

What do psychologists do?

If you are one of the thousands of new psychology students receiving this issue free, read on as **Jon Sutton** illustrates some potential career paths ahead of you

Although this may be the first step of your journey in psychology, perhaps you already feel like a psychologist. Perhaps you are spending your first weeks at university pondering how your new social groups are forming, or the effect of alcohol on the brain. Now that you have started your studies, you are embarking on the path that could take you from being an amateur psychologist to a professional one. How can you turn your growing knowledge of psychological theory and research into a career in which you solve practical problems in society and improve people's quality of life?

This article will try to give you a picture of different areas to help you to decide whether you want to find out more. We'll meet psychologists working all around us – in schools, hospitals, prisons and workplaces – to find out how they have put psychology to work, and what they love and hate about their jobs.

Where do psychologists go?

Psychology graduates are pouring out of universities as the popularity of the subject continues to rise. In 2005 there were over 10,500 new graduates. Can there really be jobs for them all?

In fact, only around 15 to 20 per cent of psychology graduates end up working as professional psychologists. But this doesn't mean that the majority of graduates do not use what they have learnt. On the contrary, many employers appreciate the scientific grounding, statistical know-how and critical thinking skills a psychology graduate has gained – see tinyurl.com/yv4xx2 to discover just how employable you will be!

This article will cover areas in which recognised training route has developed over the years, leading to membership of a Division of the British Psychological Society and eligibility for the Register of Chartered Psychologists – a seal of approval that employers often seek (see www.bps.org.uk/smg for much more information). We'll turn to these main specialisms now, but don't get too hung up on them: psychologists working in any of these settings are likely to use knowledge from right across the breadth of the discipline.

Clinical psychology

Psychology is a helping profession, and perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the field of clinical psychology, which aims to reduce psychological distress and promote

psychological well-being. It's demanding work. You would deal with a wide range of psychological difficulties and serious mental illnesses.

Clinical psychologists work largely in health and social care settings, including hospitals, health centres, community mental health teams, child and adolescent mental health services, and social services. They usually work as part of a team with, for example, social workers, medical practitioners and other health professionals. Most clinical psychologists work in the NHS, but some work in private practice. Others work as teachers and researchers in universities, adding to the evidence base of the profession.

The work is often directly with people, assessing their needs and providing therapy based on psychological theories and research. But as Glenda Wallace (a UK psychologist now working with Otago District health Board in Dunedin, New Zealand) explains, these people can be a great resource themselves:

You are face to face with another human being who can bring you richness, and if you are lucky you can give them something back. This is not dismissing our profession, but acknowledging that people are a wonderful resource even without the wealth of theory under their belt that we are supposed to have.

Places for training are in short supply and a first- or an upper second-class degree is required. Relevant experience is also important: this could involve working as a psychological assistant, research assistant or care nurse/assistant, either before or after graduation.

Counselling psychology

If you love to talk people through their problems – really get to the bottom of

jobs online

See www.psychapp.co.uk for the following jobs, to search by job type, area and more, and to sign up for suitable e-mail alerts.

JCA – Senior Consultant
University of Plymouth – Lectureships in Psychology (3 posts)
Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust – Principal Clin or Ed
Psychologist/Highly Specialist Systemic Psychotherapist
MEND Central Ltd – Chartered Health or Clinical Psychologist
Mind Professionals – Consultant Clinical/Neuropsychologist
University of Auckland – Developmental Psychology Lecturer

Advertisers can reach this prime online audience for just £150 (NHS and academic) or £250 (commercial), and at no extra cost when placing a job ad in *The Psychologist*.

Print ads are available from just £300+VAT. The next deadline for job advertising is 10 September (for the October issue).

For more information, see p.792. To book, e-mail [Kirsty Wright](mailto:Kirsty.Wright@psychapp.org.uk) on psychapp@bps.org.uk or call +44 116 252 9550.

them – perhaps you should consider counselling psychology. You would work with others to explore issues underlying a diverse range of human problems. How, for instance, would you go about helping a man who had just lost his wife of 50 years? Perhaps more importantly, how would you help him to help himself?

As human problems are pretty universal, you could end up working virtually anywhere. Counselling psychologists work within the NHS, in general and psychiatric hospitals and GP surgeries; in private hospitals and in independent practice; within education in schools, colleges and universities; in industry and in public and private corporate institutions. It's this diversity that keeps Linda Papadopoulos (London Metropolitan University) hooked:

I've done everything from work on acute psychiatric wards and GP surgeries, to giving lectures to dermatologists and plastic surgeons. I've battled with statistical analysis, travelled all over the world to listen to and talk about research, even sat on Richard and Judy's couch!

