

## A rollercoaster ride

Ian Florance talks to Claudia Hammond about how she has put her background in academic psychology to good use in her broadcasting career

I interviewed Claudia Hammond in a London café on the day before the first episode of her new BBC Radio 4 series was broadcast. *State of Mind* tells the story of mental health care in the UK from the 1950s to the present. Many readers will know her regular programme *All in the Mind*, perhaps the most important source of psychological ideas in the UK media.

Early on in the interview the café fuse box blew. Struggling to scribble notes in the gloom increased the anxiety of interviewing someone quoted on the BBC



Radio 4 website as saying: 'The great thing about this job is getting to interview some of the most brilliant researchers in the world...' and who commented: 'It's a really luxury to be able to decide what I want to ask them.'

So, how did Claudia become one of the most listened to and read UK psychologists after a period as a greyhound tipster? And why does she tend to be seated next to new-age enthusiasts at weddings?

I asked her what came first – psychology or the media. 'I was at a children's book festival and, after I had queued up to get Roald Dahl's autograph, he asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up. I'm told I said "I want to work in radio". That was the first my parents knew about it. It was probably the first time I realised.'

It seems radio work was the constant. Claudia worked local stations in parallel to and between school and university. Her interest in psychology developed out of that. 'Claudia's Sunday Requests on Hospital Radio Bedford was not an award-winning production', she says (though Claudia is still listed on their website). 'I started it when I was 14. I went round the wards asking for requests and I found myself going in earlier and staying longer. Patients told me their stories and details of their illnesses and treatments. This was what got me interested in psychology, maybe what even led to me doing a postgraduate degree in health psychology.' Not that this

educational path was a foregone conclusion. 'Before going to Sussex to do a degree in applied psychology I worked at Three Counties Radio as a newsroom assistant. Watching news stories come in and going in and out of the studios during live programmes was incredibly exciting. Occasionally I'd get on air too: the first time was giving blood on the breakfast programme. So I can say I've given blood for the BBC! I thought about staying on but was convinced I should get a degree. My friends thought I'd do media studies, but I wanted to learn about something new. So I did a degree in applied psychology at Sussex.'

Claudia's book *Emotional Rollercoaster* displays her fascination with research findings. This started during her first degree. 'I liked the experimental aspect of the work – setting up a hypothesis then testing it. I also found I liked the range of psychology – the number of different areas it studies and affects, the different ways of doing it. I knew I didn't want to be a clinical psychologist, although I did think about going into research. But at the time I was also working at Radio Sussex so I was torn between psychology and radio.'

Claudia undertook an MSc in health psychology at Surrey University, researching doctor-patient communication in a breast cancer unit. Her first job on national radio – as a journalist on Radio Five Live – marked a real change. 'I'd done the greyhound racing tips on local radio, but now I was dealing with sports stories as well as breaking news. I'm hardly an expert on sport. This, along with watching a piece on horse insemination involving recording people doing extraordinary things with drainpipes, are two of my odder media experiences.'

Claudia stressed that she's always been and remains freelance rather than a staff

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member. 'In a sense I was trying to keep parallel careers going, as a reporter on the one hand and as a psychology lecturer on the other.' But whatever strange tasks she undertook as a journalist, she was always looking to develop items on psychology and wider health issues. 'I began to start reporting on Radio 4 series such as *Woman's Hour* and *All in the Mind*.'

Claudia was then able to bring the two together, presenting a wide range of programmes that reflect her earlier fascination with psychology's breadth: it covers memory, group psychology, positive psychology, conformity and sports psychology, among many other subjects. There's also a strand that looks at wider health and biological science issues: fingerprints, the experience of miscarriage. 'I have a weekly programme *Health Check* on the BBC World Service. This has led to some extraordinary experiences and gives me a chance to get a more global view of health provision. Visiting the biggest brothel in the world was quite extraordinary.' (You can read her fascinating *Guardian* article on this at [tinyurl.com/da49oq](http://tinyurl.com/da49oq)).

Claudia also has a regular column in *Psychologies*, originally a French magazine but now available in a number of European editions. She describes it as a 'women's glossy monthly magazine that's different from any other, because there's no fashion'. Her first book, on the science of emotions, was published in 2005 to excellent reviews.

