

Championing psychology

Ian Florance talks to Jean Gross CBE

Jean Gross received a CBE in the latest New Years Honours List. In 2008 she was appointed England's Communication Champion for Children and has helped to improve services for children and young people who have speech, language and communication needs. We asked her how her training in psychology has influenced her fascinating career.

What sparked your interest in psychology?

I was brought up in a good socialist

household and wanted to 'help' people. Nursing appealed, but I was told I was too academic! Then I wanted to be a doctor, but my girls' grammar school did not offer the necessary A-levels. It's hard to believe that now. So psychology seemed like an alternative: an interesting, scientific route.

What was your first step into the professional world of psychology?

I followed one traditional route of psychology degree, teaching then a postgraduate qualification in educational psychology. My first educational psychology job was in north London. I couldn't drive so I rode a moped with my test kit strapped to the front, and wore vintage fur coats. When it rained I would turn up at a school looking like a drowned rabbit wearing a crash helmet.

Why did you move on from that?

I eventually got promoted to be Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP) in Bristol but, like so many PEPs, also managed a range of other children's services. From there I joined the then National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies as their special educational needs expert, and later had a wider brief for 'overcoming barriers to achievement' with the Primary National Strategy.

That was a fascinating time, giving me the opportunity to work with government as well as local authorities across the country. I was able to try to enact on a larger scale some of the things we had tried to do when I was working in Bristol, such as work in schools to develop

children's emotional intelligence, efforts to improve the way children with special needs get taught, and the introduction of evidence-based programmes to tackle early literacy and numeracy difficulties.

I was then approached by the KPMG Foundation to develop and head up the Every Child a Reader programme, which brought business and eventually government funding to allow 20,000 six-year-old children a year (at the peak of the programme) to have one-to-one specialist help from a Reading Recovery teacher.

I wouldn't have guessed at the start of my career that I would end up working for a firm of accountants! In fact, they were great to work with, though the experience did bring home to me the vast disparity between their flower-filled marble offices and the public sector offices I was used to.

We then set up a new charity to continue to take an interest in Every Child a Reader and develop a parallel programme for numeracy, Every Child Counts. In that period I started to work with other charities to develop programmes for oral language, so when the role of Communication Champion for Children came up it was natural step to apply.

What have been the highs and lows of your career?

Being the government's Communication Champion was a strange role. I once looked up 'champion' on Google Images to explain it in a presentation, and it came up with images of Ann Widdecombe in full ballroom splendour on *Strictly*, and a prize cow. I'm not sure which one applies to me.

The focus of the Communication Champion role was to promote the importance of developing all children's communication skills and getting better help for those who need it, by talking to everyone I could: from ministers to local authority and health service commissioners to schools to parents. The highs were the fantastic practice I saw



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across the country, and the chance to influence policy in this area. We succeeded in placing communication and language at the heart of the new early-years curriculum. Ofsted now include it in their school inspection framework, and I am hopeful that the revised National Curriculum for school-age children will include oracy as a key element.

Other highs were having my final report featured in *Private Eye* (in a good way), and the chance to appear on the Radio 4 *Today* programme to talk about the growing problem of language delay in children brought up in disadvantaged communities.

The lows were experiencing the lack of joined-up planning across local authorities and the NHS for children with speech, language and communication needs, and witnessing the savage cuts to advisory teachers and speech and language therapists that has followed the change of government.

What drove your career choices?

Being an educational psychologist meant I spent a lot of time with children who experience disadvantage of one kind or another. Since then I have always wanted to make a difference to children who don't have much going for them in their lives. To make that difference, we need to support parenting, develop oral language skills, make sure these children do learn to read and become numerate by seven, and build children and young people's social and emotional skills including the crucial dimension of self-efficacy. I'm motivated by evidence on 'what works' in all these areas, and my career choices have been driven by trying to embed what works in local and national policy and spending.

How has your work been informed by psychological knowledge?

