MARCH 2006
VOL. 37, NO. 3

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

MONITOR ON PSYCHOLOGY

GST# R127612802

A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

How psychologists change

Adaptation's role in professional growth

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How psychologists change

In nature, change can be driven by the smallest of events—a wayward seed, a shift in the breeze—and also by forces as strong as an ice age. Similarly, factors large and small can contribute to psychologists' growth.

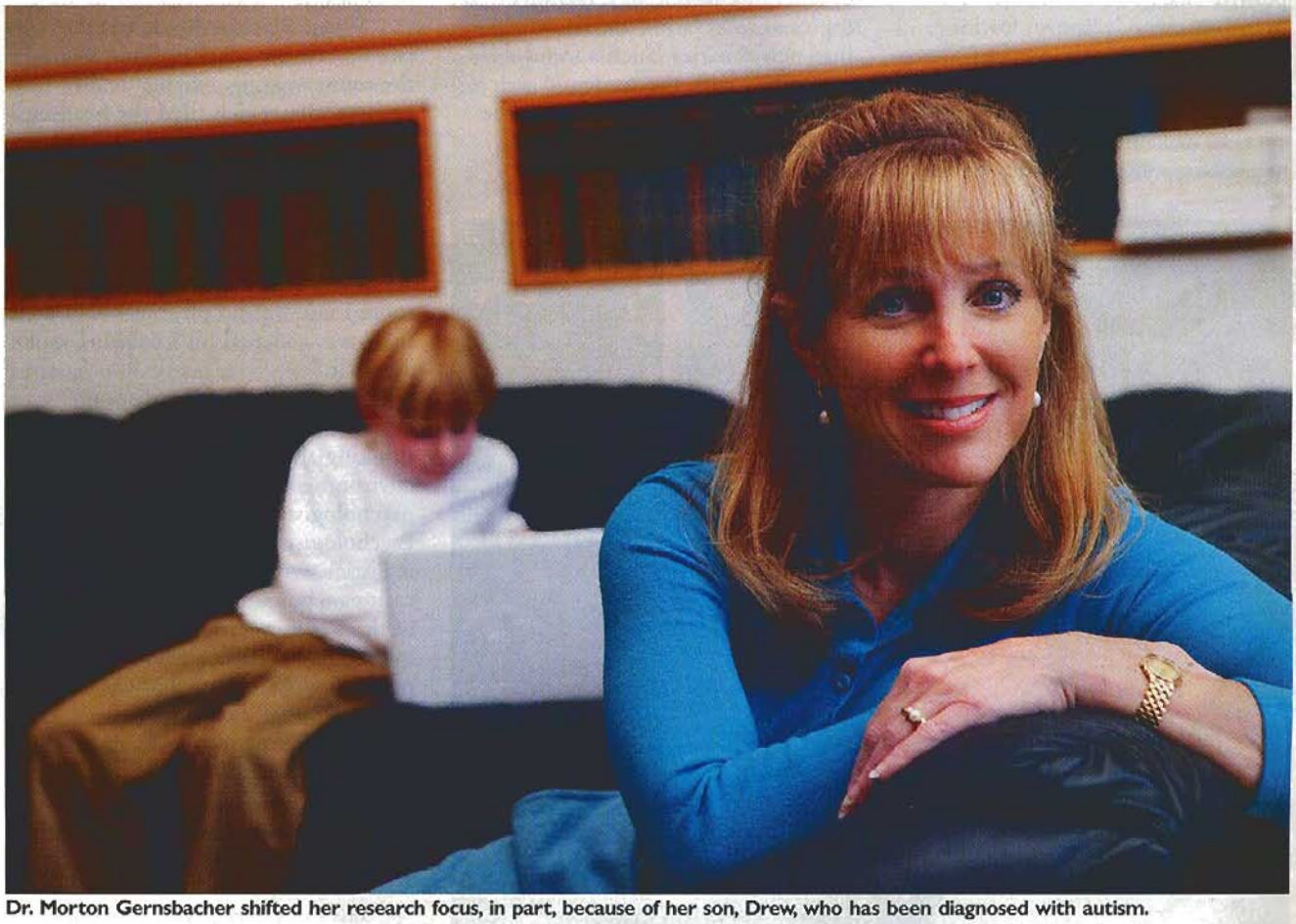
For some, market forces drive a shift in workplace settings, spurring a private practitioner, for example, to seek out opportunities in the world of business. For others, an unexpected insight may tempt a researcher to venture down a formerly untrodden path. Psychologists may choose to blend theoretical orientations they once saw as disparate, or tap new technology to approach research questions from a fresh angle. Others find inspiration closer to home, when events in their own families spur new interests and directions.

