

# 'I'm lucky that I've always known what I wanted to do'

Ian Florance interviews **Doyin Atewologun**

**D**r Doyin Atewologun originally suggested an article on the Division of Occupational Psychology's (DOP) Leadership Development Programme, but her work with the British Psychological Society also involves the Diversity and Inclusion at Work Working Group. We settled down to talk about these and other topics in a pleasant coffee shop on the Mile End Road.



'I've always known what I wanted to do – work with and understand people. When I was 11 or 12 my aunt told me that that was exactly what she did – she was a child psychologist working at a school. It made me very proud to be affiliated with such an encouraging and thoughtful profession.'

Like a lot of Nigerian children with her background, Doyin was sent to the UK to do her A-levels. 'The aim was to be an international student dividing time between the UK and Nigeria. My cousins were returning to the UK at the same time, and I ended up living with them and my aunt in Northampton.'

Doyin made an early decision to be an occupational psychologist. 'At the time I would have said I wanted to work with "normal" people rather than the ill or with children. Anyway, after A-levels I took a year out and worked in HR in Benin. I had done some research, so my psychology degree at Birmingham didn't surprise me as it does some students – it certainly interested me as I discovered the reality of areas such as neuropsychology.'

Doyin then took another gap year working for what is now Connexions. 'I deferred a place at Nottingham on an Occupational Psychology MSc to get the ESRC funding I'd qualified for with a first class degree. Nottingham had a good reputation but the classes felt too big for me. This made it difficult to connect with a wider group although I made friends there. Students should see their degree and postgraduate years

as an opportunity to set up a peer network which can be useful throughout their careers.'

Did you want to be an applied or an academic psychologist? 'It sounds funny now but I didn't really see academics as true occupational psychologists. In my eyes, occupational psychologists were people who worked for consultancies and testing companies. But we were warned that the job market was going to be difficult – 9/11 happened a couple of weeks before we started the course. Once I'd finished the MSc I set about finding a job in a fairly organised, energetic way.' She searched for jobs in the West Midlands, using BPS resources to find addresses and firing off letters to everyone she could think of. 'I came to appreciate the value and skills of cold calling. Looking back I'm really touched by the number of people who sent me encouraging replies, telling me not to get put off but to persevere. I've kept those letters, and it made me very proud to be affiliated with such an encouraging and thoughtful profession.'

Doyin was finally made an informal offer of a job by a very major company she really wanted to work for. 'They told me to hang on as there were "some things going on"'. I'm afraid I'm still waiting. Then I was offered a job by OPP, the test publisher and consultancy who, among other things, are Europe's distributors of the most widely used personality test in the world. I loved that job. Nowadays different individuals tend to specialise in either training or consultancy – I did both, which had positive implications for chartership and for my credibility. For instance, it meant that during training I could talk about my own experiences.'

Reflecting on her move into work, Doyin thinks 'I could have been more commercially astute. I sometimes think a hybrid MBA and Occupational Psychology course would help newly qualified psychologists become effective quickly in the real world of work.'

Doyin's interest in diversity and her PhD in the area started in her early years

Have you taken a look at our website, [www.thepsychologist.bps.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.bps.org.uk)?

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 now complete – back to 1988.

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

For the latest jobs, visit [www.psychapp.co.uk](http://www.psychapp.co.uk). Society members can sign up for suitable e-mail and RSS alerts. Recruiters can post online from just £750, and at no extra cost when placing an ad in print. For more information, see p.844.



in work. 'For a long time I worked with very few black or Asian colleagues, and there was very little talk about diversity. I became aware that the same behaviours from different people would be rated differently by different bosses as well as by raters in assessment centres. I got fascinated with diversity as an issue and this tied in with authentic leadership, which was of huge interest at the time. It struck me that asking people to be themselves, to be authentic, was tenable if their identities aligned with society's expectations. But what if the "authentic you" isn't actually what people expect to see in leadership roles?'

