

# RESEARCHER PROFILE



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### EARLY YEARS

Becoming a researcher was intrinsically tied to my love of learning and curious nature from a young age. I grew up in the Middle East and throughout my childhood, was exposed to regular news updates on the first Palestinian Intifada, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Civil War in Lebanon. By the time I was 12, Iraq had invaded Kuwait and my hometown was awash with US and British military.

This early exposure to violence led me to read numerous political memoirs from China, Iran, Pakistan, Kashmir, and the Arab region as a teenager. By the time I was 23, I was translating Arabic conversations with political leaders and prisoners for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). That was where my researcher journey really began. It was in the field, sat on plastic chairs in prisons that had been half-bombed, with people who had experienced significant trauma, loss of dignity, and grief.

## HUMANITARIAN FIELD WORK

Frontline field work still guides the essence of how I research today. A lot has happened since but I'll never forget the intensity or experience of interviewing people about their life stories. As an ICRC prison delegate, I led numerous field investigations into allegations of abuse and torture. This work involved difficult conversations with the authority figures overseeing these interrogation processes. I sometimes sat with the very interrogators themselves accused by their detainees of human rights violations.

After long days in prison, I would sit at my desk writing up my notes and contacting prisoners' families to let them know they were alive and well. I wrote report after report, describing in qualitative terms the stories of each prisoner before categorising and quantifying the types of abuse. Eventually, through repeat visits, myself and my colleagues would identify patterns of abuse and present these findings to the authorities within the framework of International Humanitarian Law. The work was meaningful, challenging and at times, emotionally exhausting.

## BECOMING A RESEARCHER

My first foray into academic research was during my first Masters degree in Violence, Conflict, and Development in 2003. After a mission to Jerusalem, which I had quit after 6 months, I decided to explore the politics of neutrality, a humanitarian principle that meant we couldn't take sides. It was one of several principles that helped us to gain access to prisoners but it came at a price. That price, I calculated in my subsequent dissertation, was to render us bystanders to inhumane processes. We bore witness to immense suffering and yet we couldn't fully intervene to make it stop.

Over a decade later, and more missions later, I left humanitarian work to set up an executive coaching practice. My main clientele were humanitarian and political entities so although I left, I also maintained close ties with those who continued to work on the front lines of suffering and war. During the first year of practice, I decided to write a book on the journey beyond violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity. Inspired by Jungian archetypes, the book, titled *Wild Zen: An Inner Roadmap to Humanity*, featured myself as narrator and interviewer of people who had survived adversity, suffered in the process, and created meaning from their difficult times.

I interviewed people like Christine, a woman with chronic rheumatoid arthritis, and Steve, a stage 4 bowel cancer survivor, as well as a dance movement therapist who grew up in communist Romania, a street kid and meditation teacher from Cambodia, an ICRC delegate who was the sole survivor of a shooting in Chechnya, and a homeless woman who went on to lead health projects for the Australian Red Cross. Their stories touched me deeply and reminded me that I wasn't alone. The wisdom churned from their hard times gave me hope that I too could find my own.

Parallel to my executive coaching practice, I continued to explore my own experiences. I didn't realise it at the time but what I was drawn to intuitively was a style of qualitative research known as narrative enquiry. Perhaps I was influenced by the early political memoirs I had read, or maybe it was the effect of years spent interviewing survivors of violence. Now, I was finally slowing down to question, what is my story? In order to answer that, I had to also pose the very difficult questions of who am I, who have I been, and who am I going to become if I don't understand what has happened to me?

Answering those questions took me on a relentless quest into my own narrative, this time closer to the present moment rather than looking back into the past, as I had done in *Wild Zen*. In a second book, titled *Cherry Blossom Dojo: The Way of Inner Strength*, I explored the parts of me drawn to a life-long passion for martial arts. Starting with the philosophical insights and principles of the founder of Shotokan Karate, Gichin Funakoshi, I wove my day-by-day narrative around my interpretation of his words. Eventually, I framed the book in 4 parts: *Character, Defence, Competition, and Longevity*.

As fate would have it, writing *Cherry Blossom Dojo* led me train as a self-defence instructor in the UK. There, I met my Positive Psychology teacher in the Chief Self-Defence Instructor, who happened to specialise academically in fear, courage, and hope. It was a serendipitous meeting. He too had experienced and witnessed violence, and sought to find a way out. Positive Psychology had been the way that he had found.

It made perfect sense to me that violence would breed fear and negativity, and that hope, courage, and positivity could offer ways out of the suffering we had seen and endured. And so it wasn't long before I embarked on Positive Psychology studies and from there, psychology-driven research.

## PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH

After studying for a diploma in Positive Psychology, I completed a Masters degree in Exercise and Sport Psychology. I chose this route as it related more specifically to my personal interest as a martial artist in exercise and sport, and my professional interest as an executive coach in performance psychology. Although I was also accepted onto a Masters degree in Applied Positive Psychology, I wanted a broader scientific psychology base. Exercise and Sport Psychology offered this with its emphasis on Cognition and Emotion, Neuroscience, and Social Psychology.

My Masters thesis focused on the *Motivation to Teach Martial Arts and/or Self-Defence*. Based on a research method called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, it explored aspects of Social Psychology (Self-Determination Theory), Exercise and Sport Psychology (Motivational Atmospheres), and Positive Psychology (Positive/Negative Emotions and Character Strengths) before interviewing 9 instructors of self-defence and martial arts. The outcome was a richer understanding of how Positive Psychology concepts worked within a wider base of psychology knowledge.

To be quite honest, this second Masters degree also humbled me. By the time I started it, I was almost 40 with plenty of lived experience behind me. I was used to being a field researcher and taking the lead on analysis and recommendations. Psychology research in academia came with a barrage of strict criteria and dry criticism that are perhaps necessary in the making of a science. But to a field researcher like myself, who had worked on the front lines all her life, I was initially lost and confused. I seemed to care about reality while my professors cared more about what happened in a laboratory. We didn't see eye to eye when it came to the human experience.

Over time, I understood that the emotional and instinctive judgments that had served me well in times of war were not serving me in this new world. I gradually developed a more critical mind and came to appreciate the value of analysing one aspect of a concept rather than attempting to tackle a much broader picture. I learned to appreciate the value of quantitative as well as qualitative research, and the beauty of a more philosophically-oriented psychology, such as Positive Psychology, as well as the more data-driven psychology disciplines, such as Cognition and Emotion. There is a place for all of it and as researchers, our role is to figure out with integrity which approach matters most for the topic we are addressing.

## CURRENT RESEARCH

At the moment (2020), I am currently leading a research project directly on the experience of self-defence for women. This is a collaborative project between the Positive Psychology Guild, Combat Academy Community Support Division, and G.E.T. Therapy Ltd. The project links to my interest in the character formation and skills development process of coaches, trainers, instructors, and teachers in self-defence and the martial arts.

As part of the preparation for this future research, I am studying for a Level 5 Diploma in Personal Safety, Security and Self-Defence. This course covers psychology, physiology, biomechanics, criminology, and counter terrorism. An area I am researching here is the impact of violence and trauma on a victim's self-concept and level of confidence. I am also interested in the embodiment of confidence through self-defence and martial arts training.

Beyond my own research interests, I oversee research projects for the Positive Psychology Guild (PPG). In this capacity, my role is to support Positive Psychology students and practitioners in their own research projects, and run the PPG Scholarship Fund. We currently have research initiatives at various stages in Violence & Post-Traumatic Growth, Positive Organisations, and Positive Ageing.

## REFERENCES

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