

A trip down memory lane (via Penny Lane)

Ian Florance talks to **Catriona Morrison** about cognitive psychology, teaching and research... with a few mentions of the Beatles on the way

Times have changed since I was at university in Leeds in 1974. In 2009 I sat in the airy reception of the Leeds University psychology department. The protected, original university buildings – back-to-back housing, the Students' Union studded with a blue plaque commemorating the Who Live at Leeds album – contrasted with this more modern structure. As I waited for Catriona Morrison, Honorary Chair of the British Psychological Society's Cognitive Psychology Section, I read about a PsyPAG social evening themed around



Sex in the City. I'd lost my way getting to the department and was feeling old, all of which fits in with Catriona's research interests in ageing, cognitive processes and memory. But I did get the feeling I'd come across Catriona's accent before.

She's leaving home

'I grew up in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis but left when I was 16 and moved to Glasgow. I was brought up speaking Gaelic and English, which perhaps underpins my interests in language and bilingualism. I'd always been fascinated by psychology, but at that time you couldn't study it at school. I started a degree in Psychology and Russian Language and Literature but finally gave up Russian. I wasn't good enough at it, but again, it must have fed into my language interests. You can also argue that Russian literature offers great psychological insight! I'm a great believer that psychologists choose to work and study where they have a personal interest.'

Catriona's replies give the impression of a career facilitated by other people and influenced by chance. She didn't really have an idea of the future during her first degree but... 'I chose my undergraduate supervisor, Tony Sanford, because his enthusiasm for his subject area was absolutely infectious. I also like an easy life and I thought that working on connectionist models would be a soft option. How wrong I was! I ended up

working on connectionist models in alphabet sequential processing which involved serious programming. Tony started talking about me doing a PhD and I happened to see a poster which advertised a place in York on connectionist models of language. Pure serendipity. Andy Ellis, my supervisor in York, was key to my success there.'

In retrospect Catriona views her increasing interest in cognitive psychology wryly. She remembers a conversation in the third year of her degree with a student who said he wanted to become a cognitive psychology lecturer. 'I said he was crazy! Cognitive psychology was and is seen as dry. You have to enthuse students about it when teaching degree courses.'

'I wasn't sure what I would do after my PhD. I wasn't drawn to academic life: a clinical assistantship proved that clinical psychology wasn't for me, and attending careers fairs suggested that I wasn't right for a lot of employers. I was overqualified. But my tutor again stepped in. My PhD was successful and I got a grant to do a postdoc with him. The postdoc finally convinced me where I wanted to specialise.' Catriona comments that the Scottish education system is better than the English one in 'giving you access to a wider range of subjects. You aren't forced to make choices too early. As you can see I delayed mine. I was offered a lectureship at Cardiff, where I stayed for six years. Even at that point I had a wobble but my supervisor emphasised I needed to go to a good university department. Cardiff's research and leadership were excellent. I learnt a lot there, not least about teaching.'

Think for yourself

Catriona is Director of Learning and Teaching at Leeds. 'I'm committed to

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research-led teaching and I'm often seen as that person who takes people away from research.' I mentioned that my experience 30 years ago was that my secondary school teachers were more inspiring than my university lecturers. 'The old assumption was that if you were good at a subject you'd be a good teacher. Some people still believe a good researcher can stand in front of people and impart knowledge effectively. That's now questioned. HE staff have to take teaching courses. There's another side to this increased professionalism though. University staff are evaluated all the time, not least by their students. Some lecturers are scared to be themselves and spend too much time simply pleasing their students. But teaching is going to change. We're going to use more technology – podcasts, web-based distance learning and other techniques. We'll see how well this works.'

Catriona sees the same professionalisation trends in HE management and leadership. 'Universities are big organisations with large budgets. I've just been on a course with the Leadership Foundation: I wish I'd had that chance earlier and had learnt the hugely important distinction between leadership and management. What the training taught me is that there's no one correct way of doing these things – you have to try to be yourself.'

To return to her career: Catriona grew interested in ageing and Alzheimer's at Cardiff but left for family reasons. 'My husband is a lecturer in evolutionary psychology and two jobs came up in Aberdeen. We went for them and arrived as winter descended. I quickly realised it wasn't for me. Then two jobs came up in Leeds. I got the one I applied for. My husband didn't, but we came down and he got a position at Sheffield Hallam.'

A day in the life?