No matter what sparked the change, continuing to grow and adapt keeps the psychologists on the following pages engaged in their work and looking for the next professional challenge.

Prime time for innovation

As psychological scientists become more established, many break free from conventional topics and methodology.

JOHN NIENHUIS



Dr. Morton Gernsbacher shifted her research focus, in part, because of her son, Drew, who has been diagnosed with autism.

BY SADIE F. DINGFELDER
***Monitor* staff**

At first glance, a psychologist's curriculum vita has little in common with a novel—except perhaps its length. However, a careful reader might be able to discern a plot out of that list of published articles.

Often, the issues researchers explore early in their careers grow and broaden. Sometimes, though, topics can transform so dramatically they become recognizable only to their authors.

That scenario may describe the career of researcher Jim Blascovich, PhD, who started out studying risk taking and gambling behavior but today is also known for his research with virtual reality technology. Life circumstances and serendipity drew him to virtual environments, but a single question—what makes a situation seem either challenging or threatening—remains central to his work, he says.

"If one looked at my vita, one might not see the threat and challenge thread that I can," notes Blascovich.

Other researchers find themselves returning to old questions—perhaps ones that interested them before they focused in on a topic as graduate students. Such is the case of Dan P. McAdams, PhD, who as a midcareer

psychology professor at Northwestern University has begun to explore issues of racism and religion—topics that dogged him as a teenager growing up in Gary, Indiana, but that he didn't have the opportunity to study earlier in his career.

Investigating a socially important topic may allow him to contribute to positive change in the world, says McAdams, who is known for his research on adult development.

"Some researchers, as they move into their midlife years, are looking for a way to make their research relevant to...making something better for the next generation," he explains. "They look for social or societal implications for their work."

Although young scientists can savor the simple pleasure of having an article published in a top-tier journal, established researchers must seek out professional satisfaction elsewhere—perhaps by exploring the possibilities of emerging technology, tackling new topics or integrating old knowledge into new theories. Such a trend dovetails nicely with the academic system, which allows tenured professors the freedom to explore and expand, McAdams notes.

Exploring new technology

Blascovich's 20-year research program in social psychology metamorphosed when he entered a virtual environment for the first time at the age of 48. A recent transplant to the University of California, Santa Barbara, he happened by the lab of Jack Loomis, PhD, a psychology professor who studies visual perception.

When Blascovich entered the lab, he saw a student walking around the room wearing a virtual reality headset. Blascovich tried the headset on, and found himself transported to a plank that stretched across a bottomless pit.

"I couldn't believe I couldn't consciously control my fear response," he says. "I knew that in the physical room there was no pit, but because there was a virtual pit I couldn't walk across it."

Impressed by the realism of the technology, Blascovich began thinking about the ways that virtual environments could be used by social psychologists. One possibility: Psychologists could create highly realistic environments—such as casinos—but control every aspect of them. Or, a researcher could manipulate variables—such as a person's appearance—that can't be changed in real life.

In one experiment currently under way, Blascovich is giving some participants a stigmatizing physical deformity and exploring how other participants in the virtual environment respond to them.

