

... with Rita Jordan

## 'A superpower? To have real empathy'

### One moment that changed the course of your career

One event, rather than a moment: My young son had to have an operation (to remove a swallowed penny!) and I was prevented from being with him in hospital. That led me to fight for the rights of children in hospital and (after a *Guardian* exposure) to extend that to disabled children, excluded from education, and often neglected in 'subnormality' hospitals, since there was not even health support until they were seven. I set up an 'opportunity group' for those excluded children in my area.

### One book that you think all psychologists should read

Stephen J. Gould's *Wonderful Life*. This is not about psychology directly but the very nature of our work. It concerns the culture of research, the way the urge to be accepted as 'proper' scientists has caused some forms of empirical research



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(such as RCTs) to be elevated at the expense of detailed observation, the way research is influenced by dominant theories, which may distort our data collection and its interpretation. He also shows how promotion and recognition of our work can interfere with our proper engagement with research or our work with clients. All sadly true in psychology.

### One thing that you would change about psychology

The competitiveness. Psychology is riven with different traditions and schools of thought, which is what makes it so rich and interesting a profession. Yet there is little dialogue across those divisions and often bitter exchanges at conferences.

### One challenge

Neurobiology advances apace and of course opens up many new avenues of research and understanding in neuropsychology. At the same time there are significant advances in developing social and behavioural approaches. There is a danger that psychology is squeezed between these, yet I believe that we need to work at the (tricky!) interface.

### One regret

I got too busy with work to give proper attention to my own PhD research so that I took over 10 years to finally complete it – it was always the one thing that could be left! Meanwhile, I supervised other PhDs. In the end the data were too old to publish. Unpublished research is a criminal waste.

### One nugget of advice

Read around subjects and read (or listen to) psychologists with views that differ from your own (or your supervisor's). Things are hardly ever as simple as they seem, or may be presented to be. Online searches alone tend to be restricted by the mindset of the searcher. If you get the opportunity, browse in a real library from time to time, just seeing what is out there.

### One cultural recommendation

Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*. I only read this last year so it is still with me – a glimpse into many different lives, inspiring, tragic and even funny. All human life is there, as they say!

### One anecdote

A story from my time teaching students with ASD illustrates the joy and the difficulties of working with this group. It was a morning when HMI (the civilised predecessors of the tick-boxing Ofsted) were due to visit. In my class of seven adolescent young men with severe autism were two with complementary obsessions: one would undo anything and everything and in particular could not stand doors (there were none in his home); the other was obsessively tidy, needing to put everything away, close doors, drawers, etc. An inspector entered the room and, in a flash, while my attention was elsewhere, the first young man, leapt to his feet, unscrewed hinges

on the door, lifted it up and presented it to the inspector. No sooner had this happened when the second young man leapt up, took the door and screwed it back into place. I decided not to 'explain' and let the class proceed as if this was some planned 'double-act'. We passed the inspection!

### One alternative career path you might have chosen

Well, I was set to become an organisational psychologist or even to go into ergonomics, if I hadn't had a baby in my last year of my degree that turned me on to child development. I might have been richer, but not happier, I think.



### One thing that 'organised psychology' could do better

Lobby government more effectively for all the client groups where greater understanding and resources are needed, the disabled, the mentally ill, those in prison, young children.

### One psychological superpower

To have real empathy for others.

### One hope for the future

That it will finally grow out of its obsession with being like physical sciences and develop, and cherish, its own research protocols to suit different circumstances and to encompass human reactions.

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