

From vitamins to showing loving kindness

How do those on the fringes of psychology view our profession?
Ian Florance meets Michèle Down

Psychology sometimes seems hermetically sealed from non-practitioners. The British Psychological Society's Fifth European Coaching Psychology Conference offered

counter-evidence: an event attended not only by chartered and student psychologists, but also those who use psychological techniques in their work, whatever their job titles or training.

I met Michèle Down at the conference and we arranged to talk a few weeks later in a coffee bar near Victoria Station. I wanted to get a feel for how psychological techniques inform work beyond its own professional boundaries. It was clear Michèle didn't fit into any neat categories.

'I have an unusually rich heritage,' Michèle told me. 'My father grew up in Rangoon and in turn was descended from Iraqi and Indian Jewish stock. My mum was brought up in Soho in the 1930s and was of Polish Jewish descent. I am the oldest of three girls.'

Michèle describes her first love as being drama. 'At school I wanted to be an actress but was realistic

enough to decide that I wasn't good enough to make it: excelling is important to me!' Interviewing for *The Psychologist*, I've met a number of people who took a route from training in a performing art, to being – for want of a better term – a mind worker. Why did Michèle think that was? 'Somatic therapy is becoming a more important element in what we all do, so that suggests a link. And much performance and sports training uses techniques which have been applied more widely in psychology and coaching.'

How did Michèle make the transition? 'My drama teacher was a real role model for me – young, vibrant, creative and inspirational. We stayed friends after I left school and went on to sixth form. She attended a workshop called De Silva Mind Control in the USA, and when it came over to the UK (then called Mind Dynamics) I attended. It was life-changing. I was introduced to the theories of positive thinking (à la Dale Carnegie), psychosynthesis and meditation amongst other things.'

Michèle had never wanted to go to university for its own sake but was advised by the two people running Mind Dynamics that she should become a teacher. 'I did a BEd at Goldsmiths, planning to teach dance and English. I loved teaching but didn't like the predictability of the school timetable. I like variety and am strong-minded, so was probably pretty unemployable anyway – I still am! I intuitively felt that there was something different out there for me, though I didn't know what it was.'

Michèle then met an American businesswoman who was something of a pioneer: selling specialised food supplements and skin care door-to-door for a company associated with Werner Erhart, the founder of the then trendy 1970s EST movement and an early pioneer of extreme and much-criticised coaching methods. 'I went to San Francisco to train with the organisation, which partly involved selling vitamins door-to-door in San Francisco and Marin County – the best (and hardest) training



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I've ever had. When I got back, I set up Earthlore Ltd, selling, and finally manufacturing, a range of vitamins based in Chalk Farm. My husband joined me in the venture and we moved to Herefordshire, from where we ran the business. We were young, in a niche industry, eager to grow, with little capital, so looking to expand in some way. My eldest son's dairy intolerance led me to make carob Easter eggs... we became pioneers in the healthy confectionery market. To expand even more, we entered the world of mainstream chocolate manufacture. Eventually, we sold both businesses, and I remained as director of the confectionery business through the transition. Concurrently, another major life change convinced me to leave the business: what was I going to do next?

Michèle was a Samaritan at the time. 'It was something I really enjoyed. But our work didn't go far enough for me, particularly with people who were not in crisis. I retrained as a counsellor, taking a diploma at Newport. I loved every minute of it. At the end of the second year I wrote to everyone I could think of to ask if they needed a counsellor and in December I got a call from the Royal College for the Blind. Their student counsellor had gone off sick and they'd found my letter. Within two weeks I had 22 clients and ended up staying there for three years. It's the only salaried job I've ever had, and although I absolutely loved my client work, which I found deeply rewarding and enriching, I didn't like office politics or bureaucracy. I decided to work solely for myself once again.'

In parallel with this experience Michèle started teaching a basic counselling skills course for adults in Hereford, ran a BTEC in coaching and set up her private practice. Round about then she set up Michèle Down Dynamics (www.micheledowndynamics.co.uk), 'where I got particularly interested and involved in the trend of intensive leadership and teambuilding training in the UK and South Africa. I also wrote and ran training in standard areas such as assertiveness. But I began to miss the business world. It occurred to me in the end that my combination of business and counselling/coaching skills would be valuable.'

Michèle sees this issue as important for anyone from a psychology, counselling or coaching background working with any set of clients. 'You have to understand their experience and talk in a language they understand. This was true when I

worked with blind and visually impaired people; it's also true now I spend almost all my time coaching business leaders.'

Working with high achievers who have hit a stumbling block or feel they can achieve more, Michèle only works with five to six organisations at any one time. 'I have time and space to understand the ethos of each organisation making my work informed, relevant and meaningful. I help organisations to and through change. What I'm trying to do is help people find real quality of life at work, to discover meaning there, and in that way what I do has huge resonance with the positive psychology movement... I'm helping things get better and I stay the course.'

Michèle is now a registered British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy coach (in fact she is on the executive committee of the BACP's coaching division), with 17 years' experience of coaching and a successful business career behind her.

