

## Misconceptions and more

Caprice Lantz and Peter Reddy on how students can develop a 'career focus' in psychology

Misconceptions around psychology abound. Psychology is often thought to be just common sense, to teach you to read minds, or to not be a real science, and as Jarrett argues in the September 2008 issue (see [www.bps.org.uk/studentgift](http://www.bps.org.uk/studentgift)), some widely known older studies in psychology are poorly reported, misunderstood or just plain wrong.

The misconception that we are focusing on here, however, is that a bachelor's degree in psychology confers

direct entry to the psychology professions. Unlike some undergraduate 'ologies (e.g. meteorology), a first degree in psychology does not lead directly or automatically to a career as a psychologist. Many students study psychology to become psychologists without realising that this typically requires two or three years of postgraduate study and supervised experience. This time commitment discourages many students, and while some continue undaunted to apply for further study, many find the competition for places on postgraduate courses tough. For example, about one in four applicants who meet minimum entry requirements are accepted on to clinical courses. In the end just about 20 per cent of all UK psychology graduates go on to become psychologists.

Highlighting these facts is important. Students planning on a career as a psychologist need to be aware of the commitment involved in attaining the necessary degree classification and gaining experience that will position them to obtain entry to postgraduate courses. They also need to understand that, for most students in most subjects, there is not a simple progression from chosen degree subject to profession; there are choices to be made and actions to be taken. Lecturers too, although often excellent at encouraging students to pursue postgraduate psychology, may benefit from being more aware that no matter how passionate they are about

psychology, the majority of their students won't be going on to careers in psychology

If most psychology students don't become psychologists, what is the point of studying it? Psychology, like the majority of undergraduate courses, is non-vocational; but this does not mean that it lacks vocational relevance. Like history, economics, biology and many other subjects, it offers high-level general education, training of the mind, the development of mature judgement and reflection, graduate skills and competencies and general employability. To succeed in their chosen career, students need to develop their graduate skills and competencies through the opportunities offered in their degree and reflect on their interests, preferences, strengths and weaknesses. Psychology offers a rich diet of such opportunities, as made clear in the Higher Education Academy's *Psychology Student Employability Guide* (see [tinyurl.com/heapsyguide](http://tinyurl.com/heapsyguide)).

Students who are not sure about becoming psychologists need to be made aware of the value of a degree in psychology and how it can be used in a variety of occupations. They also need to know that being an excellent student, having potential for professional psychology and being highly employable interconnect. The ability to reflect on and analyse a problem will make you an excellent student and make you more employable in a range of occupations and a stronger candidate for professional psychology training.

The breadth of usefulness of psychology degrees often escapes students and they graduate uncertain of what they can do with their degrees. Psychology teaches students not only how to do science, but also to take a critical view of its limitations, how to use statistics to get

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meaning out of data and how to analyse text, and how to weigh evidence where there is no clear right answer.

Undergraduate psychology helps students to learn how to learn, develops critical thinking faculties, and helps them to see the world from other perspectives. In this way they can jump into roles where they may have little or no experience but learn what's required; they can see things as they are, get to the point, discard what is irrelevant, and detect sophistry. Psychological theories around learning, motivation and personality can help students to better understand themselves and others, which can contribute to working more effectively alone or in groups – and the ability to work effectively in teams is one of employers' most sought-after skills. Additionally, because of the independent research project that all psychology students undertake, you will have the opportunity to develop skills in research, analysis, problem solving and reasoning, ethical considerations, and so on. These competencies that psychology students can develop will certainly interest employers.

### Becoming a registered psychologist

Students whose ultimate goal it is to become a psychologist and who have the motivation and resources to pursue it, should not be dissuaded by the somewhat low percentage of graduates who eventually do so. The requirements mostly suggest the importance of planning and preparation; and many manage it, with nearly 5000 UK students gaining doctorates or other postgraduate qualifications in psychology each year.

