

Interview

The Quarterly Big Interview with Dr Sally Wiggins

Robert McQuade

*Having completed her PhD at Loughborough University in 2002, Sally worked first at Nottingham Trent University, then at the University of Strathclyde for over 12 years. During this time, Sally established herself as a social psychologist with expertise in discursive psychology through a wide range of projects including analyses of family mealtimes, weight management treatment within the NHS, online suicide help forums, and student tutorial group interactions. In 2016, Sally moved to Linköping University (Sweden), where she is currently senior lecturer in social psychology. In 2017, she released the methods textbook, *Discursive Psychology: Theory, Method and Applications*. I became enthralled with social psychology thanks to Sally's undergraduate teaching and was delighted to catch up with her in October 2018 as part of The Quarterly's Big Interview series.*

Robert: Thank you for offering your time to chat with me today, Sally! Could we start by talking about your current role(s)?

Sally: It's a pleasure to be asked! My current role at Linköping involves research, teaching – mainly social psychology and qualitative research methods – and some admin responsibilities. I teach on the psychology programme and contribute to other programmes across the university. I'm our departmental postgraduate coordinator, overseeing around 70 postgraduate students across different programmes like psychology, pedagogy, and sociology. I also help to train staff in problem-based learning, tutoring and other teaching roles. So quite a variety of interesting things to keep me busy!

Robert: And what are your main research interests?

Sally: My main research interest continues to be in social interaction around food and eating, and the use and consequences of constructions of psychological concepts of eating practices or processes. So, for example, how are food preferences or appetite made relevant by people in everyday mealtimes and how does this impact on eating as a social practice? What happens when kids say they don't like a food? Why is this different to what happens when adults say it? I've spent a lot of my career looking at family mealtimes, and there is still so much that we need to know in terms of the role of social interaction around eating practices. So, that's one area. I've also started to develop research based on my teaching interests in problem-based learning or PBL, where students' learning is focused on their interaction within small tutorial group meetings. As you know yourself (with your own PhD work), PBL brings social, psychological and pedagogical issues into close proximity, so it is exciting to see how our research might begin to inform teaching and learning practices.

Robert: Thinking back to your own psychology degree, how did you identify your niche?

Sally: Good question! I don't think I did. Not then, anyway. When I was doing my undergraduate degree (at the University of Dundee), I had no idea what I wanted to

do. I didn't even think I would do a PhD. But in my final year, I took a couple of optional modules which were particularly influential for me: one was on epistemology and feminism (with Suzanne Zeedyk), and the other one was on discourse and interaction (with Nick Hopkins). Both raised questions and ideas that I had never encountered before during my psychology degree, but which really captured my interest and imagination. I did, however, miss out on a module on eating psychology (with Marion Hetherington), which I was rather devastated about. It was just too popular so I didn't make it onto the list! Despite that, I still ended up looking at food and eating. So I do wonder, actually, if I had taken that module, would that have set me off in a different direction? The same topic area, but from a different perspective?

Robert: It all worked out in the end, then! So, beyond your studies, what was your first official post as a psychologist? Did you always have lecturing in mind?

Sally: My first psychology job after my PhD was as a lecturer at Nottingham Trent University, very close to Loughborough in fact. In the final few months of my PhD, I had applied for quite a few lectureships, so it was a combination of circumstance and determination (and probably a bit of luck) that led me there. I think at some point toward the end of my undergraduate degree, and then into my PhD, I decided that I liked the idea of being an academic. Unlike many of my peers, I actually felt quite at home in a university. I didn't ever see myself as a 'practising' or professional psychologist. At the time I did my undergraduate degree (in the mid 1990s – I know, ages ago!), jobs in clinical psychology, for instance, were very hard to get into. So I guess early on I decided that I wasn't driven enough to go into something that would be so competitive. Besides, I liked the academic environment, so lecturing made sense to me. I like research, I like teaching. It ticks both boxes.

Robert: In your teaching, you take a less traditional approach (Sally pioneered problem-based learning in the psychology programme at Strathclyde). What advice would you give to readers who are thinking of challenging what is commonplace in teaching psychology?

Sally: That's a really good question. You have to be quite sure that what you're doing is going to be useful in some way. You don't challenge current practices just for the sake of it. My advice would be to start slowly. Find out as much as you can and talk to people about it; get others involved to help you out. One of the mistakes that I made was to try to do everything on my own. I thought it would be great if we had more PBL throughout our psychology programme, and so I applied for some internal funding, only having spoken to my head of department and our course leader. When I received the funding (which paid for Gillian Hendry to work as a research assistant before she began her PhD), I soon realised that I should have involved more of my colleagues first, since the project involved introducing PBL elements into their modules. So, we achieved some things but also had to compromise and be more realistic about our goals.

