

## 'In sport 90 per cent of what you do is psychological'

Ian Florance talks to **Dr Rhonda Cohen**, Head of the London Sport Institute at Middlesex University

**S**port dominated English society in 2012 to a greater extent than in any year since 1966. Interviews and articles raised the profile of the psychology of elite sports as well as the issue of exercise motivation in the general population. It seems a good time to talk on the phone to Dr Rhonda Cohen, Head

of the London Sport Institute at Middlesex University, about her career in psychology.

Rhonda grew up in Rhode Island, New England. I asked her what initially interested her in psychology. 'High school sociology introduced me to the way factors such as gender affect people. I also loved reading as a teenager and I was fascinated by descriptions of character development in certain novels. For example, I read *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, Joanne Greenberg's 1964 novel about a teenage girl with schizophrenia, in the same year that one of my classmates killed herself by jumping off a multi-storey car park. Obviously that really affected me.'

Rhonda was interested enough in the mind to start her degree (psychology with a minor in education) at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts: 'It's the only US university where Freud spoke, which is why I went there. He was visiting the States in 1909 along with Jung having been invited by G. Stanley Hall. When asked about the symbolism of his smoking, he was said to have replied "sometimes a cigar is only a cigar". Psychology degrees are sometimes disappointing until you get to specialise. I got fascinated by psychometric testing and abnormal psychology once we got on to them.'

After her second year of university, Rhonda moved back to Rhode Island when she married an Englishman. 'I advanced into the final year of university through a series of advanced

placement tests and began studying for my final year before starting postgraduate work at Rhode Island College. However, the economy was difficult so we made the decision to move to the UK.' Was that a difficult transition? 'Moving to London from small, quieter Rhode Island was challenging. English people were harder to get to know than Americans, but once they got used to you were loyal and built deeper relationships.' Rhonda went through the graduate management trainee programme for HR at Marks and Spencer, '...introducing me to organisational psychology. I enjoyed working in business and, though it wasn't the right route, I learnt a lot about management and organisation, which I found I had a passion for.'

Rhonda's next career move was an accident. 'I had a young family and was considering a business making cakes for special occasions. I also thought about doing some part-time teaching because, though I didn't have any teaching qualifications, it seemed a route into educational psychology. Anyway, I rang up the local college to see if they ran courses in cake decorating. In passing, I asked if they offered any teaching qualifications. When I mentioned my experience in psychology they immediately asked if I could teach A-levels in the subject and, a week later, I was at the college doing exactly that. I stayed for around 10 years. Unfortunately the cake-making course was on the same night so I never got to attend it.'

How did Rhonda's psychological interests link to sport? 'I played tennis at high school and university. At the age of 18, I got the urge to go skydiving and loved it. Then on holidays we'd go white water rafting, snowmobiling, jet skiing and kayaking. I've been down the bobsled run at Lillehammer and went off-roading for my birthday in order to get a last British Off Road Driving Association (BORDA) licence. I liked pushing it a bit! Drag racing was a big influence. I was a psychologist in a drag racing team for six



for students

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In particular, search our archive for 'The journey to undergraduate psychology', 'What do psychologists do?', and see

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years – we became FIA European Champions for four of them. The team travelled all around Europe and even raced in the USA. It was exhilarating. Think about the mindset required for a driver who travels at 360mph in under five seconds. My passion for psychology and my love of extreme sport seemed to come together. I'd have done a lot more of those sorts of activities if I'd got interested in them when I was younger. They teach you to trust in yourself. You feel "If I can handle that I can handle anything".

During the drag racing years, Rhonda qualified as an advanced fitness instructor and completed an MSc in Health and Psychology. 'At that time there was no such thing as a sports psychology master's. My dissertation, on sports addiction, was written under the supervision of Hannah Steinberg, who was a member of the Sport and Exercise Psychology Section within the British Psychological Society. I got involved in writing modules for a health and fitness foundation degree and now I lead the London Sport Institute, which is a department within Middlesex University. I'm immensely proud of it. We have over 500 students, a range of internationally recognised research, postgraduate programmes and consultancy activities. It says something about the growing importance of sports science and the department that we have almost 100 per cent employability.