Doyin's PhD looked at the effect of micro-behaviours on minority ethnic leaders' work identities. 'OPP gave me huge support, and because I was working in training and consultancy I was able to work very flexibly alongside studying. I suppose I had early experience of a portfolio career. I finished the PhD in January 2012 and entered a whole new world of researching leadership and diversity.'

Surprisingly, given her earlier views, Doyin's more recent career has been as an academic. 'Not deliberately – I had

received a lot of positive feedback about some of my academic skills like writing and presenting abstract information in an accessible way, so I was warming to it. And, soon after completing my PhD, I was offered a maternity cover job at City University, then another, and then I moved on to Queen Mary, University of London where I am now. I still do a little consultancy – as an associate for companies and some off my own bat.'

The diversity group has grown 'with the support of the Society. But I'm surprised that this sort of work is only just beginning. At the moment our mission is very much to link diversity practitioners with academic research but, as well as this external communications role, we have an internal marketing mission – to make the Society itself more aware of and more responsive to diversity issues, like coaching minority clients, gathering evidence for interventions that work for heterogeneous groups, and training occupational psychologists.'

Doyin is also involved in the DOP Leadership Development Programme, which for the last three years has aimed at providing potential DOP committee members with the knowledge, skills and

attributes needed to become effective leaders. 'I was on the first programme and volunteered to evaluate it, working with a team of volunteers. It's taught me a lot about logistics, project management and motivating others. I think the course has helped participants to be more realistic through understanding the structure of the Society. The Society is run, to a great extent, by volunteers, and members' fees are not thrown about. It takes longer to get things done than one might want but that's understandable – everyone has their day job.'

You seem to get involved a lot with the Society. Would you like to do more? 'The thought fills me with foreboding since I have enough to do! But I suppose if you complain you need to step up to the mark.'

Have you got any advice for someone starting in psychology now? 'Make good friends on your course. Volunteer for the DOP. Do your research and *really* try to understand what sort of roles there are out there. And be careful about going into HR. It's a different identity and you'd do better to get experience as a locum, associate or volunteer within our profession.'



## The British Psychological Society

Promoting excellence in psychology

**BeyondAutism**

Home of **RainbowSchool**

### Trainee ABA Tutors

London

Upto £18,000 pa



### Consultant/Lead Clinical Psychologist

Scotland

£56,104 to £69,168 pa



### Clinical Psychologist (Specialist – Autism) Part time

Bromley, Kent

£40,201 - £48,500 pro rata

To check the latest jobs please go to  
[www.psychapp.co.uk](http://www.psychapp.co.uk)



# ‘As with fairy tales, you used to ask me to tell you the famous studies over and over’

Psychology graduate Melanthe Grand interviews her mother, Chartered Psychologist and novelist Voula Grand

**M**y mother, Voula Grand, is a Chartered Psychologist and novelist. Her professional practice focuses on the development of leaders in global corporations. She has 30 years’ experience working with teams and individuals using a range of psychological techniques to enhance performance. Voula has been a member of the British Psychological Society since her student days and is now an Associate Fellow.

Her first novel, *Honor’s Shadow*, about the psychology of betrayal and revenge, was published by Karnac in 2011. Voula is one of the authors of the BPS Book of the Year *The Psychology Book* published by DK in 2013. She writes a blog discussing aspects of writing and psychology. She is also mother to my 28-year-old brother Thibault, and three adult stepchildren,

I studied psychology at the University of York and am now studying for an MA in integrative child psychotherapy at the Institute of Arts in Therapy and Education. I have an interest in the application of the arts for children with special needs, and I write a blog about my relationship with one boy with autism. I work part-time for my mother’s company as an assistant psychologist.

**Our editor is working on a feature ‘growing up with a psychologist’. If you are the child of a psychologist, with a view on how this may have affected your upbringing, he would like to hear from you. Or perhaps as a psychologist you are aware of how that knowledge is affecting your own parenting? E-mail jon.sutton@bps.org.uk**

Here, I interview my mother about the impact that the study and practice of psychology has had on her life, in mothering, business and writing.

