

One nagging thing...

Top psychologists help us to celebrate the 150th e-mail issue of the Society's Research Digest

The British Psychological Society's Research Digest was launched in 2003, as a fortnightly e-mail service. Over the years it has added www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog (now ranked as the 16th most influential science blog in the world by Wikio), a Facebook site and a Twitter feed. It is read and appreciated by many thousands of psychologists and others across the world.

To mark the 150th e-mail edition, its editor, Dr Christian Jarrett, asked some of the world's leading psychologists to describe in 150 words 'one nagging thing you still don't understand about yourself'. Their answers featured on the blog, *The Independent* newspaper and websites internationally, but for those of you who missed it we publish a selection here.

Puzzling love for our children

I've had three of my own children and spent my professional life thinking about children. And yet I still find my relation to my children deeply puzzling. Our love for children is so unlike any other human emotion. I fell in love with my babies so quickly and profoundly, almost completely independently of their particular qualities. And yet 20 years later I was (more or less) happy to see them go – I had to be happy to see them go. We are totally devoted to them when they are little and yet the most we can expect in return when they grow up is that they regard us with bemused and tolerant affection. We are ambitious

for them, we want them to thrive so badly. And yet we know that we have to grant them the autonomy to make their own mistakes. In no other human relation do we work so hard to accomplish such an ill-defined goal, which is precisely to create a being who will have goals that are not like ours.

Alison Gopnik, Professor of Psychology at the University of California at Berkeley

Satiators and addicts

I've been told that there are two kinds of people in the world: Satiators and Addicts. Satiators get their fill of something, and that's enough for the rest of their lives. For example, I'm that way about beaches: I grew up a 10-minute walk from the Pacific Ocean, and went to the beach practically every day during my adolescence. But enough was enough, and I now don't care whether I ever see a beach again. In contrast, Addicts get hooked, and never get enough of something. I've obsessed about the same narrow research topic for over 35 years, and the end is not in sight. Why am I a Satiator in some cases, and an Addict in others?

Stephen Kosslyn, Dean of Social Science and Professor of Psychology at Harvard

Who am I?

Who am I? I am a Jew, but I am no believer and I do not believe that Israel speaks for me. I can't be sure what it means to be a Jew. Yet I am sure that others are sure. And I know that Jewishness matters. I know that millions were slaughtered for being Jewish. I know that millions have been displaced by Jews for not being Jewish. What is being Jewish to my world and to me? Who are we? Who am I? I was born in England of family who fled from Germany and Poland. I was raised in England by parents who moved abroad for work. I live in Scotland with a wife born in Yorkshire of a father born in Pakistan and with a son born in Scotland. Our history is

pandemonium, our destiny (we hope) is Caledonian. Who do we want to be? What will others let us be? And does it count one jot to anyone but me? No wonder I study identity.

Steve Reicher is Professor of Psychology at the University of St Andrews

Still fooled

One nagging thing I don't understand about myself is why I'm still fooled by incidental feelings. Some 25 years ago Jerry Clore and I studied how gloomy weather makes one's whole life look bad – unless one becomes aware of the weather and attributes one's gloomy mood to the gloomy sky, which eliminates the influence. You'd think I learned that lesson and now know how to deal with gloomy skies. I don't, they still get me. The same is true for other subjective experiences, like the processing fluency resulting from print fonts – I still fall prey to their influence. Why does insight into how such influences work not help us notice them when they occur? What makes the immediate experience so powerful that I fail to apply my own theorising until some blogger asks a question that brings it to mind?

Norbert Schwarz, Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan

Optimism

When my dear friend and colleague Roger Brown was alive he used to say that to him, I define the edge of the optimism continuum. I think my outlook explains my choice of research topics. Instead of describing what is, most of my work is aimed at exploring what might be. In my most recent book I discuss extending what we take as limits to our physical health and well-being. I don't understand why I'm so confident that we've just scratched the surface of what our consciousness is capable of, but every year and every experiment I do makes me more certain that the future will only vaguely resemble the past in this regard. I don't know how I came to these views, or whether in the long run people like me will 'win or lose' to the cynics. One thing I do know, however, is while the future unfolds people like me are having a better time as we consider all sorts of possibility. So, I remain optimistic about being optimistic.

Ellen Langer, Professor of Psychology at Harvard University

Death and forgiveness

In my recent conversations with the Dalai Lama we disagreed about two matters. One

Nagging need for more?