'We work with a number of national and international teams and have close links with Spurs and Saracens. I think we've really innovative in creating a synergy between education and major sports clubs. We've developed degree programmes and even a university technical college with Spurs. We're now moving our high-performance labs to Saracens' stadium at Allianz Park.'

Rhonda has also been continuing with her own development. She has a specific interest in psychological aspects of extreme sports. 'Last year I finished my PhD on the relationship between personality, sensation seeking and reaction time in participation in sport, and I'm writing a book to be published in 2014.' These interests have led to a number of TV appearances. 'The media are fascinated by this area, and I found the Society media training very useful. I've worked on TV programmes like *Daredevils – Life on the Edge* and *Hidden Talent*. I get to meet a lot of different people from different sports. Perhaps the highlight was being interviewed by Michael Johnson for BBC's *Inside Sport* on the psychology of downhill skiers during the Winter Olympics. Social media are an increasingly important tool for psychologists, so I'm very active on Twitter and LinkedIn for instance.'

How do you think sport psychology will develop? 'Sport was once thought of as competition where players abide by

rules and regulations, and win according to a points system. Now, it includes people who are BASE jumping off cliffs, flying through the air in winged suits or running ultra-marathons in the desert over five days. Sport psychology is growing because it teaches individuals to challenge their comfort zones through finely tuned skills, such as focus, stress control and confidence. In addition, it is incorporating technology to help us advance the connection between thought and movement. What I would love to see in the future is a real involvement and acceptance for applied sport psychologists developing positive mindsets starting with, for example, children and exercise, youth teams and teamwork, and helping adults with challenge and risk taking.'

Rhonda concludes with a heartfelt plea. 'Every team at whatever level should have a sport and exercise psychologist working with them. Sport psychology to me is about getting the best out of yourself. It is my passion, and the enthusiasm I have for it gives me so much energy! As they always say, "in sport 90 per cent of what you do is psychological" so post-Olympics, there are plenty of things to do.'

**I** Ian Florance, the freelance journalist who conducts many of the interviews for the 'Careers' section, has a new novel out. *A Glass Rope* is available through the usual online outlets.

## Spreading our ideas more widely

Ian Florance talks to **Dr Birgitta Gatersleben**, Senior Lecturer and Course Director of the MSc in Environmental Psychology at the University of Surrey

There aren't divisions, sections or special interest groups for environmental psychologists within the Society so, when I talked to Birgitta about this growing multidisciplinary area and her involvement in it, I started with a very basic question.

What is environmental psychology? It was called architectural psychology in the '70s when it started and focused on architecture, design, urban planning and related areas. Architects were trying to understand what people wanted and needed from buildings and urban spaces. Its name changed as it began to address sustainability, consumer behaviour and the effect of environments on our

psychological functioning, among other issues. It draws on different psychological subdisciplines including cognitive, occupational, social and health psychology, as well many other areas of study and practice. An environmental research project might involve architects, educationists, engineers, communications and technology experts.

How does it relate to ergonomics? There are no hard dividing lines but ergonomics tends to focus on designing objects, systems and environments so that they fit in with the way people actually behave and perceive the world. By contrast, environmental psychology is about larger spaces and the two-way

interaction between the environment and people – what environments mean to people and how that affects the interaction. Ergonomics tends to have a more functional focus on health, safety and individual performance, focusing on designing systems. Environmental psychology focuses on creating workspaces that promote well-being for individuals and groups.

People know about ergonomics from the design of workstations but scratch their heads when they hear the term 'environmental psychologist'. While we are interested in the workstation, for instance by studying how plants and window views affect performance and well-being, we are also interested in the

social, organisational and environmental context of the workstation as these also affect performance and satisfaction.

How did you get interested in the area?

I grew up in the Netherlands and initially studied architecture at the University of Delft. I was good at maths, liked drawing and making things and wanted to study something technical. I quickly discovered that I was actually at an arts university and needed to find a new subject. A friend of mine had started psychology in Leiden, I went to a lecture on old people, the environment and exercise and was hooked.

