

... with Jo Silvester

'Nothing you learn is ever redundant'

One moment that changed the course of your career

It would have to be a press interview at the BPS Centenary Conference in 2001, which led to the newspapers picking up on my research about diversity and selection. I received a letter from Christina Dykes, who was then Director of Candidates for the Conservative Party. Christina invited me along to discuss how they could develop a fairer and more objective process for approving prospective parliamentary candidates. I got to redesign the Party's procedures based on best practice from occupational psychology. In the 2005 general election we captured the first empirical evidence that critical thinking ability impacts on electoral performance (i.e. the percentage swing in votes achieved by a candidate). The work led on to many other projects, including redesigning selection procedures for the



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Liberal Democrat Party and implementing 360-degree review for candidates in the 2010 general election.

One essential characteristic for a politician

For the past decade Maddy Wyatt and I have collected self-report data from many hundreds of politicians. We now have good evidence (empirical and qualitative) that three qualities emerge consistently as important: 'analytical skills' (i.e. cognitive ability), 'resilience', and 'relating to others'. 'Communicating vision' and 'developing support' were also key to performance for political candidates, and local politicians identified integrity as important (strangely this did not emerge for national politicians). If I had to say which I thought was key to getting elected, I'd say 'communicating vision' – voters need to know what politicians believe and what they think is important.

One book that you think all psychologists should read

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, because it reminds us

that the power of the 'expert' is easy to abuse.

One great thing that psychology has achieved

I'd say 'reach'. I've been visiting university open days with my daughters, and several of their friends have joined me for work experience. It's easy to forget how much psychology inspires interest among young people. I know some people worry about the popularity of psychology – that it may somehow lead to a 'dumbing

of occupational psychology to business schools where journals are given a greater REF weighting compared to psychology.

One cultural recommendation

Doctor Who.

One alternative career path

My PhD investigated parental attributions in child abuse, and I won a place to train as a clinical psychologist, but I decided I wasn't cut out to work full-time in the area.

I now come across writing about abuse and power in political contexts – I guess nothing you learn is ever redundant.

One nugget of advice for aspiring psychologists

Don't be afraid to take risks and challenge current paradigms. There are only so many ways you can test a theory – focus on creating your own.

One hero from psychology past or present

Donald Broadbent because he helped me jumpstart my car when I was an undergraduate student at a BPS conference. Here was one of the great minds of cognitive psychology asking me about what I wanted to do as a future psychologist. My heroes are those people who have achieved success, whilst avoiding the traps of hubris, who still have the humanity and interest to encourage lesser mortals along the way.

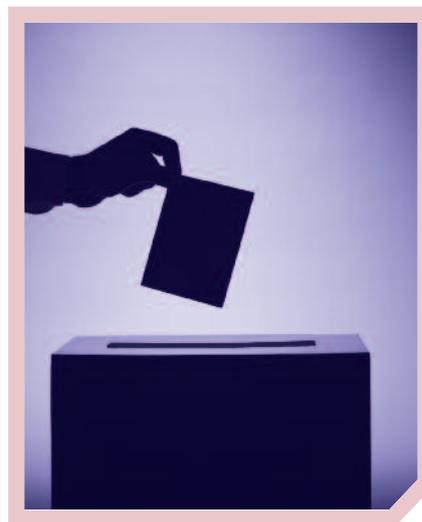
One psychological superpower I'd like to have

I'd like to be able to understand my dog.

One inspiration

My mother (a teacher) was fond of quoting Piaget: 'play is work you enjoy doing'.

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down' of the discipline – but this energy and enthusiasm can only be positive.

One challenge psychology faces

I think a major challenge for the discipline is the need to reconcile divisions between research and practice, and between pure and applied research. University appointments are driven by a need for applicants to have 4* publications for the REF. In psychology most 4* journals are not concerned with applied areas, and the knock-on effect is a reluctance to appoint staff to teach applied postgraduate courses without such publications; even if they have extensive expertise as practitioners and professionals. This perhaps leads to the steady migration

coming soon

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