

The Compleat Social Psychologist

A review of



The Scientist and The Humanist: A Festschrift in Honor of Elliot Aronson

by Marti Hope Gonzales, Carol Tavris, and Joshua Aronson (Eds.)

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Reviewed by

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Social psychology was an exciting place to be in the last half of the 20th century, a time when social-psychological theory, experimentation, and application began to achieve genuine synergy and integration. There were many talented contributors to each of these three components of the enterprise, but it was the ubiquitous and exuberant Elliot Aronson who best embodied them all. He is also justly famous for his teaching, his writing, and—as several of the chapters in *The Scientist and The Humanist: A Festschrift in Honor of Elliot Aronson* exemplify—serving as a mentor and source of inspiration for succeeding generations of young psychologists.

In 2007, the Association for Psychological Science gave Aronson the William James Award for Distinguished Lifetime Contributions to Scientific Psychology, and he is the only psychologist in the history of the American Psychological Association to win all three of its highest awards: for scientific contributions, for teaching, and for writing. In short, he is the

complete social psychologist. Accordingly, this Festschrift volume also serves as a wonderful history of the field itself, and it includes several chapters that extend that history up to the present time.

In an early chapter titled “The Ultimate Lewinian,” Thomas Pettigrew identifies Aronson as a second-generation Lewinian. Kurt Lewin had reshaped social psychology with his field theory, his innovative approach to experiments on basic issues, and his emphasis on the importance of applying psychology to real-world problems. When Aronson was a graduate student at Stanford, he was mentored by Leon Festinger, one of the most prominent of the first-generation Lewinians; it was here that Aronson developed his enthusiasm for social-psychological theory and experimentation.

As an early contributor to cognitive dissonance theory, Aronson convincingly demonstrated the importance of the self-concept to the dissonance-reducing process (Aronson, 1968). He is equally well known for his extraordinary inventiveness in fashioning clever, high-impact experiments (e.g., Aronson & Mills, 1959) and rewriting the rules on how to conduct them (Aronson, Ellsworth, Carlsmith, & Gonzales, 1990). Phoebe Ellsworth provides a thoughtful chapter in this book, “The Rise and Fall of the High-Impact Experiment.”

But it was not Festinger who nurtured Aronson’s longstanding concerns with practical applications. These stemmed from other sources, including his own childhood experience with anti-Semitism and the influence of Abraham Maslow at Brandeis, where Aronson was an undergraduate (Aronson, 2010). These early influences led him to contribute to such diverse areas as interpersonal relationships, police interrogation, energy conservation, and race relations—all of which are discussed in Chapters 10 through 13 in *The Scientist and The Humanist*.

Aronson’s most famous applied research, of course, is his *jigsaw classroom*, a set of procedures designed to promote empathy, compassion, achievement, and interracial harmony in school classrooms (Aronson, Blaney, Sikes, Stephan, & Snapp, 1978). As it is described in Chapter 13 by Anthony Greenwald and Chapter 14 by Joshua Aronson (Elliot Aronson’s youngest son, also a social psychologist), the most direct antecedent for this work was Gordon Allport’s (1954) intergroup contact theory.

There is another Lewinian thread to Aronson’s humanitarian interests that does not earn a chapter in the book, however. Lewin himself had responded to racial and religious prejudice by setting up a workshop to try out what is now known as T-groups and sensitivity training. During the counterculture period of encounter groups in the 1960s and 1970s, Aronson and his wife Vera become deeply involved in conducting such groups. As the editors of this Festschrift volume note,

We regret that one central domain of Elliot’s life is not represented in this collection: his work with T-groups . . . when most of his colleagues thought he had gone a bit loony, lost in the touchy-feely world of gurus and goofiness. Elliot loved this phase of his life and has

always claimed that work as a scientist made him a better encounter-group leader, and his work with groups made him a better social psychologist. (p. 8)

The broad impact that Aronson's writing and teaching have had on colleagues, students, and the general public is discussed in Chapters 15, 16, and 17. His delightful textbook, *The Social Animal* (2011)—first published in 1972—has probably recruited more students into social psychology than has any other textbook or popular work.

The book ends with a brief Last Word by Aronson himself, who sighs,

I loved reading these essays . . . But [they] were all written in the past tense. Although that is understandable, it does feel a bit like being present at my own funeral. As proof that I am still here, I wanted to have the last word. (p. 343)

In my view, a much more satisfying last word to this volume is Aronson's own autobiography, published at virtually the same time as the Festschrift: *Not by Chance Alone: My Life as a Social Psychologist* (2010; also reviewed in *PsycCRITIQUES* by Chibnall, 2011). The two books are perfect companions for conveying the warmth, the humanism, and the exuberance of Elliot Aronson.

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