Educational psychology

The small girl sits sullenly in the corner, her education (her future?) slipping away before the teacher's eyes. What's her problem? Can you find it and help?

As an educational psychologist you would tackle all kinds of problems encountered by young people in education, from learning difficulties to social or emotional problems. Work can be either directly with a child (assessing the problem through observation, interview or test materials, or giving counselling) or indirectly (with parents, teachers and other professionals).

The majority of educational psychologists are employed by local education authorities (LEAs), working in schools, colleges, nurseries and special units. They liaise regularly with other professionals from the departments of education, health and social services. A growing number work as independent or private consultants.

The very competitive postgraduate training courses look for candidates with 'relevant experience': usually with children in education, childcare or community settings. But a rewarding job awaits you at the end of the long road to qualification. Independent educational psychologist Kairen Cullen says:

This is, unarguably, a satisfying and rewarding occupation and will use an individual's academic and personal qualities to the full. Most important

of all, in my view, is the possession of a total commitment to one's own learning and ongoing development. The psychological processes around how individuals, groups and organisations function most effectively are complex and fascinating. As an educational psychologist I use my knowledge of psychological theory, training in hypothesis formulation, and testing and analysis, and create unique solutions for unique problems.

Forensic psychology

The newspapers often explain the popularity of psychology at university by reference to dramatic television depictions of forensic psychologists. But according to Jane Ireland, a forensic psychologist at the University of Central Lancashire and Ashworth High Secure Hospital:

The work of a forensic psychologist is much more diverse than that depicted by the media. You may be disappointed if you see yourself as a full-time 'offender profiler', helping the police catch criminals.

But if you're interested in working with challenging groups of individuals, in developing and delivering offending-behaviour programmes, working with victims, conducting in-depth offender assessments to inform on decisions about the risk an offender poses to themselves and the general public, in training staff, conducting applied research and providing a consultancy service, then this may be the profession for you.

There's clearly a lot riding on this type of work and, according to Professor Ireland:

It is not a career that should be taken lightly. We often find ourselves making decisions that impact significantly on others. The compilation of forensic risk assessments, for example, can contribute to the length of time that an offender or patient will remain detained. It's also not a career for those seeking a '9 to 5' job or whose primary wish is to make individuals 'better'. Rather, the focus of some psychological intervention with offenders, for example, is on making them 'safer' for their eventual return to the community and in doing so increasing their quality of life. This can be one of the hardest lessons learned by those new to the profession. You either accept the reality of how difficult the work can be or become disillusioned with it and

seek a career within another branch of applied psychology.

Health psychology

'Just say no!', 'If you do drink, don't do drunk', 'Smoking kills', 'Eat five a day'... We are constantly bombarded with health-related messages, and the relatively new field of health psychology uses theory and research to make sure they work, and to understand how they work.

Charles Abraham (University of Sussex) explains how psychological principles are used to promote changes in people's attitudes, behaviour and thinking about health and illness.

Many professionals aspire to change people's health behaviour. Health psychologists work on understanding how the processes that underpin behaviour patterns and behaviour change can effectively be altered. So in the case of preventive health behaviours (such as using condoms) and adherence to medical advice (e.g. taking medication as directed) health psychology research can help professionals offer their patients and clients the right advice in the most effective manner. For example, we have analysed the messages contained in leaflets promoting condom use and moderate alcohol use across a number of European countries. We were able to distinguish between research-based leaflets (which are more likely to be effective) and those containing messages that do not correspond to the psychological antecedents of behaviour change. This work provides guidelines for the production of health texts and helps to establish a foundation for evidence-based health promotion practice.

Neuropsychology

Imagine you are in an accident and your brain is injured. If you can't remember your life pre-injury, including giving birth to your son, how do you relate to him now? Or if you can't lay down new memories – you're stuck in the past – what is your emotional life like? If you can only respond with an eye blink, how do you share your thoughts with others?

These are the kinds of questions that fascinate Camilla Herbert, a consultant clinical neuropsychologist with the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Trust and Hurstwood Park Neurological Centre:

Neurorehabilitation is about people struggling with events and injuries that none of us would choose to

endure. The courage and resilience that many people show is inspiring, and compensates for the day-to-day frustrations of slow progress, chaotic lives and missed appointments. What can you expect? The joys of home visits, sitting on vaguely damp sofas drinking brown liquids out of dirty cups . . . talking with families about the changes they are experiencing, laughing with a client as they describe their latest memory failure, whether it was leaving the dog outside the post office or a bucket of dirty water in the boiler cupboard 'to come back for later'.



