

Alan Clarke (1922–2011)

Alan Clarke, who has died aged 89, revolutionised the field of learning disabilities. He was a mainstay of British academic and applied psychology, and a major contributor to national policy.

He was also my uncle, making this in part a personal memoir.

My earliest memories of Uncle Alan are of the bachelor lodger at our Herne Hill house. A lifelong family man, he unfailingly took a warm, kindly and pedagogic interest in his nephews. His refrain was 'Learn something new every day'. This commitment to enabling learning found ample expression in his 'open door' policy as Professor at the University of Hull from 1962 to 1984.

Alan grew up in Surrey, his father a London solicitor, his mother the daughter of Alfred MacLeod, pioneering speech therapist. At Lancing College, he was more interested in geology and classical music than mainstream studies.

On demobilisation from the Army in 1946 he succumbed to the characteristically pressing suggestion of his brother-in-law, my late father Monte Shapiro, to read psychology. As a Reading undergraduate, he met his future wife Ann. They progressed to PhDs at the Maudsley in London, and only then became romantically linked. Their involvement in the 1970s 'Burt Affair' was seeded by Burt having tampered with published accounts of their doctoral projects in pursuit of controversy with Hans Eysenck.

In 1951 Alan and Ann took jobs at the Manor Hospital, Epsom, in the then unpromising field of learning disabilities, in whose subsequent transformation their joint work played a leading role, overturning the received wisdom that the 'mentally deficient' could not learn. Repeat IQ-testing frequently revealed improvement over time. Those with the worst social histories, characterised by cruelty and neglect, made the most improvement, indicating recovery from the effects of prior psychological damage. This work was informed by Alan's progressive politics of human potential, gave new hope to patients and their families, and revolutionised service provision. Successive editions of the Clarkes' monumental, research-based textbook *Mental Deficiency: The Changing Outlook* (1958–85) defined the field for three decades. Addressing cognitive development more broadly, they mounted a powerful, evidence-based challenge to the prevailing consensus that the impacts of adverse early experiences are immutable.

Alan's commitment to helping others and making a difference was expressed in countless ways, from welcoming and supporting students, to building up the Hull department, to service with professional, scientific, charitable and policy-forming organisations, for which he was made CBE in 1974. He served the BPS extensively, including as editor of the *British Journal of Psychology* and as President. He was also President of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disability.

He combined intellectual rigour, depth and balance with personal integrity and leadership grounded in a stunning clarity of vision and purpose. He contributed widely to psychology's impacts on such key societal issues as transmitted deprivation, human resilience, and the effects of early experience.

Tributes received by the family testify that he was a generous and whole human being. We are all stronger for having known him. He is survived by Ann, their two sons and two grandchildren.

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