

Rising Stars

April 01, 2009

In case there was any doubt, the future of psychological science is in good hands. We present another installment of “Rising Stars,” the series profiling exemplars of today’s young psychological researchers. Here, and in next month’s issue, we will profile international scholars who, although they may not be advanced in years, have already made great advancements in science.



Gavan McNally

Gavan McNally

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Queen Elizabeth II Research Fellow & Associate Professor

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What does your research focus on?

I am a behavioral neuroscientist studying the behavioral and brain mechanisms of associative learning and motivation. I am particularly interested in learning about danger and rewards and the role of prediction error in this learning. So, at the moment, we spend a lot of time studying the neural circuits that encode prediction error in Pavlovian fear conditioning in an attempt to understand how these circuits relate to the better understood circuits and molecules important for fear memory.

What drew you to this line of research? Why is it exciting to you?

I was drawn to my current work largely because it allows me to combine my interests in associative learning and motivation with my interests in the brain. I have always enjoyed the precision and elegance of associative learning theories. Working in behavioral neuroscience excites me because one can try to bring some of the power and elegance of well-specified psychological theories and methodologies to bear on understanding neural mechanisms for learning.

Who were/are your mentors or psychological influences?

I have benefited enormously at different stages from working with three people: Fred Westbrook, Huda Akil, and Rick Richardson. Each has helped me navigate the path I am on. My thinking about learning and motivation has been most heavily influenced by the work of Robert Rescorla, Tony Dickinson, and Fred Westbrook. Fred exposed me to the work of the former and many more. My thinking about neuroscience was heavily influenced by Huda Akil and Stan Watson at Michigan. They took me on as a postdoc and exposed me to the power of molecular and systems neuroscience at a time when I did not know there was a difference between cDNA and DNA.

To what do you attribute your success in the science?

In large part, I have been able to do what I do due to the generosity and excellence of those who have taken the time to help me, the dedication of the students and postdocs who work with me, and the funding bodies who have supported my work. I simply enjoy what I do, and that makes it easy to persist and spend many hours on the research that interests me.

What's your future research agenda?

I think there can be a tendency within behavioral neuroscience for research to be driven by the biology. For example, a new gene or protein is first implicated *in vitro* in some form of synaptic plasticity and it is then studied in some measure of learning, memory, or motivation, but under conditions that typically do not provide much insight into the latter. I think this is the wrong way to answer what is probably the wrong question. This not to say I think that molecular approaches are uninformative. My view is quite the contrary. Rather, my sense is that the psychological question should drive the experiment. We need to couple the increasingly sophisticated biology with the equally and increasingly sophisticated theories and methods of experimental psychology. I am not sure I have been able to do that yet, but it is where I would like to be.

Any advice for even younger psychologists? What would you tell someone just now entering graduate school or getting their PhD?

If you believe that you are a product of your environment then surround yourself with intelligent, hardworking people. Working in Australia, I have never felt intellectually isolated because I am continually challenged by colleagues and students. Indeed, more often than not, I am grateful for the intellectual freedom that comes from being that bit further away.

What is the publication you are most proud of or feel has been most important to your career?

McNally, G.P., & Westbrook, R.F. (2006). Predicting danger: The nature, consequences, and neural mechanisms of predictive fear learning. *Learning & Memory*, 13, 245-253. I enjoyed writing this paper perhaps more than any other. It focuses on the questions and issues that are important to me and continue to direct my research.



Arnaud Rey

Arnaud Rey

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What does your research focus on?

My main research interests are language perception, language acquisition, and more recently, decision making.

What drew you to this line of research? Why is it exciting to you?

It is interesting to note that, frequently, the topics researchers are working on are in fact highly related to issues they have encountered in their private life. I have been concerned with reading and its acquisition for a long time. Part of the solutions I found came after discovering the book *Comme un Roman (Like a Novel)* by Daniel Pennac and by conducting exciting and frenetic research on reading processes.

Who were/are your mentors or psychological influences?