Neuropsychologists most commonly work in acute settings, concerned with the early effects of trauma, neurosurgery and neurological disease; in rehabilitation centres, providing post-acute assessment, training and support for people who have sustained brain injury, or who have other neurological problems; and in community services, supporting those who have returned to community living.

Research is an important aspect of neuropsychological practice. In fact, Professor Barbara Wilson OBE believes that

neuropsychology is a wonderful field if one wants to combine theory and practice. It is a broad discipline with an intriguing mixture of normality and abnormality. It encompasses many theoretical models and approaches, and it welcomes creativity and flair in adopting and adapting theories and models in the quest to improve the lives of patients and their families.

There is a serious national shortage of neuropsychologists, most acutely in paediatric neuropsychology, and prospects for professional advancement are very good.

Occupational psychology

If you want to use your psychological knowledge to change the lives of large numbers of people in one shot, perhaps occupational psychology is for you. The wheels of industry are oiled by happy workers, performing to the best of their

ability in a safe and healthy environment. This is where you would come in as an occupational psychologist. What psychological knowledge would you use to increase the effectiveness of organisations, and to improve the job satisfaction of the individual?

Occupational psychologists usually work alongside managers, trades union representatives, training officers and specialist staff from the firm or industry concerned. Their work is broad, touching on research from social psychology, personality and intelligence, as well as related disciplines such as ergonomics and personnel management.

Work can be in advisory, teaching and research roles and, to a lesser extent, technical and administrative roles. You could find yourself doing anything from creating a new image for a company, to teaching leadership and conflict resolution, to increasing awareness of ethnic minorities, women and people with special needs.

Frank Bond, an Occupational Psychologist based at Goldsmiths, University of London, says:

I get to have a positive impact on a large number of people. I work with big organisations to find ways of helping them make their workplaces less stressful but, at the same time, more productive. This is very challenging, but so rewarding when you get it right.

Some would argue that big business is becoming increasingly 'person focused' in the drive for profits, and the services of occupational psychologists are certainly in demand. Rewards can be high: there is perhaps more variation in salary in this area of psychology than in any other.

Sport and exercise psychology

Imagine combining a love of sport and exercise with the psychological theories you have learnt about, in order to push your client that fraction of a second closer to Olympic gold, or simply out of the door for a walk.

Over the last 10 years opportunities in this area have exploded. There is now

a recognised training route, and psychological input has been transformed in the eyes of the public from fringe fad to an essential element in the changing room, training ground and GP's surgery.

Sport psychologists work across a range of team and individual sports, and from amateur to elite levels of competition. They might work with a Premiership footballer to increase levels of confidence using an imagery intervention; advise a swimming coach on how to build squad cohesion; or help athletes to deal with the psychological and emotional consequences of injury.

According to Marc Jones (Staffordshire University):

Working with athletes can be a very positive experience as you help them achieve their potential. However, this can sometimes be challenging, as athletes may perceive working with a psychologist as a sign of weakness. Demystifying sport psychology and reassuring athletes that the symptoms and feelings they experience are common can therefore be an important part of any intervention.'

An exercise psychologist applies psychology to increase exercise participation and motivational levels in the general public. For example, they might work with depressed people to set exercise-related goals, help menopausal women to improve self-esteem through exercise, or set up and evaluate an exercise programme in a workplace, prison and psychiatric context.

Amanda Daley (University of Birmingham) says that it is exciting to see people change through exercise.

This is especially true since, quite often, you're asking a lot. These people may well have been sedentary for months or years. When you first tell them about the benefits of exercise they may be scared or resentful. Sometimes they don't accept what you're saying. You have to overcome the common view that 'rest is best' after an illness. You have to accept that progress will not be quick, or uniform. And sometimes you fail. Anyone entering the profession needs the ability to cope with this.'

Pay and opportunities vary considerably, reflecting the diverse nature of the field. Although full-time opportunities are increasing, most practitioners see it as a 'portfolio career', combining consultancy, teaching and research.

Teaching and research

My friend and former colleague David Shewan, who sadly passed away last year, wasn't your stereotypical bearded, shuffling Prof with tatty tweed jacket adorned with leather elbow patches. He spent a lot of time in the pub. 'Much of my job involves waiting around in Glasgow bars in order to talk to interesting people,' he once told me.

Then I go back to university and tell all (well, mostly all) about this and get paid for it. Sometimes I hang about in jails instead of bars, but the rest remains the same. The people I talk to are drug users, sometimes drug dealers. I summarise and analyse what they tell me, get it published and incorporate it into lectures.