My final dissertation looked at the effects of the natural environment on people's moods. It was funded by a local authority who were interested in developing local woodlands.

Were you an outdoor type of person?

No, but I discovered I loved working outside. And I also found that I loved research – setting up experiments, crunching numbers in SPSS. I knew by the time I'd finished my degree that

I wanted to be an academic. My PhD in Groningen was a multidisciplinary project into sustainable consumption. In 1998 my dissertation supervisor mentioned to me that the University of Surrey

was advertising a postdoctoral position for a 'rather vague multidisciplinary project'. I applied for it, got it and I've been here ever since.

To me environmental psychology is a fascinating subject. It has huge practical implications and meaning for our everyday lives.

Presumably there are advantages in working in such a small, focused discipline.

It's very international, with very specific country niches. You can, in effect,

know everyone in the area. This also means that there's less competition for environmental psychology jobs, funding and projects.

The University of Surrey is an acknowledged research centre for its study. Professor Terence Lee established environmental psychology at Surrey and gathered together many of the

environmental psychologists working in the UK. These included David Canter who started out as an architectural psychologist. They set up the first MSc in Environmental Psychology in the world in 1973, which is still the only one in the UK.

This seems a very different approach from more conventional psychologist training routes.

It isn't possible to become a Chartered Environmental Psychologist. We accept people from many disciplines on the master's course, for instance architects and planners who want to approach their craft differently or have become more interested in the people aspects of design, and engineers interested in sustainability. They don't have to have had psychological training.

So, we're actually using our course to spread psychological ideas more widely among other professionals, enabling them to apply psychology in their activities. Of course, psychologists on the course have their eyes opened to the theories and practices of other disciplines. They learn from each other.

Although we are quite small in numbers compared with some of the sections and divisions in the BPS, we are growing, and the work of environmental psychologists is becoming increasingly recognised and valued by other psychologists as well as those outside the discipline. We've been building good links



Birgitta Gatersleben

## Out of the shadow of others

**Mark Taylor** is a third-year PhD student at the Institute of Education and Birkbeck. **Dr Angelica Ronald** is his supervisor, and a senior lecturer at Birkbeck.

Here Mark puts her on the spot about having a research career in psychology.

Mark: Right, Dr Ronald, I've got lots of questions. I hope you've done your homework!

I'm about to finish my PhD, and I'm keen to have a research career. What tips have you got for someone moving into an academic career in psychology?

Angelica: You are looking for postdoc positions, and, quite understandably, it can be a nerve-wracking time, because there are many different options. It's good to be pragmatic about what's available. Be sure to work with people who will give you respect and freedom to do what you want. Don't just say yes to anything!

Mark: I just had my first job interview for after my PhD, and was offered the position. I thought about it, but the proportion of my time in that post required for admin and teaching was going to completely stall my research career. So I turned it down.

Angelica: I think you did the right thing. It's important to know your own worth by picking a job that you really want to do – a day can feel very long in the wrong post! There is always an element of luck and learning as you go along.

Mark: Yes, I've definitely learnt things during my PhD that I wish I had known from

the start. You read so many papers as an undergraduate, but you don't realise how many man-hours go into preparing a psychology paper until you actually do it for yourself! I've also learnt that you need to keep a thick skin, because you're likely to get rejected from your first choice journal, and reviewers can be pretty blunt. But it was a great day when I got my first first-authored paper accepted for publication – it made it all worth it.

Angelica: Yes, Tony Charman [Mark's other supervisor] and I were very proud when you got your first paper accepted [M.J. Taylor et al. (2013)], and in a leading journal too, *Psychological Medicine*. I was always advised as a PhD student that the most important thing in this job is to have good ideas for psychological research, and everything follows from that. Your paper got accepted because you had dared to test a new hypothesis. Most work on autism and ADHD overlap has been cross-sectional, so I was not surprised that your novel analyses

with the Society. For example, my colleague David Uzzell chaired the BPS group that organised the Psychology and Climate Change Policy Conference on behalf of the Society and the Royal Society for Arts in 2009 [see also [tinyurl.com/uzzell2010](http://tinyurl.com/uzzell2010)]. This was directed specifically at government policy makers and sought to demonstrate the value of psychology to this pressing issue.

