

# Q&A

**Essi Viding**, a developmental psychologist at University College London, won the 2010 Wiley Prize in Psychology on 4 May from the British Academy and scientific publisher Wiley-Blackwell.

## What was a pivotal moment in your career?

I was on track to becoming a clinical psychologist, but after getting my undergraduate degree in psychology at University College London (UCL) I stayed on to work as a research assistant with James Blair, an expert in psychopathy, hoping to get the experience necessary to be a clinical psychologist. I watched my mentors make exciting new discoveries, including that children with psychopathic tendencies are unable to process emotion properly. That experience convinced me to focus on research and go on for a PhD.

## What drives your research?

Curiosity and a foolish desire to do science that might matter. Antisocial behaviour touches everybody in society at some level — but particularly victims or perpetrators. I'm hoping that long-term research tracking children's development through time will help with prevention or intervention strategies. Our research seems to strike a chord with people fascinated by what makes children behave in an extreme, antisocial way. Whether the data turn out as predicted or are different in interesting ways, both outcomes keep you on your toes and interested in asking the next question.

## What was one of your best career decisions?

One of the most significant was joining an interdisciplinary PhD programme in social, genetic and developmental psychiatry at King's College London. There, I trained with world-class scientists who have been hugely influential on my career. They had the perfect blend of enthusiasm, curiosity and originality to make them excellent role

models. None of my mentors had teaching responsibilities, so they had all the time in the world to mentor. Because of that, I came out of my PhD with several publications, many in top journals, and got two principal-investigator grants, which helped me to secure a faculty position after just one year of postdoc work.

## Does this award validate research into childhood disorders?

Yes, recognizing our work in developmental psychopathology shows that society views investigation into childhood disorders seriously. Traditionally, the focus has been much more on adult mental health, but understanding childhood disorders offers potential for treatment and prevention, which hopefully will make an impact on public health.

## How important were your mentors?

A good mentor is hugely important to career development. They can help you to think strategically about your career, give you advice on writing papers and grants, and promote opportunities for you. I find that people who have been successful themselves and are passionate more about science than their own glory make good mentors, because they are secure enough in their own standing that they can afford to be 100% supportive of their students.

## What is the best piece of advice that a mentor has given you?

My King's College mentor, Robert Plomin, told me to pick collaborators carefully. "Bad collaborators are

harder to get rid of than bad spouses," he said.



## How have you tackled being both a parent and researcher?

Juggling family life and work is a challenge, but not impossible. The UCL administrators are supportive of staff with young children. I have the flexibility to get work done in my own time. As long as the output is good, I can write by the light of the moon. Also helpful is that I co-run my lab with Eamon McCrory, a clinician and cognitive neuroscientist at UCL.

## What are the benefits of running a lab with someone?

Eamon and I were both junior researchers in Blair's lab, and were appointed at UCL around the same time. We were friends with overlapping research interests, and thought that our work would blend well. We spur each other on and push each other's thinking. We've also found that we write grants and papers effectively together. On a practical level, it's nice to lead a lab together because there are two heads to deal with staff management and logistics. I highly recommend it.

## Where do you see your career in 20 years?

I hope Eamon and I are still running a lab together and have progressed in understanding and classifying the different subtypes of children with antisocial behaviour. And we want to determine how parenting acts as a potential risk factor and interacts with biological risk factors. ■

Interview by Virginia Gewin

# IN BRIEF

## Mentoring for success

The number of students a mentor trains correlates with the protégés' future success, says a report in *Nature* this week (*Nature* 465, 622–626; 2010). Researchers at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, used mentorship data from the Mathematics Genealogy Project to follow students. Metrics such as number of publications improved with the number of protégés mentored, but large pools of students later in a mentor's career led to protégés who themselves had 31% fewer protégés than expected. The authors suggest that mentors, later in their careers, might allot fewer resources to protégés; or students with low mentorship aspirations might court prolific mentors later in those mentors' careers.

## UK tuition rise needed?

The Russell Group of 20 elite research universities in the United Kingdom warns that tuition fees must rise if UK universities are to keep their global reputations and stay competitive. Fees are currently capped at £3,225 (US\$4,632) a year. The group said in a May 2010 report that additional funding from public and private sources does not meet needs. The report does recommend, however, that more public funds be applied to science, technology, engineering and maths courses, to defray their higher costs so that students are not discouraged from enrolling. The Russell Group includes the universities of Oxford and Cambridge among other institutions.

## Biotech tax credit

On 21 May the US government announced a US\$1-billion programme to boost hiring and production at biotechnology companies with fewer than 250 workers. The initiative is part of the Therapeutic Discovery Project Program created by the US health-care legislation signed into law on 23 March. Awards will be tax credits or grants to cover up to 50% of basic research costs, and the US Treasury says that one criterion for earning grants will be the potential to create or sustain jobs. The economic downturn has caused layoffs and project delays throughout the industry, says Alan Eisenberg, of the Washington DC-based Biotechnology Industry Organization. "This infusion of cash will help companies get to the next milestone," he says.