His excitement about virtual environments has spurred some projects that are far from the social psychology mainstream, as he works with engineers to fine-tune the way such environments are designed. However, Blascovich sees much of his current research as a natural extension of his early work on challenge and threat.

"What I did was take on a big new area of research at a midpoint in my career, and so I now have two big things going on," he says. "But the virtual one, I think, has the potential to greatly benefit not only the kind of substantive questions we ask, but provide a

methodological tool for studying social behavior."

Helping develop a technology that future social psychologists might use has given Blascovich a satisfying new way to contribute to the profession, he says.

Emerging technologies can also help researchers approach their old topics from new angles, notes Todd Heatherton, PhD, a psychology professor at Dartmouth College. Heatherton had long studied the question of how people regulate their eating and other behavior, but when his department purchased a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machine, he had the opportunity to take a peek inside participants' brains.

Taking on a new methodology allowed Heatherton to better understand the self-regulation process, but he hopes to apply the technology to other issues as well, he says.

"There are a lot of interesting questions about how the human mind works, and I think that is what draws a lot of us into the field," he says.

Revisiting past ideas

Although some researchers use fMRI to explore their long-standing questions, the technology conspired with life circumstances to pull at least one researcher—Morton Ann Gernsbacher, PhD—into entirely new areas of research. Early in her career, Gernsbacher studied the cognitive processes that underlie language comprehension. Her participants were mostly college students, and her measures were behavioral. Today, she also studies people with Alzheimer's disease and autism, and she uses her department's fMRI machine to see how their brains work on a physiological level.

Her move to the University of Wisconson–Madison and access to clinical psychology collaborators sparked some of Gernsbacher's interest in clinical psychology, she says. But another key influence has been her 10-year-old son, who has been diagnosed with autism.

"The only thing average about him is his height and weight—everything else about him is in the 99.9 percentile or very below average," she says. "Given that most of my life I have studied the average, it has been really fun to get up close and personal with someone who doesn't come in 'size average.'"

In fact, Gernsbacher's son has been the basis of two published articles by the researcher, and has given her new insight into her earlier theories on speech and language. Today, Gernsbacher makes careful distinctions between the two, because she has learned from her son that some people with problems speaking often have complex, language-like thoughts.

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>
> *Dan P. McAdams*
>
> *Northwestern University*

Like Gernsbacher, many midcareer scientists find themselves revisiting and reshaping their early theories, McAdams observes.

"When you are in your 30s, there are a lot of great ideas that come out of your head. They come out hot and fast, but they are maybe not that well formed," he says. "When you are in your mid-life years and you are still in the research game, they don't come out as fast but they are sometimes a little more subtle, nuanced, sculpted."

Applying expertise broadly

Although some psychologists stay in the research game their entire careers, many find that the narrow questions one can answer with individual studies become less interesting than tackling broad topics, such as how entire cultures conceptualize mental illness, says Danny Wedding, PhD, director of the Missouri Institute of Mental Health. Wedding has found an outlet for his integrative instinct by writing and editing books—12 of them.

"There is that precious moment when you cut open the box and see your new book for the first time," he says. "You've seen the proofs and the galleys, but there is nothing like seeing it all put together."

Moving even further afield from his original research area of neuropsychological testing, Wedding has found professional satisfaction in his role as director of a research institution. He especially enjoys the opportunity to create an environment where promising young scientists can flourish and, best yet, churn out research that could improve public health in the state, says Wedding.

For instance, one current study aims to decrease rates of fetal alcohol syndrome by developing new ways the state of Missouri can educate pregnant women about drinking's dangers.

"I take some comfort in the fact that I might make a difference in public policy," says Wedding. "I like to think that due to our fetal alcohol prevention work, some babies might be born safer."

Aiming for a broad impact may be a driving force behind many researchers' late-career directions, McAdams says.

"As you get to be a senior researcher, you want to have a voice in what you consider to be the big conversations going on in your society," he says. "You feel you have learned a lot, you have something to say, and someone should be listening."

FURTHER READING

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