## When you look back on being a mother, how do you think your knowledge of psychology had an effect on your parenting?

I studied social psychology at LSE, back in the early eighties. I was fascinated by Ainsworth’s work on attachment and the Strange Situation studies. At the time, that was very new material; now, it’s being applied in all sorts of interesting ways. When I went back to work after Thibault was born in 1986, I had to arrange childcare. Because of the attachment studies, I was keen that my brand new baby should have a third attachment figure in his life, especially as he didn’t have a grandmother. So I chose a childminder; then, when you came along, we had a nanny. I believed then, and still believe now, that this is the best option for secure attachment. Though you told me recently, from your studies, that a child only needs a ‘good enough mother’ a third of the time, so maybe I was overly cautious back then. But we had an amazing nanny, Alice who stayed with us for 15 years, having two children of her own along the way. Alice was very talented, and loved you two as though you were her own. She still does. I also appreciated how skilled she was with me. Some mothers may feel some envy towards their nanny, but Alice was exceptionally sensitive to this, and deferred to me as your mother. She and I became like sisters. For you two, as long as I, Dad or Alice were there, you were

happy and loved. I will be grateful to her for her contribution to your upbringing for ever.

## And in the years that we were growing up, how do you think you differed to mothers who weren’t also psychologists?

My mother was a reading addict, and reading stories was a lovely part of my relationship with her. Instinctively, I read to you and Thibault from the very beginning, all the traditional fairy tales as well as the modern stories. *The Hungry Caterpillar* was a favourite. As you got older, and during long drives to our holiday home in France, I started to tell you about Zimbardo’s prison, Harlow’s monkeys, Milgram’s shock experiment. As you had done with the fairy tales, you both used to ask me to tell you the famous psychological studies over and over again, you were fascinated. So I think you both grew up very psychologically minded.

Every birthday, I would give you a development theme for the year. When you were six, I suggested you develop your ‘ignoring skills’ when you were going through a hard time with your brother. I know you think that was a mistake. Maybe that was me applying some business psychology to my mothering – they were almost like yearly appraisals.

## I remember you used to talk to us about Greek mythology and philosophy as well as psychology. There was a strong emphasis on talking openly in our family. How did you go about cultivating this?

I was raised in a Greek community in Wales, and my dad used to tell me stories about the Greek gods. As a small child I believed his story that we were directly descended from the gods of Olympus, and that was why we had blue eyes and fair hair. I still treasure a book of Greek myths that my father won as a school prize. I was very keen that we communicated very openly as a family, though I'm not sure where that desire came from. I remember when you were little Thibault giving you some world-weary advice: 'Don't ask Mum any questions about sex, because she will answer them.'

I wanted us to be able to speak freely about anything that we would want to, especially the most difficult things. When Thibault went into the army in 2003 and served three tours of duty, I was very keen to be able to listen to him in a way that would be helpful. So I learned about PTSD and how to help veterans after experiences in war zones. He had a very difficult tour in Afghanistan in the summer of 2009. When he came back, I hope it helped that he could talk to me about his experiences, and I didn't react with shock or horror, that I could listen and accept such very extreme events.

I knew I wanted to raise you both to be hopeful, optimistic and resilient – what parent wouldn't – and you are, but maybe you were just born that way.

**I also remember you encouraging us to follow whatever path it was that we wanted, and I suppose looking up to you when I was younger, you were a very good example of doing this – writing a novel, for example. Do you think your knowledge of psychology has an influence on this?**

My mother wasn't a psychologist, she was an artist. She was great at encouraging me and my siblings to pursue our hobbies and interests. That seems to me to be a core parental responsibility, and looking back I can see that I was always alert to what you both enjoyed and were drawn to. I suppose it is a psychological thing, but for me it was a mother thing. Thibault was focused on an Army career from a very young age, and I didn't discourage him (even though I wanted to). Your early ambition was to be an art teacher, but when I went to Thibault's school to do a careers talk on psychology, you came with me. It was after that you said that you wanted to go into psychology. Now here you are combining psychology and art in psychotherapy using the arts. Psychology has been a passion in my life and it has been a great joy to share that with you.

