

Shrink Rap Radio #18, December 17, 2005. Two Blokes in an Aussie Pub Discuss Psychology

Frank Smolle interviews John Stevens

(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Dale Hoff)

Introduction: Hello everyone. This is David Van Nuys, aka Dr. Dave, coming to you once again from the beautiful wine country in Sonoma County, California. As you may know by now our show revolves around interesting personalities in and around the world of psychology. Shrink Rap Radio is the podcast that speaks from the psychologist in me to the psychologist in you, whether you be an amateur, student or professional. It's all the psychology you need to know and just enough to make you a little bit dangerous.

Dr. Dave: Imagine that we are in the back room of a steamy pub in Australia. The room is quiet except for the burbling of an air conditioning unit and the murmur of two blokes having a pint. Wait a minute. One of them is Frank Smolle, the former auctioneer turned psychology student at Charles Sturt University. We interviewed him in an earlier show. He seems to be talking to John Stevens, a research assistant in the psychology of deception. Perhaps we can practice a bit of deception ourselves and eavesdrop on their conversation.

[Frank] Smolle: Here we are. We're sitting at the Rafters bar at Charles Sturt Uni and I'm speaking to John Stevens. John, as I understand it, you're originally a qualified chef.

[John] Stevens: That's correct.

Smolle: And how did you get into psychology from being a chef?

Stevens: Well, I think one of the things with psychology is that it's applicable to every facet of life and one thing I quickly discovered whilst being a chef was that it's a very stressful job to do. A lot of chefs tend to have a lot of problems. Then I developed a medical problem which led me to having to stop being a chef. Psychology sort of became a natural field for me to want to go investigate after working with so many strange people so I picked it up.

Smolle: What do you classify as strange with the people working in that area?

Stevens: Well, what was strange was how they had trouble dealing with the pressures of their job. When I say strange behavior, it's not socially acceptable to throw a knife across the room or a pot of boiling water and yet these are commonplace scenes that you see happening in a commercial kitchen. Violent verbal abuse towards apprentices – a very hierarchal system. Yet outside of the kitchen—as soon as I walk out of the kitchen, it switches off. I found that very fascinating. I found it very unusual the way people behave. I'm not heavily researched but a lot of chefs drink, are alcoholics. That's thought to be this is because that's how they deal with the stress in their out-of-work life.

Smolle: It's funny you should say that because I've seen the same sort of thing with auctioneers that have been in the game for more than twenty or thirty odd years. They also have become alcoholics.

Stevens: One of my research areas is deception and how people lie. I find that—and also fear, which sort of ties into that in certain ways.

Smolle: I've seen a program—It was a documentary—about micro emotions. Is that a lot to deal with, micro emotions? I saw that thing with Bill Clinton saying that “I did not have sexual relations with this person” and you could see a micro emotion in the forehead.

Stevens: Well, I think in relation to micro emotions and deception, micro emotions may indicate that someone is trying to deceive you. However, someone trained in deception will have a great level of control over these things. So I think micro emotions are a very effective way of trying to measure deception. A guy trained in an intelligence agency—trained all about these sorts of thing—is more likely to probably score a zero so there are ways around it and there are flaws in it. But for the general population, it's a very useful tool. It's a very useful theory and it's heavily used now. But I feel that there are probably better ways of trying to measure this.

Smolle: That's very interesting. It's sort of a field that I'd like to know more about. Now, on the other side of your life, you've got a quite an interesting hobby. I think it's more of a way of life than a hobby for you. It's with managing and playing war games.

Stevens: Yes. Miniature scale modeling war games. That's a very interesting hobby. It's a very nerdy hobby and a very time-consuming hobby and money-consuming but it's a very fun hobby for me. It's a very good outlet.

Smolle: With your training in psychology, have you seen patterns of behavior emerging in players?

Stevens: Well, yes. I have. I think when a player—well, here's a good example. We have a player at our club who loses and when he loses, he has a tantrum. Now he finds it difficult to separate the reality of the real world with the reality of the game. If a character in his army or his role-playing character dies, he's been known to cry, be very depressed. If he loses a game on a miniature scale war, he'll have a tantrum because he lost. He feels the pain of the loss in his fictional army.

Smolle: It sounds like that type of behavior is very emotionally immature.

Stevens: It is. But one's got to ask the question as to why. Why would someone feel that emotional immaturity during a board game? What arouses these emotions so strongly and so quickly in a person? It's not isolated either. There are several people who don't take kindly to losing at all.

Smolle: I've talked to a friend of mine. He's in Sydney. He was part of a Dungeons and Dragons game and one game that he was in lasted for something like five years, just one game. They developed quite three-dimensional characters and with high-level skills. And there was one character that had the ability of he could transport himself from place to place just with thought.