Robert: Were you ever confronted with people who were totally resistant to what you were proposing?

Sally: It was often a case of staff being interested, but just being overwhelmed with demands on their time. Some were unconvinced about PBL, even if they could see that lectures were also problematic. So, yes, a fair bit of resistance. But that is a positive thing: we need to challenge and question things! Academia shouldn't be about the easy options.

Robert: You've had an exciting couple of years, what with relocating from the UK to Sweden. Could you tell us some more about this, and do you have any advice for psychology graduates thinking of moving for a post? What are the pros and cons of teaching psychology in another country?

Sally: It has indeed been exciting! Getting the job at Linköping came about in part because I had already been visiting the department through the Erasmus scheme, to learn more about their use of PBL. I heard that they were looking for a social psychologist, and by then I had already gotten to know Linköping (the university, and the city) a little better. So it wasn't a complete step into the unknown! Moving to a different country is very challenging, because it throws you out of your comfort zone in ways you don't expect. It also depends on whether you need to learn a new language or not. For me, however, the benefits hugely outweigh the costs because you gain so much more in terms of life experiences and perspectives. I also moved with my family, so for me it was always more than just the job.

Moving for a post might not always be an option for people, depending on their personal circumstances. But even if you just move to another university in a nearby city, it means that you're a new person in that department – you can start again. By contrast, if you stay within a department after your PhD, you might have to work that bit harder to establish yourself as an equal member of staff. Suddenly you shift from being a student to a colleague, and that can take a while to adjust.

Robert: Recently, you took on the role of president for the European Society for Psychology Learning and Teaching (ESPLAT). Could you tell us a little about that?

Sally: Sure. ESPLAT is a new society that has grown out of previous endeavours (EuroPLAT, PLAT, LTSN network), all of which were focused around teaching and learning in psychology. So it already has a vibrant history and an enthusiastic group of people involved. Our aims are to advance the learning and teaching of psychology through scientific research, and to provide opportunities through which teachers and researchers in psychology can get in touch with one another across Europe.

Robert: How can psychology postgraduates become involved in this community?

Sally: It's a very good time to be involved because we're open to different ideas and possibilities! Drop me an email (sally.wiggins@liu.se) or leave a message on our website (www.esplat.org). There are different ways to get involved, whether it be through helping to develop the website/online resources or in bringing ideas for effective teaching practices. Psychology is one of those unique disciplines in which our subject areas cover all aspects of learning, memory, cognition, motivation and the social contexts of pedagogy, so there is huge potential for us to develop evidence-based approaches to teaching,

Robert: You recently published a book (Discursive Psychology: Theory, Method and Applications). What would you say are your main career highlights?

Sally: Well, writing the DP book was a real career highlight for me. The whole process - getting the contract, writing it, seeing it published, and then having feedback - has been one of my favourite things so far in my career. The book is a methods book – I’m a bit of a qualitative methods nerd, so I very much enjoyed writing it. My aim for the book was to make something accessible. When you’re a postgraduate or just starting out, there’s a lot of stuff written about being an expert, or that you need to have trained for years to do this properly. And I felt that was very isolating and totally counterproductive, because many students will choose alternative approaches if they think they are easier or more accessible. So I hope the book is a step in that direction.

Another career highlight was, of course, moving to Sweden. It is a privilege to be able to contribute to another society and educational system, and to be made to feel so welcome. But the book and the move abroad are quite unusual or infrequent events. For most of us, most of the time, we need to appreciate the small victories. Getting a journal article or book chapter published is still a thrill. Working with colleagues whom I respect and admire is also amazing. Working with great data, getting positive feedback from students or for a paper or conference presentation; these are the fun things about the job. So for me, a highlight can sometimes be the small points of light that help to keep you motivated and passionate about your work.

Robert: And to finish off, what advice would you give to postgraduates thinking of pursuing a career within social psychology? What are the main challenges here at the moment?

Sally: Social psychology is such an exciting and vibrant area of psychology. We have so many diverse areas of study, and there is huge flexibility and potential for research and career opportunities. One of the challenges is, however, that this diversity means that at the moment there is no defined career path for students who want to become a professional social psychologist, in the same way as there is for clinical or educational psychology, for example. Despite this, there is a growing field of ‘applied’ or interdisciplinary work in social psychology that offers enormous potential for collaboration across disciplines and sectors in society. Just as our societies change, so too can our social psychology thrive and diversify to meet these challenges.

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