

# 'Psychology sang to me'

Ian Florance meets **Jake Farr** and talks music and creativity

In my mind, the area around Goodge Street – just off Tottenham Court Road in London – isn't particularly associated with psychology, but with music and creativity. It was celebrated by the folk singer Donovan on his 1965 album 'Fairytale' as 'Sunny Goodge Street', a song which introduced many people to Charles Mingus the great jazz musician. The area still has a bohemian feel: multi-ethnic restaurants, coffee bars, street stalls and music shops.

Jake Farr – the founder of Alchemy Personal and Organisational Development (APOD) – arranged to meet me in the recording studio which features heavily on her company's website. We grabbed sandwiches and, before the formal interview began, discussed a number

of topics, including her son's career as an actor. 'I've become interested in acting and some issues it raises. Where does your sense of self come from? How do you direct your energy? The idea of the "psychological gesture" is fascinating.' This is a technique, articulated by Michael Czechov, used by actors as varied as Jack Nicholson and Johnny Depp to get themselves instantly in character.

## 'You can't put artificial barriers between parts of a person's life'

This placed Jake in a creative context and lessened the strangeness of meeting a psychologist who was obviously at home in a recording studio. But, what about psychology? The APOD website seems to suggest she's an organisational or occupational psychologist. Is that how she sees herself?

'I treat clients in a very holistic way. You can't put artificial barriers between parts of a person's life. I'm an example: I'm a psychologist; a mother with children ranging from 17 years to 8 months and I'm running a business. So I see myself as a chartered psychologist who most often works in a business setting.'

If you take this approach, your own life story must be important in what you bring to your work. 'I was the eldest daughter in a hard working family. We lived just outside Leeds. My dad was a very bright "grafter" who became a very successful business man. His interest

in business informs a lot of what I've done since.'

## 'It was like a light going on'

Jake says she hated school, rebelled against just about everything and left home to live in a bedsit in Leeds. 'My school was terrible but I made a fresh start studying psychology, sociology and communication studies at an FE college. It was like a light going on! I started getting As for essays and people seemed to view me in a completely new way. I made up with my family, moved home and then went to university. The experiences I'd had were incredibly helpful in applying technique and theory to real situations.'

So, did you consciously decide to study the subject? 'I didn't have to think about it. Psychology sang to me. I liked experimental work. That I did philosophy rather than biology alongside it helped: I was fascinated by ideas. Theatre work at university introduced me to lots of different people. In fact...' Here Jake looked rather uncertain. 'Well, it was the first time I'd really met people from southern England which highlighted how I behaved. I've been described as inspiring by clients, but at that time I was pushy! In fact my first ten years in the profession involved a certain amount of toning down so I could be direct without being overbearing.'

This exactly reflects my own experience in the opposite direction: a southern boy deposited in a northern university who took some time to get used to a very different way in which some people express their opinions!

Jake became interested in the complexities of sexuality, and her involvement in women's issues ultimately led to her Cardiff master's in applied psychology, 'which was actually about occupational psychology. My dissertation was on women's identities and how they linked to their identities as leaders. It looked at real-world issues and didn't use masses of data. This led, in the early



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1990s to working with a charitable organisation, New Ways to Work, which provided advice to women and worked with women managers.'

But even before her master's she learnt an important lesson. 'I liked working! I worked for the student accommodation office in Leeds for a year and loved it.'

Jake explains that she really learnt her trade as a psychologist at the Post Office. 'It gave me hands-on experience of basic techniques: team building; psychometrics; organisational development; leadership work. I also began to get a feel for what I didn't like and how I wanted to "be" a psychologist. I learnt my craft but they didn't give me much "air". The measurement culture, which was very prevalent in the 90s was a bit of a shock. Measurement has its place but it doesn't begin to exhaust psychological practice. They were trying to define what occupational psychology was, and this diminished it. I grew increasingly interested in the development features of the job. I learnt that, although I was quite young, I could win the respect and trust of senior, older leaders and that I was good on client relations. I delivered on high-level projects; and that's critical – delivering on what you promise. By this time I'd come to two conclusions – I wanted to run my own business and I wanted to have an impact on the world in some way.'

