

'We have a significant contribution to make'

Ian Florance meets health psychologist Rory O'Connor

Rory O'Connor is Professor of Psychology in the School of Natural Sciences at the University of Stirling (he moves to the University of Glasgow in July), Honorary Professor of Psychology at University of Nottingham, a health psychologist and a former Chair of BPS-Scotland. The announcement of his appointment as President-Elect of the International Academy for Suicide Research prompted us to ask him a few questions about his life and career.



Where did you grow up? Tell me a bit about your childhood.

I grew up in Derry, Northern Ireland in a family of five boys. It was a happy place to grow up and family is very important to me. I have an identical twin brother who is also a Professor of Psychology and being a twin is a defining feature of who I am. We're mirror twins which means we're genetically identical but, among other things, I'm right-handed and he's left-handed. Our father was also an identical twin so, unsurprisingly, being a twin has always fascinated me.

What interested you in psychology?

Aside from my interest in nature/nurture – on the back of being a twin – I remember meeting a psychologist at school and this first awakened my interest. Although psychology, medicine and ophthalmology – I have no reason why the latter! – all interested me as a teenager, psychology was always my number one focus. One of the things that I liked about all those areas was that, rather than emphasising the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake, they used knowledge and evidence to help people.

Where did you study?

Queen's University, Belfast (QUB). It was an exciting and thriving place to be a student. One of my

abiding memories as a first-year undergraduate was of Ken Brown teaching us developmental psychology. He was an extremely enthusiastic lecturer, brilliantly peppering psychological science with amusing anecdotes. Like many students I hadn't anticipated the amount of statistics involved in the degree, but I came to enjoy them.

Why did you choose health psychology? Although my interests were always at the intersection of clinical and health psychology, I have always been impressed by how health psychology, as a new subdiscipline, drew from other areas of psychology. It crossed boundaries and wasn't constrained by its past. Also, as I view suicide and self-harm as 'health' behaviours, I felt that the theoretical approaches that characterise health psychology could and should be extended to understanding them.

How did you get interested in these particular topics?

From my earliest days in psychology, I was interested in the aetiology and course of emotional distress as well as how people respond differently to the same events. This led to an undergraduate dissertation which investigated the interplay between personality and cognition in the context of the learned helplessness/hopelessness paradigm. In many ways my work on suicide and self-harm was a logical extension of my undergraduate work. However, I got seriously involved in studying suicide serendipitously through the intervention of Noel Sheehy, one of my tutors at QUB. Although I had originally applied for PhD funding to extend my undergraduate work, Noel got in touch out of the blue in the summer following my graduation to say that there may be funding to do a PhD on suicide in prisons. To cut a long story short, the suicide in prisons funding didn't come through but this had whetted my appetite for suicide research, so I continued in that field with Noel, thanks to a QUB scholarship. I'll always be

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grateful to Noel for his support and enthusiasm during my PhD. Recent personal experiences of suicide have only served to further drive me in the field.

Have you any observations about the field of suicide research?

What struck me most when I started working on my PhD was the relative lack of coherent theories of suicidal behaviour which went beyond psychiatric risk factor profiling. There were countless publications on the epidemiology of suicide and self-harm but little theoretical work. So, for the last 10 to 15 years I've been trying to build a theory of why people kill themselves.

As alluded to earlier, historically, suicide has been viewed almost exclusively as a 'clinical' phenomenon but it is much more than that – it results from a complex interplay of social, cultural, biological, psychological and clinical determinants. To understand suicide, we have to accept that first and foremost it is a behaviour, and this view opens up many avenues of investigation including the use of theoretical models from all areas of psychology (and beyond) to understand why suicide happens in some people but not others.

You seem to be implying that crossing boundaries within psychology helps.

Yes. Psychology has become too splintered. Arguably we have been become too focused on the adjective before our titles, losing sight of the bigger picture. In my view, what divides us within psychology is far less important than what unites us. While the profession spends a lot of time minutely distinguishing different types of psychology, people outside – other academics and professionals, policy makers, clients, sponsors, a lot of the media – see us as psychologists pure and simple. I fear that psychology as a profession can create unnecessary division. We need to be careful not to weaken the discipline further, and we should strive to be more outward-looking. Indeed, interdisciplinary working is at the heart of addressing the 'big questions' and with the growth of research impact in the Research Excellence Framework, interdisciplinary partnerships are vital.

And you've worked with policy makers and politicians to make an impact. Yes, I see it as part of my job. Ever since I started working as a psychologist, I have been keen to ensure that the accumulation of scientific knowledge was not kept locked away in ivory towers, and over the years I have tried to influence

public policy on suicide/self-harm-related issues. In recent years I've worked with the Scottish and Northern Irish governments on suicide prevention policy and practice and regularly work with suicide prevention organisations nationally and internationally. Psychology has a lot to contribute to public discourse, providing sound research methods, coherent theories and robust data which should inform decision-making and the development of effective solutions to complex problems.