All my work has psychology at its heart. I still remember dissecting brains in my undergraduate degree, for example, so I'm comfortable with frontal lobes and amygdalas and their role in executive function and emotional regulation. I know enough to rubbish the fashion in education for 'brain-based learning' (what else do people think we learn with – our big toes?). I like reading chunky research and I know one end of an RCT from another. I have always tried to build in robust evaluation of all the initiatives I have been involved in.

The SEAL programme (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) is the piece of work that has interested me perhaps more than anything else. It's rooted in psychology and basically aims

FEATURED JOB

Job Title: Clinical Psychologist
Employer: Zero Three Care



'The first of our services opened in early 2005,' says Dr Katy Arscott, a Chartered Clinical Psychologist who is one of the three partners who set up Zero Three Care Homes LLP. 'We offer high-quality care services to adults with a learning disability and complex needs.'

Zero Three's website is unusually focused on people and personal issues, saying one of the keys to the organisation is 'to employ compassionate, caring, trustworthy individuals, who see their role as much more than a job'. According to Katy, 'That's the joy of running your own organisation – you can reflect your own ideas and beliefs.'

The organisation is small, with 50 beds across seven sites in Essex. 'Most of our clients are 18–25 years old and extremely active. All have communication issues and challenging behaviour, and many have autism. Our original aim was to bring clients who had been moved out of borough closer to their families and friends. There weren't the specialist facilities to achieve this in the county.'

Katy runs the psychology team. 'It is important that psychology breathes through the organisation. I and one other psychologist, supported by a behavioural support worker – with one more to join in October – specialise in collecting data on behaviours then working closely with staff teams to develop and implement plans. We focus on ensuring clients improve their quality of life and achieve their potential – we do this by managing challenging behaviours and ensuring the safety of all.'

What sort of person are you looking for? 'Someone who doesn't believe "I'm the expert", but works with staff teams, communicates well and respects the skills of others. It's an ideal role for a newly qualified clinical psychologist, maybe applying for a first role, who would be open to our person-centred approach and who will react well to a structured environment, but is also full of new ideas as to how we can engage our clients and move them forward. There's some individual client work, but a lot of the role will be working with staff to design programmes and support the implementation of these. It's not a crisis-based role, but a proactive one in which there's continuity of psychology input. Each psychologist takes responsibility for a number of homes, so they get to know the staff and service well.'

Are there any other points about what would make an ideal candidate? 'This is an applied role, focused on how we can make a difference to clients' lives, so passion, enthusiasm, energy and personal commitment are essential.'

You can find this job on p.632, and with many others on www.psychapp.co.uk.

to teach children a simple psychology course – everything from how emotional arousal and anger work to the stages in grief and loss. I recruited brilliant psychologists, like Deb Michel and Julie Casey, to write the materials.

I try to keep up with research on how children learn to read. I'm fascinated by the research on how children's secure attachment and communication skills develop in the earliest years through warm reciprocal interaction with caregivers. All this has informed my work and is motivating me to focus on what we need to do to support parents in how they interact with babies, so that every child will get the best start in life.

What's next?

Being Communication Champion was my last 'proper job' I think. I'm now part of

the ranks of the quasi-retired, working more or less full-time on whole range of things that interest me, from MP Graham Allen's Early Intervention work to an excellent SEN programme called Achievement for All, and continued government advisory work on SEN and on early years.

What or who inspires you?

I have always had professional heroes and heroines, many of them psychologists or in related fields – people like John Bowlby, Michael Rutter, Stephen Scott, Kathy Sylva, Geoff Lindsay, Maggie Snowling, and my much-missed friend Barbara Maines. They are all people who provide or process solid research evidence so that it make a difference to children. They also seem to me people with a moral purpose, and that is important to me.

'I'm inspired by my own ignorance'

Ian Florance talks to **Tom Stafford** (University of Sheffield) – academic, author, blogger and more

'I'm not sure I've got a life story to tell,' said Tom Stafford when I first approached him for an interview but, having convinced him to give it a try, it became clear there was plenty to cover in his route to becoming an author, a prolific online presence and a lecturer in psychology and cognitive science at Sheffield University.

