



Access to souls denied, access to science granted

BBC

I EXPECTED psychology to teach me how to look into people's eyes and gain access to their souls. So, to tell you the truth, I was surprised to have to learn about neural pathways and bewildered at the need to do statistics. Freud, who I'd assumed was what psychology was all about, was relegated to the status of a philosopher. Science, in all its meticulous, experimental glory, was the order of the day.

This was tough; it not only meant hard work (in the arts you are encouraged to make things up), it called for readjustment. My grandfather and aunt had been

We would like to hear from people who have used their psychological knowledge outside the discipline. If you've got a psychology degree and something interesting to say about how you have put it to use beyond the teaching or practice of psychology, we'd like to hear from you. How has your background been of use in your subsequent career? What is it like 'outside' looking back in? Of course such people might not be reading The Psychologist, so if you were at university with someone who you know went on to different but interesting things, you could see if they would like to contribute. E-mail jonsut@bps.org.uk.



Broadcaster **NICK ROSS** on what psychology did for him.

psychoanalysts, and I had come to assume that dreams could be interpreted as precisely as a mathematical formula and that behaviour could be explained as the outcome of a struggle between competing spiritual forces.

Equally intriguing for those of us who came from arts backgrounds was the company we were expected to keep. Maybe half my fellow students were reading physics, zoology, or some such, as subsidiary subjects, as opposed to English or history. While at first we regarded them as geeks and anoraks I was dismayed to find most of them not only knew as much about cinema and art as we did, but could also explain how radio waves got through the wall.

Nonetheless, I was helped profoundly in my first foray into psychology by virtue of my digs. My accommodation was not on campus, and my fellow tenants, though pleasant enough, were not students so much as customs officers and tax officials. Nor did I have friends to sit with at tutorials or lectures. I knew nobody. My university (Queen's University, Belfast) was about as far from my family as is geographically possible in the British Isles and I was homesick. So every lonely

evening I took my files up to the library and studied. Only later did I find everyone else had repaired to the bar.

But that was to change after the first-term test, which resulted in my being called to see the boss, the diminutive but seemingly omnipotent Professor Seth. To be summoned to the Prof. was heady stuff, for there were almost 460 of us reading first-year psychology and none of us had ever been beckoned to his rooms. I was terrified: had I failed the test, was I about to be expelled? George Seth beamed at me. I had come top.

After that, of course, I scarcely visited the library again. The university found me a room in halls of residence, and I found myself a stool in any of a dozen bars in the vicinity of the students union and busied myself in socialising and student politics. Life at university, as opposed to study, was the most formative part of the academic experience. From that day on, after shaking hands with the professor, psychology became a backdrop to the real business of having fun and learning about life.

And perhaps that sums up what psychology has done for me. It has expanded my horizons. It has been its

methodology that has impressed me, rather than its details. It taught me about science, something that seven years of school had utterly failed to do: that science isn't a set of subjects like biology and chemistry, but a technique for testing our ideas against reality. It taught me how to guard against contamination by bias and chance. It showed me how to distinguish between the apparent certainty of belief and the wary scepticism of experimental methods, between subjective and objective, between the sterility of New Age alternativism (superstition dressed up as pseudoscience) and the extraordinary practical creativity of real science and technology. And it taught me that scientists are as urbane as artists, no more freaky or absent-minded, and often more stimulating company.

So although my early ambitions have been dashed – of becoming a clinical psychologist and repairing the lives of behaviourally disturbed children – my background in psychology has profoundly affected my outlook and my work.

In fact promoting science became something of a theme with me. I have been an eager member of the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science, and I

remain frustrated that so few journalists have any real scientific training and often misunderstand fundamentals when reporting medical and scientific stories. I have had a spell as chairman of the Science Book Prize jury and was irritated that so many Americans can write elegantly fluently about science while Britons, with

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a few notable exceptions, are still snobbishly taught to use jargon and impenetrable syntax. Not much has changed in that regard since the days of my own thesis, 'The identification of religious affiliation by static physiognomic cues in a sectarian social milieu'. Of course it should have been called 'Can you tell Catholics from Protestants in Northern Ireland just by looking?', but in those days I shared the prevailing presumption that if lay people could understand it then it couldn't be good science.

My career in broadcasting came about more or less by chance (I always promised myself that when I grew up I'd go back to psychology and get a proper job), and my immersion in the field of crime was equally unplanned, but I have been appalled at the lack of application of scientific rigour or ambition in crime prevention. Most criminology seems to be theoretical, even political, with very few practical outcomes. I have launched a more focused discipline called crime science with a new school at UCL (the Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science). Perhaps it should be no surprise that its first director and many of its key figures happen to be graduates in psychology.

Sadly, psychology itself has always been undermined by sentimentalists who prefer presumption to experimental proof and who peddle all sorts of half-baked procedures and therapies some of which are tantamount to quackery. But as any good psychologist knows, cautious, sceptical and rational deduction is not the mainspring of humanity.

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