It can be argued that the Special Group in Coaching Psychology is the area of the Society most open to other professions. What did she make of the conference? 'I was interested, somewhat surprised and delighted, that people seemed to be talking the same language in their discussions after sessions. From the outside, psychologists seem to define themselves by schools, as types of

practitioner, as followers of a particular teacher. It was interesting to see so many of them agreeing over issues that needed to be addressed.'

Do you see yourself as a sort of psychologist, I ask? 'I am one of a growing group of therapists-who-coach. I'd describe myself as an integrative coach – someone who takes ideas and techniques from different places rather than just one school or even one discipline and integrates them into my own model of coaching. I feel as if all my life experiences have merged to inform my work – my business background, my insatiable curiosity about people, their thoughts feelings and motivations and my years' experience working deeply and psychologically to help people to change and grow.'

Is there anything else you feel coaches and psychologists share – or should share? 'Well, the creation of a trusting relationship with your client or patient is vital and underpins all the work we do. This can be challenging: although Rogers' "unconditional positive regard" is not always easy, unless you can accept your client for who they are, and unless they palpably feel that acceptance of their real selves, warts and all, how can they allow you to help them to change? We need to show our clients, for want of a better term, loving kindness as we help them to transform their lives for the better.'

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A journalistic eye

Liz Hollis, freelance journalist and media consultant specialising in psychology

Psychology is a particularly rich source of material for the media. Some of the most significant and high-profile news items are about psychology. The discipline also underlies a vast amount of media content in newspaper, magazine and digital publications too – often more than you would think. Indeed, a cursory look through today's newspapers reveals that most carry page-lead stories about research by Dr Lenny Vartanian from New South Wales University into clutter, chaos and overconsumption. Whether you are a staff writer, in PR or a freelancer, the media are always looking for an 'angle', a 'line' for their story.

My background as a qualified newspaper journalist and former features editor has equipped me with a finely honed journalistic eye for these hooks. Meanwhile, a mid-career break to complete a postgraduate diploma in psychology, combined with a huge interest in the subject, has found me increasingly turning that journalistic focus towards the discipline.

For the past seven years I have

worked as a freelance journalist and media consultant specialising in psychology. I write features, with their roots mostly in psychological research, for national papers, magazines and digital publications.

I also run my own media consultancy business, alongside the freelance journalism, advising clients on editorial strategy, disseminating research findings to the public, PR and communications – again specialising in psychology. This can involve turning research findings into press releases, looking for news angles in data, writing content for websites and social media and advising on PR.

One recent contract for a research organisation, producing reports that include data on children's mental health and wellbeing and their media use, involved trawling hundreds of pages of findings to mine for the lines that will catch media attention. Once identified, these news angles were written up as press releases and disseminated to national and trade media. I also dealt with media enquiries as they come in and liaised with the research director, helping



him respond to queries and handle interviews. The stories I had spotted made national headlines and it was satisfying to hear a live debate on Radio 5 Live and *BBC Breakfast* sparked by what was originally data in a research report.

My work as a freelance journalist involves communicating the findings of psychological research to the public in easily understood language. These are sometimes couched in abstruse language and hidden away in lengthy conclusions, pages of data or buried in subscription-only journals. Sometimes my work feels a little like being a translator, turning

A culture shock to the system

Nadine Mirza, MPhil student, University of Manchester

My first intensive clinical placement was for three months in the psychiatric department of a government hospital in Pakistan. I had just completed my bachelor's from Manchester, spending three years learning about psychological practice as it's done in the UK, ignoring all the jokes from my home country about how I was becoming a 'whitewashed' psychologist. In truth, having spent 10 years of my life living in Pakistan, I was very much in tune with how psychological practice occurred there. Regardless, I was still thrust into what can only be described as a form of culture shock when I began my placement.

Years of practised traditions and customs have led to all major aspects of the country, including health care, being heavily structured around cultural practices and norms. Therefore, it was

clear to me going into the job that psychological welfare and ethical practice, while regarded with high esteem, were overruled ultimately by traditional expectations. With emphasis on the importance of creating and maintaining a family unit at the forefront, when assigned a patient it was generally a given that you were also responsible for three or four accompanying family members. They deemed it their duty to be present at all sessions that more often than not extended beyond the recommended psychoeducation and family counselling. While being aware of this natural behaviour in mental health practice back home, I was yet to be exposed to its more sinister side.

Of course, this highly accepted family involvement could suggest a positive step towards families rallying around

individuals suffering from mental health difficulties. They are expressing a deep-found interest that goes beyond a societal taboo of mental health and fanatical assumptions deep rooted in the culture, such as black magic – a prevailing belief in rural communities. Family and friends find themselves gaining firsthand knowledge of mental health issues and how to prevent or manage them. However, a more profound analysis could bring into question whether society's preference for family involvement may in fact be causing more damage than not.

When working with patients I was expected to never second guess the personal involvement of parents, siblings and even aunts and uncles, who would sit in on privileged sessions with or without the patient's consent. Whether the patient was comfortable with their grandfather sitting in on their private consultations was of little regard. All that mattered was keeping the family unit solid, even if at the cost of privacy. In the UK this would be a serious breach of ethics, but in Pakistan, where tradition means to be family oriented as

academic-speak into specific, user-friendly language for the media without losing the meaning.