'I went to a small village school: there were four people in my year. We moved to Winchester, and after a secondary school in Southampton I started studying history at the University of Sheffield. It became clear that I didn't have the talent to write historically. I'd done some psychology in my first year so I moved courses and did a psychology degree.

'There I was really switched on to the excitement of research into cognitive science. Most notably, Andrew Mayes did a neuropsychology course in my second year, and always used to turn up from the hospital slightly out of breath, wearing a double-breasted blazer. He would talk with as much passion about what wasn't known as about what was known. I was hooked. In the summer of my second year I applied to do research on temporal-lobe amnesia with his group. That was my first research job and so really the place where my psychology career started. I've always wanted to thank Andrew for giving me that chance.

'At the end of my degree I didn't have a plan. I rarely make a plan! I didn't want to do a PhD since I wasn't excited about the topics on offer. I went into the department to check my e-mails for the last time, one of my lecturers saw me and this led to a part-time research post with Professor Kevin Gurney on a neural network project. I started doing a master's degree and in the end wrote it up as a PhD.'

'Psychology has spent years trying to be physics'

Tom's books and his online writing (www.idiolect.org.uk and www.mindhacks.com) are marked by two qualities: the ability to make complex topics as clear to as wide an audience as possible, and a sense that he's not just explaining ideas but attempting to challenge thinking and get a reaction. Tom answers questions like that: pausing to get his answers clear and precise but not shying away from challenging opinions or admitting ignorance. It seems you can trace this approach back to his school days.

'I suppose I was quite academic but I always thought I understood things less well than others at school. I had to try to simplify things to understand them. So, when I write now I do the same thing. A typical model of popular scientific communication is "Let me tell you something amazing which will blow your mind". Black holes and dark matter are examples. A typical model of much psychological writing is "Let me show you something mundane and reveal how complex it is". You could say I got fascinated with cognitive science because one of its guiding principles is "You don't need a complex plan to explain something that seems complex. Interactions between simple things will generate it." Neurons are an obvious example. I try to understand complexity through simplicity.'

On his idiolect blog you'll find reports on Tom's academic work but you'll also read quotations from Aldous Huxley, Shakespeare and Orwell and, as I write this, a post headed 'What if an evil corporation knew all about you' [not to mention an announcement of a psychology in the pub session!]. I suggest that some of the ways he talks about psychology are overtly political and ethical.

'Most undergraduates start psychology wanting to either

understand themselves or understand other people. At its best this can lead to the idea that psychologists help other people and themselves, at its worst that they fix people. Of course I still have some of these desires to help, but I see psychology as helping us to understand what it means to live. Study of mind and brain are linked to our physical experience in the world and our culture. We tend to be taught quite a narrow version of psychology and it can be a struggle to remember that big picture.'

This seems to link in with what I've read about Tom's 2010 e-book *The Narrative Escape*. The narrative of the world is pretty compelling and it's easy to let it carry you along. I'm as prone to that as anyone. So I'm fascinated by people who resist it and step outside it into their own story.' In another interview Tom has nominated Peter Tatchell as an example of someone who does this. 'The world is a painful place and if you are politically or ethically motivated then right action requires a right understanding of the world.' I suggest that sounds almost

Buddhist. 'Well, perhaps that's because I've been reading some Buddhist writings. The topic of narratives might seem a long way from traditional psychology but, at base, it's not. It's addressing philosophy of mind – how far are our decisions instinctual, how far deliberate? How does our brain work? Decision making is a core research interest of mine. But you can't just leave these concerns in the lab nor can you just apply them ad hoc because they're "science". Science is a modern idol. We practise savantism, making celebrities of people because they know something technical. There's an important domain of life which is not amenable to technical explanation. If I had to express a hope for psychology in the future it would be that it re-established itself as a human science. Psychology has spent years trying to be physics without any great success.'