She chairs conferences and lectures too. 'I started at the OU and now lecture on two courses – Social Psychology Issues in the UK and Health Psychology for Boston University's UK base. I love doing this. Students challenge you and expose you to different views and I like having to keep up to date for those lectures.'

Claudia must also surely be the only psychologist to appear alongside bands, comedians, novelists and poets at the Latitude Festival in 2008.

In the gathering gloom of the London café it was sometimes difficult to keep up with the sheer range of Claudia's activities. What is the common thread running through them?

'Sometimes if I go to a wedding I'm put next to someone who is "interested in psychology". Quite often, this person turns out to want to talk about chakras, read my aura, compare crystals or some other new-age topic. People are fascinated with psychology but they don't always understand what academic psychology covers. They link it to fringe beliefs and activities. There can be a misunderstanding among people who set out to study psychology. Sometimes they

## FEATURED JOB

**Job Title:** Female Head of Psychological Services  
**Employer:** Refuge

**Refuge set up the world's first refuge for women and children escaping domestic violence, in Chiswick in 1971. Since then, it has grown to become the largest provider of emergency accommodation and emotional and practical support to women and children in the country, and a leading voice in the campaign to end domestic violence.**

'On any one day there may be 1000 women and children in our refuges,' says Ruth Aitken, a consultant psychologist who works with Refuge. She was formerly their Head of Psychological Services, so can talk about the job with authority. 'We presently only employ two psychologists. We've just appointed two more and there is another job advertised in this issue for a psychologist based in Hounslow. This increase in psychological provision is at the centre of the Head's management role.'

Funding structures are changing and Refuge will be explaining and marketing their services to trusts and local authorities to gain new funds. 'We already have some funding to increase psychological services in terms of group work within London, but we're seeking more. So the role will be part of a senior team who plan, implement and find funding. The successful candidate needs to think strategically and creatively and be able to genuinely contribute to the work of this team.'

"The psychologist must turn consultation into conversation"

But this is only one element of the role: another is a client caseload. 'Partly this enables them to learn about Refuge's unique clients and work. It's different from a traditional clinical or educational role. Our service deals with children and women together, and most psychologists will need to move outside how they've been trained and their experience. They'll need to deal with crises. They'll have a caseload where everyone has been abused, not just a percentage. If they're used to working with children they'll need to learn about women's experiences and vice versa. Apart from helping them learn, the casework keeps them emotionally close to the real individuals we help.'

Ruth emphasises the qualities they're looking for. 'A feminist view of domestic violence and an understanding of the power and control underpinning abuse. Cultural and ethnic sensitivity. Absolutely central is a non-pathologising, non-stigmatising and non-labelling approach. It is not helpful to understand the impacts of domestic violence in terms of illness or cures, or look for causes in individuals. The roots of domestic violence are social. This feeds into what we're trying to achieve. We reduce blame, including self-blame. We emphasise there's nothing "wrong" with the people in front of us; that one in three women will experience domestic violence in their life and that it's the most repeated violent crime. People find it liberating that someone understands them without seeing domestic violence as an illness, a list of symptoms to be treated.'

The role will require a range of psychological skills, and the ability to 'match the correct approach to the living, breathing person in front of them,' Ruth says. 'Most people we see have never met a psychologist, avoid services and may have told no one about their experiences. The psychologist must turn consultation into conversation.'

The Head of Service provides supervision for the team and this is particularly important in stressful, challenging and creative work. But as the team grows, more systems will need to be set up for supervision, support and CPD.

Why is Refuge looking for a clinical or educational psychologist in particular? 'We might have looked for other types of psychologist, but experience of working with children is essential. The effect of domestic violence on children is less discussed than its effect on women but it's equally important in the work we do.'

Ruth makes a final point. 'This is a big job. It has aspects of strategy and management, fundraising, public relations as well as a caseload. It addresses an issue which poses real challenges. We need someone special.'

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think it will help them work through their problems.'

In an interview included in her book, Claudia expanded on this. 'It's not a self-help subject... for the most part psychology today is about the study of large numbers of people; it's not about introspection.'