Several people have had a tremendous influence on my formation. Among academics, here are only a few of them: a great philosophy Professor, François Warin, for his unbearable deepness of being; my PhD advisor, Arthur Jacobs, for his passion and his excellence in science, his ability to push the youngest ahead, and his friendship; my post-doc referent, Alfonso Caramazza, for his brilliant Cartesianism, his ability to ask questions you have never heard before, and his help in finding some answers; and a wonderful researcher in psychology, Pierre Perruchet, for the time he spent sharing his ideas and showing me how to live science as a fascinating and pleasant exchange of thoughts and arguments.

To what do you attribute your success in the science?

According to Sigmund Freud, a subtle dose of sublimation is the best formula for having success in science or in art. I partly agree with him.

What's your future research agenda?

Answering little questions about language perception, language acquisition, and decision making in order to be able, in the far future, to touch and maybe taste some of the biggest questions, such as the dynamic of thoughts.

Any advice for even younger psychologists? What would you tell someone just now entering graduate school or getting their PhD?

Read. As much as you can. And not only what has been published in the last 5 years.

Meet and discuss with the best people in your field, the ones who are supposed to have answers to your questions. And then, by realizing that they don't have these cherished answers, find yours, yourself.

And, as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

What is the publication you are most proud of or feel has been most important to your career?

Giroux, I., & Rey, A. (2009). Lexical and sub-lexical units in speech perception. *Cognitive Science*, 33, 260-272. In this work, we tested empirically opposite predictions from two computational models that implemented two general theories of word acquisition. The data were inconsistent with one model/theory. This is the way science should be done, as expressed by Karl Popper. This work has been a great human adventure shared with Ibrahima Giroux (my former PhD student and one of the first PhDs in Cognitive Psychology from Ziguinchor in Casamance, Senegal).



Rachel Zajac

Rachel Zajac

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Lecturer in Psychology

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What does your research focus on?

My general research area is the intersection of psychology and law. I am particularly interested in three aspects of eyewitness testimony: 1) the effect of cross-examination on children's and adults' testimony, 2) how external influences such as discussions with other witnesses can distort eyewitness evidence, and 3) why eyewitnesses make mistakes on photographic lineups and whether we can develop new identification procedures that reduce errors.

What drew you to this line of research? Why is it exciting to you?

Research on eyewitness testimony is extremely important. Last year, I was lucky enough to sit in a room in California with about 70 people who had been convicted of crimes that they didn't commit. DNA technology that was not available at the time of their convictions had conclusively shown that these people were innocent, but not before they had spent 10, 20, or even 30 years in prison. Some had even been on death row. Mistaken eyewitness testimony played a role in the vast majority of these wrongful convictions. If I'm ever in need of a motivational push, that's it right there. I also love working at the interface between science and practice. It's a constant challenge to straddle that boundary and to come up with innovative ways to conduct research that is both theoretically important and practically useful.

Who were/are your mentors or psychological influences?

My PhD supervisor and mentor, Harlene Hayne, who continues to be both a fantastic role model (because of all she's achieved in a short space of time) and a terrible role model (because of all she's achieved in a short space of time). Three fellow Antipodeans whom I particularly admire for their general outlook as well as for their work in the field, and whom I've been fortunate enough to work with in recent times: Maryanne Garry, Martine Powell, and Neil Brewer. And Elizabeth Loftus, for her reminders that conducting and publishing research is not enough in the eyewitness testimony field — you have to stand up and spread the word where it counts.

To what do you attribute your success in the science?

When I stand back and look at the big picture, success would be knowing that I've influenced the way that judges run their trials, the way that lawyers question their witnesses, or the way that police officers collect and interpret their evidence. Publications are great, but they're only one step towards making all that happen. Four things have undoubtedly smoothed my path: I've found something that I love to do. I've happened on some important research questions and a couple of novel ideas. I strive to keep my research relevant by maintaining close contact with its end-users (probably easier in a country with a population of 4 million!). Finally, I have an unbelievably supportive department and university.

What's your future research agenda?

To produce good quality and relevant research, to foster more good scientists to carry on this work, and to use research to implement changes to policy and practice so that our legal investigations are safer as well as more successful. The three research strands that I described above are all at really exciting stages. With my first postdoctoral fellow, Fiona Jack, I'm also about to embark on some work looking at adolescents' ability to negotiate the investigative process, as witnesses and as suspects.

Any advice for even younger psychologists? What would you tell someone just now entering graduate school or getting their PhD?

