



What makes a psychologist?

The five winning entries from our 2019 'Voices In Psychology' programme, along with extracts from some of the other submissions and a response from Society President David Murphy.

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We're always listening out for 'Voices in Psychology'. People who can take often complex ideas and communicate them in a way that will engage and inform our large and diverse audience. Writers with real impact, who are learning to avoid some of the traps of academic writing. They're the future of our science, of our Society, of our magazine.

But perhaps you need help to find that voice. Perhaps you've got that certain something but you need practice, nurturing. We think we've made a real effort with this in recent years, providing opportunities and guidance to many first-time authors. And in 2018, we introduced our 'Voices In Psychology' programme to identify new writing talent and support some of these authors in developing their skills. For example, we funded them to attend our Annual Conference in order to report, and we've tried to be a sounding board since. Now we've started to develop a more formal structure to this process.

For 2019, we set the question **What makes a psychologist?** We received dozens of entries, of a high standard, but the judging process was a pleasure. A variety of perspectives emerged, and the positivity of the next generation shone through. The best entries, in our opinion, propelled the reader through the piece with a clear and original argument. There was evidence of thought, but not over-thinking (it's worth checking out the piece on our website, 'Trying to sound clever is a good way of sounding stupid'). We were struck by the diversity of perspectives in the submissions this year. We had insights from clinical, occupational, forensic, and counselling psychology, each one with a unique sense of what contributes to the 'making of' psychologists.

Here, we present the work of the five we are looking to take forward, in full (with their photos and info about them). We have also taken the opportunity to publish edited extracts from eight of the other authors, and we have sought a response from Society President David Murphy. The theme of underlying traits and values – what we have in common, rather than what sets us apart – is one that we hope to return to across the year. It's also worth searching out the British Psychological Society video 'We are Psychologists'.

Remember, this is just one way that new writers can contribute to The Psychologist. Do engage with us, particularly via @psychmag on Twitter. We want to be at your shoulder through your journey in psychology. In terms of 'What makes The Psychologist', it's you!

Dr Jon Sutton, Managing Editor
Madeleine Pownall, Associate Editor, VIP

Finding common ground across research and applied settings

As a psychology graduate working in research, I have wondered if I can call myself a psychologist. It can feel like the word is reserved for those who practice in clinical settings and work to alleviate mental illness. I recently heard of a well-established academic in psychology being asked, 'I know you sort of identify as a psychologist and you call yourself a psychologist on your Twitter, but what are you actually?'

It is difficult to pinpoint what makes a psychologist, because there is such a diverse range of people in this profession: educational, clinical, research, forensic, neuro, sport psychologists and more. This makes it all the more necessary, when we engage with the public, that we provide professional identities that are accurate and clear. Despite doing very different things on a day-to-day basis, I would like to reflect on the commonalities that make both clinical and research psychologists.

Before I began my undergraduate degree in psychology, an academic and friend advised me to 'Raise questions, provide answers, put counter-arguments, prove assertions, explain assumptions'. This advice captures the inquisitive nature of a psychologist, and accurately warned me of the intricate nature of research. I quickly learned from 'fluffy' essays, that debates would only be useful and productive if they were precise. Our questions must be specific and testable, our explanations based on detailed theories, methods, testing conditions and analyses.

In applied settings, precision is key to finding what works, for whom and when. For example, a psychologist providing treatment according to the neurobehavioural approach may tweak a patient's incentive structure and record how this affects the occurrence of aggression or motivation in the morning, compared to the afternoon or evening. I think this eye for precision is essential to both research and applied psychologists navigating the complexities of human thinking and behaviour.

Considering that psychology is the study of human behaviour, it might seem highly obvious that we care about human experience. Psychologists dedicate their careers to improving wellbeing and alleviating symptoms of brain injury, dementia, depression, anxiety and so-forth. However, some of the most famous studies in our field have shown psychologists go to uncaring lengths to find answers. For example, Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment and Peter Neubauer's concealed twin study, both showed the public that psychologists are deeply fascinated by human experience but failed to show that we care about it.

Whilst these studies are in our history, I can see that even today it might not be immediately obvious to participants that research psychologists are caring. For example, the motivation for our recent project was to understand how children regulate their



Hayley Gains

'I graduated from Durham University in 2017, and then worked as a postgraduate research assistant in the centre for Play in Education, Development and Learning at Cambridge University. I have worked on projects looking at executive function, self-regulation and intrinsic motivation in early years education.'

'Last summer, I was able to join my colleagues at parliament for the delivery of a policy brief, which really sparked my interest in how to effectively communicate research to different audiences. During my undergraduate degree in Psychology and more recently, I held placements with clinical psychologists in secure rehabilitation settings, for acquired brain injury and personality disorder treatment. In line with my interest in Clinical Psychology, I am currently studying an MSc in Psychological Research Methods, at the University of Exeter and work as a Graduate Research Assistant in the College of Medicine and Health.'

behaviour and develop a love of learning. Our team puzzled for hours at a time over weeks and months about how to support children with these skills and how to test what genuinely works. However, when taking classroom observations, the research protocol demanded I avoided interaction with children; when I assessed executive functions, I had to avoid deviating from the script to fully engage in conversation with children. As a result, teachers may have been more likely to describe us as objective, patient, thorough and systematic. We are these things. However, I think that part of what makes a psychologist is caring deeply about human experience and simultaneously having the ability to take a detached, scientific approach to our work.