There's a strong move in UK universities to develop multidisciplinary studies, and we fit into that trend. I lecture on courses in other departments, such as engineering.

Is environmental psychology growing? We're bucking the national trend in that our master's student numbers are growing. They come from all over the world and have very different motives for studying the area. Some have very strong environmental, political and ethical commitments, and this can lead to interesting and challenging conversations.

Your website lists a lot of different organisations who are involved in research.

Two current PhD projects highlight that variety. One, with funding from the National Trust among others, looks at how birdsong affects people. The Royal Horticultural Society have part-funded another project into garden design.

The five-year multidisciplinary Resolve project into lifestyles, values and

the environment involves researchers from the Centre for Environmental Studies, psychology, sociology and economics, looking at issues ranging from teenage consumerism to mindfulness and consumerism. We're working with the EDEN project on a survey of sustainable household consumption patterns. We are also undertaking research examining the attitudes and practices of Shell oil rig workers to sustainability issues both on North Sea platforms and in their homes. Two other strands include transport and restorative environments – how natural environments, for instance, affect moods and creativity. I can only touch on the range of areas we research.

Since students come from such a wide range of backgrounds and work on so many different areas, the careers they go on to are equally varied from design-related jobs to transport planning.

### Summing up

The idea that psychology has a real opportunity to spread its ideas, influence public debate and inform policy has come up a great deal in interviews we've published in *The Psychologist*. Birgitta's hugely enthusiastic description of environmental psychology – an area where basic psychological concepts are used to inform an issue of critical public importance – struck me as a particularly fruitful approach. I think we'll be hearing a lot more about it in the future.

looking at how traits of autism and ADHD interact across childhood got published.

Mark: I'm blushing now! I have to admit it was a highlight, which brings me on to my next question – what's been your favourite point of your career, and the worst?

Angelica: In the second year of my PhD, I developed chronic fatigue and had it for about four months. I recovered well and got my PhD done in time. Now I always look after myself. In a way, it was a helpful lesson for the rest of my career in terms of maintaining a balance.

Fruitful collaborations are probably one of the best aspects of this job. That includes having great PhD students and postdocs. I've been really lucky to have amazing mentors, such as my PhD supervisors Robert Plomin and Francesca Happé, as well as Mark Johnson and Paul Lichtenstein.

"study what you most enjoy"

How about you? What have you found fun and challenging about doing a PhD?

Mark: I think the part I found most surprisingly difficult at first is getting to know other more senior scientists. It's daunting to approach other academics at conferences. I found the most effective way to get to know faculty is through going to journal clubs, offering to give talks, and helping out with research-based activities.

But I don't regret going to conferences and also training courses. As well as having trips to Rhode Island, Toronto, Edinburgh, San Sebastian, Colorado and Marseilles, I have now had lots of experience speaking publicly to lots of different types of audience, and getting to hear informal feedback. I've had some surprisingly useful comments in the unlikelyst of places, like in the toilet queue and passport control!

Finally can I just ask what's your one

message for a happy and successful academic career?

Angelica: You saved the hardest question for last! It's a cliché, but being true to yourself is worth it in academia because science values new ideas and perspectives. Being different is what can shape a career. The point of science is to do new things, and it is easiest to do research you find interesting; so study what you most enjoy, and don't feel you need to work just in the shadow of others.

### Reference

Taylor, M.J., Charman, T., Robinson, E.B. et al. (2013). Developmental associations between traits of autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: A genetically-informative, longitudinal twin study. *Psychological Medicine*, 43, 8, 1735–1746.

For more information on their research, visit Birkbeck's Genes Environment Lifespan laboratory webpage: [www.gel.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.gel.bbk.ac.uk)



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