Health psychology seems to have changed a lot over the last 10 to 20 years.

In my view, the early days were very much about establishing the discipline and developing the theoretical foundations of the prediction of health behaviours and the course of ill health and disease. I think there has been a step-change within the discipline, with much more emphasis on translational research. We're now involved in applying what we know to real-world contexts by developing and implementing theory-driven behaviour change interventions across the spectrum of acute and long-term conditions. We are also very much focused on prevention as well as intervention and the long-term management of illness and disease.

And what about the future?

I am hopeful that psychological science and psychologists will have greater influence on policy and practice and that we can have a really positive impact on people's lives. I enjoy training psychologists in this area, and I am particularly keen on developing novel ways in which undergraduates, postgraduates and researchers can network and learn from each other.

I'd like psychology graduates to become much more aware of the skills and competencies that they develop throughout their training. In my experience, employers really appreciate the wide variety of competencies/skills that psychology graduates acquire. Psychologists are good at report-writing, group working, applying the scientific method, communicating and critically appraising data and arguments, among many other skills. I think psychology does a good job in producing rounded students but I think we ought to make these transferable skills more explicit.

I also want to encourage psychologists to influence policy more rather than being nervous about it. As long as we have good evidence we have a significant contribution to make.



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From builder to business psychology

A career in construction did not turn out as expected for Terry Sexton, managing director of Wise Leader Group. The many different 'characters' he encountered led him on a circuitous route into business psychology.

I didn't plan for a career in construction. After doing badly at A-level I failed to find any work. A careers adviser asked me if I liked working outside and suggested that I sign up for an HND in Building Studies. A week later I started the course and began my career in construction.

The HND was a sandwich course so, at the age of 19, I spent a year on site working for a local house builder. I found it very tough. The site manager took a very authoritative approach to leadership, shouting and swearing at everyone, and I copied him. I assumed that was how you managed people.

Whilst he was on site with me, this method worked up to a point, though someone did threaten to throw me out of a window. However, things really fell apart when he took two weeks holiday. Luckily the tradesmen on site got together to prove that they would work better when not being yelled at and they told me to simply keep the materials coming, they

would look after themselves.

This worked like a dream; I even had Directors visiting site because they couldn't believe how fast the works were progressing. It was embarrassing when the site manager returned: he'd expected things to fall apart without him. I realised then that you can't lead without the support of your followers.

After the HND I joined a major construction company's management training programme. I was able to work in all the departments and eventually chose to stay in planning

because the planners were a great group of people and hilarious to work with.

When the recession came many planners were made redundant. I was lucky to find a project in Whitehall for another large construction group, and back on site I realised I was different from most of those around me. I didn't get excited by huge concrete pours or reinforcing bar schedules. What I really enjoyed was interacting with different characters: architects, clients, labourers, project managers.

Generally I found that people on site are authentic, there is no pretence, 'what you see is what you get'. You can have a huge argument with someone but an hour later it's all forgotten. Construction people tend to feel that they don't do team work very well. However, in



Psychology – a start or end?

My decision to pursue a path in psychology wasn't an accident. After majoring in microelectronics in 2001, I was caught in the midst of a manufacturing crisis, which landed me in Singapore Airlines working as a flight stewardess for five and a half years. Working in a 'person-centred' organisation, I loved observing people's body language and behaviours in particular. I was trained to use 'reverse psychology' to deliver customer service with a softer touch, and I realised a potential in me to offer an excellent listening ear. My non-judgemental advice seemed to attract a lot of people for a second opinion in times of crisis.

This discovery led me to sign up for a correspondence degree in psychology with the Open University. Upon completion of my undergraduate dissertation, I had a sudden and overwhelming interest in learning more about sexual offenders. I completed an MSc in forensic psychology at Glasgow Caledonian University, simultaneously

gathering voluntary experience with GAMH and Victim Support.

With soaring hopes, I started applying for jobs at least three months before graduation. The only reply to the endless amount of applications – 'Rejection'. My desire to be a forensic psychologist undiminished, I continued volunteering and applying for jobs.

More than a year has passed since my graduation; currently I am employed full time with Geeza Break as a project administrator. Geeza Break is a voluntary, 'person-centred' organisation providing family support and respite services to families with 0- to 16-year-old children (or up to 18 years for children with disabilities) with addiction, crisis, stress and isolation issues. It aims to provide positive support primarily to children and families located in the East/North East region of Glasgow, via respite services such as care, sitting and Toffee Club (which runs during summer holidays). In addition to the three respite

services, Geeza Break provides respite services throughout the Glasgow area to grandparents and extended family members who have care and responsibility for a child through parental drug and/or alcohol misuse. Geeza Break works collaboratively with Family Addiction Support Service (FASS), to provide support to families in various ways, such as one to ones, group work and person-centred support plans. The aim is to assist with preventing or reducing statutory involvement by working with clients to develop and encourage parenting skills and personal social development.