This caring attitude often leads psychologists to ask progressive questions such as; how can we support

action against climate change? How can we engage citizens in community action? How can we embrace technology in the prevention of mental illness? To me, being progressive means making adaptive decisions to improve the future. For a psychologist in clinical or applied practice, this means envisioning a person according to their entire potential and having the skills necessary to progress that vision into reality. The open science movement has also demonstrated that psychologists want to uphold scientific principles and

produce valid information: seeking a solid base for progressive solutions.

Regardless of the field they work in, I cannot think of a psychologist I know who is not progressive, inquisitive, precise and caring. Does this resonate with your own experience?

A multitude of perspectives



Daniella Nayyar
'I am a PhD student at the University of Birmingham. My interests lie in social psychology, specifically in understanding how and why our society runs the way that it does so that we can discover pathways that are fuelled by curiosity, equality and cohesion. My thesis is on patterns of intergroup social identification in the voting groups of the EU Referendum and the US Presidential Election of 2016. If we can understand how and why these groups act and make decisions in different ways, we can take steps towards higher acceptance rather than fuelling conflict.

I hope to explore opportunities in the field of research and impact, whether that be in academia or in policy.'

If you had asked me this question a year ago, my answer would have been a lot less introspective. My experiences as a PhD student, particularly as a female and British Indian PhD student, have tailored the way I look at the entire process of becoming a psychologist. It's been a pathway of self-discovery that each psychologist must go through. Without understanding your drivers, your truest motivations, it is easy to lose yourself in the culture of academia.

What makes a psychologist, then, is not just learning the science, the methods and the culture of psychology. It's the journey to understanding why you want to be a psychologist. A psychologist practices what they preach, through introspection and self-discovery, to become aware of how their biases and those of the social systems in which they have grown and worked will tailor the questions they ask, and the answers discovered.

The greatest psychologists are those who do not sacrifice their creativity in the quest for scientific discovery. With the need to prove the standing of psychology as a science, the art of creativity has been somewhat lost. The drive to publish rather than to discover leads many research questions to target a specific academic audience, rather than reaching out to those the research is about.

Yet with a recent movement towards interdisciplinary and inter-topic collaboration, there is hope. A psychologist is brave enough to wear their creative ways of thinking on the surface, and use their alternative way of seeing the world to interact with those from different thought processes to generate optimum schools of thought. We must be willing to integrate a multitude of perspectives.

So what makes a psychologist is resilience, compassion, creativity, understanding, empathy, honesty, truth, and belief in the impact of their work, research or applied. Someone driven by curiosity and understanding more than ambition and pride. But mostly, what makes a psychologist is being open to, and absorbing, new ideas, ways of thinking and experiences that exist outside of the context of you. No human experience is alike: so a true psychologist is a person who can see, or train themselves to see, from all perspectives.

Rising above common sense

We humans are born psychologists. We have an interest in the behaviors of others, the flexibility to shift perspectives, and the capacity to empathise. I suppose that's how I got started.

The real question is 'what makes a professional psychologist distinctive?' I first delivered psychotherapy in a community mental health setting at the age of 24. I looked even younger. Back then, I was amazed that couples in their 50s would visit me week after week, assuming that I could help their marriage. What credibility could I muster when I looked like a teenager? Nonetheless, I was thrilled when those under my care seemed to benefit from my interventions.

Yet the parting remarks from some of those clients, once we agreed they no longer needed treatment, were disconcerting. I'd hear comments like, 'That was easy!' or 'I already knew what I needed to know before we began here'. Such words triggered a crisis of faith in me, as a fledgling psychologist. By then, I'd earned my M.A. degree. After so much study and preparation, I wondered how what I had to offer could seem so commonplace. Did I have no special insights? No insider's edge?

Such questions vexed me while I pursued my PhD. But eventually, I realised that virtually every claim psychology establishes, to explain what makes people tick, has been around since the dawn of history. Psychology doesn't invent new ideas very often. Instead, its special contribution, as a science, is to identify and discard time-honoured, but vacuous explanations. Which accounts work, and which don't? Ask a psychologist.

Discerning what to believe about the world's workings, and which beliefs to discard, is the aim of science. While we all attend to the world around us, it takes more than observing to be a scientist. Science is an expression of everyday curiosity. But it takes more than ordinary curiosity to satisfy that yearning to understand, scientifically. It takes critical thinking, systematic scrutiny, exacting records, careful experimenting, clear communication, and a humble receptivity to disconfirming data. It takes caution when making assertions based on experimental evidence. It takes a creative knack for asking revealing questions. A psychologist must refine these practices to rise above the confines of common sense.

Keith Sonnanburg is a clinical psychologist based in Seattle.

Peering to the horizon and beyond

There are still barriers to entering the profession and we have to acknowledge that the possibility of becoming a Psychologist, 'being made', is less for some. 'What makes a psychologist' is largely defined by cultural and political shifts.