**I was so inspired after that talk, and being so excited for a career in it. How did you start your career in psychology?**

My career in psychology had very unconventional beginnings. I left home after O-levels at 17 and worked for 10 years in a variety of business environments. I decided to go to university when I was 27. As I hadn't done A-levels, I did the very first access course in the UK – the Fresh Horizons course at the City Lit in London. I wanted to study English literature, so that I could become a novelist. But a fellow student brought back the syllabus for social psychology at LSE and I changed my mind, applied and got a place to study there. Standing on the steps of LSE at the start of my degree programme was one of the most proud and thrilling moments of my life.

**And after your degree?**

Because of my work experience, and having grown up in a business family, I never doubted that I would work in business. I started work as an assessment psychologist in the early 1990s. Back then, executive coaching was just beginning as a mechanism for executive education, and I was fascinated. I started my own practice, Grand Shearman Consulting, in 1991, to coach individuals and teams. Through that work I became intrigued by the power of human emotions to help or hinder people's development, so I became deeply interested in the explosion of research on emotional intelligence work that started around that time.

**How do you apply psychology to businesses now?**

Now I describe myself as a leadership expert. One of the projects I am involved with at the moment, with one of my colleagues, is a comprehensive, in-depth leadership programme, REAL: Resilient, Energised and Authentic Leadership. Resilient leadership is a hot topic at the moment, as corporate life is now tougher than I've ever known it, mainly because of the challenges of global economics. I work with individuals and teams still, focusing on the deeper dynamics that underlie work performance and success.

**What theories do you draw on for your work?**

The corporate world is very interested in the new field of positive psychology developed by Martin Seligman, and I have trained in some of his methods. Identifying strengths, focusing on what you are good at, developing resilient

thinking skills, all these form a solid foundation for optimal performance of corporate executives.

I am fascinated by the new findings coming out of neuroscience, and how such insights can be applied to leadership. I also draw on psychodynamics – in particular how we unconsciously project family dynamics on to the work 'family' to re-create familiar patterns of relating in our working relationships.

I have never been wedded to one theoretical perspective. I like to choose what is appropriate for each individual or team. Change is generally hard and slow, so it's important to seek out ways that might be faster and easier for any given individual. The answer will differ widely from one person to another, so it is important to have an extensive tool kit. As the saying goes: 'if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail'.

Having said all that, I am a Jungian at heart. I love his work, particularly on dreams. Jung is very poetic in the way that he expresses things, and I find his writings profoundly moving. My first novel, *Honor's Shadow*, drew upon his theories of the shadow personality. I love his comment on the task of mid-life – to turn the self inside out, and show the shadow to the light.

**And how have you applied this psychology background to your novel writing?**

I always had the ambition to write novels, from a very early age. On my 50th birthday, I decided I should shut up about it or get on with it. So I got on with it and enrolled on an MA in creative writing at Birkbeck. As a result of my life and work experience, I will never run out of material for fiction. I like to write about psychological topics: in the end, all writers are trying to be psychologists. A book of fiction is psychology in action.

I like to write about dilemmas rather than problems. A dilemma has two (or more) choices and neither is perfect; so choosing the least bad is the challenge, and this is where my interest lies.

**Finally what is your favourite book?**

*The Fifth Child* by Doris Lessing, because it explains one of the worst dilemmas I can think of – what to do when a family is disturbed by the birth of a child with extreme special needs.

**I** Voula's professional website: [www.grandshearman.com](http://www.grandshearman.com); writer's site and blog: [www.voulagrand.com](http://www.voulagrand.com) Melanthe's blog can be found at <https://mysonnydays.wordpress.com>