



## ‘If you treat clients as adults, they’ll treat you the same way’

Ian Florance meets **Holly Price**, who is finishing her Forensic Psychology MSc and looking for Assistant Psychologist roles

The path to becoming a professional psychologist can be a challenging one; particularly finding that first job. Holly’s story suggests you don’t need to follow the usual route, but you can challenge yourself – and travel – in the long journey to chartership.

**Holly is aiming to become a Chartered Psychologist in the forensic field. ‘In the longer term I’d like to work with adult offenders. One of the things that first attracted me to psychology was its breadth: it offers space to grow and diversify. Since starting my psychology degree I’ve worked with different client groups. I’ve learnt a lot professionally from working with adult offenders. Relationship building with that group has been incredibly satisfying.’**

A lot of Holly’s work has been with the homeless – she’s presently employed as an outreach worker with rough sleepers for St Mungo’s in Oxford. How does this link with her goal? ‘Working with homeless people made me realise the cycle of moving from prison to homelessness and back to prison again. That convinced me of the importance of rehabilitation and breaking that cycle. There’s a lot of interest in these areas at the moment – in reoffending rates, for instance. From working in homeless shelters I’ve seen what institutional life can be like. It might sound naive but I’ve always wanted to help vulnerable people in that sort of setting.’

Where does this desire come from? ‘My interest is in why people do what they do, piecing together their behaviour from their history. And this involved more than just psychological issues. My first job was with victims of crime, and I also worked with offenders. If you’re in any way empathetic, doing that sort of work will make you aware of social and political causes. And

my parents had instilled certain values in me: that in a healthy society people should help each other.'

Other forensic and some clinical psychologists have emphasised the challenge of remaining professional and non-judgemental towards clients who have done terrible things. Have you experienced that? 'Yes, I've dealt with people who've stretched my empathy. But, in addition to what you've learnt in your training, that's where a supervisor becomes essential.'

I knew Holly's family because we had all lived in Henley-on-Thames, the quintessential English market town. Holly was brought up there and I wondered how she must come across to offenders and other clients. Do they treat her as vulnerable or privileged? 'Actually, in general I've found clients incredibly unjudgmental: they're more respectful of diversity than some people assume. If you respect them as adults, they'll treat you the same way.' It's clear that Holly doesn't shy away from a challenge. 'I've always liked to challenge myself, to put myself in situations where I have to think on my feet. For that reason, my path to chartership has, so far, not been a necessarily conventional one.'

#### **'Perhaps we specialise too early as a profession'**

'I had a nice, supportive upbringing with no obvious influences that would lead me to this sort of work. I moved to Manchester when I was 18 – from a sheltered to a much more diverse society. At university I changed my degree from English and French to psychology. I thought about my strengths, my interest in relationships. I quickly discovered what a broad subject psychology is: at first that was intimidating but now it's exciting. I think people need to realise the opportunity for different and wide interests the subject represents. Perhaps we are too tempted to specialise early. I got interested in subjects like memory and sleep. By contrast, neuroscience was more of a challenge for me. I suppose because I come from an arts background, I'm more at home in the areas with a humanist bias.'

After finishing her degree, Holly travelled, and then took a number of jobs and worked as a Financial Adviser for two years. 'Travel shapes a lot of my decisions. Going away gives me clarity over what's important. It also instils confidence, particularly if you're travelling alone. Those experiences have helped me face challenges. I'm pleased I did non-psychologist jobs at that stage. Maybe it wouldn't suit everyone but it gave me a broader view of what life is like.'

After her spell as a Financial Adviser, she started working in victim support. 'I'd researched options and decided, by that stage, that I definitely wanted to train in forensic psychology. The job was in Bristol and again I was challenging myself: starting a new area of work in a city where I knew no one. I like the feeling that you might be close to out of your depth: it helps you develop. Bristol is an amazing city and like many cities and towns, very divided. Wealth and beauty sit beside poverty and disadvantage. This is equally true

of Oxford, where I work now, despite the image you get from films, books and TV. But the real baptism of fire in these early jobs was working as a complex needs worker in a hostel, for St Mungo's. You meet people in the most desperate straits or with the most damaging histories. If you want to work in forensics, I'd recommend you get experience in that environment: once you've survived that, nothing else will seem too intimidating.'

After a while Holly moved into a locum position, 'then I went to New Zealand. My sister lives there and I thought I could work with homeless people in a different environment. I was an Admissions Case Worker in emergency housing in Auckland, for the Salvation Army. This involved liaising with a lot of services and I got amazing experience working in prisons with offenders ready for release. I can't speak too highly of the commitment and concern the people of the Salvation Army show. They really are among the most committed to helping of any group I've met.'

Then moving to a small town on New Zealand's South Island, where there were none of the usual services or areas she was used to working in, Holly took a job in a secure dementia unit. 'I take my hat off to people who work in that area. It was eye-opening, relentless, physically and emotionally demanding. I learnt there for the first time the challenges of working on a secure unit. But I'd said I would start my MSc by the time I was 30, so I came home and started the excellent course I'm on now at Royal Holloway by the time I was 29 ½! It's been a great course, incredibly interesting and in-depth training for forensic work. And, in parallel I'm doing outreach work with people who live on the streets. It's very fulfilling and much harder than working in a hostel. People rely on you and you have to be committed to helping them.'

Do you get the reward of feeling you've made a difference? 'Yes. There are moments when you feel you've achieved something. You work with clients, they disappear, then you see them a year later and they've tackled drug issues, got off the street. Sometimes you're privileged by an act of trust, a disclosure of earlier trauma, for instance. My Master's has helped me practically. It's given me a much deeper understanding of people's patterns of behaviour and their routes into homelessness. I'd like to see all front line social and health staff have psychological training.'

Holly is now looking for psychological assistant roles. Given her experience, how can other psychologists and the Society help those in training better? 'Many people feel overwhelmed by the options, the cost, the time. I think giving wider, more diverse advice on how to get relevant experience would help. For instance, I'm one of the oldest people on my course but I think there are pluses from the amount of different jobs I've done and cultures I've experienced. It's important to make people aware that you don't have to specialise and go straight from undergraduate to postgraduate degree on the route to chartership.'