Although psychology is diversifying in terms of scientific knowledge and research, the number of BAME Psychologists doesn't reflect our culturally diverse world. We must ask why. When we consider 'what makes a psychologist?', what are the essential qualities people need to see reflected in us in order to engage with psychological therapies and research? We need experience to inform what we do. If the profession can't accommodate the diversity it needs, then who and what makes a psychologist will remain the same.

Becoming and being a Psychologist is a vocation. It is all-encompassing. It is a continuous, ever-changing process. Psychology evolves with humanity, it changes just as we do. 'What makes a psychologist?' will ultimately be very different in the future. I hope that the profession I so want to be a part of will continue to look outwards. I hope to shape it.... I hope it shapes me. As long as there is something to fight for, something to change, something to improve, psychologists will be made. We are the future heads... necks straining, looking forward, peering to the horizon, and to the darkness behind.

Leone Alexander is studying an MSc conversion course at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Let people speak for themselves

According to the British Psychological Society website, psychology is about 'understanding what makes people tick'. Everyone understands this, to some degree. An observation that 'He snapped at me, but he had a stressful day' contains a range of implicit theories about the way environmental stressors influence our mental state and impact our behaviour. Compared to the average person, a psychologist can give more detail and context to these explanations; but so can philosophers, politicians, commentators, novelists, or anyone with an agenda for justifying the behaviour of themselves or others.

Perhaps it is scientific training that is the psychologist's hallmark? The tools and methods of the trade that set them apart? The wide range of epistemological standpoints and tools alone speak against this – a quantitative researcher crunching personality questionnaire data doesn't sit comfortably in the same bracket as a visual methods researcher exploring the lived experience of refugees. There is nothing distinctive about the way psychologists work.

Neither is there anything exceptional about these methods: a psychologist's tools are often employed to greater effect by others. Statisticians, human geographers, social media companies, political parties,

and computer scientists wielding the huge power of 'Big Data' have the resources and technology to explain far more about human behaviour than pokey N=300 studies of young, well-educated, psychology undergraduates. Neuroscientists and biologists have far more sophisticated tools to explain the mechanisms of the brain and body that produce the mind and influence behaviour. A skilled journalist or documentary maker has the expertise to ruthlessly expose what makes a person tick. Advertisers, digital marketers and even YouTube personalities who run 'social experiments' – unconstrained by the ethics of academic research – can make shocking discoveries and compelling tests of actual human behaviour. Whilst it may be unfair to say that psychologists



Tom Hostler

'I'm a lecturer in psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University and an early career researcher. In the last couple of years since finishing my PhD at the University of Sheffield I've become more interested in looking at my profession and discipline from afar. I've followed the replication crisis, the open science movement, and the issues these raise. This summer I attended the Society for the Improvement of Psychological Science (SIPS) conference in Rotterdam where people shared and developed inspiring new ideas and grassroots initiatives to improve psychological research. I'm also interested in the growing interdisciplinary field of meta-science, which looks at how the underlying practices of producing and sharing scientific research are done and can be improved. I'm currently completing a Master's in Higher Education which has also given me new perspectives on the social, political, and economic forces that shape and direct the University sector and Higher Education in the UK.

I'm trying to improve my writing and I enjoyed being able to comment on broader issues in psychology and academia here. Find me on Twitter at @tomhostler and t.hostler@mmu.ac.uk on email.'

merely repackage what we already know in fancy labels, the psychologist's lens is not always the most powerful or effective when it comes to understanding behaviour.

Psychologists are not just about pure understanding though – they apply an understanding of how people think and behave to help others solve their problems, increase productivity, improve themselves and make themselves happier and healthier. But these tasks are already performed well by religious leaders, managers, authors, coaches, doctors, and teachers. Often, these people have substantial contextual knowledge or existing trust and relationships with people that make them far more effective at these tasks than external psychological consultants. Anecdotal reports of 'life-changing' books or 'inspirational' teachers aren't necessarily untrue because the claims haven't been put through a psychologist-approved Randomised Control Trial.

It is tempting to emphasise the high standards and ethical approach that psychologists employ as their unique identifier: their non-partisan and unbiased eyes, the ethical standards they are held to, and their ability to always provide justification of how their work will benefit others. But as the replication crisis has shown, scientific impartiality is a mirage: psychologists whose pet theories are under scrutiny often double down in trying to conjure more evidence to support them. And psychologists are human too. The problem with extolling an ethical and virtuous approach as a defining feature is that when it is transgressed it hurts doubly hard. Cases of fraud, misconduct, and questionable research practices all result in accusations of hypocrisy if psychologists define themselves as the 'ethical' ones, compared to say, social media companies harvesting personal data. Unfortunately, the replication crisis has also highlighted that many of the incentives for psychologists to behave questionably are baked into the system and difficult to remove.

So what makes a psychologist? One answer is that psychologists are the only ones who strive to combine the purpose, tools, ethics, and application. There is definitely an argument that the other professions mentioned above often lack the unique combination of the focus on understanding behaviour; combined with a systematic, rigorous, and ethical approach; and a view to immediate or downstream humanitarian applications. It is possible this combination – the 'psychologist personality' – represents more than the sum of its parts.