Catriona pulls a face when I ask her to describe an average day or week at work. 'There isn't one. I do some expert witness work. I might give a lecture to 200 students on memory and language. I love teaching. The higher level the teaching the more rewarding it gets. All the time you're trying to get over the phase where students are daunted to the point where they take responsibility for their work. I'll also see project students – two current projects are on whether brain trainer software works and on music and memory.'

Catriona also gets asked by the media to do interviews, and she says she takes this seriously. 'I think it's a pity scientists

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"You will have a record of achieving results in a management capacity"

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don't take the opportunities to communicate science carefully to the public. You need to know the limits of your expertise and you have to accept that sometimes the media will get it wrong and you'll get criticisms. I got interested in contagious yawning and its relation to theory of mind and the research ended up getting a lot of attention and criticism. It was seen as a waste of public money – in fact it was free research which didn't cost the public anything.

'I also have a lot of management work – recruiting and interviewing staff sometimes for other university departments. Perhaps I'm most proud of having been involved in creating the new psychology degree course. Then there's travelling, giving papers, submitting grant applications. There's real choice about setting your own priorities and choosing what you do. On the other hand the main pressure is to bring money in and that's a problem for cognitive psychologists whose area is not a high priority for

careers

research councils and commercial organisations. But I do get involved in large cross-disciplinary projects'.

You obviously take your role in the Society seriously. 'Yes. I think the Society and academic psychologists have not always seen eye to eye. I felt it was better to change things from the inside, and I have to say the Society is very responsive nowadays.'

Magical mystery tour

Music came up regularly in our conversation, partly as a key to Catriona's life outside work and partly as an illustration of her desire to make cognitive psychology seem less dry.

'If you asked me what was my happiest moment, it was a particular Sunday morning. My husband had gone to church, I was holding my four-day-old child, the sun was streaming through the kitchen windows and 'Astral Weeks' by Van Morrison – no relation! – was on the stereo. If only all life – and all music – was like that.

'Music brings back memories. I love the Beatles and I believe they're an extraordinary social, cultural and personal phenomenon. People have all sorts of

memories that link to them. If you go to www.magicalmemorytour.com you'll see just how many. We gathered peoples' stories, memories and anecdotes linked to

the Beatles – the individual members of the group, events, songs and albums. In fact we're still collecting them; you can log on to the site and add new ones. We analysed the memories – I'd

love to do a book containing them – and presented them at the BA Festival of Science in Liverpool in 2008. As you can imagine there was quite a Fab Four theme, including a social event at the Cavern Club where the Beatles started. At the end of the evening

"in ten years cognitive psychology may not exist in its present form"

Psychology and human rights

Joy Icayan charts a personal journey from taking a degree in psychology, to market research, to human rights work in the Philippines

I work as a human rights researcher in an NGO called Philippine Human Rights Information Center (PhilRights). Over the previous years, PhilRights has been involved in researching and monitoring issues such as mining, children involved in armed conflict, economic social cultural rights and restorative justice.

Studying psychology

I studied psychology in the University of the Philippines Diliman. As a child, I wanted to be a psychiatrist. This dream was mainly born out of my fascination with Hannibal Lecter and movies I watched growing up, like *Girl, Interrupted* and *K-Pax*. As an undergraduate, I learned that psychology is more than the study of deviant behaviour. I was particularly interested in the areas of biopsychology and social psychology.

In college I was part of an academic organisation that sought to use a cultural psychology (*sikolohiyang Pilipino*) framework when conducting field studies. This method taught students to be critical of

adapting Western findings and methods (such as the use of Western-developed IQ tests) too quickly in the local Filipino setting. It encouraged an interdisciplinary approach to studying human behaviour, borrowing from anthropology, linguistics and other disciplines, and emphasised the need for psychology, or any branch of science, to empower individuals. This entails an active participation of the researcher to bring back



research results to the community or the participants. This method receives a lot of valid criticism from psychologists and scientists in the Philippines – for example,

the possible lack of objectivity in the role of observer, and the very real danger of exoticising the subject matter. These are very real critiques, and we bring these to mind whenever we conduct research, but the approach helped me learn to view psychology as something that exists in settings outside the laboratory.

I wanted to continue doing field studies after college but there were limited options for that – either work in academia or join an NGO. I couldn't see myself staying in the university, and I didn't have enough research credentials to go into full NGO research work. I wanted to get more experience, and applied to become a market researcher.

Market research

I conducted studies on product meanings and associations and market behaviour trends. Market research provides a picture of human behaviour, particularly how perceptions and associations do or don't translate into behaviour. Market researchers ask questions to gauge how a product can be changed to increase client or market satisfaction, profit or improvements in quality. As a market researcher, you learn

to 'own' a product, whether you like it or not. You watch it grow.