For those pursuing a career as a psychologist, another misconception is that all psychologists become therapists – hence the popularity of clinical psychology. Actually, a variety of career paths exist within psychology (see also Sutton's 'What do psychologists do?' at [www.bps.org.uk/studentgift](http://www.bps.org.uk/studentgift)). The Health Professions Council (HPC) (the body that ensures that allied health professionals meet regulatory standards) lists seven distinct areas of psychology: Clinical, Counselling, Educational, Forensic, Health, Occupational, and Sport and Exercise. Psychologists who work in these areas work in very different environments and in different ways. For example, health psychologists use psychology to promote changes in peoples' attitudes or behaviours around such issues as smoking, diet and exercise. They often work in hospitals, research units or in

## FEATURED JOB

**Job Title:** Psychological Therapists (and a number of other roles)  
**Employer:** KCA

**KCA's advertisement headlines the need for a number of psychological therapists to offer short term therapy in GP practices, but it also mentions other roles, including volunteer positions. 'The whole service is changing,' says Lesley Rogers. 'The impact of IAPT and increased use of cognitive behaviour therapy is creating a bigger role for psychological interventions, and these new initiatives are transforming our work more radically than ever. KCA services are now available across London and the Home Counties. We're looking forward to working with GPs and fund holders to ensure access to psychological therapy is made as easy as possible for anyone who needs it.'**

So, what sort of person thrives in the therapist role? 'Successful candidates may well have a psychology degree but will also have a lot of clinical and counselling experience and will have used, and liked using, CBT. They'll also love the challenge of change and want to shape a rapidly developing service. We want people who are keen to keep up with the latest developments in psychological therapies and eager to put new knowledge to use.'

Communication is a key skill. Therapists have to be able to talk to GPs and surgery staff and, increasingly, to clients with complex problems. 'We're seeing more clients referred from secondary care because of our excellent reputation for CBT work. This taxes the ability to communicate appropriately. Really good people skills are a must. So someone with more than just a psychology degree.'

Is the work very target driven? 'More than ever. Looking at impact and outcomes is integral to the service. It enables you to see how your clients are progressing, how you're doing as a practitioner and how the service is performing. The culture is really collegial – we have a staff meeting every week where we discuss issues and trends and share knowledge.'

It's good to see recent initiatives having such a profound effect on provision. 'It's making for an exciting life. It also means we can develop volunteer roles which could provide valuable experience for graduates who ultimately want to get on postgraduate courses. So we now have a full range of posts – from trainees, through to senior practitioner and clinical manager roles.'

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"Really good people skills are a must... someone with more than just a psychology degree"

health authorities. Being an educational psychologist, however, is much different. It often involves working in schools and colleges with parents and teachers in an effort to develop awareness and effective practice in those who work with young people with learning and other difficulties. Even students who think they are sure about their chosen subdiscipline will find it educational to investigate all the possibilities.

As noted above, there is competition for places on postgraduate courses;

however, this competition varies with the course and the institution. Those considering particular courses would do well to check on what makes for a strong applicant and then strive to do what is necessary to become competitive. Educational psychology courses, for instance, prefer applicants with experience with children and young people in roles such as teacher, learning support assistant, or care worker. Applicants who plan ahead may be able to acquire such experience during

## careers

undergraduate studies, or have experience as a volunteer in a school or as a mentor or tutor that makes them a stronger candidate for paid work. Checking the applicant requirements at different institutions can also be helpful. Whilst some departments may require a degree at 2:1 or above, others might accept 2:2s with relevant experience. Of note, however, is that not all courses are approved by the HPC and those who complete unapproved courses may not be able to become registered psychologists.

### Other options

In the subdisciplinary areas described above, becoming a 'registered' psychologist is important as it is legally required for professional practice. However, many areas of psychology are not strictly regulated and are often of interest to psychology students. Research psychology, neuropsychology, consumer psychology, environmental psychology, and coaching psychology are just some psychology-related career areas to consider. Whilst some find postgraduate

qualifications necessary to enter or advance in these fields, others put their undergraduate degrees to work by choosing related dissertation topics, taking relevant modules, or gaining the related experience.

Beyond career areas labelled as 'psychology' are many jobs that are related to various degrees to psychology. For instance, careers advisers are employed by almost every university and by private companies to assist people in making career decisions and in developing job search related skills. Psychology graduates may be able to find jobs in careers advising with related experience only; however, many go on to complete a one-year postgraduate diploma in careers advising before securing a post.