Stevens: Teleportation.

Smolle: Teleportation, that's it. And this fellow threw the dice to teleport the character to another part of this realm that they're playing in and he transported himself into the middle of a tree. And roll after roll, he constantly failed to correct his mistake from the first roll of the dice. From what I've been told, this person suffered deep depression for two or three months and ended up seeking counseling.

Stevens: Well I think, or rather, it's quite a jovial thing. You've got to look at—these players put an awful lot of time, effort and energy and thought into—whether it be role playing and creating a fictional character or whether it be the war

gaming. With the war gaming aspect, you've got a person who's invested a large amount of money and then an extraordinarily large amount of time painting it, modeling scenery for the army and a board for the war to take place on. It's a lot of work and when it all gets torn to pieces, it's emotionally devastating. And when their little world that they live in, if they don't have other aspects to their life, that becomes their social world—so when they get ripped apart within their social world, they unleash. They're not happy about it, either in a sad and depressing way or, and this is quite often, in a violent way. But this relates back to how psychology relates to all aspects of life, not just, you know, to stuff we research. Every little facet of every little thing we do whether it be shopping, putting fuel in our car, having drinks with friends, psychology always plays a role. And I find it interesting even this little corner of these nerds who play these games, and I'm one of these nerds, suffer from the same psychological rules and boundaries that you would have in any other social situation. Look at a person, they spend a lot of time doing up a car, a racing car, and they race it and they lose. That person's not going to be very happy about losing because of the time, money and effort they've put into developing the car. It's the exact same thing with these nerdy hobbies. The difference being that some people would see these hobbies as immature and it's not socially considered normal to play with little lead figures.

Smolle: Now that you bring it up I can truly see the relevance because I've seen the car races on telly and I watched quite a few car races. And when there is an incident when there're two people involved, one person blames the other person for the accident and the other person blames and it becomes a blaming game and you can see helmets being thrown around and gloves being thrown around and pointing fingers.

Stevens: Well, no one likes to lose. It's very difficult to find a gracious loser in anything. I know that there are people in our little club that are extraordinarily gracious losers. I'm actually one of the people that enjoy losing because I don't lose that often so I find it interesting to find out why I lost. But we have certain players that consistently lose but consistently still put in that time and effort to maintain their hobby. And they're not reaping the benefits of it and it's becoming more and more frustrating for them and then, at some point during their game, they just snap and will throw their dice and have a wally. You know, this particular person that cried when his role-playing character died. Now, you're talking about a

twenty-three year old man here who just could not handle something fictional dying.

Smolle: A character that only exists on paper.

Stevens: On paper and in his mind. He developed some sort of attachment to it which was really—it was quite extraordinary actually. We all laughed about it behind his back and thought it was funny but when you really think about it, in a way it makes sense. You know, this is a person that doesn't have children.

Smolle: It's like telling somebody with a mental illness, "Just get over it." You just can't do that.

Stevens: Someone breaks into your house, you're devastated.

Smolle: You can't tell them just—

Stevens: Yeah, but people go, "Well, what can you do?" You don't want to hear that.

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Smolle: We're talking to John Stevens, student of psychology and philosophy and currently a research assistant. So with your studies of deception that you're currently working on, have you seen anything like that happen in the war games?

Stevens: Well, yes. We have players that do try and cheat and are deceptive, you know. I think in a way because I've been trained in this area, I have a little advantage because I can usually tell when they're lying to me. But what it is interesting to do is watch two players try and lie to each other so one of them can gain an advantage to win because they're that desperate to win, particularly these players who consistently lose. They will go to any means necessary to lie and convincingly lie to do it. And the more practice they get and they do convince themselves that it's true, the better they are at being deceptive. And I've witnessed games where they've probably not even followed one rule in the rule book for the game and just had this completely strange game based on deception upon deception.

Smolle: It's very much like that research that I've read about where they get a participant to come in to partake in an extremely boring task. They have two groups set up so one group is given, say, two dollars to go out and tell the next participant how exciting this research project was and another person they may give twenty dollars to go out and tell the next participant how interesting being a participant in the research is. And the people that were paid the lowest amount were more convincing liars than the people that were paid more.

Stevens: That's interesting because you've got to think, "Why? Why would the people who got paid more be less enthusiastic about it?" Maybe because the people—it's a pretty jovial task to go tell someone something pretty simple.

Smolle: I think it was all about discovering cognitive dissonance and dealing about lying to others within yourself and wearing the emotional consequence within yourself—cognitive dissonance.