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was fear of death, which I claim not to feel and he claims everyone has. The evidence is in his favour since all religions promise life of some kind after death, and they would not do so if people didn't need it. I fear a painful death, but not death itself. Can't comprehend why people do; which doesn't mean I don't wish to continue living, but as time progresses and body parts and the mind wears out I expect death will be welcome. Our other disagreement was about forgiveness. I believe there are unforgiveable actions – child abuse, rape, holocausts, torture are examples. The Dalai Lama says he forgives but does not forget. In my view, since he believes such people will be reincarnated in an undesirable form, he doesn't need to forgive them.

Paul Ekman, Manager of the Paul Ekman Group, LLC (PEG)

Nightmares

I don't understand why I have nightmares almost every night. Nightmares of frustration. Obstacles in my way that keep me from catching an airplane trip on time. Obstacles that keep me from getting where I'm supposed to be. I wake up almost every morning with a sense of relief – 'Thank goodness it was just a dream.' None of my colleagues seem to spend their nights this way. What possible reason is there for this mental behaviour, night after night, that is clearly so uncomfortable? One colleague, a developmental psychologist, said: 'That's it – the happy relief you feel at the end. There's your reinforcement.' And thus she took away my one idea, by explaining it. It is now one nagging thing that I only partly understand. Or do I?

Elizabeth Loftus, Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Irvine

Lost opportunities

Why didn't I ask my grandparents before they died, more about their childhoods?
'Grandpa, what was it like being born in 1900 into a world where man couldn't fly and an abacus was the closest thing to a computer?'
'Grandpa, did it hurt when grandma burnt the leeches off your back on your return from the trenches, as you sat in the tin bath in front of the fire?'
'Nana, did you enjoy being one of the

first families in Sunderland to own an "automobile" and having to eat "below stairs" with the cooks and the maids?'
'Nana, how did you cope as the youngest of 12 in a poor, Derbyshire, farming family, gaining a scholarship to grammar school, but being forced to go away into service at 13 to become a scullery maid?'

Marilyn Davidson, Professor of Work Psychology at Manchester Business School

What should I do?

There's plenty I don't understand about myself, but nothing nags. Paradoxically, the deeper I got into neuropsychology the less interested I became in the details of my own inner workings. I'm not sure why. It certainly is not because I arrived at any great insight or understanding. I still experience the almost visceral sense of puzzlement over matters of brain, mind and selfhood that first drew me to the field. What happened, I think, was a shift – let's imagine a neural switch somewhere in the frontolimbic circuitry – from one preoccupying question, *What am I?*, to another, *What should I do?* It left me less inclined to bother about self-understanding than to consider the value of things, moral and aesthetic. How best to

Beauty

What is this thing I call beauty? Not 'art' as a social phenomenon based on status or display, or beautiful faces seen merely as biological fitness markers. Rather, the sheer, drawing-in-of-breath beauty of a Handel aria, a Rothko painting, T.S. Eliot's poems, or those everyday moments of sun shining through wet autumn leaves, or even a PowerPoint layout seeming just right. Content itself doesn't matter – Cézanne's paintings of apples are not beautiful because one likes apples, and there are beautiful photographs of horrible things. Somewhere there must be something formal, structural, compositional, involving the arrangement of light and shade, of sounds, of words best ordered to say old ideas in new ways. When I see beauty, I know it; and others must also see it, or they wouldn't make the paintings I like or have them hung in galleries. But why then doesn't everyone see it in the same way?

Chris McManus Professor of Psychology and Medical Education at UCL

live? But here's a nagging thought: might those two preoccupying questions turn out to be one and the same, like the evening star and the morning star?

Paul Broks, a clinical neuropsychologist at the University of Plymouth

Overcoming irrationality

Why do I often succumb to well-documented psychological biases, even though I'm acutely aware of these biases? One example is my failure at affective forecasting, such as believing that I will be happy for a long time after some accomplishment (e.g. publishing a new book), when in fact the happiness dissipates more quickly than anticipated. Another is succumbing to the male sexual overperception bias, misperceiving a woman's friendliness as sexual interest. A third is undue optimism about how quickly I can complete work projects, despite many years of experience in underestimating the time actually required. One would think that explicit knowledge of these well-documented psychological biases and years of experience with them would allow a person to cognitively override the biases. But they don't.

David Buss, Professor of Psychology at the University of Texas