Many PhD programs outside of the United States involve spending 3 to 5 years on a single project rather than having input into multiple studies. If that's the way your program works, it can be hard to be competitive in the international job market, where publications are a primary consideration. Try to get involved in other projects and in other labs where you can, and don't expect to get paid for it. When you get your PhD, immerse yourself into a postdoc and embrace all the opportunities that it throws at you. I moved straight from my PhD to a faculty position, which made life pretty difficult for those first few years. To the New Zealanders and Australians, take the 24-hour trip and get yourself to international conferences whenever you can. When you hear other conference delegates talking about their west-coast-to-east-coast jetlag, bite your tongue and smile. Finally, wherever you're from, remember that work isn't everything. One of my much-loved (and sadly departed) clinical psychology lecturers used to say, "If you got a head injury tomorrow and could no longer do the work you're doing, would you have things to fill the space?" Make sure that you would.

What is the publication you are most proud of or feel has been most important to your career?

Zajac, R., & Karageorge, A. (2009). The wildcard: A simple technique for improving children's target-absent lineup performance. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 23, 358-368. I chose this paper because it's just been published, it came out of an undergraduate research project, and the data led to my first big external grant. It's such a simple idea really, but it worked a treat. I was worried that we'd never replicate it, but we have...twice!



Friederike Range

Friederike Range

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What does your research focus on?

Ever since my PhD, the focus of my scientific interest has been on animal cognition and development. Within this field, I have explored a number of different questions regarding cooperation, and individual and social learning capabilities, as well as the cognitive mechanisms underlying those abilities in various species.

Using a series of new methods, developed by myself and my colleagues, we have found ways to measure an animals' attention during social learning situations. These methods have been adapted to a range of animal models including marmosets, keas, dogs, humans, ravens, and jackdaws. Another milestone was the application of the touch-screen procedure in dog research. Using this, we were able to demonstrate that dogs form visual categories, test whether animals can learn by exclusion in an abstract task, investigate transitive inference in dogs, and examine whether or not dogs can transfer knowledge acquired in reality to the virtual world and vice versa.

Another technique I used with dogs, the two-action method, has been successful in demonstrating that dogs are capable of inferential selective imitation, which had previously been thought to be human-specific. Currently, we are investigating how ostensive communication could interact with social learning abilities in dogs. Finally, I have recently investigated the underlying cognitive mechanisms of imitation and tested whether the associative learning theory might explain imitative behavior in domestic dogs.

What drew you to this line of research? Why is it exciting to you?

I was always fascinated by animals and how they solve problems in different situations. The more one observes them, the more questions arise about their understanding of the social and physical world. This is probably also the reason why I do not have a well defined field of research — whenever I observe an interesting behavior, I like to understand if it originated from basic understanding of the situation and the likely consequences of the behavior, or rather on learned contingencies.

Who were/are your mentors or psychological influences?

One of the most prominent experiences was when I went for the first time to the University of Bayreuth, Germany, to figure out if I would like to do my undergraduate study there. I asked for an appointment with Dr. von Holst (Department of Animal Physiology) and although he had a lecture to give 15 minutes later, he admitted me to his office, lit a pipe and took those 15 minutes to tell me about his research. When he had to leave, he asked a PhD student of his, Rüdiger Beer, to show me around and explain everything I wanted to know. This experience probably decided my scientific career.

Another very important mentor was Ronald Noë (Max Planck Institute in Seewiesen, currently University of Strasbourg), who provided me with the possibility of doing my masters thesis on sooty mangabeys, a terrestrial monkey species in Africa. He not only taught me to be critical and careful not to over-interpret animals' cognitive capacities, but he also encouraged and helped me in my decision to do my PhD with Robert Seyfarth and Dorothy Cheney at the University of Pennsylvania.

With them, I found another two mentors who gave me many opportunities to become an independent researcher and allowed me to follow my own ideas. They taught me how to think, write and present my data — a very important asset for every researcher. Coming back to Europe, Ludwig Huber turned out

to be another fantastic mentor. Even though I was employed as a postdoc in his EU Project, he never told me what experiment to run, but left it up to me to investigate the questions I was interested in. He was, and is, a great discussion partner when designing new experiments or interpreting data.