But a better answer is to recognise that psychologists are not a homogeneous group. The traditional disciplinary boundaries that psychologists work in are more porous than ever; large interdisciplinary projects and working with industry are the norm. Academic psychology is one of the most interdisciplinary fields, and the extent to which it draws on and interacts with other fields is increasing (Milojevic, 2019). The best science mutates as it adopts new perspectives and practices, which may

make old labels redundant. As one example, work in scientific publishing has shown how treating 'contributors' as a single group has distorted incentives and allowed gaming of procedures with regards to scholarly authorship (e.g. giving authorship to those who did not significantly contribute anything). Replacing ambiguously ordered author lists with clear 'contribution statements' of who did what in the research process provides transparent information about a person's contribution without labelling (Brand et al., 2015).

In a similar way, those interested in developing and applying an understanding of 'how people tick' are better defined by their own specific combination of interests, preferred research methods, values, and modes of application. Many academics find disciplinary labels inadequate (Brew, 2008), and such categorisations can reinforce stereotypes of interests, methods, and expertise that act as barriers to collaboration (Bruun et al., 2005). Why not let people speak for themselves?

Psychologists do not have a unique, effective approach to the understanding and application of what makes people tick. But as individuals, everyone has a specific combination of skills and interests they can contribute to this endeavour. 'Psychology' can be a useful word to help broadly categorise an area of interest, but asking 'What makes a psychologist?' does little to help identify what makes a professional capable, important, or unique.

The lens of curious inquiry

When I think of myself, I never think of myself as a psychologist. Even with a first-class degree in psychology, a Master's in research psychology and in the middle of a PhD. The word 'psychologist', to me, denotes adjectives such as power, intelligence, perspicacity, and professionalism, to name but a few. When I think of myself, these are not the words that usually spring to mind. Imposter, nervous-wreck, idiot... how did I get to this place in my career? I'm tormented by the fear that somebody is going to find out I'm secretly bad at what I do. The most disturbing part of my self-doubt is that the more I'm commended, the more nervous I feel. Eventually, the people praising me will be even more disappointed by how long I have fooled them for.

Most of us, in some form or another, are constantly striving for approval from others, trying to 'read' their behaviour or body language to determine what they are thinking about us. In some respects, everyone is a psychologist. We've evolved as social creatures, developed theory of mind, constantly attributing mental states onto ourselves and others. It's within our nature to view the human condition through the lens of curious inquiry.

If we all used this curious desire to understand others, rather than labelling them or simply trying to guess what they think about us, we could become a more empathetic society. I have watched our world become more polarised. Embracing our inner psychologist could lead to less violence and greater compassion as we begin to respect and validate the beliefs and practices of those around us. As Harper Lee wrote in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 'you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it'.

Georgia Louise Wilson is a PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University, and works part-time as a career's assistant for the Faculty of Health, Psychology and Social Care.

Start with ourselves

In the first episode of the hit 1990s British crime series *Cracker*, Robbie Coltrane's forensic psychologist Fitz gives a lecture. He lists a litany of famous psychologists and, one by one, chucks their books away. He tells his students to lock themselves in a room and study what they really feel. 'When you've shed a little light on the dark recesses of your soul, that is the time to pick up a book.'

I first saw this last week, two years into my journey into psychology as a career change after leaving my job in accounting and finance. I had started practicing vipassana meditation and it shares Fitz's message: 'just observe'. An almost identical aphorism comes from the Delphic oracle in Ancient Greece: 'know thyself'. We could quibble about ontological differences between 'observing' and 'knowing', but by observing something we can come to know it intimately.

It's unlikely to be chance that the same message keeps cropping up. Self-observation is what makes a psychologist, due to the special and universal nature of psychology as a discipline.

Psychology is the study of mind and behaviour, 'how people tick'. It is a unique discipline in that, as people ourselves, none of us can step outside the subject matter. The mind is the prism through which all subjective experience is filtered. Ultimately we can only comprehend the human mind using the human mind. In turn, 'behaviour' encompasses every single action of every individual, conscious or unconsciously executed, and every person in every group. On a more macro level, we can only observe humans in society from within human society. This makes it very difficult to obtain completely objective data, completely 'real' evidence that a world exists outside our own shared perception.

We can lever this potential drawback to our advantage. That universality is our opportunity. If we cultivate a reflexive stance of self-awareness, then we can see examples of psychological subject matter in our own lives. We can start with ourselves, then branch out to observe others around us. Seeing instances of psychological effects consolidates our

learning and offers unparalleled opportunities for growth. For example, you could be aware from textbooks that people are liable to project onto others their own unattractive qualities. You might read that finding another's manner irritating often means that deep down you suspect you can be irritating too. But nothing compares to the transformative moment you catch yourself doing it. After that, we have more compassion for people around us, and our understanding might enable them to grow too.

Psychology's universality also guarantees a wide lay interest. There seems to be a misconception in our field that the 'average person' is a sceptic, panning psychology as a made-up science, 'all just common sense'. I have never seen evidence of that. Across the board, everyone I meet is interested in some form of psychology. Personal acquaintances, patients at the care home I work at part-time and taxi drivers... all want to hear about my course material, and discuss how it relates to something they have heard or seen. It is our duty to make the tools of observation and the material more available.

