

Why Did You Study Psychology?

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Why did psychology's leading researchers take that first course? Was it the compelling advice of a master? Perhaps a sudden epiphany?

There's a story behind every good psychologist. A cross-section of psychologists were asked to share their stories and illuminate the heart of this career-making decision.

This series showcases the paths of psychologists in various disciplines from around the world.

Animal Appetite

By Elizabeth D. Capaldi

I was a math major my first two years in college. I picked math because I loved geometry – the logic of it appealed to me. I felt great pleasure when you got to QED at the end of those proofs. When I started school, all my friends were English majors. So when I had an elective to take I took English or math. However, all universities have distribution requirements, and I had to take a lab course, and a social science. I took physics as my lab course and was going to take sociology or political science for my social science since most students did so. However, one of my roommates took psychology as her social science elective, and liked it, so I took it too. I had no clue what psychology was before I took that course. They had no psychology courses of any kind in my high school, and I never knew anyone who knew anything about psychology. It was an adventure to try it.

Elizabeth D.
Capaldi

My first psychology course was introductory psychology and thought it was easy, so I took another one. In that course, animal learning, I fell in love with the field. The course covered the major theories in the field historically, and the experiments that compared them. We did the cognitive theory of Tolman and the grand Hullian theory, and the latent learning experiments that led to Spence, and the theories after that. Unlike my other courses, psychology seemed to be relevant, and to have a method that led to progress in understanding. In my English courses, people had opinions, but no way to choose between them. In my math courses, there was only theory, no test of theory, or application of theory. Psychology appealed to me because there were elegant theories, as in mathematics, but experimental test of those theories, that led to progress and to application. There was a way to choose between opinions. There wasn't endless argument, but experimental tests and progress. I was, of course, incredibly naïve to believe experiments so neatly led to progress and theories led to clear application, but I was correct that there is a check on unbridled theory and opinion. Psychologists, like other scientists, collect data and modify our thinking in light of the data. And there are real applications of animal learning data to help

people. It is a relevant field.

I have never looked back, and have enjoyed reading, teaching, and researching in psychology ever since that very early animal learning course. While animal learning as a field has shrunk, all of psychology shares its use of data to modify theory, and the incredible practical importance of applications in our field. And although my field has fewer members, I am still an animal learner and still have a rat lab. My parents never understood exactly why I study rats, but I continue teaching students to this day how animal behavior elucidates laws that are common to all behavior, and how experimental tests in animals can lead to theoretical progress and practical applications that have immense importance for human life. What more could you want?

Engineering a Career

By Kenneth Maxwell

I work in human factors, a profession that blends psychology, science, engineering, and other disciplines, toward the pursuit of realizing systems that are well adapted to human use. Professionals come to this cross-disciplinary endeavor from many different areas of formal study. I came to it through my study of psychological science and a circuitous path that brought me back to my earliest career inclinations.

Kenneth
Maxwell

From early in life I was intrigued by science and engineering. The new discoveries and gadgetry of the time, particularly in the areas of computers and space exploration, offered a promising future, promoted by science fiction, of abundant leisure time supported by automation, complemented with taking family vacations in space. I would be satisfied, I thought, being a part of making such a future a reality, and because of both a natural affinity and aptitude, my personal future choices seemed to solidify early.

In high school I tended to excel at mathematics and science. Upon selecting an engineering school and major I immediately found myself understandably saturated with courses in “hard” sciences, technology, and mathematics. All other pursuits of culture and science, known collectively as the liberal arts, were collapsed into a single course each semester with the telling name of “special interdisciplinary studies.” The courses did not hide the engineering administration’s attitude, perceived or real, that these pursuits were indeed liberal in that they were beyond the utilitarian concerns of an engineer’s education.

These special courses were overly broad, but in being so they held the promise that connections between art, music, psychology, anthropology, political science, and such could manifest themselves more brilliantly than they otherwise would have had these areas been taught separately. To my sensibilities, psychology emerged as a particularly strong nexus among this amalgamation of studies. On another hand, these courses underscored that my education was missing a broader sense of the world that college should provide.

I continued my engineering studies but grew dissatisfied with the narrow concentration. In consequence, I left engineering and school for a time, returning with a renewed enthusiasm and the expectation that the study of psychology formed a broad foundation that could be applied to many of the avenues of life that lay before me. Moreover, psychology offered me a choice to build this foundation while studying science. As I worked through my undergraduate degree I became aware of engineering psychology, a field that would allow me to symbiotically incorporate engineering back into the mix of my studies in a manner unforeseen to me.

There are other factors that informed my choices, including much needed guidance from mentors and peers, for which I am very grateful. I have chosen here to note the guidance I gleaned from examining my own aptitudes, interests, and aspirations as I discovered the possibilities the world offered. This is a guidance that came to me in stages and brought me full circle to a choice that was in retrospect at once unexpected and inevitable.