This is a good example of how teaching and research in psychology usually go hand in hand. Some teaching staff will have qualified in one of the applied psychological professions already mentioned. They may return to teaching to develop professional practice and conduct research, or simply to share their knowledge. All university lecturers are expected to help extend their subject by gathering psychological evidence on key research questions, and then disseminating it through journal articles, conference presentations and books. Securing funding for this research is a vital part of the career of a teacher and researcher of psychology.

Teachers and researchers usually have to be administrators too, involved in student selection, devising new teaching programmes, sitting on committees that allocate resources and coordinating aspects of the life of the department. Most are fairly happy to do their share and can find the teaching very rewarding, but it is often the research they live for – the freedom and flexibility to explore those nagging questions about human behaviour, and the opportunity to discuss these ideas and findings with colleagues at conferences.

If you go down the academic path you will get a taste of this freedom while studying for a PhD; most applicants for lecturing posts have one. Essentially an attempt to answer an original research question under the supervision of an established academic, a PhD is a rite of passage that can vary wildly depending on the way you work, the way your supervisor works, even the way your finances work.

Many schools and sixth-form colleges of further education now offer psychology

as a subject at GCSE and A-level. You'll need a PGCE to teach psychology in a state school; for more information see www.teach.org.uk.

The future

There are several reasons to think that career prospects for psychologists will continue to expand and improve.

First, the undergraduate entry levels for psychology are high within most universities, so psychology students tend to be academically capable from the start. Second, BPS requirements for the curriculum ensure that graduates and postgraduates have a tremendous range of skills that employers in many organisations are looking for.

In addition, employers in the public and private sector are also finding that psychological knowledge and expertise is often what they need to deal with behavioural questions, and the financial value of being able to anticipate people's behaviour is central to the marketing strategies of most large commercial and retail organisations. Finally, as the organisation and structure of political and social life become more flexible and less dominated by particular political ideologies, people seem to be increasingly interested in the psychological dimension of one another's decisions, actions and fate.

Psychology is fast becoming the major means of interpreting and understanding what society has been, is and what it may become. We are seeing applied psychologists taking an increasingly leading role in education, health, social care, justice and the workplace. More government money is being pumped into training in order to improve access to psychological therapies. And we are seeing a rising tide of professionalism, led by the BPS and continued by the government's proposed 'statutory regulation' of psychology through the Health Professions Council.

It is hard to predict the impact of statutory regulation on psychology, but one possibility is that boundaries will be blurred and the current adjectival descriptors may fall into disuse as the profession come to see themselves first and foremost as 'applied psychologists'. And psychology is expanding into new areas all the time, such as coaching psychology. It's an exciting time to be embarking on a career in psychology.

As first years, it might seem a bit early to be thinking about such things. But it

The reality of TV

Many of you will have had your first contact with psychology through reality television like *Big Brother*. So what is it like to be a psychologist working on one of these shows?

Tomás Chamorro-Premuzic (Goldsmiths, University of London) has made regular appearances on *Big Brother*. He says:

'TV is not as glamorous and well paid as people may think. All producers work within a specific budget and would always try to pay as little as possible. Their compensatory weapon is "exposure", but most psychologists are wary or even afraid of this!

'The result is a bad cocktail of demanding producers who want top scientists that are able to communicate complex ideas to a low-level audience (well, quite often not as "low level" as they think it is), and snobbish academics who hate or pretend to hate the media. This leads to a clear imbalance between the media's need for top psychologists who are approachable and good communicators and the supply of such professionals. This explains why more often than not, we see bogus psychologists discussing cliché topics on TV.

'This is not to discourage people. Quite the contrary – there is a lot of room in the media for psychologists and given the wide scope of application of this science the opportunities are unlimited. The more serious academics we get on board, the bigger the snowball effect will be and the more realistic the goal of making psychology a useful tool for society – if only to encourage debate about topics of interest which have psychological relevance.'

does no harm to have a look at your options: see www.bps.org.uk/smg for links. And try to talk to psychologists: ask what they love about their jobs, and think about whether you would love that too. In fact, just talk to anyone – perhaps you'll come across a human problem and you will remember an approach or a piece of research and, before you know it, you are a pioneering figure in a completely new area of psychology.

As a science and as a profession, psychology is still relatively young. It's up to you to make an impact and help people in the process.

I Jon Sutton is editor of *The Psychologist*.

*This article was adapted from his chapter in Davey, G. (Ed.) (2008), *Complete Psychology*, by permission of Hodder Education. See www.hoddereducation.co.uk/hepsychology*