'Science is inherently open access'

After his PhD, Tom had no plans to return to university. 'I wanted to write. I moved to London in 2003, worked on a magazine and got involved in blogging about psychology and science, something that wasn't very common at that time. I got reacquainted with an old school friend, Matt Webb, who one day made a joke about cortex



hacking. Basically you can't improve a product, an object or a system without understanding how it works.' I suggested, showing my age, that in my youth everyone knew you could make vinyl record players sound better by taping a halfpenny on the playing arm.

'Exactly. You improved it but you had to understand something about how a vinyl disc and its needle works to make that improvement. So why not do the same with the brain? Matt and I both got excited by this and sent a proposal to publishers. I think Matt's original plan was that I'd write the book, but we ended up writing *Mind Hacks* together. It helps people test neuroscience theories on their own brains.'

Writing the book, Tom updated himself on research and talked to lots of people 'including technocrats in the IT industry. It sold very well and we set up the Mind Hacks website.' Some of Tom's more recent material is published under creative commons arrangements rather than protected by traditional copyright. 'It's open access because a science like psychology is inherently open access. That's what blogging is.'

The intelligence of movement

'I had a job at the BBC. Working as a journalist can be fun, but I found the experience of writing *Mind Hacks* had made me want to go deeper. I was drawn back to academic life. In addition I was pretty poor and worn out. So in 2005 I moved back to Sheffield and got my present role in the university.'

Tom says the research he's doing is inspired by the fact that the brain evolved to move us around. 'If you can understand the intelligence of movement then you can perhaps begin to understand intelligence more widely. For instance, we look at how people learn skills and how this translates into movement, but we also look at how decisions are made, which links this back to my interest in life narratives. How much is instinctual or habit or training, how much is deliberative? I also work with a neuroscience group on areas such as robotics. And I'm concentrating more on my research work over the next few years while planning longer-term writing projects.'

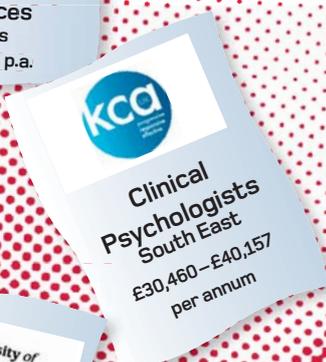
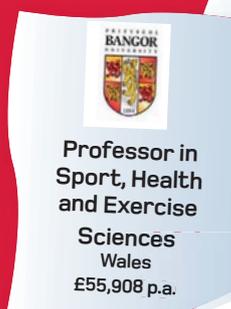
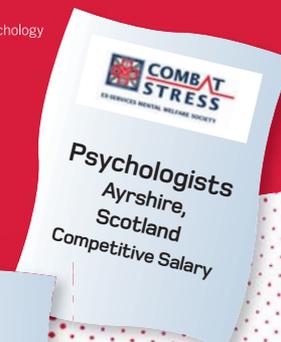
Tom is also involved in outreach and media activities for his department. 'I like to help. I understand journalists, having worked in the media for a while, and know what they want. When they try to reach out, I think psychologists often underestimate the intelligence, but overestimate the precise knowledge of people. Hence a lot of attempts to write more popular books lurch between condescension and sections of very long, technical vocabulary.'

Since Tom had to head off for his regular football, we didn't have time to discuss Tom's impressive list of papers and articles or his two new books – *Control Your Dreams* and *Explore Your Blind Spot* – one a travel guide to lucid dreaming, the other an examination of the construction of consciousness despite missing information. I suggested to him that he didn't sound like a neuroscientist. With an audible smile, if that's possible, he answered, 'Maybe I'm not one.' And maybe no one fits the growing media cliché of the cognitive or neuro scientist. Tom approaches his subject from unusual angles and then communicates his ideas in a uniquely engaging way, one that spills over the traditional confines of what psychology is and the material it takes into account.

I asked him to sum up what motivates him. He thought for a while and replied: 'I'm inspired by my own ignorance.'



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