So Claudia says she is trying to 'give people a better understanding of the role psychology plays. Helping people articulate and get across a seemingly technical piece of good research is central to my approach. I also like bringing different specialists together – it's amazing how often people who are hugely expert in one area of psychology know next to nothing about related work in a slightly different field. I really enjoy it when two people involved in a discussion exchange cards on the way to the lift and decide they might do some work together. One suggested I set up a matchmaking service for academics!'

You've met some very well-known psychologists. Do they intimidate you? 'I interviewed Philip Zimbardo in his house and he cooked pizza for us. It's a privilege to meet and listen to such people. But, the advantage is that I've got a role, an excuse for being there as an interviewer for the BBC - and

I've done my homework. So I'm not frightened. I like to be in control, so that I don't get in the way and you hear the ideas from the horse's mouth. Reading journal articles is one thing, but hearing someone actually talk about their research can really bring it to life.

'I can't emphasise too much how my experience as a reporter and producer in my early media career has helped me. Understanding how the media works as well as knowing your subject is crucial.

But it's more than that. The experience of working in a local radio newsroom and at 5Live taught me about balance and fairness in discussions, something that's crucial even in non-news programme like *All in the Mind*. My personal opinions are irrelevant when it comes to a programme

like that – it's all about letting everyone have a fair say and critically questioning their research and viewpoints.'

This led us on to Claudia's advice for psychologists seeking to communicate their ideas. Here are her key points.

"There's such an appetite for psychology amongst the public"

- | Be choosy: don't accept everything.
- | Popular programmes are fine – 'I sometimes go on *Richard & Judy* to talk about psychological research – but if I think a show is going to dumb it down, I say no. And sometimes they're looking for is a qualified therapist, and that's not me.'

## Preparing for redundancy

**Ben Williams** (a Chartered Psychologist who works as a strategic adviser and executive coach) with a timely review of some of the effects of redundancy, and how to react to it

Redundancy may creep up slowly, its approach hardly noticed until the last minute. It can arrive suddenly and without warning. Sometimes people read the signs accurately and expect the worst – occasionally it can be a relief.

Whether redundancy is expected or not, it is usually a shock, and psychologists are very strongly placed to help. In some instances it may even be a case of 'Psychologist, heal thyself!': psychologists are no more immune to job cutting than any other profession.

While the threat to one's bank balance and the need to meet family and other financial responsibilities are the most obvious effects, it's important not to underestimate redundancy's emotional impact.

The key to reducing these negative effects is planning: taking precautions as soon as the threat of redundancy registers.

### Planning

It's wise to put contingency plans in place against the

possibility of redundancy in today's economic climate. Yet surprisingly few people

consider doing this. We insure our

lives, our homes, even our travel, but not our careers. If the worst happens, having plans in place will mean you are less likely to feel devalued, worthless or a failure. By planning in advance, you can take a realistic overview of possible career paths and

"it's important not to underestimate the emotional impact"

evaluate them calmly and without pressure. This checklist should help convert potential disaster into probable success.

- | Prepare as much as possible in advance to avoid being surprised. Take time to research likely organisations for future employment in your area. And of course, every time you complete a successful project, add the details to your CV.
- | Define what you would regard as equitable terms for your termination of employment, and be ready to negotiate effectively. Improve your negotiating skills in readiness for this!
- | Examine and define your personal and career goals, ensuring that these are in line with your value system.
- | Establish in advance which career directions or changes might realistically satisfy you in terms of contentment and success.
- | Make yourself aware of how your current skills, talents

and ambitions are transferable and match the requirements of the employment marketplace.

If redundancy happens, you will be more ready to approach the marketplace if you've accepted the possibility than those who have refused to face up to it, hidden their head in the sand or viewed it purely in a negative light. You will be more effective in job-search, and better prepared to perform well at interview.

If you're prepared, you will be less likely to sign redundancy agreements while in a state of shock. You should always examine such documents carefully and negotiate terms to take full advantage of financial entitlements and all possible outplacement and support services your employer may offer.