To what do you attribute your success in the science?

I guess a big part is really the result of my fascination for how animals solve daily problems in their social and physical environment. This fascination allows me to watch them for hours and actually “see” interesting behaviors. I very much believe that the most exciting questions arise from careful observation of the species you work with and from having a basic understanding how they might behave in a certain situation. Only then, is it possible to ask the right questions and design proper experiments. However, fascination for animals is not enough to be successful in science. Hard work is definitely a big part, as well as a certain flexibility to work with different people at various places. Another part is to have a balance in life between science and other things. I could never work the entire time, I need my spare time — evenings and weekends — that I can spend doing things completely unrelated to science. Only if I take this time, can I be productive. Last but not least, the support of family and friends is another very important aspect that has kept me going over the years.

What’s your future research agenda?

My goal for the years to come is to gain an understanding of the evolutionary, developmental, cognitive and motivational/emotional bases of the cooperative potential of wolves and dogs. Cooperation is a fundamental aspect of human society and has triggered much research in economics and psychology. Although it is clear that human collaborative skills are exceptional, comparisons with animal species may reveal the evolutionary origins and the functional relevance of cooperation. Moreover, they provide us with the opportunity to understand the proximate mechanisms and the development of cooperation. Thus, the main objective of my research in the next few years will be to gain a full insight into the ultimate and proximate processes, as well as into the development of cooperation. As cooperation is at the core of canine social organization, wolf packs and domestic dogs are the ideal model system to analyze cooperation with conspecific and human partners.

Any advice for even younger psychologists? What would you tell someone just now entering graduate school or getting their PhD?

For me, it was always important to work on my own ideas; thus, I would advise every student to find a supervisor who is open to your ideas and supports you in becoming an independent researcher. It is often the harder way — especially in Europe, where people who have research money usually look for a PhD student working on a specific topic. But you can only be really good if you are fascinated by the topic you are working on! Do not opt for a certain position just because it is easier to get. The other advice would be to find a balance in life — do not just work. Usually people are much more productive if they also spend time on other things that are unrelated to science!

What is the publication you are most proud of or feel has been most important to your career?

Range, F., Virányi, Z. & Huber, L. (2007) Selective imitation in dogs. *Current Biology* 17, 868-872. I picked that publication because of the surprising results. I never really expected that the dogs would

selectively imitate the way they did. Only when I sat down to analyze the first trials, did I get excited! At that moment I really had the feeling ‘wow’ — and then I redid the analyses two more times before calling my coauthors!



Abdolhossein Abdollahi

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What does your research focus on?

My research mainly focuses on Terror Management Theory (TMT), a social psychological theory explaining human social behavior based on the conscious and nonconscious activation of thoughts about death. I am particularly interested in exploring the relevant underlying mechanisms involved in intergroup aggression and terrorism. I study factors that may attenuate the aggression-provoking negative effects of death reminders or thoughts. For example, colleagues and I have recently shown that priming such variables as common humanity and compassionate values tend to mitigate intergroup aggression by curbing the malignant effects of death reminders.

What drew you to this line of research? Why is it exciting to you?

Death thoughts’ influence on human cognition, emotion, and behavior has been an interesting subject to me since my undergraduate years. Part of this attention might be attributed to the fact that I lost my parents earlier than I expected. Their deaths pushed me toward pondering much about this existential concern in a scientific way. Reading the first paper on TMT also drew me to this line of research. However, I know that there are other reasons for my interest in TMT which are unknown to even to me.

Who were/are your mentors or psychological influences?

A couple of years ago, I wrote Tom Pyszczynski on my idea that social death, being socially excluded by people important to one, could be envisaged as a symbolic form of physical death. Tom eagerly

responded to my e-mail and encouraged me to get involved in their ongoing research on TMT. Along with Tom, my other TMT colleagues and friends such as Jeff Greenberg and Sheldon Solomon have played a pivotal role in my psychological research life. In a research line outside TMT, Henry L. Roediger, III was another influential person who helped me study the false memory effect and write my PhD dissertation on this topic. Also, recently I wrote a paper with Susan Fiske on the universal dimensions of warmth and competence. Susan taught me a lot along the way; I thank her very much.