Commissions are many and varied and have included covering the British Psychological Society's Annual Conference for the national press, writing about the psychology of whistleblowing for *The Guardian*, interviewing Daniel Kahneman for *Psychologies* magazine; writing about the paradox of choice for *The Times* and the psychology of saying sorry for a feature in *Management Today*. I cover all branches of the discipline, but I am particularly interested in consumer, health and sports psychology.

Ultimately, my job is all about finding 'the story' in psychology research, reading journals and conference papers, talking to psychologists, maybe bringing two or more pieces of research together, and then spotting what journalists call 'the line'.

My career as a journalist began as a cub reporter on a regional daily paper, the *Eastern Daily Press*. This is the coalface of journalism, where you hone your journalistic eye reporting on council meetings and debates over wheelie bin collections and bypass campaigns, while working towards the National Council for the Training of Journalists certificate.

After several years on the local beat I worked as a feature writer at *Health & Fitness* magazine, in London, and then as features editor for a leading press agency

filing stories daily to national newspapers and magazines. I eventually decided to go freelance to take full advantage of the freedom and opportunities it could offer. To earn a living as a freelance you have come up with literally hundreds of ideas for possible features every month and I have always found psychology to be the richest and most interesting vein.

I have always enjoyed reading deeper and wider than writing a newspaper feature required, and it was this curiosity that convinced me to convert my philosophy and French degree with a postgraduate diploma in psychology. After three years of part-time study I was pleased with a first-class distinction, and membership of the British Psychological Society has been an added bonus, which has motivated me to specialise in psychology in my media consultancy business (see www.lizhollis.co.uk).

A deeper understanding of research methodology gained from studying psychology has also been beneficial and, I like to think, helps with accuracy and better questions when interviewing psychologists. However, one of the challenges always remains the fundamental tension between the media's desire for novelty and simple correlation on the one hand, and the very nature of the scientific method with its convoluted and lengthy time frame on the other. There is an inevitable conflict between

psychologists and journalists writing stories about the discipline. Psychologists are circumspect, guarded and slowly accumulate complex research data. Journalists want it simple, bite-sized and accessible with quick headlines that convey the latest and the new. They make the simple assumption that correlation is causation, since cause and effect is easy to communicate and leads to advice readers can transfer to everyday life. Hence the almost impossible task of turning years of careful psychological study with a guarded conclusion into a user-friendly title: a decade of psychology lab research on attention, self-control and eating behaviour is reduced to the likes of 'Calling a food healthy can actually put people off eating it, researchers have warned.'

The tension between psychology and research will always exist, but I hope my background helps bridge the gap when I write about the discipline. I try to bring in as much of the nuance and bigger picture as possible, but I'm still mindful of the consumer-focused need for 'a story', which ultimately helps communicate psychology and its research and understanding to a wider public.

So while psychology and journalism are not obvious stablemates in a career, for me they have come together and allowed me to specialise in a discipline I find endlessly interesting and absorbing.

opposed to self-oriented, this conduct is par for the course.

One woman would have her husband accompany her to every session, and it did not seem conceivable to him when it was suggested that his wife may want to discuss her issues in private. She eventually stopped coming in for her therapy because her husband didn't have time for it and I was bound, both professionally and culturally, to accept this. Such instances are common and generally acceptable. Another young woman, dressed conservatively and displaying an unassuming demeanour, was only able to discuss her active and secret sex life and how it was affecting her after her parents were persuaded, with much difficulty, to leave the room. When they later demanded to know what their daughter had said in their absence I was encouraged by superiors to break privilege as it was their parental right, despite their daughter being



over 20 years old. It is an unspoken rule in the culture that being a legal adult hardly means anything when it comes to parental emancipation.

One's own professional conduct is often called into question when dragged into these political games. One patient, upon confessing he had been raped by his cousin during a session, received conflicting reactions of comfort from his psychologist and judgement and anger from his parents. In that situation, from a professional standpoint, you are not at a liberty to begin challenging the parents of your charge. From an ethical standpoint however, would it not have been beneficial for your patient to separate him from his parents? Or simply not have them present in the first place? In the end policy dictated the psychologist remain neutral and impartial, even if that

meant letting the parents force their son into forgiving and further interacting with his rapist.

Family values, whatever those values may be, seemed to trump mental health each and every time. Never was this more heavily ingrained into my brain than when I saw my severely depressed catatonic patient being yelled at by his mother for bringing shame to the family and ruining his chances at becoming a doctor. She then had her son removed from the ward without his consent, despite the fact that he was legally an adult and a high risk for suicide. To this day I do not know what became of him... should I have called his mother out on being the stressor in her son's life? I played the passive professional, submitting to the family member's wishes, which did that young man no favours.

Ultimately I questioned not just the ethics of practising in Pakistan, but my own ethics and potentially compromised morality. How far should cultural practices and traditions be allowed to venture into psychological practice before a line must be drawn?