The field lets you decipher the motives and emotions behind consumer behaviour. It was exciting work, but I had some reservations. I didn't feel too comfortable attaching more emotional power to brands and products than was necessary, especially in a less well-off country. Having grown up with little concern for brands, I didn't have the passion of my colleagues.

I applied for an internship with Isis Manila, an NGO looking at women's issues, and after that had two other brief jobs, one in a government agency. Then I decided to go back to research.

Working in the Philippines

As a research associate in a human rights organisation, I help conduct qualitative and quantitative studies on themes and issues that the organisation is involved in. Recently these have been economic, social and cultural rights; mining; and children involved in armed conflict. We go to different project sites around the country for interviews, focused group discussions and surveys. Reports on these activities become the bases for recommendations to community partners and state agencies.

I found myself on stage with lots of other people singing along to 'Hey Jude' at the top of my voice. If cognitive psychology can give you such great experiences, it can't be that boring, can it?

We can work it out

I asked where cognitive psychology was going. Catriona thought for a while about this. 'In the new degree course we don't call it cognitive psychology. We have modules on memory and language and neuroscience. The discipline is changing. Neuroscience is developing by leaps and bounds, and my suspicion is that in ten years' time cognitive psychology may not exist in its present form.'

However, Catriona she is very aware of the pressures on HE funding. 'In Leeds we are currently engaging in an "economies exercise" that we perceive as being a threat to jobs and teaching standards. As part of the management group I accept that we need to deal with this; the tricky task is preserving the standards we have fought hard to attain and sustain the morale of staff and students. These are tough times for the HE sector and there is no doubt that we will be leaner as a result.'

And what, I asked, was Catriona's next step? 'Research has taken a back seat over the past few years. In two years' time I step down as Director of Teaching and Learning and I want to consolidate my

research – give it the attention it deserves.'

Ticket to ride

Walking back to Leeds station, it struck me that the physical structure of the university I attended nearly 40 years ago reflected Catriona's views on HE teaching, research and psychology in general. Some things are the same, some have changed but more changes are in the air. Psychology is facing a critical period; cognitive psychology will transform; HE is under increasing policy and cost pressures; technology is transforming teaching. How will it all end? 'Tomorrow Never Knows'.

Human rights work poses difficult, fundamental questions. A recent massacre in Maguindanao involved the systematic murder and desecration of at least 57 people. It raises issues about empathy and the human capacity for brutality: what are human beings capable of, given the circumstances? In attempting to answer these you go back to rules of behaviour – how these are applied and broken within a group. In a way this is like any laboratory experiment, except there may be no quick definite answers. Asking questions, in itself, helps to highlight the issue.

There is a certain wonder and fulfilment in seeing how theory can be applied in a setting outside the laboratory. Prejudice, for instance, is fostered by a lack of significant contact with outgroups, and prejudiced attitudes become even more polarised when they are only exposed to similarly minded people, thus resulting in groupthink. During a peace camp conducted for children in Mindanao, we observed some children displaying negative attitudes towards children and facilitators of a different group/religion. Their stereotypes of the outgroups were unfounded, and yet they held them strongly. This effect can be attributed to the recent armed conflict in the surrounding areas



REUTERS

A recent massacre in Maguindanao raised issues about empathy and the human capacity for brutality

between the military and non-state groups, reinforced by the attitudes of adults. However, placing children from different groups/ religions together in one isolated setting – letting them play, talk and eat with each other – helped them relate to each other better and to form friendships.

This work creates challenges and low-points. The more superficial ones include having to defend the work against friends who wonder if I do anything other than go to rallies and cause traffic jams while they're on their way to real work, or who wonder if being involved in advocacy work is just

an extension of a life crisis! Popularising human rights concerns creates real difficulties. Extrajudicial killings, and state-sanctioned human brutality do capture peoples' attention; it's more difficult to raise public awareness about more general issues, like lack of access to education and health, demolition of houses, suppression of speech. People see human rights issues as the territory of human rights advocates, the legal system or academe.

However, I find enough motivation in believing that psychology has a huge place in the field of human rights, and

there is much to be done and looked into. Professor Chei Billedo of the University of the Philippines Diliman states that behaviour modification is one of the basic reasons we want to learn more about ourselves and why we want to delve into our psychology. Human rights workers want to modify this too, and to affect areas such as policies, laws and social practices. Working with individuals who come from different fields, who bring with them different frameworks for analysis, different perceptions, provides the necessary idealism that comes with the work. That, of course is its greatest reward.