

...with Steven Pinker

Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, USA.

One person who inspired you
Roger Brown, the social psychologist who founded the modern study of language acquisition, and who was my graduate school co-adviser. As well as being an unfailingly creative scientist, Roger was a witty and urbane writer. Late in his life wrote a searing memoir of his experience as young gay man in the 1950s and an ageing gay man in the 1990s.

One book that you think all psychologists should read
David Marr's *Vision*. Twenty-five years later, it is still a breathtaking synthesis.

One moment that changed the course of your career
In my first month of graduate school, I was assigned a technical paper in a theoretical computer science journal by E.M. Gold called 'Language identification in the limit', which provided a way of thinking about language acquisition in a mathematically rigorous way. I immediately

saw that it could clarify thinking in child language research, which was (and still is) theoretically fuzzy. I wrote a course paper reviewing all the existing mathematical and computer models of language acquisition, which led to the experiments, chapters, courses, and books that have preoccupied me for much of my career.

One great thing that psychology has achieved
Documenting the human propensity for self-deception, self-serving biases, cognitive dissonance, and defence mechanisms of the ego – the source of much of the complexity, and tragedy, of human life.

One cultural recommendation
I'll have to keep that within the family: *The Mind-Body Problem*, by my partner Rebecca Goldstein, a novel about a graduate student in philosophy of mind married to a mathematical genius.

One challenge you think psychology faces
Showing how the meaning of a sentence – not just the meanings of words, but predicate-argument structure and quantification – are represented in neural networks.

One thing that you would change about psychology
More attention to explanation. Most 'theories' in psychology consist in giving a fancy name to a laboratory curiosity. We need deeper attempts to explain why something is the way it is, as opposed to some other way it could have been. This in turn requires attention to constraints from fields outside of psychology, such as evolution, genetics, theoretical computer science, philosophy, and linguistics.

One hero/heroine from psychology past or present
William James.

One hope for the future
To achieve consilience in human knowledge by serving as the bridge between the sciences and the humanities.

One nugget of advice for aspiring psychologists

Don't just study psychology, but also become proficient in the relevant adjacent fields (see my answer to 'What would you change...?'). More specifically, don't just learn the names of the major theories, but learn to think like a linguist, or a neuroscientist, or a philosopher, or an evolutionary biologist.

One problem that psychology should deal with

Understanding the enormous amount of variation in personality and intelligence that is neither genetic nor familial. Because psychologists have been so genophobic, they have misattributed genetic variance to familial variance, and thereby overlooked the variance that is neither.



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One proud moment

On the Colbert Report, I was asked to explain how the brain works in exactly five words. I answered, 'Brain cells fire in patterns.'

resource

Pinker, S. (1997). *How the mind works*. New York: Norton.
'It's about how the mind works – what else can I say?'

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