To what do you attribute your success in the science?

An ever-present curiosity motive locked on scientific understanding of human behavior might be the main cause of my success in the science of psychology. Indeed, I have always been excited to know about how people think, feel, and behave under various conditions. Another variable in leading my way has been my involvement in compulsive reading of psychological books and journal papers; actually I am used to reading about all areas of psychology. Also, my colleagues and friends have had a considerable role in my love of studying behavior. Those mentioned above and many others provided me with much support, emotional generosity, and nonstop favors. Finally, having the privilege to serve on four U.S.-based and Europe-based psychological journals' editorial boards has offered me a special chance to learn more from peers.

What's your future research agenda?

I will continue expanding my studies on TMT. I would like to explore the neurobiological bases of the TMT processes using such rigorous neuroimaging tools as fMRI. The main question would be this: if death thoughts get activated, which areas of the brain will light up? Also, I intend to unfold the psychological mechanisms involved in the context-dependency of death reminders effects. However, there are many other amazing areas that draw me in. Specifically, I would like to work on some mainstream hot topics in psychology. For example, how do emotions and cognitions interact? How do nonconscious cognitive processes affect behavior? How do our bodies influence our cognitions, emotions, and behavior (social embodiment)? Why and how does inconsequential and noninstrumental information affect decision making? How could we teach compassion using the brain plasticity ability?

Any advice for even younger psychologists? What would you tell someone just now entering graduate school or getting their PhD?

Be open-minded. Try to attend to and respect new ideas and information. Close-mindedness and change resistance are two dangerous viruses of a pure thought and mind. Be persistent. Never give up even if you are thinking of and working on an idea which might seem senseless to others. Remember Galileo! And read biographies of great scientists in general and great psychologists in particular. See how you could learn from them.

What is the publication you are most proud of or feel has been most important to your career?

Pyszczynski, T., Abdollahi, A., Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., Cohen, F., & Weise, D. (2006). Mortality salience, martyrdom, and military might: The Great Satan versus the Axis of Evil. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32, 525-537.

I love this paper because it nicely demonstrates how death reminders shape how we perceive members of an “outgroup.”



Roberto González

Roberto González

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What does your research focus on?

I study attitude change as a consequence of positive intergroup contact involving different groups (e.g., indigenous, immigrant, political, mentally disabled, and religious groups), as well as the psychological moderators and mediators of the contact-attitude link. I have also conducted research on political psychology in issues such as political identity, coalition’s dynamics, political attitudes, and participation.

What drew you to this line of research? Why is it exciting to you?

I became deeply interested in this research line when I started my PhD in England with Rupert Brown, one of the leading scholars in the field of the contact-hypothesis. His work has inspired me to understand the psychological process by which positive intergroup contact brings about generalized attitude change. Since globalization became a worldwide issue, there is no doubt that the connections between cultures at the economic, political, ethnic, and religious level have become more frequent and more tangible in recent years. Understanding the factors that explain how and why contact produce positive intergroup attitudes is certainly a passionate topic that is relevant in any given social context!

Who were/are your mentors or psychological influences?

There are several authors that have influenced my work, particularly Henry Tajfel, Gordon Allport, Thomas Pettigrew, Marilynn Brewer, Gerd Bohner, Peter Glick, and certainly Rupert Brown, my PhD mentor from whom I learned the passion and value of conducting rigorous social psychological research.

To what do you attribute your success in the science?

I think it is a combination of factors: first, my personal commitment to carry on conducting research in real life and experimental contexts; second, my strong conviction to derive my research from theoretical grounds; third, my strong international collaboration with colleagues from England, Germany and the United States. This collaboration has given me the opportunity to exchange and learn from different academic experiences, not to mention the value of the friendships that characterize these relationships. Finally, I need to recognize the important role that all my postgraduate students and research assistants have played in conducting research. Training them as social scientists has given me the opportunity to learn a lot from new generations and to stimulate them to pursue their own academic careers.

What's your future research agenda?

My future research agenda involves the extension of the contact hypothesis framework to other group contexts to predict both positive and negative outcomes. I am particularly interested in researching, experimentally and using longitudinal panel designs, the mediational role of intergroup emotions and normative factors of the relationship between contact and generalization of attitude change. Immigrant and religious groups are central in my new developments.

