

## 'We need to link our research to the real world'

Ian Florance talks to Susan Golombok

Susan Golombok's work has influenced family policy and law in the UK and around the world (see also p.538). It has been, and still is, controversial.

Susan is Professor of Family Research and Director of the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge and her new book *Modern Families: Parents and Children in New Family Forms* is a summary of a life's work in research as well as, it seems to me, a preparation for the next stage in her career. We met at the Wellcome Trust, which Susan praises for 'making much of my research possible'.

'I grew up in Glasgow and went to university there,' she tells me. 'Like many students I thought psychology was all about mental health, but I quickly found

out it covered more and very different things. I took a four-year degree and I'm a big supporter of that longer course. It enabled me to study other subjects ranging from chemistry and biology to sociology – it wasn't really psychology that changed my life so much as sociology. A course on inequality opened my eyes to a side of Glasgow that had been invisible to me, as an only child of older parents living in an advantaged area of the city and attending a school that was a dead ringer for the school in the film *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. At that time the sociologists at Glasgow were undertaking the ground-breaking Bad News project, the first systematic study of media bias. In my psychology course, *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed* by Michael

Rutter was the most inspiring book I read. All these things came together and, I suppose, made me aware of political issues. I became interested in feminism.'

Susan moved to London to take a master's degree in child development. 'When I was rooting around for an interesting topic for my dissertation I came across an article in the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* describing the experiences of lesbian women who were losing custody of their children during divorce proceedings on the grounds that lesbian mother families would be psychologically harmful to children. The article in *Spare Rib* called for someone to carry out an

independent study of children with lesbian mothers, and I volunteered. Little did I know that I would still be researching this issue almost 40 years later!'

I asked Susan whether she had ever been concerned about the tension between her role as a researcher and her personal views. Given what I knew about her beliefs and attitudes, there must have been a feeling that she wanted to disprove commonly held judgements of lesbian and – later on in her research – other new family structures.

'There is a tension between political commitment – or any other kind – and scientific empiricism. Any researcher who's serious about a social science subject must think about this, and it has been a worry for me. That original study of lesbian families was a risky endeavour in terms of how it might impact on real people. But there were good theoretical reasons for thinking the prevailing view was simply wrong. Those who argued that lesbian families caused damage to children tended to be psychoanalysts, and there was growing opinion that what mattered most for children's psychological wellbeing was the quality of family relationships rather than the presence of a mother and a father.'

From 1977 Susan spent 10 years at the Institute of Psychiatry. 'I carried out my PhD there and worked in parallel as a research assistant in the sex therapy clinic, which was very new and exciting at the time. I loved being at the Institute, but I realised in the end that I couldn't live on "soft" money for ever, jumping from research grant to research grant. Students who want to have academic careers need to think about these sorts of practical issues.'

Susan was offered a lectureship in social psychology at City University, London, 'which I knew very little about. For six months I was reading textbooks, delivering lectures and looking after a six-month-old baby. In the end I "came out" as a developmental psychologist and was able to return to teaching and researching



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in the field of psychology that interested me most. While at City University I set up the Family and Child Psychology Research Centre, where I extended my research on new family forms to include studies of families created by assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF), egg donation, donor insemination and surrogacy. We carried out the very first studies of these families and assisted reproduction remains a

major part of my research programme to this day. The Wellcome Trust funded much of this work – they're very far-sighted and could see that these emerging family forms were interesting not just in their own right but also for increasing understanding of what it is about families that matters most for children's psychological wellbeing.'

Susan's work has always been controversial. 'I got used to it though. Criticism of research on modern families is not new. Neither are politically motivated attempts by right-wing religious organisations to discredit the academics whose research has shown the children to be no different from children in traditional families. What is new is the deliberate strategy of conducting sham research that shows children in new family forms to be at risk of psychological harm and dressing this up as science. These organisations are setting up and funding their own spuriously scientific studies and claiming that their results disprove ours. The view that children in modern families would experience psychological problems used to be based on prejudice and assumption in the absence of research on the actual consequences for children of growing up in new family forms. Empirical evidence played an important role in countering false beliefs. Today the challenge is not simply to conduct research but also to be vigilant about the quality of this research and the motivations and provenance of those who carry it out.'

Susan stayed at City University for 19 years 'working with great people and doing truly innovative research. The job at Cambridge as Director of the Centre for Family Research came up when I was starting a sabbatical at Columbia University in New York. I almost didn't apply. It's amazing to be there now – the Centre for Family Research, which will be celebrating its 50th anniversary next year, is such a great place to work. And there are so many issues to research – one of our latest studies is of gay fathers who have had children through surrogacy and

egg donation. These families combine several new family features as the children grow up with two fathers, two "mothers" (an egg donor and a surrogate mother) and no mother in the family home. We are also studying single mothers by choice, donor siblings (half-siblings born from the same donor who are growing up in different families) and adolescents born through egg donation, donor insemination and surrogacy.'