### 'The important issue is the person in front of me'

In discussing psychology with its practitioners over the past two years I've noticed the extent to which they define themselves, in part at least, by their theoretical approach or application area. People will often mention cognitive behaviour therapy, humanistic approaches or discriminate between counselling and clinical practice to partially define what their job involves. I pointed out to Jake that she'd almost deliberately avoided my attempts to get her to talk in this way. 'Yes. The important issue is the person in front of me. I have a range of techniques that I can choose from: Jung, Gestalt approaches, appreciative inquiry, psychometrics are just some examples. I'm very interested in Ken Wilber's integrative theory. So I use whatever framework seems to be most useful. I want to combine science with intuition, good research with human sensitivity.'

*The Psychologist* was instrumental in Jake becoming self-employed. 'There was an advert in the magazine looking for associates, and I was taken on. I had two boys to bring up so I didn't want full-time

## FEATURED JOB



**Job Title:** Lead Clinical Psychologist  
**Employer:** Cygnet Hospital, Derby

**C**ygnet Health Care runs 19 UK hospitals specialising in mental health treatment and associated care. Mark Varney manages their Derby Hospital. 'We were handed the keys on 1st March last year and the first patient was admitted on 22nd April. We're housed in a building specifically designed for low-secure and locked rehab care. There are 47 beds in three wards, specialising in patient groups – female personality disorders, male low-secure complex needs, and male locked rehabilitation. Two wards are open and the female ward will open on 11th April this year.'

Presumably your work involves close multidisciplinary teams? 'Yes, and I really mean multi-disciplinary. We have a big and varied team for the service user group: occupational therapists, social workers and psychotherapists. We work with a qualified substance abuse worker. But we also emphasise a complete healthy lifestyle so a fitness instructor helps patients make the most of our large, modern gym.' You don't often see Chefs listed on a hospital website. 'No, but a healthy diet is important and Nick is a two rosette chef with a very specific food philosophy. Every aspect of our service, including en-suite private rooms and open air areas, is focused on the service user.'

"The successful candidate must really understand mental illness"

The job is well-described in the advert. What are the key issues for you? 'We're a close team so the Lead Clinical Psychologist must be a team player. He or she will manage a 24-hour clinical psychologist and assistant psychologist but the psychologists are part of the ward teams, not a separate specialist team. The lead psychologist will support patient care pathways. He or she will bring staff together, motivate them and make them think inwardly as well as attending monthly management and clinical governance meetings and ensuring a high quality of psychological intervention whoever is delivering it.' Mark pauses. 'The Lead Clinical Psychologist is also there to guide the Hospital Management in decision-making on service provision generally. The successful candidate must really understand mental illness, have experience of risk evaluation in forensic environments and a good range of techniques and approaches to draw on so care is genuinely individualised.'

Is there anything else you want to add? 'Happy service users make for happy staff and our first priority is the service user. We're here for them. So, if the candidate has additional interests – research say – that's fine and we'll support it, as long as patient care is working well.'

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work. But I was convinced that I could get enough work to keep going. I finally founded APOD four or five years ago.'

### 'One studio session can be equivalent to years of therapy'

While I'd interviewed Jake in the small main room of the studio someone had been working in the control room, mixing recordings. Jake now focused on this fascinating aspect of her work. 'I met Jon Hall, a record producer who owns his

own studio. It quickly became clear that we worked in similar ways. He was as concerned with what his artists wanted to say as with how they said it. Producers can be technicians and musicians, but they're also coaches. The breakthrough experience was when he suggested I spend a session singing in the studio. It gave a huge feeling of self-worth. One studio session can be equivalent to years of therapy. So, I thought, how can I use this? I'd come across a lot of senior managers who used to be in bands, felt

they'd lost their playfulness and wanted to get back to that. So I referred someone to Jon and the process began to develop.'

From there, Jake says it was 'a giant leap to working with groups of people who had no musical experience, but after some experimenting we came up with a process that feels safe enough and gives sufficient space for something really fabulous to happen. Over the course of a day a group of people write, play and record an original piece of music. The group start with drumming and end up walking away with a CD of the music track they've created with their colleagues. They work with a producer, a vocal coach, a lyric coach and, of course, a psychologist. The process can be used with individuals but it works especially well with infant teams or networks from different departments across an organisation. They work in an area where they may have little or no

competence, from a vulnerable place and create something. This develops deeper connections. People learn to trust and support each other. For time-bound managers the afternoon session, where a lot of writing is done, helps them understand that you sometimes have to wait for "solutions" or lyrics to appear. The whole process removes inhibitions and shifts their view of what they can do and what other people can do. A more conventional team development session follows this up. You can say we're looking at the core of leadership – trust, connection, communication, working with insecurity – and the programme works well with leaders.'