As a project administrator, I support respite coordinators with all aspects of documentation from setting up files, making appointments, organising team meetings and training sessions, to supporting respite providers with general information. In addition, I undertake assessments/reviews and unannounced monitoring checks of service users with a respite coordinator, and

my experience they do both team work and project management very well indeed. This may be linked to their inherent authenticity.

The construction industry is notoriously boom and bust and all too soon I went into another recession. This time I decided I had to get myself another qualification, construction was too volatile. I started to study for an MBA with the Open University despite people on site constantly telling me that I wasn't clever enough.

After a few months the company agreed to fund my studies and I was taken off site and given various assignments in head office. This culminated with me heading up a large culture change programme across the whole of the international business. This was very different to running a construction project. People react to change in very different ways. If I was to be successful, I knew I had to understand people a lot better, so I signed up with the Open University again, this time for a BSc in psychology.

As soon as I started the course I knew this was where I wanted my career to go. I carried on studying and leading the change programme, but I was losing my interest in construction as my interest in psychology grew. At the same time I was

becoming increasingly frustrated with the high-level politics I faced every day and the barriers this created.

My next move was into management consultancy. I thought it would be easy to move out of construction – it wasn't. Having sent my CV to several recruitment agencies, I was appalled when one of them phoned to tell me to give up, that I would never make it as a consultant because I didn't go to the right school, I didn't go to the right university and I didn't have the right experience.

After this episode I redoubled my efforts and eventually was offered a position as a management consultant in the pharmaceutical industry. New technologies were being introduced but people were unwilling to adopt them, preferring to stick with what they knew. My job was to help people through the change. Unfortunately the consultancy's US owner decided to close their UK business and I was made redundant after about a year.

The Psychologist came to my rescue. My wife saw an advert in the magazine for a business psychologist at OPP in Oxford. I didn't think they would consider me because I wasn't an occupational psychologist so I did nothing about it. Undeterred she typed out my CV, wrote a covering letter and got me to sign it.

Needless to say, I got the job and it worked out really well. I loved working there, received a huge amount of training, gained vast experience in business psychology and started an MSc in occupational psychology at Birkbeck.

OPP promoted me rapidly, eventually to Head of Leadership, which was brilliant. We won a lot of work; I was incredibly busy and working crazy hours. I had very little time to spend with my young family. One day, out walking the dog, I realised that if I wanted to see my children growing up I would have to resign, which I did the following day.

Whilst I was trying to work out what to do next OPP gave me associate work which allowed me to set up my own consultancy (www.wiseleadergroup.com), focusing on enabling people to use psychology to develop themselves in the workplace through the use of apps, e-learning, e-retreats and online coaching.

When I look back at how I came to business psychology it was mainly due to the fascinating characters I met in construction and the realisation that to be successful in business you need to understand people. Construction taught me to be authentic and accept who I am. Now I can help people to understand and develop their own authentic 'self' in the workplace.

I am responsible for the database input and extraction of statistical information and reports. Currently I am involved in the development of competency-based assessment for the carers and sitters.

The research skills that I have picked up from university have helped in this process, and being involved in the task has allowed me to gain a better understanding of the service providers.

I might not be in my desired job at the moment, but meeting vulnerable families and children in the course of duty has forced me to think out of the box and reflect on the perspectives I have learned in psychology. It gives me



a great sense of satisfaction to see the difference the organisation is making in families who need them the most. I enjoy working with carers and sitters, who display immense passion for what they do. These

are different people who share one common goal, which is to contribute to society. No one day is the same for them. Similarly, I am learning every day in my job, handling various unforeseen emergencies.

While the administrative function of the role can seem mundane, the challenges in the job coupled up with experienced and professional colleagues who make my learning process much more lively,

makes it all worthwhile for me to remain in the job for a while more.

Have I lost touch with psychology? Definitely no. Have I lost touch with forensic psychology? Tragically, yes! I have applied my skills and knowledge to work, but it's not quite the same. I have still not given up applying for jobs; in fact, I have opened up my choices to other aspects of psychology, such as in clinical settings. The outcomes are still the same.

Recently, I was offered a voluntary role as Assistant Psychologist in Crewe, but relocating to England with no guarantee of a job has stopped me from taking up the position. When should I give up my career search? The advice I receive most of the time is not to give up; whether that is practical, only time will tell. I am hoping not to end up switching fields again due to lack of choices. Optimistically speaking, this is not the end for me: this is my passion and I have been working really hard towards it for the past eight years.

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