Stevens: We're doing a deception study at the moment where we are videotaping people's body language, their eye movements, pupil dilation, those sorts of things and we ask them to tell the truth about a social topic and we ask them to take the opposite opinion to what they personally hold and lie about this social topic. Now these topics are determined by a questionnaire we get them to fill in at the beginning and we pick the one to lie about that they feel very strongly about and we get them to try and take, you know, the opposite opinion. These are things like abortion—girls that have had abortions and express strongly about it—we get them to try and convincingly lie about why there should not be abortions. That's just an example. And it's very interesting to see the difference in between the group that lie first and then tell the truth and the people that tell the truth first and then lie for their two topics. And, we've found consistently that the people that lie first always have trouble gathering up the momentum to tell the truth and they quite often stumble through the truth part of it. Where the other way around, once people have told the truth, the hard part is over, the blood's already pumping ready to do the lie part of it and they'll lie more convincingly yet still very easy to pick up on and more convincingly. That's very interesting.

Smolle: And you've seen the same sort of thing in the role-playing games.

Stevens: That's right.

Smolle: So a lot of the research that you've done so far can be taken to real-world situations where you'd think it wouldn't have worked.

Stevens: Yeah, that's right. We also have to remember that when we do research, it's a very controlled environment and we've got a lot of control over what's going on. So, there's always questions about how applicable it is to the real world. When it comes to deception, I don't think there's a person on the planet that's never tried to deceive another person.

Smolle: I think that's one of the questions in the Myers-Briggs test is, you know, "Have you ever told a lie?" If you put down "no"—

Stevens: —then you're a liar.

Smolle: —then you're a liar. Yeah.

Stevens: Yeah. I think that a lot of people lie differently too. It's interesting to get in a nice rich sample of participants and look at the myriad of ways in which they lie. Like we found at this university, students tend to laugh and smile when they lie where older people tend not to. They tend to touch their face and do things like that. So, those basic rules do apply to what's going on in this club. The younger gamers, you know, eighteen, nineteen, twenty year olds, they'll try and smile and, you know, charmingly lie to you where the older player is very stern and touches their nose.

Smolle: More like a poker player.

Stevens: More like a poker player.

Smolle: That's interesting. The old maxim is that, you know, that lies are the social lubricant of life. When you meet somebody and you know that they dressed terrible and they looked—

Stevens: We need that social lubricant, don't we? Otherwise everyone [unintelligible] but I think if there was no lies and the world would be even worse. You don't get up and tell your wife she's fat and you tell them how wonderful they look even if they look like crap. Well, the fact that they're female that does factor into that but, the point being, that you need that social lubricant. And there are such things as nice lies like telling children that there is a Santa Claus. I think that's a

nice lie. It's going to give them something to dream about and, you know, children need that fictional reality to dream about.

Smolle: So how does the psychological view of lying compare with the philosophical view of lying.

Stevens: I think it's a very grey area of philosophy where some philosophers believe we need that social lubricant and then you've got your other kind of philosophers that, you know, I think Kantian philosophy, that sort of thing, where philosophy is an evil thing. It's one of the social injustices of our world and if everyone told the truth, there'd be no problems. There's arguments for both sides. Psychologically, there's arguments for both sides. I think it's part of human nature, myself. You know? It's a survival mechanism if anything.

Smolle: And we are herd animals by nature. We congregate in groups all the time.

Stevens: We need that whether it be for personal gain, for social lubricant, whatever you want to call it. We need—I personally think that it's inbuilt and that even if we wanted to get rid of it, we couldn't. It's innate within us. You know, everyone is born with the ability to deceive.

Smolle: I'd like to come to a question that's been asked of me by the average Joe on the street is that being a student of psychology, are you able to read people a lot easier than the average Joe?

Stevens: At this university in Australia, our degrees lean very heavily toward doing research and doing psychological research where in other countries, the emphasis is more on clinical stuff. And then you've got a—relating to your question, what's better at trying to read people, a clinical point of view or a research point of view? Unless you research deception, for this example, you're not going to have a clue of what to look for. Clinically, I think people—the training for clinical psychologists is a lot more flexible and I think that would give them an advantage in being able to read people but trained at this university in Australia, I would have to say, “No, I don't think so.” I think it's—actually I'm a shocking liar and I'm only good at picking up lying because I've learned the different methods of detecting it and the only reason I've learned those things is because I work at the university as a research assistant and I've needed to know these things for my job.