People must be fearful, I say. 'People do sometimes come with a degree of trepidation but the space is totally supportive and this is one of the learnings participants take away. People can play, suggest, create, experiment without fear

of the effects, truly liberating for some. The results have been extraordinary. One delegate decided she could learn to swim and start sailing. Another decided he would get a promotion, and achieved that in three months. These are the nicest things for me.'

Jake tells me that APOD are working on a programme with Amanda Brennan, a leading trainer and coach of actors, 'on another programme about communicating with your whole self. It's where my interest in psychological gesture has led, as well as my journey into tantra.'

Jake had mentioned tantra before, and this led back to her earlier comments on her holistic approach. 'I'm interested in using any technique that fits and works. I'm interested in my clients well-being and growth as well as my own. So, although I'm often working with people who are managers, I'm not treating that as their sole identity. There are some

## Things I wish I had known at the beginning of my PhD

Jillian Sullivan, PhD student at the Autism Research Centre, University of Cambridge

**B**eing in the final year of my PhD and preparing my dissertation, a thought often pierces my intense concentration on multiple regression analyses: 'If I could do this all over again, I would have done some things very differently'. A PhD is, at its core, a learning experience designed to teach you how to effectively design, conduct, analyse and disseminate research. Unfortunately, unless you have had a great deal of experience being a research assistant before your PhD (and if so, you are very wise indeed), there is a cruel paradox: the most crucial and long-lasting decisions for your study, in the design stage, are done precisely when you have the least amount of experience. Below is a list of advice that I would have very much appreciated at the outset.

### The study itself

You are in charge of your PhD – do a project that truly interests you. Not only is it easier to write and conduct research on something you enjoy and are hungry to answer, but it will also be of higher calibre.

I spent the first year of my PhD with a very vague goal in mind, and it wasn't until writing my first-year report that I was able to hone in on a more specific and personally interesting question. Once I had this, the progress of PhD accelerated exponentially

and my stress levels decreased at a similar velocity.

Your PhD question will evolve and mutate over the course of your degree. Be flexible and be ready to become an expert in an area that you have never even considered. I went from looking at developmental trajectories of cognitive abilities in autism to scouring medical textbooks on synaptic growth and sensory deprivation in typical development. I could not be happier.

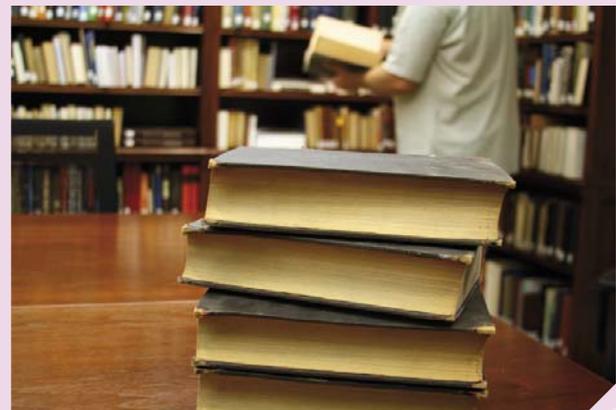
Don't even bother planning your study until you know the exact question you want to answer. I went with 'just collect as much data as possible and you'll figure out what you want to do with it later', and now have piles and piles of data that I can't answer any questions with.

Related to this, it is better to just answer one or two questions with your first study, and use these results to direct your course for the next. You will not solve your overall PhD question (or indeed the biggest

question in your field of research) with one study.

Remember that your dissertation must tell a story, not be just a collection of loosely related studies. Even though it may seem intimidating, read the dissertations of past students in your department for a better picture of the work you will be expected to do.

Even if you are not planning to continue with a research career after your PhD, but especially if that *is* your plan, writing journal articles on your research is one of the most important things you can do. Plan your studies with journal articles being one of the aims. If nothing else, articles demonstrate effective communication and



brilliant occupational psychologists out there, but the best ones are not trapped by a narrow view of their practice. My approach inevitably leads into issues of values and spirituality, and I don't separate that off from, say, more positivist approaches such as measurement or looking at the impact of behaviour on business outcomes. They all have their place. Tantra is a discipline I got interested in and it informs my work. It addresses pleasure and happiness as much as suffering; it involves light and dark. If you're not aware of your own identity, your own triggers and patterns you can't do psychology properly. That's where tantra has helped me.'

### 'I'm going to do it'

Jake had to leave shortly for a coaching session with a client. Before she went, she made some important points about

working for yourself. 'It allows you time to follow your own interests. It also allows you to take risks.' You don't seem the sort of person who creates huge marketing plans before going with something new. 'No.

