

In the presence of a great psychologist ...

Boris Semeonoff

ONE Saturday in February 1998, I sat on the early Glasgow to London flight. As breakfast arrived, the person next to me began some light conversation. 'Where are you off to?' she asked. 'I'm going to a meeting of The British Psychological Society — I'm a psychologist,' I replied.

Suddenly, I became self-conscious as I looked at the book lying open on my lap. There, unmistakably, was a large picture of a Rorschach ink-blot. Doubtless, every stereotype the world has of 'a psychologist' was confirmed in an instant.

My interest in the Rorschach at the time stemmed from an interview I was about to hold with Boris Semeonoff — a name long associated with personality assessment, particularly projective techniques. Early in March, I arrived at his Edinburgh house. It was just before his 88th birthday, and I found him characteristically busy. 'I have a book to review just now ...'

I had last seen Semeonoff the previous month at a Scottish Branch meeting, and I would next see him at the Annual Conference in Brighton at the end of March. Sadly, that was to be the final time. My interview with him was, I expect, his last.

The recording is pleasantly punctuated with the chiming of ancient clocks and the chink of fine bone china as Catherine, his wife and life-long companion, set out the mid-morning tea and scones.

Semeonoff was a quiet and humble man, who spoke with great modesty of what the world viewed as his achievements. Nevertheless, he occupied a very significant position in British psychology, becoming not only President of the Society but also President of the Psychology Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and one of the eight founder members of the Experimental Psychology Society. In addition, he made a major contribution to his own field of study. At the end of the interview I felt that I had been in the presence of a great psychologist. When he died on 2 August 1998 the Society and psychology lost one of its distinguished figures.

TOMMY MAC KAY recorded what may have been the last interview with Boris Semeonoff; on the first anniversary of his death, we publish part of that interview here.

What was your first encounter with psychology?

In 1921, when I was age 11, James Drever the Elder¹ visited my school. We were all given a vocabulary test and had to put a mark at each word we knew. This done, we were asked to give the meaning of every third word. It seemed strange, but I realised later it was probably an early attempt to include a lie test in the procedure.

Shortly after this, I began to read the works of A.S. Neill of Summerhill, whom I met later. His writings were not 'psychology' as such, but they expanded my ideas of what education and also personality were all about.

You did not set out to be a psychologist — in fact, you once described yourself as having become 'an accidental psychologist'. How did it happen?

I took a degree in English and intended to become a teacher, but found the employment prospects poor. I had taken the Diploma in Education concurrently with teacher training, and this served as the first year of the Bachelor of Education course, which was the entry into psychology in Scotland. On finishing the degree, I was offered the sole assistantship in the psychology department at Edinburgh University by Drever.

How did your career in psychology develop after that?

I did a PhD in a subject not of my own choosing — the intensity of sound, a choice wished upon me by Drever. These were the days when passing in German was a requirement for studying psychology. Then war broke out, and I was called up in 1943. I had been working on night blindness, but was diverted into personnel selection. This was for me the crucial change in direction.

Until then, my whole background had

been in experimental psychology. Now all my work was on personality. Highlights were my work for the Scottish Marriage Guidance Council, spanning more than 30 years into the 1980s and using personnel selection procedures we first developed in the War Office Selection Board, and my part in establishing the training course in clinical psychology, which led to many of the developments we are familiar with today.

Who has had the most influence on you?

My first teacher was Drever, who gave me my foundations in experimental, scientific psychology. However, the greatest influence was probably less well known — Jock Sutherland.² He became interested in psychoanalysis, and this had more of a shaping influence on me ultimately than anything else. From him, I developed the realisation that there is more to psychology than observable behaviour.

Who would be your choice of a really great psychologist?

Freud, undoubtedly.

That seems a classic answer, but in your case obviously a thoughtful one. Perhaps it is not the most popular time to choose Freud, yet in your own work he clearly has had a major influence.

Yes. Some people might deny that Freud was a 'psychologist' at all. They say silly things, like, 'Freud never conducted a controlled experiment', but that, of course, is totally irrelevant to his contribution.

You worked very closely with Drever, who made an early contribution to educational psychology by setting up a 'psychological clinic for children and juveniles' at Edinburgh University in the 1920s. Did you have any contact with this work?

Yes — it was assumed that all members of

staff would be involved in the work of the clinic. In those days it was accepted that one's general background as a psychologist was a sufficient basis for working in the educational or clinical sphere.

The work of the clinic essentially focused on three things: coaching in arithmetic, cubs and play therapy! The first reflected the view that much maladjustment in children was associated with poor academic achievement, and the second was to develop social skills. The play therapy was the one concession to a more analytic approach, although we were certainly not encouraged to adopt the basic concepts of psychoanalysis.

How long have you been associated with The British Psychological Society?

Right from the start of my career in psychology. On taking up my first post in 1933, I was also appointed Secretary of the Scottish Branch. At that time it was a much more academically-based body. The meetings it conducted consisted usually of two or three papers on unrelated subjects, held four times a year on a Saturday afternoon. Almost all members attended, including everyone in the Edinburgh department. Compared with over 2000 members now, at that time there were about 100. I wrote to all of them by hand with the details of the meetings!

As a student, I remember being introduced to the Semeonoff–Vygotsky Test.³ Professor Ralph Pickford at Glasgow tried to prop it up on his sloping desk by putting things under one end to balance it. However, the combination of his wild enthusiasm and unpredictable co-ordination made the outcome inevitable. As he swung his arms around his sleeve caught the edge of it, and we spent the rest of the lecture on the floor looking for all these wooden pieces. What was the background to that test?

It was developed for the selection of agents to work overseas during the war — spies and saboteurs. Since most of these people had a language other than English, we wanted tests which were relatively

independent of language. We therefore developed tests like this in which you manipulated objects. It did give something of a quantitative measure of achievement in concept-relation tasks.

Your name is very much associated with projective psychology. In your 1976 book, *Projective Techniques*, you said:

'Undergraduates rarely know what projective techniques are all about.'

Did you see that position changing in psychology courses after that?

I think there has been a slight resurgence of interest. But this country has always been different both from the United States and from continental Europe, in that projective techniques have never taken hold here as they have done elsewhere.

You concluded your presidential address in 1969 by saying that 'it is of the nature of a horizon that there is something beyond it, and if we knew what that something was there would not be the same incentive to get there'. What is your view of the new horizons psychology has explored since then?

I have been surprised by the number of new concepts and approaches which have emerged only to disappear. I think the main change from my own earlier days is that psychology — even within the Society — seems to have become very fragmented, which is a pity.

What contribution would you most like to be remembered for?

We are tempted to reply by referring to the areas which others might most commonly assign to us as our greatest contribution. For my part, I was first and foremost a teacher of psychology. I think I was appreciated by my students, which is the most important thing. That is what I would wish to be remembered for.

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Notes

¹ James Drever the Elder (1873–1951) was a lecturer, then professor, in the Edinburgh University Psychology Department from 1919 to 1945, when he was succeeded by his son, James Drever the Younger. He was the first holder of a chair in psychology in a Scottish university.

² Jock Sutherland (1905–1991) was a lecturer in psychology at Edinburgh University, and from 1947 to 1968 was Medical Director of the Tavistock Institute in London.

³ The Semeonoff–Vygotsky Test comprises a series of tasks in which a large number of diverse wooden pieces can be classified (e.g. according to height, width, shape or colour).