Now if I, being a student of this university as well, going through the general degree, I've not learned a single thing about how to read people be it whether they are trying to be deceptive, whether they come across as schizophrenic or whatever the DSM criteria suggests. I don't think we're trained to do anything, per se. We read the DSM and we know the criteria but we don't know how to apply it to the real world. If the DSM says something about like a schizophrenic, then he'll be, I don't know, fidgety or whatever. How do you apply that knowledge? We're not taught how to apply knowledge to the real world.

Smolle: It states in the DSM that a schizophrenic hears voices or hallucinates. Now without stepping into their mind, how are we supposed to know that?

Stevens: How do we empirically test it properly? You can't. You know, people can argue—because I do statistics, statistics is an area—people say, “well, you can give them questions and statistically work it out.” Not really. No.

Smolle: Thank you very much, John, for talking with me today.

Stevens: No problem.

Dr. Dave: Okay, Frank and John. Thanks for letting us eavesdrop on your conversation. I love the opening discussion of crazy kitchen staff. I wonder if John has read *Kitchen Confidential* by Anthony Bourdain, spelled B, O, U, R, D, A, I, N. Actually, Bourdain has written several wonderful behind-the-scenes accounts of his wild adventures as a chef in New York City. He's also starred in a TV series on one of the cooking channels. I recommend him as a good read to all. I was also fascinated by the discussion of war gaming and the extremes to which some players get attached to the outcome of those games. Addiction to fantasy, role-playing and video games might make an excellent topic for further exploration in the series. Listeners might be interested to know that some years ago, wearing my market research hat, I did quite a bit of focus group research for Atari about their early video games as well as for some other game companies such as Electronic Arts. Finally, the discussion of deception brings to mind the work of psychologist Dr. Paul Eckman who is a researcher at the University of California at Berkely, right near here. His fascinating and ground-breaking work on facial micro expressions is profiled in the recent best-selling book by Malcolm Gladwell. That book is called *Blink*. *Blink* is a book that everyone who is remotely interested in

psychology should read. Although Gladwell is not a psychologist—in fact he’s an editor at the New Yorker—he does a wonderful job of synthesizing a lot of very recent psychological research on unconscious processes which allow us to make complicated decisions often with astounding efficacy, as in the blink of an eye, therefore the title, *Blink*.

Okay. It’s time to dip into the mail bag. Last week we brought Dr. David Sowerby back to reply to a question from Michael F. in Urbana, Illinois about the frequency of intuitive experiences. Michael wrote back again in response to our comments last time. Among other things, he asks for the spelling of the pioneering parapsychologist husband and wife team that I mentioned. They are J. B. Rhine and Louisa Rhine and it’s spelled J, period, B, period (stands for Joseph Banks) and Rhine is spelled R, H, I, N, E and Louisa is L, O, U, I, S, A, Rhine. One of the Rhine’s contributions was the use of experiments using something called Zener cards. Zener cards are a deck with five recurring geometrical symbols. If I recall correctly, they are a star, a circle, a square, a wave and a triangle but I’m not sure I remember that exactly right. The Rhines and their students conducted many experiments in which subjects would try to predict the next card over a large number of trials. You’ll find some good leads about their work by doing a google search on J.B. Rhine. In his letter, Michael also recounts a number of unusual, perhaps paranormal, experiences. I will comment on one of them here. Michael writes an individual playing a competitive sport on one occasion performed much better than he had ever done before. In one case, the person was the weakest player on his high school golf team. Once at an important tournament, he felt able to visualize every shot before he took it and scored several strokes better than he had ever done. In another case, the individual was playing in a high school basketball game and was able to visualize every shot and move he was about to take and played the best game of his life. Well, Michael, there has actually been quite a bit of research on the positive effects of visualization in sports performance. I plan to interview a sports psychologist in an upcoming show and I’m sure we’ll hear that this is one of the tools he uses in his work. In this regard, I would especially recommend a book by Michael Murphy titled *Transcendent Experiences in Sports*. The publisher’s description of this book says “combing 6500 sources for stories from professional and amateur athletes, Murphy and co-author Rhea A. White explore extraordinary experiences in sport including moments of illumination and

ecstasy, out of body experiences, altered perceptions of time and space and exceptional feats of strength and endurance.”

Well, all you fine people out there in Podlandia, that's this week's show. Please help spread the word about Shrink Rap Radio. We love hearing from you. Send your emails or mp3 audio comments to Shrink@ShrinkRapRadio.com. You can leave voicemail for us on Skype or Gizmo Project. Our name on both of those is ShrinkPod. You'll find our show notes with links to some of the books I've mentioned at www.ShrinkRapRadio.com. After our closing theme music, you might want to stick around for this week's podsafes music selection, *The Path of Universal Law* by the Australian group *Buddha Nature*. Until next time, this is Dr. Dave reminding you, it's all in your mind.