

'I was doing my childhood dream job, and I don't think it would have happened without psychology'

James Olav Hill is a psychology graduate and a freelance shooting producer director for television



Since I first started studying psychology, at A-level, I have been fascinated by people: why we do what we do, act the way we act, say what we say and feel how we feel. This passion grew during my time studying psychology at university and I'm blessed that I now get to use my psychological background in my career every day. The most basic function of my job is to film people; ranging from families who have never had a camera pointed at them, to very experienced talent who are filmed for a living. But there's more to my story.

I grew up with two brothers who are seven and eleven years older than me. They introduced me to amazing cinema from a very early age. I fell in love with all the different stories and was drawn to how these films were able to tell them so vividly. As I struggled with severe dyslexia, trying to read was embarrassing and filled me with a lot of anxiety, so I gravitated more towards film.

When people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I didn't say a fireman or a cowboy; I'd say a director. As I got older I started messing around with the family camcorder. I would make videos with my friends, editing together little movies by playing the camcorder through the TV and quickly pressing 'record' and 'stop' on a VHS player. I enjoyed it, but with age came the realisation that wanting to be like Spielberg or Scorsese was the same as wanting to be a rockstar. I turned my academic attention to English and intended to study it at university.

I struggled through my GCSEs, and when I came to decide on which subjects to take for A-level I was presented with the opportunity to study psychology. I had always been aware of psychology as my mother had worked in child welfare, and now lectured on childhood development at a university in Birmingham. But I knew little about the subject. I decided to give it a go, as it sounded interesting and I didn't think it would get in the way of my English studies.

I initially struggled as I did with every subject, getting red every time I fumbled through a passage when asked to read out loud. But then I took to it, and even won a school award for the most improved student. Meanwhile I was failing in English and after getting an E grade on my AS-level exam I started to worry it wasn't going to be my path. I got an extracurricular tutor, studied for a year, retook the exam... and got a lower mark than I had the first time.

I was lost. I loved psychology but still wanted to pursue stories. Then it dawned on me. The reason I enjoyed psychology as much as I did was that I was studying the core of any story: people. Instead of examining make-believe narratives and premises, I was analysing real people's journeys through the world, and not only that, *why* they were on that journey.

After scraping together a passing grade and begging my university over the phone to let me in, I was accepted to study psychology at degree level.

Once there, learning no longer seemed a chore. Psychology helped me become more empathetic, in turn allowing me to create a more authentic connection with people. In my job this has made me more able to comfort and support contributors who are going through difficult times. I have filmed with people who are going through a divorce, who have lost their homes and whose children have been taken away.

I commonly film with people over several months and conduct many interviews, which often turn into what I like to think of as therapy sessions for some. The people I film get to tell their worries and problems to someone who is really listening. I'm always trying to use my psychological knowledge to gain a deeper understanding behind their stories. Often this results in people sharing a lot of bottled up pain. My degree taught me the importance of airing these issues, and while I feel I'm able to help a lot of people do this, one of the most challenging aspects of my job is finding the right balance of care and support while remaining professional and impartial.

Psychology taught me to take a step back and investigate moments from a more clinical perspective. It helps in getting to know the back story... it pushes me to look back into people's past and allows me to see how it is shaping their future.

My degree also helped me understand how my dyslexia could be an advantage, rather than the burden I had always viewed it as. For my dissertation, I investigated the effects of stress on the symptoms of dyslexia, and I made an unpredicted finding: that dyslexic participants were better at the creative task than non-dyslexic participants, in both stressed *and* non-stressed conditions. This has always stuck with me. I truly believe my dyslexia gives me a more creative way of looking at the world, connecting stories and seeing patterns in narrative where others may not. I've also noticed during my career that when the pressure is on and things get stressful, my ability to work is not hindered and I'm more adaptable than others.

While I was at university, I continued messing around with filming and progressed to using more sophisticated equipment. I learned more about cameras and editing, about how an idea becomes footage and how that is put together. Once I graduated I started looking into how I would be able to do this for a living, while also being able to work with people and tell real stories. I discovered the television industry and it seemed like a perfect fit. I started working voluntarily at a few television companies to gain experience, crashing on friends' couches and eating a lot of pasta. This led to an entry-level paid position as a runner.

One day I was assisting a shooting producer and director (driving, carrying kit, getting tea and lunch, packing away equipment). During some downtime he kindly showed me how a broadcast camera worked. I practised his lessons every time I could, evenings and weekends, and gradually learned to shoot for broadcast. As I continued with the show, they allowed me to receive potential contributors, which meant interviewing them on camera and editing the footage. I was amazed and elated as I discovered I was able to tell stories through questions and a lens better than I would have been able to with a pen and paper.

I progressed very quickly and became a shooting producer director on Discovery's highest rated show at the age of 24. I have been doing this a number of years now and am truly blessed that I have been able to pursue such a satisfying and varied career. I have found myself on construction sites, eco retreats, live studios, goldmines in the Yukon and homesteads in North Carolina. Not only does my career allow for travel and such varied experience, it also affords me time off to travel and pursue my personal projects.

There have been some tough times. Breaking into the industry was very hard, but I was one of the lucky ones. I have met many people who have been runners for years, or who have given up on TV altogether as they were never able to step up and weren't able to support themselves as a freelance runner.

I've also struggled with meeting many people in their darkest hour and not being able to help them as much as I would have liked. One memory that stays with me was when I filmed a couple in their seventies who had been swindled out of all their savings. I was able to talk to them and support them as well as giving them a voice, but I couldn't do anything beyond that. I have been witness to many people breaking down in tears. Many times this has been constructive, or the first step in assisting someone, but when I have had to leave someone as I met them, it stays with me.

Recently I was in a bar in the USA during some downtime on location. The TV was showing an episode of a show that I had worked on. People began cheering and discussing a scene that I had shot and directed, and it struck me that I couldn't have imagined when I was making stupid videos with my friends that it would have led to this. I was doing my childhood dream job, and I don't think it would have happened without psychology.