Any advice for even younger psychologists? What would you tell someone just now entering graduate school or getting their PhD?

Passion, rigor, discipline, commitment, and optimism seem to me key elements when pursuing PhD training. Somehow, we need to trust ourselves but also allow more experienced professors to guide our work. I said “guide our work” because we need to discover for ourselves what we want to contribute in science. Getting to know what other scientists do is central for developing new ideas and critical thinking, from my perspective, preconditions to becoming autonomous and rigorous in our academic work.

What is the publication you are most proud of or feel has been most important to your career?

I enjoyed the paper I published last year with my colleagues Rupert Brown, Hanna Zagefka, Jorge Manzi, and Sabina Cehajic (Nuestra Culpa: collective guilt as a predictor of reparation for historical wrongdoing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94, 75-90). I am proud of this paper for many reasons. First, it made an important theoretical contribution to the understanding of group emotional factors (collective guilt and shame) to predict positive intergroup attitudes (reparation). Secondly, it represents an excellent example of international collaboration. Finally, the three reported studies were conducted in real life involving a rather neglected group context — namely the indigenous and non-indigenous populations.



Chai-Youn Kim

Chai-Youn Kim

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Assistant Professor

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What does your research focus on?

I'm interested in exploring human visual perception and its underlying neural mechanisms, with emphasis on distinguishing processing that requires conscious awareness from processing that does not. To pursue this, I exploit psychophysical paradigms, such as binocular rivalry, where awareness can be manipulated. I'm also using brain imaging techniques and direct electrical brain stimulation to pinpoint neural activity associated with fluctuations in perception. In line with this research theme, I maintain an enduring interest in the perceptual and neural characteristics of color-graphemic synesthesia, a neurological phenomenon in which letters and numbers are involuntarily perceived along with an associated color.

What drew you to this line of research? Why is it exciting to you?

Art has inspired me since I was very young. I was fascinated by lines, forms, colors, motion, and volumes portrayed in works of art. I first took a philosophical approach to art. However, I got more and more interested in empirical aspects of those vivid perceptual experiences and how the brain makes those experiences possible. So I have been studying the cognitive neuroscientific aspects of visual perception starting with my years in graduate school. It feels extremely exciting to employ scientific methods to study what I've been passionate about since childhood.

Who were/are your mentors or psychological influences?

I've been always so fortunate to have wonderful people around me. For whatever I'm managing to do successfully scientifically, I owe thanks to those people. Among the great teachers and mentors I've had throughout my academic career, a single individual stands out, Randolph Blake at Vanderbilt University. He was my PhD advisor and also my postdoc advisor. I learned everything I had to learn as a psychologist/neuroscientist from him.

To what do you attribute your success in the science?

Diversity in background (art, philosophy, and cognitive neuroscience) helped me to develop unconventional ways to think about topics of psychology and cognitive neuroscience. Plus, I thoroughly like what I do and feel passionate about it. I'm not sure whether I can say I have been "successful," but I can surely say it's been fun and enlightening for me!

What's your future research agenda?

Recently, I began trying to bridge my initial interest in art and my knowledge and experience of visual cognitive neuroscience. So-called "neuroaesthetics" will be my new venue. I'm also extending my range of research methods to eye-tracking, scalp-recorded evoke potentials, and subdural brain stimulation. Armed with those tools, I'll keep studying neural mechanisms of conscious visual experiences.

Any advice for even younger psychologists? What would you tell someone just now entering graduate school or getting their PhD?

Have fun; don't lose sight of what drew you to this field.

Be patient; doing science is like running a marathon.

Seek criticism of your ideas and your writing, and accept that criticism without losing your self-confidence.

What is the publication you are most proud of or feel has been most important to your career?

Kim, C.Y., & Blake, R. (2005) Psychophysical magic: Rendering the normally visible "invisible." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 9, 381-388. The original version of this short article was a 200-page review I wrote for my qualifying exam. It was a highlight of my graduate years to write the grand review. After completing that long journey, I felt grown up academically. I'm proud of the mini version of the review published in TiCS, since it serves as a user's manual for researchers studying consciousness.