

Why do I study psychology?

Today, out of blue, my mom asked me why I chose to study psychology in college. Mind you, I have graduated from college for more than 30 years. It seemed a bit late for her to query about my career choice NOW.

Well, my mom was, and still is, unusually liberal for a Chinese mother. Although she is every bit a tiger mom, oddly, she always lets me choose whatever I choose to do and believes in my choice blindly.

I told her I would give her answer tonight through this blog.

I ended up in psychology not by wise choice. Rather, it was an accident.

It started from my wanting to be a teacher.

I wanted to be a teacher as young as about 7-8 years. The reason I wanted to be a teacher was because I, even at that age, already found my teachers' teaching ability to be far from desirable, in particular in math. They often made things more complicated than needed to be. Sometimes, I already understood a math concept but they would drag on and on to talk about it until everybody in the class got totally lost.

For instance, I had this classmate, Ah-Guang. My teacher tried very hard to teach him math but he managed to fail every test he took. He seemed rather stupid to me at the time because even simple math concepts such as decimal points or simple arithmetic operations such as subtraction and multiplication seemed unable to penetrate his brain.

One morning, for some reason, I got up earlier than usual and went with my mom to the street market to do grocery shopping. I found Ah-Guang manning his family's vegetable stand. Not wanting to embarrass him (street merchants were looked down upon at the time), I stayed away from his stall but watched as he was busily selling vegetables.

He had his little ancient Chinese hand-held scale that measured vegetables to grams or even half grams. The vegetables would cost from 4 or 5 cents to 12 to 13 cents a kilo. Let's say, a customer might want a half kilo of Chinese cabbage which cost about 11 cents per kilo. But a head of Chinese cabbage might weigh a half kilo plus 120 grams. It should be: $11 \times 0.5 + 11 \times 0.120 = 6.82$ cents. Ah-Guang rounded it up to seven cents but throw in a couple of green onions to even things out.

His stand was rather busy. Many customers were coming and going. In one motion, he haggled, weighed, and wrapped while doing mental calculations loudly. He did addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, sometimes at several decimal points.

As I was watching him in action, I turned on my mental calculator in turbo mode but often could not keep up.

I was completely astonished by his math prowess! All things he did so effortlessly in the market were the very obstacles he could not overcome in the classroom.

What a failure of teaching! I thought.

I decided then and there I should become an elementary school teacher to save kids like Ah-Guang from bad teaching.

When I went to junior high, math became more complicated but teaching got worse. So I decided to become a junior high school teacher.

In high school, however, teaching became much better but students seemed to have changed from all quiet, obedient, hard working in junior high to noisy, rebellious, and lazy.

One incident stood out.

We had this fantastic physics teacher. He worked very very hard. He seemed to show up everyday for six days a week before we arrived at 7:30 am and left later than we did after 5-6 pm. He came to the class during the recess so that he could write the notes in Chinese characters on the blackboard in perfect alignment vertically and horizontally. He managed to make every physics class so interesting and the difficult physics concepts so easy to understand. Despite his effort, on one test, the class on average got 30 percent. I was one of those who got 30.

When he announced the test results, my classmates all took it nonchalantly. They kept on chatting and fidgeting as he was commenting on each item of the test and why we failed. No one seemed to care and listen. He became very upset.

He said, you are in the best school of the city and in the best class of the school. If you are not working hard and learning, what is point of me teaching you! As he berated us, he started to cry.

That night, I went home and asked my mom to borrow a physics exercise book from her library (my mom was a librarian). I decided each night I would spend an extra 30 minutes on the exercises to live up to his expectations.

I also decided I would never ever become a high school teacher.

So, when the time came that I had to decide to choose a university major to apply for, I chose psychology, because psychology was not taught in high schools in China. There would be no chance for me to be sent to any high school to teach those careless and ungrateful sons of bitches!

When I received the admission letter to the psychology program at Hangzhou University, my parents asked: "What is psychology?"

I said: "I don't know."

So I asked my best friend, Yongping, "I got in psychology. But what is psychology?"

Yongping was the most well read student in my class.

He said, "I don't know either. But I think I have this book at home."

He ran home and brought a very slim book.

I opened the first page and saw a picture of a dog hooked up to some messy tubes with two bearded Russian guys standing behind him. The caption said the Russians were collecting saliva from the dog by ringing a bell.

I asked, "This is psychology? Shit!"

I was very disappointed.

When I showed up in my department, I ran into a bespectacled skinny lady.

She said, "I remember you. You almost did not get in because of your eye sight." (I have one normal eye and the other with amblyopia).

"But I told the other members of the admissions committee that psychology does not need too good eye sights, and you have the highest entrance exam scores. Why not give you a try?"

So this was how I got into psychology.