If it is true that the more we observe the more we know, then it stands to reason that the more we experience the more we can observe. In Fitz's case, his penetrating insights into the criminal mind appear to come from his inside knowledge of gambling addiction and misanthropy. Paradoxically, this means that what makes a psychologist is being something other than a psychologist. Someone with varied life experience. A full and varied life might help a therapist find topics



Stephanie Droop

'I'm doing an MSc in Human Cognitive Neuropsychology at Edinburgh University. I try to keep a broad interest in both neuroscience and philosophy of mind to underpin my research into how the mind works. I want to gain understanding myself, and pass it on to others, whether I end up running my own empirical studies or writing journalistically. At the moment I am reorganising my notes and literature reviews in a zettelkasten (the methodology of Niklas Luhman, see Sonke Ahrens How to Take Smart Notes). The aim is for everything I work on to form a cumulative and interlinked bank of knowledge, out of which research questions and blog posts will flow naturally.'

in common with a client to build a relationship and gain their trust. Likewise, diverse information sources might help a researcher make the links that give rise to creative ideas. A wide field of interests will also allow you to speak with other psychologists from our wide field, and maybe achieve synthesis.

This is important, because our field is fractured. A good example is the variety of unexamined received attitudes to Freud held among psychologists of different factions. Like many students aspiring to run adequately powered neuroimaging studies, somehow I acquired a low opinion of Freud, and by extension psychotherapy as a whole. The assumption was that psychotherapy is 'unscientific', including outdated notions of women as hysterical, intended to keep a privileged few talking, with few results in sight. But since reading Norman Doidge's exciting *The Brain that Changes Itself*, I realised how maligned Freud has been in recent times. Doidge sets out how Freud described neuroplasticity and the synapse in 1895, years before Sherrington and Hebb. Thus, psychotherapy aims to rewire neural connections by bringing out traumatic memories and associations formed when a person is too young to verbalise them, helping them consolidate the memories and transfer them to accessible episodic memory, defusing their power. So Freud was a neuropsychologist, and there is no reason for other neuropsychologists to automatically doubt the method.

Like all prejudice, mine was insidious. It was not thought out, but just happened as a result of other things I had read and heard. My point is how easily bias can infiltrate and affect us. Unnoticed bias makes for bad psychology. But by encountering other evidence and convincing stories, and by continuing to consistently apply and train the principle of self-observation, we can synthesise a whole new viewpoint all of our own. Then we'll be proper psychologists.

Pushing for change

I'll never forget my first role in mental health as a Support Worker for a Low Secure Forensic service. Four years in a lecture hall had not prepared me for how to see the person beyond the paperwork. Challenging my perception of a person, and their experience beyond their description, has been the foundation to all my subsequent work. As Einstein said, 'The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking'.

I worked with kind and compassionate colleagues, but the common belief about the service users was that their crimes and mental health difficulties were an extension of themselves as individuals. If we all held the view that these men were a lost cause, their institutionalisation would become inevitable.

This is why I have chosen Psychology as my profession and as part of my personal definition. Other professions do harbour individuals that will challenge their perspective and push for progress as a reflection of their own and others' experience. But I believe that Psychology *requires* it. It has the ability to go from changing one person's life, to changing a whole system. This ambition to progress the human experience makes a Psychologist – and Psychology.

Laura Hughes is an Assistant Psychologist working in a Community CAMHS setting

What more can we do?

Five months as a support worker in residential care leave me with two deep scratches on my face, a new talent for a technique we called the 'Snatch and Run', and a strong reminder of the gaps in our knowledge of autism.

Week 1: reality. 'The first few weeks are shocking, then you get used to it.' Whilst I wasn't sure at the time, my manager was (to a point) correct. If you make it past your first weeks (many did not) your threshold for challenging situations increases. I found myself more confident, learning little tips for managing and calming particular young people, as I got to know them and they got to know me.

After some time, I learnt to love it. You are over the shock. You understand the young people and you want more for them. Why are the young people not going offsite and into the community more? Why are they not offered more activities? The pictures and symbols we were taught to use in training, to speed up their communication development, are nowhere to be seen.

Then, your attention turns to the staff. Why are we letting these behaviours happen? Why are we accepting the kicks, hits and scratches without trying to teach the young people they are wrong? Everyone's tired. Everyone's exhausted. Everyone's still a bit scared, even if a bit numb. Why is there not more in place supporting the support?

Questioning the systems makes a psychologist. We help people do better. Will an intervention improve the situation? Can we support the person better? Can we help them access more? Can we do more to improve quality of life? What more can we do?

Kate Anning graduated from the University of Bristol in July and spent five months at a children's home for young people with severe and complex needs.

You recognise yourself in her...

The psychologist meets you wherever you are. You can just be. She has an ethereal ability to just allow you to show up as you, with whatever you're dragging along with you that day. Her biker boots intrigue you, you realise, as you recant the horrors of that China trip, being trapped and traumatised.

She coaxes out the information you didn't even realise you'd buried. She shows you, mirror-like, the language patterns you're using, the ways you're self-berating. She encourages you to ask for what you need from relationships that have been too focused on giving and not receiving. You like her earrings.