This preparation time should involve doing as well as thinking. Raise your profile in at

- I Ask plenty of questions beforehand on the phone (not when you arrive at the studio), so that you can think about what you're going to say.
- I Don't agree to talk about subjects you know nothing about. Have some research in mind that backs up what you're saying, but be realistic about how detailed you can be – this isn't the place for a critique of research methods and stats.
- I If you choose the programme well, the interviewer and interviewee are in it together. The interviewer wants to make the interviewee look good because it makes a better programme.
- I Psychology is something worth talking about. 'It's a pity when good researchers are nervous about getting their research out there where the public can hear about it. There's such an appetite for psychology amongst the public that it would be great to see

some really good TV programmes made on the subject.'

In near pitch blackness I asked Claudia what her plans were for future programmes, series and books. I was aware that this might be asking her to give too much away about submissions to the BBC or her publishers and she thought long and hard about it. The next day I received an e-mail which is worth quoting:

'What I hope might happen in the future is that just as the field of economics is suddenly catching on to the decades of psychological research on decision-making, that other fields might start to do the same and to realise that there's all this research out there which could be put into practice. Expert panels and commissions wouldn't dream of not including an economist. I'd like to see a day when they all have a psychologist too.'

contribute

We would like to hear from our readers about what areas of psychology you would like to see covered in these pages.

Articles and interviews can cover any topic related to careers in psychology, including:

- I Getting on the career ladder
- I Career progression
- I Trends in the employment market for psychologists
- I 'Warts and all' accounts of the highs and lows of your working life
- I Your careers-related letters

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least one professional organisation or association, for instance the relevant Division of the British Psychological Society. Begin networking with colleagues in other organisations or areas of work where you might be interested in progressing. Making contact with others enables you to update your professional skills. Your morale is more likely to remain high if you talk with other people rather than simply thinking about issues in isolation.

Apart from the obvious period of unemployment and financial difficulty the prime danger of redundancy is succumbing to disempowering despair and dysfunction. It is important to maintain an active routine, to keep physically fit and mentally active.

## Recovery

Like all major difficult life events, it is important to understand the need to go through recovery, often referred to as a 'mourning process'. This involves a range of, initially negative, emotions of varying degrees of intensity – shock,

disbelief, anger, fantasy, depression and guilt. It is during this negative phase that people may need support.

This sequence can be rehearsed over a short or indefinitely long period, but in most cases negative emotions will give way to more positive ones. The positive elements begin with acknowledgement of the reality of redundancy, followed by self-awareness, goal-setting, planning, taking action, gaining results and finally, acceptance. It is during these positive processes that most people will respond best to being challenged.

## Goal-setting

Asking yourself 'What would you have, or do, or be, or achieve, if you knew you could not fail?' helps to establish life and career goals. Answers should be 'SMART', i.e. specific (not a generalisation like 'happiness' or 'health'); measurable (set a recognisable standard for your

achievement); acceptable (will fit the chosen ecology of your life as you want it); realistic (will

involve skills and talents you already have or can develop); and timed (set a specific and finite time for the achievement of each item).

Once 10 different answers have been established,

each of these goals should be broken down into sets of objectives, which, in turn, are broken down into daily tasks. Daily tasks fall into two categories: progress and maintenance tasks. Progress tasks are those which initiate a new activity, make an introduction, or establish a new approach; maintenance tasks are the regular tasks which make things happen. Over 20 years experience as an occupational psychologist dealing with redundancy suggest to me the need to: understand fully the value of



your skills and experience, and prepare a statement which accurately describes them; establish what you want from your new job, or your new career, and disclose this positively to interviewers and to people you meet at your prospective new workplace; be ready to explain that you will make a positive effort to fit into a team in your role, and take a collaborative approach with colleagues; indicate that you wish to build your career with the organisation (if this is not the case, consider why you are making the effort to join!); be ready to enhance and develop your skills and experience with training, mentoring and coaching.

## A journey

Success is a transient state, rather like happiness; you can consider it as a journey rather than a destination. Bertrand Russell said that 'Success is getting what you want and happiness is wanting what you get'. It is my view that both can be achieved, but only if you are prepared to choose very carefully and then take positive and persistent action.