I get interested and go for it. One of my pet phrases is "I'm going to do it". It's a point I make to my children,

to clients and to colleagues: follow where you're interest takes you; do what you're genuinely fascinated by. It's risky but you can't help clients if you're bored or going through the motions and no one wants to grow old feeling they've had their life's work imposed on them.'

But if you are going to follow your passions you need support. 'APOD associates have different skills and interests from me and that diversity

"I'm interested in using any technique that fits and works"

is critical to providing a service that reflects the client. I have a wonderful supervisor and belong to a CPD group made up of independents. If you work for yourself you'll work long hours, intensely.

You have to know when you're too busy, when you need a short break or need to change how you work to reduce your responsibilities. I never intended APOD to grow to be a big corporate entity and, fairly obviously, my beliefs about psychology and approach to working with clients wouldn't suit a big structure.'

As I left and walked into a rain-spattered Goodge Street, I asked Jake if there was anything else she's learnt from her career to date. 'Trust yourself and your life experience. Give yourself the space to hear it.' I ask Jake if there is anything she regrets. 'I wish I'd found the spiritual playground earlier.'

writing ability and can be stepping stones for your dissertation.

### Collaboration – a lifesaver

You do not have to, nor should you, attempt to do your study without help from your colleagues. You may think you are being independent and/or that your PhD must be filled with only your own sweat and blood, but this is foolish: those who collaborate or at least ask advice do better. Full stop.

Similarly, those who collaborate get their names on more journal articles, make more contacts, and make a name for themselves in their field. Seek and accept help, but also proactively seek to help your colleagues on their own projects. This will come back to you a thousand-fold. One especially fruitful route is to talk to the PhD students who are starting at the same time as you.

It is quite frankly a waste of time and resources to go ahead with your study without checking:

- | whether others are already recruiting similar participants who you could work with; recruitment is by far the most difficult aspect of a study, especially if you are working with a clinical population;
- | whether others are interested in working with you;
- | the advice of more experienced colleagues on your study proposal and design; you may be overlooking a critical measurement, performing unrealistic tests for your population, or underestimating the timescale or costs – listen to them;
- | effect and power analyses; you can easily

waste your time performing studies that you will be unable to use in your dissertation or journal articles because of small participant numbers.

### Contacts, contacts, contacts

One essential goal of your PhD should be to make as many contacts in your field and related fields as you can. Go to conferences and seminars and, importantly, talk to both the big and small names. Don't be intimidated: if they are a true researcher, they will be genuinely interested in discussing their topic and considering yours.

Your university is an incredible resource. Make appointments to meet with researchers outside of your lab to discuss your study plans; most professors will be happy to do this. They may have a fresh perspective on your plans that those in your lab may be unable to see, and each meeting chalks up another contact in your book.

### Well-being – you really do deserve it

The horrifying recipe of literature reviews, proposal drafts, waiting for feedback, ethics applications, administration, and recruitment always results in a significant delay before anything can be accomplished. This happens to everyone and is a normal part of a PhD (and indeed any research).

It took nine months before I was able to test my first participant and a few months after that until my first study was in full swing. Deeper (initially shame-filled) investigation in my lab revealed that this was about average. It may feel like everyone is more efficient, capable and further

advanced on the above timeline than you are. Everyone else thinks the same thing about others.

This was the first advice given to me when I started my PhD, and although I proceeded to immediately ignore it and stress about my inadequacies, it turned out to be 100 per cent true. You were accepted on to your PhD programme: you deserve to be there.

Your psychological well-being is just as important as the well-being of your study. Your first year is when you will meet the majority of the friends you will have when you finish. Join societies, go out with your housemates, go to university events: don't hide away in your lab or with your eyes glazing over on PubMed.

This is possibly the only thing I did right – my first year was an amazing time and, although not much progress was made on my studies and I stressed about it, it turns out that the inevitable red-tape-breaking waiting period was favourable to creating a social support network that I now rely on in the truly difficult patches.

Don't forget to take holidays and breaks from your work. Every lab and university is different, but all expect that you will take vacation days. Believe me, you will need it. Somehow, my productivity and thought-process is always infinitely better after a week off in the sunshine.

Which brings me to the final piece of advice. You *will* have bad spells, times when all you want to do is give up your PhD and run away to the Caribbean islands for the idyllic life of a bartender. You will also get through them.