Likewise a relatively new initiative called Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) has attracted a lot of attention among psychology students who would like therapy-type positions but are not prepared to pursue the full postgraduate qualification. In an effort to provide better public access to mental health care, IAPT has created additional roles such as Low Intensity Therapist and High Intensity Therapist. Psychology students are well placed to pursue such roles, although they do require some additional training beyond a first degree.

### Developing a career focus

Although undergraduate study in psychology is valuable in helping students to develop skills and competencies useful in the job market, and many graduates are currently using their degrees in a variety of fields, some students and employers perceive psychology somewhat

## 'Psychologists have essential transferable skills'

Ian Florance talks to **Joan Baxter** about providing therapy, being the patient, schools, and more

Joan Baxter had only been in the role of CEO at WPF Therapy 'for a week last Monday' when we talked in the charity's new offices at London Bridge. 'The City is just over the river. One of my aims is to build up contacts and sources of support there.'

Previously the Westminster Pastoral Foundation and wpf Counselling and Therapy, WPF Therapy ([www.wpf.org.uk](http://www.wpf.org.uk)) celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2009. 'It was founded by a Methodist minister, Bill Kyle, who had identified a need for "synthesis between social case work and pastoral counselling". We were based in a Catholic convent in Kensington for many years, but we no longer have a religious affiliation. What has remained from those early days is a strong psychodynamic and psychoanalytic tradition. We provide a range of training,

from introductory courses and post-qualified CBT training to master's degrees and postgraduate diplomas in psychodynamic, group analytic and psychoanalytic psychotherapy.'

WPF also see over 500 clients a week at London Bridge and over 15,000 across the national network of centres for one-to-one and group sessions. Many clients self-refer and pay for themselves. 'We offer lower price clinics for full-time students and those on jobseekers allowance. Our contract and partnership work will become more important in difficult financial times. We've been working with Wandsworth PCT to reduce waiting lists under the IAPT initiative, for instance, with Kensington and Chelsea to support carers, and we're developing groups for older people. We're building

links with Community Action Southwark and with commissioners in local areas.'

Joan says she is particularly keen to strengthen a third strand of activity: research and development. 'We need more robust evidence of the effectiveness of our interventions. Impact analysis was an integral component of a recent grant from the Department of Health to develop CBT services.'

New government emphasis on third sector involvement, funding for IAPT and personalised budgets means that there is real scope for WPF to grow and develop. I can understand why Joan saw the job as a fascinating challenge, but I can't see how she got here, since she trained as an educational psychologist and, in recent years, worked for the Audit Commission.

'I wasn't sure what to study at university. My father wanted me to study medicine. I did hard

science A-levels. I was drawn to psychology but no one from my school had studied it before. So I played safe and went to Reading University, where the first year allowed me to sample psychology alongside physiology and biochemistry and zoology. By the end of my first degree, I knew I wanted to be a psychologist. At the time clinical psychology was very much aimed at adults with mental illness, and I decided to become an educational psychologist. There's something hopeful about educational psychology: you're in at the beginning. I followed a fairly standard route: I did my PGCE at the Froebel Institute, taught for two years in Hackney and then trained as an educational psychologist at North East London Polytechnic.'

Joan came out of her training with a 'full set of behaviourist assumptions, but in the real world there was not enough in that toolbox. My first

negatively. One obvious reason is the lack of understanding amongst both about how psychology can be useful in a variety of careers. Another is that whilst the study of psychology can be valuable in terms of its broad applicability and keeping options open, there are so many options open to students that they struggle to decide or are so engrossed in meeting course requirements they don't make careers a priority. As a result, career decisions get put off and students graduate without direction and struggle to find it and jobs. Indeed there is evidence to support this. Employers have noted psychology graduates in particular can lack of career focus making them less desirable job candidates – see Siobhan Hugh-Jones and Ed Sutherland's report at [tinyurl.com/2714o4c](http://tinyurl.com/2714o4c).

So for students who pursue non-psychologist career paths, what is the remedy for misinformation and lack of career focus? Misinformation can be corrected by students gaining a better understanding of what makes their degrees valuable and then articulating this to employers through well-written

CVs and well-done interviews.