Do you influence policy? 'Our findings have certainly had an influence. We engage with government departments and the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority,

for instance. Our research findings contributed to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, changing the emphasis from a child needing a father to needing supportive parents. I hope this new book will also influence debate on issues such as same-sex marriage, surrogacy, and adoption by gay and lesbian couples and single people. In the book, I make a distinction between new families and non-traditional families. The term "new families" refers to family types that were either hidden from society and became visible through the growth of the women's and gay rights movements, or did not previously exist and arose from the introduction of IVF and other assisted reproductive technologies. These include lesbian mother families, gay father families, families headed by single mothers by choice and families created by assisted reproductive technologies involving IVF, egg donation, donor insemination, embryo donation and surrogacy. The term "non-traditional families" generally refers to families headed by single parents, cohabiting parents and stepparents. These families result largely from parental separation or divorce and the formation of new cohabiting or marital relationships. New families represent a more fundamental shift away from traditional family structures than do non-traditional families formed by relationship breakdown.'

You've given some advice to new psychologists and students. Have you any more? 'Please think about other aspects of the subject than cognitive psychology and neuropsychology. We need to link our research to real-life issues; we should not dodge moral and ethical issues. Also, don't ignore other disciplines: psychologists don't have all the answers and working together produces more nuanced and interesting results.'

"we should not dodge moral and ethical issues"



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## 'We have seen real improvements'

Sangita Bhandari on her role with a UK education charity working in Nepal

Imagine your five-year-old child was about to start school and you discovered that their chances of leaving at 16 with the national qualification was only 14 per cent. That is the reality in my country, Nepal. You might think this is because most children drop out before grade 10, or don't even go to school. Or you might think that Nepal is isolated with no modern educational inputs or financial aid from developed nations. None of these things are true.

My own education was different. I was born in the district of Dhading, about 150km west of Kathmandu. I was very fortunate to attend school as a girl, and eventually I studied for a BEd at Neelakantha College and then for an MEd at Kathmandu University, where I graduated in 2012. I also worked as a part-time primary teacher in a number of schools to earn an extra income and to help my parents. My education had taught me to observe the running of schools, the teaching methods, resources used, teacher abilities and motivations, and much more. What I saw truly shocked me, and it was to get worse.

At the end of 2011 I joined the UK charity Nepal Schools Aid ([www.nepalschoolsaid.org](http://www.nepalschoolsaid.org)) as an education consultant running teacher training courses in Kathmandu. They were building a presence in Nepal by training Nepalese staff like myself to influence change in our education system. Two of their trustees are psychologists, and one is a highly experienced ex-teacher. With their guidance we began to realise how much psychology should have been embedded in our system and used in changing it.

Over the next three years we built a programme of school development and teacher training that so far we have applied to almost 200 schools. We provide training in pedagogical skills containing topics such as child development, approaches to motivation, classroom management, values and ethics, learning styles, constructivism, cognitive acceleration, formative assessment... all with sound underlying components of psychology, most of which were completely unknown to our primary school teachers. We also provide in-school coaching to teachers, leadership training for principals, child counselling, and workshops for the local communities of poor parents.



**Sangita Bhandari is the Manager of School Development with Nepal Education Leadership Foundation, the Nepali NGO created by Nepal Schools Aid (UK). E-mail [nelfsangita@gmail.com](mailto:nelfsangita@gmail.com)**

We now have six staff and I am the manager of all school development work, as well as being a part-time student doing an MPhil at Kathmandu University. My research aims to define and measure the expression 'quality education' and to identify its relationship to pedagogy. This concern stems from the 2009 publication of my country's School Sector Reform Plan 2009–2015 (<http://bit.ly/1HAMeW6>), in which several billion dollars were invested from overseas aid. The plan was to bring about the transformation of our education system and to improve the 'quality of education'. Policies were outlined, targets set, yet nowhere was 'quality education' defined – even Ministry of Education officials couldn't help when asked! Without such a definition we have no sense of direction, no ultimate goal and no milestones. And worryingly, the pass rate of 14 per cent I mentioned in my opening paragraph has actually fallen from 55 per cent since the implementation of the SSRP and the investment of all of those billions!

My research focuses on child needs, education inputs, and desired outcomes. We then devised a questionnaire to assess these dimensions and to create a Quality Education Index (QEI) scale akin to a client satisfaction survey from the

students. We then created a pedagogy observation approach that has enabled me to observe many classroom sessions objectively and consistently, the end result being an index of child centredness – our ultimate goal in the classroom. We have used our scale and observations in order to provide in-school training to teachers in eight schools, and then reassess the teaching. We have seen real improvements in the quality of education and how child-centred it is.

This work is significant for Nepal – not only in terms of creating a descriptive framework of quality education and how to measure it, but also by showing our Ministry of Education that there are many tools and processes rooted in psychology that can help to transform our antiquated education system. Using personal construct theory to devise measurement tools, using child-centred approaches with their many psychological features, applying child development stages, facilitating learning instead of forcing remembering, understanding gender differences, and many more aspects of psychology need to be embraced, explored and applied. I intend to pursue this beyond my MPhil, into my daily work with 50 schools each year, until our system changes.

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