

# ...with Jay Belsky

Professor of Psychology at Birkbeck University of London

## One inspiration

Professor Urie Bronfenbrenner, Cornell University; among so much else, he showed me how to find what is of value in others' work, rather than concentrate on its limitations.

## One common denominator underlying your work

Fascination with how developmental experiences shape – or fail to shape – who we are.

## One moment that changed the course of your career

When I spotted a teammate on the Georgetown University soccer team with a bunch of four-year-olds in tow, leading me to ask him, 'Where did you get them?' His reply led to the eventual resolution of my identity crisis, as volunteering at the university daycare centre was my first step in becoming a developmental psychologist.

## One great thing that psychology has achieved

Enabling so many to appreciate that children are not just miniature adults, but individuals who should be understood on their own terms.

## One challenge you think psychology faces

The tendency to regard only experimental work, and possibly only neuroscientific research, as science.

## One alternative career

I spent my entire childhood wanting to go to the US Military Academy at West Point but, after securing an appointment there, including a congressional nomination, decided instead to study international relations at Georgetown University.

## One lesson from Sure Start

Demand that anyone speaking about 'evidenced-based' anything distinguish scientific evidence from so much else that masquerades as such (e.g. anecdote, qualitative study, general impressions).

## One thing that you would change about psychologists

That they be less critical of each other and more open-minded, actively engaging, even if only experimentally, ideas with which they might (initially?) disagree.

## One nugget of advice for aspiring psychologists

Follow your nose! Never lose sight of what interests – or better yet, fascinates – you.

## One cultural recommendation

Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*; masterly interdisciplinary scholarship, even though he is undoubtedly wrong in contending that humans have not changed genetically since the dawn of agriculture.

## One hero from psychology

Sir Michael Rutter, based on the depth and scope of his scholarship, including the crystal clarity of his thinking.

## One regret

Never having mastered a second language.

## One proud moment

Remaining calm and focused when a hippo dumped me out of my canoe into the crocodile-infested Zambeze River in Zimbabwe – and surviving to tell the tale!

## One problem that psychology should deal with

The continuing distrust by so many of all things evolutionary and thus the obsessive interest in the 'how' of psychological/behavioural phenomena, with insufficient concern for the 'why' of them.

## One idea that grabs you at the moment

That individuals vary in developmental plasticity, with some being more susceptible to environmental effects, both good and bad, than others.

## One hope for the future

That it not be a self-serving guild. If it makes good



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scientific sense for 'psychology to wither and something else to assume or assimilate it, profession politics should not stand in the way.

### resource

Belsky, J., Steinberg, L. & Draper, P. (1991). Childhood experience, interpersonal development, and reproductive strategy: An evolutionary theory of socialization. *Child Development*, 62, 647–670. 'It re-cast traditional thinking in modern evolutionary terms, advancing new, testable hypotheses.'

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