Money on Your Mind Interview with Dr. Merle v.d. Akker

1. Who or what got you into behavioural science?

I started my professional career as a corporate FMCG marketer. What fascinated me the most about my role was consumer research - trying to understand why consumers purchased one brand or product over another and how it was possible to influence and steer them towards buying the one you were marketing. When corporate marketing started shifting more towards analytics and digitally focussed communication, I knew it was time to move on.

I spent a few years lecturing part-time in Marketing Comm's at Bournemouth University and came across Nudge and Thinking Fast and Slow during that time. I also went back to university and completed an undergrad in Psychology. Purely by chance, I then stumbled across the field of CyberPsychology. Technology has always fascinated me, so to be able to combine this with psychology and behavioural science is a dream come true. I have recently completed a research masters in CyberPsychology from the University of Buckingham. As my research project corresponded with the first lockdown late March 2020, I focussed on how working parents used their personal and workplace technology to juggle their work and home commitments and how this technology juggling could impact on their overall mental wellness.

2. What is the accomplishment you are proudest of as a behavioural scientist? And what do you still want to achieve?

Technically, I am still a relative newbie to the realm of Behavioural Science. However, having completed a research masters during a globally turbulent 12 months, while juggling paid work, completing a placement at a VR company and managing family life is probably one of my proudest personal achievements.

While I was doing my masters, I also developed the concept for and set up 'Cybercology'. Having found so much rich information while building my literature review, I really wanted to bring workplace technology insights out from behind academic walls and into the public domain. There is so much valuable knowledge that can help both businesses and individuals manage the upcoming workplace revolution. They just seem to have gotten lost in the gulf between research insights and public awareness. I would like Cybercology to be a go-to platform that helps remote and hybrid knowledge workers to pursue healthy behaviours around technology use that improves their work in general, and overall mental wellbeing in particular. Alongside this, I would like it to support businesses in their transitioning to better workplaces of the future. This includes helping them with strategies to improve worker productivity, increase healthy workplace norms around technology use, update leadership skills to work more efficiently in hydrid teams, and reduce cybercrime through behavioural change.

3. If you weren't a behavioural scientist, what would you be doing?

I would probably have set up a garden centre or been a garden designer. I inherited my grandmother's love of all things plant-like, and having grown up in South Africa, I thrive being outdoors. So, I spend (maybe too many) hours pottering in the greenhouse and digging in the garden. Most of the plants I propagate or grow from seed are given away to friends, but I do find great fulfilment from digging in the dirt, clipping hedges and generally just being outdoors.

4. How do you apply behavioural science in your personal life?

Often, it's in figuring out why I do things, how I work, how to get myself to work more efficiently and motivating myself to keep going when I just plain don't want to. There are probably a lot of times I use these techniques when interacting with friends and family, probably more subconsciously than intentionally. I have also often shared my understanding of behavioural science principles to help friends, when they (or their children) are struggling with general life-issues.

5. With all your experience, what skills would you say are needed to be a behavioural scientist? Are there any recommendations you would make?

Behavioural science, like CyberPsychology, is a field that encompasses so many areas of work and life. Having an inherent curiosity of human behaviour and a desire for continuous learning are both key traits to have. Although the theoretical and academic side of behavioural science is vital for expanding our overall knowledge of the field, having practical experience of how that theory works, how it can be most effectively implemented and how nuanced it can be, is a key part of being a great behavioural scientist.

6. How do you think behavioural science will develop (in the next 10 years)?

I think a lot more insight will start coming from how we engage with and use new forms of technology. Portable ECG devices and human-computer interface technology will give us new and interesting insights into how our actions and thoughts impact our brain activity and behaviour (and visa-versa). A lot of current insights seem to be based on observations, experiments, and real-life examples of how techniques have changed human behaviour. These are vital insights that will continue to be key to understanding how we act and react. However, adding the technology dimension may tweak and enhance this understanding and help us to be better informed behavioural scientists.

It's a very, very exciting time to be in this field.

7. What advice would you give to young behavioural scientists or those looking to progress into the field?

For those entering their field, I would encourage them to specialise in one area of behavioural science and then become known for that particular expertise. Being a generalist, in the future, I think will not be enough to build a strong career in behavioural science.

8. Which other behavioural scientists would you love to read an interview by?

I would probably most want to read interviews by other CyberPsychologists. A lot of the CyberPsychology academics are contributing dynamic insights and knowledge into the behavioural sciences, especially in areas of AI, technology development, cybersecurity, social media use, gaming, VR & AR. I don't think they are being recognised enough for all that they are contributing to this field.