You can tell she has a story too. It helps, makes this more human. She shares, you wonder if a little too much, but realise it's just her ability to build rapport. She's meeting you, guiding you, showing you it's safe to express yourself, exactly as you.

You like her. You're two intelligent, strong (you believe that now), capable women. She doesn't treat you as a patient, but as a human being. She even encourages you to pick up the psychology degree you dropped out of 10 years ago. You sort of wish you were friends. She makes you intensely angry, deeply sad and passionately determined. You're processing emotions that don't even feel like you. She shares anecdotes and tools, reframes and alternative opinions.

You recognise yourself in her. The quirky, biker-boot wearing nurturer, previously only doing life from the sidelines. In a few years' time, you hope, you dream, that could be you. The psychologist.

Hayley Gillard is a mature MSc psychology student and an accredited performance coach.

We are shaped

Psychology is the science of humans and their behaviour, so it seems fitting to me that in my case 'what makes a psychologist' has been people and relationships.

The English teacher who introduced me as a 12-year-old to *Brave New World* and encouraged me to read, question, write, and then read and question more.

The music teacher who pulled me aside at the end of a lesson and asked 'Are you OK? I mean, are you really OK?', and on seeing that I was paralysed with the weight of expectation (other people's and my own) helped me draw up a revision timetable that felt manageable.

The mental health professional who told me, aged 16, that I should never expect to be able to hold down a job, which provided a needed kick up the backside.

The distant relative who quietly presented me with a laptop to start university, because he knew that my parents couldn't afford to do so.

The lecturers that kindled my curiosity and encouraged me to think in broader terms. To ask both 'Why?' and also 'Why not? Why can't that be done?'

The therapist who helped me to see that my parents had largely been doing the best they could and that the anger I felt, although valid, was holding me back (and who introduced me to Bowlby).

The callers I have spoken to over the years as a Samaritans volunteer who taught me how to listen and (not) talk and who started the thought that a change in career wasn't such a pie-in-the-sky idea.

The clients who made me feel out of my depth just as I was becoming an overconfident assistant psychologist, and the supervisor who picked up the pieces and encouraged me to reflect.

I was shaped. By my experiences, my learning, but most of all by those I met. To add to the Society's soundbite: 'We are compassionate. We are curious. We are caring.' And we are privileged. To have the teachers, mentors, friends, lovers, clients, who have made us who we are, and who will continue to ensure we never stop learning and becoming better psychologists.

Helen Pattinson is a veterinary surgeon now on the DClinPsy course at Salomons.

Blue pill or red pill?

Let me ask you a question: are you the sort of person who would take the blue pill, or the red pill?

Psychologists are the people who would choose the red pill. We are the people who are not afraid to face the brutal truth of reality, to delve beneath the surface and question the way we perceive our world. We are not content to remain blissfully ignorant of the intricacies of the world. Life in a comfortable illusion is not for us. Psychology is a search for the truth and psychologists want to find out how deep the rabbit hole goes.

Just as people and society are rapidly changing, so psychology needs to adapt to keep up. Technology is opening up new worlds, offering insights into the brain that could only be imagined in years gone past. Psychologists must be bold and unafraid to break new ground. We must be ready to build on previous research, yet not be afraid to offer critique and new ideas.

To pierce the veil of the unknown, psychologists also need to be creative. A thread of creativity runs through the entire research process; from designing a research study, to recruiting participants, to solving problems along the way, to finally communicating your findings to a range of audiences. All of these steps require us to think creatively in order to find the best route to reach those elusive answers to our research questions.

Alongside creativity comes curiosity. In psychology, it's essential to be curious. Curiosity is what drives us to reveal new knowledge and search for new truths. A toddler is constantly asking 'Why?' as they learn about the world around them and discover things for the first time. Psychologists need to retain this child-like curiosity. It's what motivates us to continue asking questions, to wonder why people are the way they are, and to seek out answers. A passion for learning is key to research in psychology.

But it's not enough to be creative, curious, and bold. Psychology is a science. So, psychologists must also ensure that their work is scientifically rigorous. Collecting empirical data, conducting appropriate analyses and reporting our results; these are all familiar tasks for many psychologists, whichever branch of psychology you identify with, whether your work is qualitative or quantitative.

Psychology isn't, however, cold in the way it strives to meet rigorous scientific standards. Psychology is, in essence, the study of people. It's the study of our minds, our bodies, our behaviour. This demands a great deal of compassion, particularly when psychologists find themselves conducting research with a group of potentially vulnerable participants. Showing empathy and understanding is incredibly important when working with, for example, teenagers who have suffered trauma, people who have a long-term medical condition, or new mums and babies. Without our participants, many psychological studies would never



Laura Oxley

'I'm currently in the final year of my PhD research with the Psychology in Education Research Centre at the University of York. I am exploring senior school leaders' attitudes towards, and knowledge of, alternative approaches to behaviour management. The system used in most UK schools is not working for all young people: witness the rising trend of school exclusions and the number of teachers leaving the profession due to stress from student behaviour issues.

