

...with Daniel Gilbert

Professor of Psychology at Harvard University

One person who inspired you

Edward E. Jones was one of the great social psychologists of the 20th century and a wonderful mentor.

One moment that changed the course of your career

In 1976 I was a science fiction writer living in Denver. One day I went to the college to sign up for a creative writing course, but it was full. I asked whether there were any other courses that met at the same time and that still had room. She scanned the list and said 'Psychology'. I shrugged, signed up, and the rest is history. If cartography had been open that day, I'd probably be a mapmaker.

One thing that you would change about psychology

The journal review process, which is almost perfectly designed to suck every trace of joy and creativity out of both the author and the article. We are brutal to each other and our field is much

worse than others, which explains why so many bright people leave it and why so many bright young people avoid it. Our editors and reviewers (that's all of us, by the way) seem to think that the field will perish if they make a Type I error and accept an article that has (gasp!) something wrong with it. The fact is that fields don't die from Type I errors because the marketplace eliminates erroneous beliefs in short order. Instead, fields die from Type II errors – from failures to generate interesting and important ideas. To publish means 'to make public', not to certify or canonise, and editors and reviewers need to remember that. We should lighten up on each other and let a thousand flowers bloom.

One hero/heroine from psychology past or present

Gustav Ichheiser was an utter failure and a complete unknown. He died with no academic appointment, no money, and no friends. But he

developed some of the most insightful theories that the field of psychology has ever had the chance to ignore. He's a truly tragic and romantic figure in a field that generally lacks both.

One cultural recommendation

Any film made between 1952 and 1961 that has the words 'outer space' in the title.

One article or book that you think all psychologists should read

The Principles of Psychology by William James, of course. Not only is it brilliant and prescient, but the quality of the writing is humbling.

One challenge facing psychology

Psychologists have a penchant for irrational exuberances, and whenever we discover something new we feel the need to discard everything old. Social psychology is the exception. We kept cognition alive during the behaviourist revolution that denied it, we kept emotion alive during the cognitive revolution that ignored it, and today we are keeping behaviour alive as the neuroscience revolution steams on and threatens to make it irrelevant. But psychological revolutions inevitably collapse under their own weight and psychologists

start hunting for all the babies they tossed out with the bathwater. Social psychology is where they typically go to find them. So the challenge for social psychologists watching yet another revolution that promises to leave them in the dustbin of history is to remember that we've outlived every revolutionary who has ever pronounced us obsolete.

One great thing that psychology has achieved

The shift from dogmatism to empiricism was the great leap forward that made modern science possible. The people who decided to trust their eyes instead of their elders were called scientists. Psychology takes us one step further by teaching us not to trust our eyes either. Our memories, perceptions, predictions, and introspections are all susceptible to errors. In some



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sense, psychology's greatest achievement is that it has provided a scientific basis for Kantian idealism.

More answers online at
www.thepsychologist.org.uk

resource

Gilbert, D. (2007). *Stumbling on happiness*. HarperPerennial. 'I was delighted that the book sold so well and that so many ordinary people seemed to like it, but I was especially pleased to receive recognition from the Royal Society.'

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