

**(SPS Ltd trading as Resource Group)**

**Location** - Midlands - West

**Deadline** - 24/06/2016



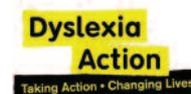
### Consulting Psychologists

**Dyslexia Action**

**Location** - South East

**Salary** - Competitive

**Deadline** - 15/06/2016



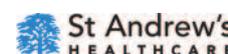
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