In terms of developing a career focus, research suggests that it often takes graduates up to five years to settle into careers. Indeed, many take time off to travel or take up non-graduate jobs for a time until they decide what they would like to do. For graduates who have the resources to do this, that is absolutely fine. Some people's careers evolve over time or occur by happenstance.

However, graduates who want to develop a focus and land in a job soon after graduation are advised not to procrastinate about making career decisions. To develop a career focus, take stock of job possibilities, consider personal strengths and weaknesses, access interests and test out career areas through work experiences, volunteering or part-time work. Indeed, students can use their degree course both to help them make career decisions and to gain entry into

“students need to use their time at university to develop employability”

particular career areas. Interested in international relations? Opt for a semester abroad. Keen on business management? Consider an occupational psychology module. Thinking of becoming a teacher? A dissertation topic on childhood learning disabilities could evidence interest on applications. Want to work in not-for-profit community development organisation? Find a work placement or opt for a sandwich year to develop experience, or if you are unsure and just want to explore it, do a short work experience over the holidays to simply try it out.

In conclusion, psychology offers some fascinating professional specialisms, but it is a misconception to assume that these are available to all psychology graduates or that entry to them does not require further training. A psychology degree is in the great tradition of high level non-vocational education, but students need to use their time at university to develop their employability, identify their interests, strengths and abilities, and gain voluntary or work experience.

job brought me into contact with the Tavistock Clinic, which had a huge influence on my work... I became interested in emotional aspects of learning and became much more systemic. I soon realised that the emotional culture and power relations within a school have a significant impact on children's well-being. There was a real tension in the work. Educational psychology embraces a social model of disability. The SEN framework has encouraged schools to locate difficulties within the child. The growing autonomy of schools encouraged a view that it was the institution and not the child or parent who was the real client, with an emphasis on keeping the headteacher happy with the services received from the local authority.'

Driven by her insights, Joan applied for a job with the charity theplace2Be. 'I was Head of Service Delivery and spent five years helping design a model of practice to support children's emotional well-being in schools. This was my escape from being

a resource guardian, to focus on the child in context.'

Joan moved on to become Assistant Chief Educational Psychologist in Buckinghamshire. 'I enjoyed the work but found the political dimension very frustrating and a major restructuring placed my job at risk. Whilst there, I was extremely impressed by the Audit Commission's review of our services for behavioural needs. Their report helped us focus on priorities. So I applied for a position there and learnt a lot about finance and governance while working with hugely varied clients. I also led on the development of web-based tools to help schools and children's trusts improve value for money in provision for special educational needs.'

All of this seems a big jump, but as Joan says: 'Psychologists have transferable skills which are essential in any job – assessment and analysis, generating trust, testing hypotheses. Communication matched to audience is another skill I used in giving evidence to

parliamentary committees and drafting responses to policy consultations. People with psychological training can make effective organisational leaders. I used all these skills when I had to review governance arrangements at a primary care trust recovering from a £25 million deficit, within ten days!'

Some years ago Joan had some Kleinian analysis herself, an experience she describes as 'extraordinarily valuable. It's a shame that psychologists, unlike psychotherapists, are not required to have an experience of being "the patient". Don't get me wrong: Psychology offers a really valuable scientific approach, which gives a more certain basis for action than some other approaches. But scientific method has been necessarily slow in providing a full toolkit, and, meanwhile, people need help. People's fundamental strategies for dealing with the world are formed when they're very immature and totally dependent on others for their care. Psychoanalysis relies on gaining

an understanding of these habitual ways of managing ourselves, using evidence drawn from the relationship which develops between the therapist and the patient. Ultimately I hope that the disciplines of psychoanalysis and psychology can properly inform each other to build a much richer profession of psychotherapy.'

And this, among many other experiences, led to Joan's present role at WPF. 'I felt I was ready for a CEO role having had plenty of experience as number two. I wanted a fulfilling job back in the charity sector, focused on supporting people's emotional lives. All my training and experience has pointed me in this direction. As a newcomer to the business you have to identify how best to add value and what are the real priorities – at the moment, making sure we are well positioned to benefit from a new policy context, bringing in new contracts and capturing and reporting the impact of the work. It's not all rocket science, but it is very worthwhile challenge.'