I hope to engage with policy makers and senior school leaders to disseminate my findings and consider ways in which barriers could be removed. Communicating my research in an accessible and engaging way to a wide audience is essential to be able to make a difference to current policies. I am interested in being involved in public engagement events, writing articles for both specialist and wider audiences, and speaking at conferences, as well as reaching out directly to stakeholders in schools.

I want to continue working in academia. I love teaching in Higher Education and I have many ideas for future research projects that I hope to have the opportunity to explore further.'

happen, so psychologists must be compassionate and act ethically towards those who volunteer their time for the advancement of knowledge. Many of the experiments that were done in psychology's dim and distant past would not meet the ethical standards of today. Times have changed and acting ethically is an essential trait for psychologists.

With all of these brilliant qualities that psychologists have, there are still times when things don't go to plan. We all have those moments where we look at our research and think, 'What am I doing?' This is where resilience comes in. Psychologists need to be able to persevere, even when things are not going smoothly. Whether it's trying to recruit enough participants from a niche hard-to-reach group

or having to re-design your experiment after an unsuccessful pilot study, psychologists can overcome these difficulties. We are able to forge ahead, adapting to new circumstances.

What comes next? The study of people is little use if we can't communicate it to people. Psychologists are able to distil complicated research into clear and engaging publications and presentations. We are the builders of bridges from the ivory towers of old, ensuring that vital research finds its way into the public awareness.

There is great variety within psychology. But throughout all areas there are some common threads, certain qualities that make a psychologist. Psychologists are bold, creative and compassionate, with a burning curiosity. We are resilient, ethical and scientifically rigorous. We are excellent communicators who are not afraid to seek the truth. For anyone who's just starting out on their journey studying psychology, all I can say is... go on, take the red pill, you won't be disappointed.

From the Society President, David Murphy...

You might think after 30 years as a psychologist, having edited several books on professional psychology (including one titled *What is Clinical Psychology?*), and now being President of the British Psychological Society, if anyone knows the answer to this question it should be me. However, I find I'm much more circumspect now than I would have been earlier in my career. If I'd been asked the question at my interview for Clinical Psychology training, I would have rattled off a response highlighting a combination of theoretical knowledge, an empirical clinical approach and interpersonal skills. However, as time has passed, I've come more and more to agree with Aristotle's famous observation, 'The more you know, the more you know that you don't know'.

Psychology has always been positioned at the interface of other disciplines and psychologists have always arrived to it from different backgrounds and perspectives. Early in its development, in Europe at least, Psychology arose at the interface of the disciplines of philosophy and physiology. Although the first meeting of what is now the BPS, only a little over 100 years ago, was only attended by ten people, it included experimental psychologists, physicians, philosophers, a pathologist and the headmistress of a local school, each came with a very different perspective on what psychology could contribute. Through sharing their perspectives they advanced the discipline and gave rise to what is now a Society with over 60,000 members, many of whom bravely attempted to tackle the seemingly simple question posed by The Psychologist.

My own perspective on this question was significantly altered in 2013 when I spent three days in Stockholm as part of an international working group of psychologists from across the world who

Perseverance

A psychologist is made by their ability to adapt and grow in response to an ever-evolving world. To learn from the evidence base, but also from those around them. In listening to others, communicating and co-producing, psychologists contribute to a world where we value our similarities, differences, and connections. Instead of seeking to know all, curious psychologists collect data, analyse and problem solve. A psychologist is made by their ability to identify their own shortcomings. Yet a psychologist is also made by their ability to lead by example, advocating for progress and innovation, even when this change goes against the grain. Psychologists bring attention to power imbalances, inequalities, group dynamics and process issues – empowering others to make positive change.

A psychologist is made by their perseverance. Those on the lengthy pathway to becoming an applied psychologist will be all too familiar with the gruelling selection processes and never-ending temporary posts, one day to be granted with the 'golden ticket' of acceptance onto a doctoral course. Psychologists undergo years of training, learning and scrutiny before reaching the qualified psychologist title, only to find that this is followed by more of the same. Psychology itself has stood the test of time, despite the stern gaze of traditional 'sciences', misconceptions, replication crises and continuous threats to funding.

Our work has the ability to impact upon people's lives at an individual, systemic and global level. It is complex, challenging and varied – and this is precisely why it thrills us.

Meghan Nicholson is a recent graduate of the University of St Andrews, currently working as an Assistant Psychologist in the NHS within an inpatient service for older people.

came together to try and identify 'core competencies' of applied psychologists. I discovered that many of the 'basic truths' that I had held as universal were, in fact, nothing of the sort. We had fascinating discussions on the role of scientific evidence, the place for spirituality, and many other issues. After three days of some of the most fascinating professional discussion I have ever participated in, the output, which attempted to generate a catch all set of competencies that could be agreed by all, felt a little disappointing. To paraphrase, it said, 'Psychologists have skills to perform psychological assessments and carry out psychological interventions'. In fact, the BPS couldn't endorse even this most generic statement as it was felt that the ability to carry out formulation (a concept that I had to explain to most of the other delegates) and independent research were absent.