The Privilege and the Joy

By Jeanne Enders

There are at least three reasons I chose a career in psychological science. The first is that I admired many psychology teachers in my life. The second is that I thought knowledge about psychology would be very useful in my personal life as a teacher, co-worker, spouse, and parent. And finally, I felt my life could have the greatest impact by becoming a psychologist.

Jeanne Enders

There were so many faculty members in my undergraduate and graduate education who “wowed” me with their insight, knowledge, and pedagogical skills. I recall my favorite undergraduate professor, Jesse Nolph at Pacific Lutheran University, coaxing us to open any book to two random pages, so that he could use psychological theory to link whatever topics we found. He never failed to pull it off beautifully. This demonstration always illustrated the prevalence of psychological principles in the world around us. Later in my education, Milt Rosenberg at The University of Chicago dazzled me with stories of the role psychological adjustment played in the motivations of American Presidents. Across campus, Fred Strodtbeck made small group theory come alive by eliciting stories from our own families’ lives, and made systems theory seem like an explanation for any phenomenon known to man. I am deeply grateful for the passion with which all my teachers and advisors shared their knowledge of psychological science with me. I am quite sure that it is often the admiration we have for the scientists and teachers that turns us on to the material.

While regard for my teachers probably drove my initial decision to study psychology, a secondary effect of learning about psychological science becomes more and more clear to me with every year that I parent my children, collaborate at my job, interact with my community, and teach my own students. Basic learning theory principles, such as the knowledge of the power of intermittent reinforcement, have influenced all of the domains of my life (just ask my children!). The notion that an inverse relationship exists between frequent, genuine praise and organizational conflict has influenced the way I interact with

my daily world. The small group theory finding that humor breaks tension in especially useful ways at beginnings and endings of meetings has come in handy on many occasions. Such things are so useful in every aspect of my adult life.

And finally, I chose this field to make a lasting and positive impact on the world, an ideal I'm sure holds true for many psychologists. I have taught ethics and organizational behavior in a business school for several years. I believe the subject matter that I am privileged to share with students will enrich and improve their working lives. I am currently working on some research that might help a small chain of grocery stores find ways to retain high-performing employees by investing in their local communities. I believe both the teaching and the research will eventually impact daily working environments, make for better employees, and cultivate more ethical workplaces. This is the kind of impact I believe psychologists can have in many areas. It is a privilege and a joy to be a psychologist.

A Body Coming Through the Rye

By Richard A. Weinberg

As a callow fellow contemplating Holden Caulfield's (*The Catcher in the Rye*) youthful escapades, I used to daydream of my own destiny – my coming of age. As a freshman at the University of Wisconsin, I was uncertain about an academic major, although I assumed I would ultimately follow in my father's footsteps and join his law firm. Like many others in my cohort, I shopped around, exploring the usual smattering of liberal arts courses. During that discovery process, I had the good fortune of taking introductory child psychology from Mavis Hetherington. I was smitten. Her amazing teaching ability matched by her passion for the field drove me to major in psychology. Under her guidance, I conducted my first empirical study and came to appreciate both developmental science and its applications.

Richard A.
Weinberg

Also, during the summer of that first year at Madison, I worked in my father's law office performing the menial chores that I was fairly capable of completing – getting coffee, making copies on one of the first machines around, and carrying my father's briefcase. However, it was during that summer that my commitment to pursuing psychology as a career was affirmed, and my interest in the law waned. My father's law practice was devoted to divorce and matrimonial law, and the complexity of the cases of his high profile clients brought him to hire a child psychologist to deal with custody issues and other problems that accrued among the messed-up children of these celebrities. I was fascinated with the work of this clinical psychologist and we spent quite a bit of time discussing the field and directions I might take in graduate school. He made a major impact on my life.

After completing a master's degree at Northwestern University with an internship at the Psychosomatic and Psychiatric Institute at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago, I pursued a doctorate in school psychology at the University of Minnesota, followed by my first academic appointment at Teachers College, Columbia University. Several years later, I met Sandra Scarr at the University of Minnesota and soon directed the doctoral school psychology training program. Teaming up with Sandy, a renowned

developmental behavior geneticist, I began a more than 30-year collaboration on several research and writing projects. My contribution to these efforts has been ostensibly as the “applied” person responsible for the collection of clinical and educational data and providing an alternative perspective to the questions we have addressed in our work. As a result of these experiences, I redirected my career trajectory and ultimately joined the faculty of the Institute of Child Development, which I directed from 1979-1989.

Throughout my career as, what I am proud to call, a scientist-practitioner, I have focused on “giving away” child development through research, teaching, public policy work, civic engagement, and outreach. I am thankful that the serendipitous crossing of my path with Mavis Hetherington, the encouragement of a practicing clinician in my father’s law office, and the collegueship of Sandra Scarr led me to experience a fulfilling and rewarding career as a psychologist.