

...with Helen Haste

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One hope for the future

Psychology is a wonderfully eclectic field – which, after all, is a fair description also of the human mind. Periodically sections of it get territorial and threaten to hibe themselves off, either on the grounds that they are more ‘scientific’ or that they are more ‘human’. The future lies in the creative tension amongst the various parts, and also the productive relationships with other disciplines. Fragmentation would feel cosy but it would be intellectually terminal.

One alternative career path you might have chosen

I did anthropology as a minor in my undergraduate degree and my interest in cultural psychology is heavily influenced by that experience and training. I was also interested in journalism, and that remains in various forms: writing and broadcasting, and

in my concerns about public dialogue, science and society. I think that informed my long involvement with the British Association for the Advancement of Science (now called the British Science Association).

One moment that changed the course of your career

When I became involved in the Women’s Movement in the early seventies and realised I could do more good for feminism by doing decent research on gender than by walking up and down carrying a banner.

One book that you think all psychologists should read

Alice Through the Looking Glass, by Lewis Carroll. This is *not* a children’s book; it contains a large number of the paradoxes about meaning, perception, consciousness, logic and language that we confront in our field. Most

psychologists don’t study either philosophy or the history of ideas, which is a great pity, but this book is an entertaining and painless way into asking rather fundamental questions. I used it as a core text for a final-year



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course; students would discuss some event in the book in relation to current theory and research. It produced some very original work.

Within psychology itself, I think one of the most important and brilliant recent books at least in social psychology, is Michael Billig’s *Arguing and Thinking*, which both demonstrates the real social nature of language and

thought, and shows us how modern concepts are deeply rooted in the history of ideas. Compulsory reading for all my students.

One heroine of psychology

Marie Jahoda supervised my graduate work at the University of Sussex (I was working on a replication of Kohlberg’s study on moral development). Her personal history was inspiring. Her early classic work with Paul Lazarsfeld on unemployment in an Austrian town (see tinyurl.com/ny9b5s), was an example of her passionate commitment to looking at real-life problems and at people within a social and cultural context. Her political life in pre-war Austria led to her being held in solitary confinement for nine months. At Sussex, she was committed to the integration of practical social problems with psychological theory and, most particularly, with taking account of a wide range of different perspectives rather than espousing one orthodoxy. In an obituary, one of her former students is quoted as saying ‘The trouble with studying under Marie Jahoda is that you think Psychology is going to be like that’ – true indeed! She was a sharply critical supervisor who constantly made one question and think. She had a wonderful way of saying that something was ‘interesting’ – you waited in trepidation for the elaboration.

One nugget of advice for aspiring psychologists

Innovation – in all fields – happens on the margins. If someone praises your work as ‘mainstream’, be worried.

resource

‘I am rather fond of a paper I wrote called ‘Dinosaur as metaphor’ (1993). I have found metaphor a crucial concept in cultural psychology. This paper originated in work with my then partner, a palaeontologist who died in a car crash in 1991. He introduced me to dinosaurs and to the way that explaining them has been a touchstone in the development of theories in palaeontology. All this made a rather unusual, but provocative, base for demonstrating the psychology of metaphor in action.’

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