This made me see even more clearly that what it means to be a psychologist is grounded in a specific context and history; people who confidently identify 'universal truths' in our amazingly diverse field, very often haven't looked very far outside of their professional or cultural niche. Since the vast majority of psychological literature comes from an exclusively Euro-American perspective this is not as easy to do as it sounds. Even the much quoted cliché

that Psychology is about understanding ‘what makes someone tick’ is grounded in a culturally specific belief that understanding arises from introspection as looking at the mechanism of a watch rather than looking at what is around them in their social, physical, or spiritual environment.

Over my career, I have been incredibly fortunate to meet academic and practitioner psychologists in many other countries and I am continually struck by the extent culture and the unique history of development in a particular country shapes the view of psychology. This summer I spent time with psychologists in Russia, and it was clear that the strong history of



David Murphy

physical sciences, and the legacy of one of the most famous early psychologists Ivan Pavlov (who of course was a physiologist rather than a psychologist) continues to shape the way psychology is thought about. When visiting a clinical service, I was greeted by clinical psychologists dressed in laboratory coats who treat patients using an array of biofeedback and psychophysiological apparatus that I hadn't seen since I was a student (I say this as someone who thinks as a whole we focus a bit too much on the mind at the expense of the body). In contrast, I had the privilege recently of attending the 25th Anniversary congress of the Psychological Society of South Africa where I attended a number of workshops on African-centred psychology. Cheryl Tawede Grills

describes African-centred psychology characterised by beliefs that the Spirit that permeates everything that is, that everything in the universe is interconnected, that the collective is the most salient element of existence; and the idea that communal self-knowledge is the key

to mental health. Some of these beliefs may seem quite alien to psychology as it is conceptualised in the West, but as Suntosh Pillay asked in the *South African Journal of Psychology* in 2017, ‘Why is Western psychology innocently labelled “psychology” but African psychology geographically located?’ The unquestioned, even unacknowledged, global dominance of an Anglo-European perspective has led to the movement to decolonise psychology.

Of course, definitions of what makes a psychologist also arise from underlying ontological and epistemological positions, which, whether acknowledged or not, shape the way in which we define the core characteristics of a psychologist. Whilst rational positivism has been a dominant underpinning of the development of Euro-American psychology during the 20th Century, Social Constructionism has become more influential in psychology in the last 30 years or so, particularly in the UK, and provides a framework for understanding contrasting perspectives without needing, or indeed being able, to determine which is ‘right’.

The five winning VIP authors here approach the question from their own perspectives; although all are early career researchers/students they come at it in slightly different ways and each one eloquently highlights some of the dialectics and tensions that exist within psychology.

Hayley highlights commonalities between research and applied psychologists including inquisitiveness and precision; she also characterises a psychologist as being able to manage the dynamic between a detached, scientific approach and caring deeply. Laura highlights curiosity as a common characteristic of psychologists but contrasts scientific rigour of research with the compassion and empathy required to engage with participants. Stephanie highlights the need for psychologists to include themselves in their field of study and emphasises the importance of self-reflexivity. This point is picked up by Daniella, who also identifies a tension between the art of creativity and the need to prove the standing of psychology as a science. Finally, Tom proposes that what defines psychologists is the ability to combine multiple, sometimes contradictory, characteristics and that even this combination of characteristics varies widely between psychologists such that a search for a common ‘psychologist’s code’ is not meaningful.

So, the five authors have described a range of contrasts that exist within our definition of ‘What makes a Psychologist’ even though they all share a relatively similar vantage point. If I were to try and sum up a definition, I would have to say that a Psychologist tries to understand, and work with, human behaviour and emotions drawing on psychological knowledge and using the tools available within their own construction of psychology grounded in culture, time and position. It might not be as straightforward as some would hope, but if you want something straightforward then don’t ask a psychologist!

Just the beginning...

Now we take our Voices In Psychology forward. seeking to provide them with opportunities to develop that voice for a variety of audiences. But this is just one way we are seeking to nurture the next generation... do get in touch if you are interested in being a part of what we do.

Also, it will soon be time to set a question for our 2020 Voices In Psychology programme. What would you like to see us cover? Get in touch via email or on Twitter @psychmag.

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the british
psychological society
promoting excellence in psychology

Call for Nominations

President 2021-22

The President is the visible figurehead of the Society and Chair of the Board of Trustees.

We are seeking nominations of Members of the Society to stand for election to the role of President in the Presidential year 2021-22.

The successful candidate will be President-Elect in 2020-21 and Vice-President in 2022-23.

Descriptions of the role and responsibilities, together with requirements and time commitments, are available on request. Please contact Viola Sander, Executive Assistant (email: viola.sander@bps.org.uk).

Procedure

The Board of Trustees has the responsibility to ensure that there is at least one candidate for this position.

Those wishing to propose candidates are invited to contact the

Honorary General Secretary, Dr Carole Allan (e-mail: carole.allan@bps.org.uk) for guidance.

Nominations will go live in early January. These will take place electronically and will be operated by our selected partner, Mi-Voice, which is part of Democracy Technology. Any member information used by Mi-Voice is being handled in accordance with the Society's strict data security protocols. For those members who have opted out of being contacted by email, a form will be posted to their registered address on request. Please request via viola.sander@bps.org.uk

If more than one candidate is nominated, the election will be decided by a ballot of the Membership and the result announced at the AGM which is expected to take place at the British Psychological Society Conference 2020.