

Champions of Psychological Science: Carol Tavris

February 11, 2011



Carol Tavris

Carol Tavris earned her PhD in social psychology at the University of Michigan. In her career as a writer and lecturer, she has sought to educate the public about the important contributions of psychological science and to explain how pseudoscience can lead us astray at best and, at worst, cause enormous personal and social harm. (She admits this is an uphill battle.) Her latest book, with Elliot Aronson, is *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*, has been translated into 11 languages. Her other best-known books include *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*; *The Mismeasure of Woman: Why Women are Not the Better Sex, the Inferior Sex, or the Opposite Sex*; and, with Carole Wade, two textbooks in introductory psychology. She has written hundreds of articles, essays, and book reviews on topics in psychological science for a wide array of publications; many of these have been recently collected in *Psychobabble* and *Biobunk: Using Psychological Science to Think Critically about Popular Psychology*. She is an APS Fellow and Charter Member and serves on the editorial board of *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*.

APSSC: What led you to choose psychology as a career?

C.T.: There are two separate questions here: “choosing psychology” and “career.” As an undergraduate at Brandeis, I majored in sociology and comparative literature, and took only one psych course — Intro, in which I got a C+. I had always wanted to be a writer, but realized it might be a good idea to have something to write about. For graduate school, I thought sociology would prove more interesting and socially relevant in the long run.

APSSC: How did you go about selecting a graduate program?

C.T.: There were, at the time, two graduate programs in the country that had faculty interested in “the sociology of literature” — one at Berkeley and one at the University of Michigan. These seemed tailor-made for me and my two majors, not that I had the foggiest idea what “the sociology of literature” meant or would include, so I applied to both schools and was accepted. I never heard from the professor

at Berkeley, and the department informed all applicants that they accepted twice as many grad students as would be allowed to remain after the first year — a terror-induction approach to education, I thought. At Michigan, the professor was beside himself with excitement to have a whole student who shared his interest, and the department told its applicants that Michigan believed in creating an environment in which every new grad student would succeed. Which offer to accept? A no-brainer.

Yet during my first term at Michigan I realized I'd made a terrible mistake. This field called "sociology" meant reading pompous tomes written in the most tedious jargon, and I could barely understand a word. My new friends in social psychology were ecstatic about their program, which then was jointly administered by psychology and sociology — and so I shifted into it as soon as I could. I loved it. I'd landed in clover. I'd found the subject I wanted to write about. Though, having had only one undergraduate course in psychology, I felt pretty stupid compared to my classmates.

APSSC: What were the most rewarding aspects of graduate school for you?

C.T.: The camaraderie with fellow students, the support of my wonderful mentors Libby Douvan and Bob Kahn, taking a seminar with Judy Bardwick with the curious title "The Psychology of Women," the broad spectrum of topics and methods — from experiments to surveys — that we learned in the social-psychology program, the hard but gratifying work, and the sheer fun we had. Also my brand-new red Camaro, which I kept for 30 years.

APSSC: How did you go about developing your current psychological interests, and how have they influenced you as a person and a professional?

C.T.: I came of age in social psychology with the rebirth of modern feminism — the "women's movement" that emerged in the early 1970s and took the nation, and its institutions, by storm. Suddenly every topic in psychology was up for reassessment of the male bias that had shaped questions asked, questions avoided, interpretations made. I had taken a year off from Michigan to work at a brand-new magazine called *Psychology Today*, which in those days was the *Scientific American* of psychology, located on the beach in Del Mar, CA. A fellow editor, Carole Wade, and I taught one of the first courses in women's studies at nearby San Diego State, and from that experience we wrote our first textbook — *The Longest War: Sex Differences in Perspective*. My professional interest in gender studies was born, merging with my personal passion for gender equality. My mother, who had gotten a law degree in 1927 at the age of 21, had warned me that the struggle for equality for women would be a long one. She knew whereof she spoke.

Working at *Psychology Today*, where world-class editors whopped my prose into shape and blew the dust of jargon off my articles, shaped my decision not to go into a traditional academic career. When I got my PhD, I went back there as a Senior Editor. When the magazine was later sold and turned into more of a pop-psych venture, I left and found myself in the cold — out of academia, unemployed. I began writing about psychological research for magazines and newspapers; I wrote my first popular book of psychological science that debunked widespread, but wrong, clinical assumptions [*Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*].

And then Carole Wade called me out of the blue and asked if I would like to write an intro-psych textbook with her. Carole had two radical ideas. She wanted us to write a book that would mainstream gender and culture into the Intro course, instead of relegating those subjects into special boxes or sidebars, as was the custom at the time. Carole's second radical idea was to integrate principles of critical and scientific thinking into the writing, so that students would learn how to think the way psychological scientists do. I loved her proposal and signed on to the project. Our book is now in its tenth edition. We wrote two other textbooks along the way, and I wrote several other books for the general public. I woke up one day and realized I was making my living as a writer after all. And that I was writing on subjects I cared passionately about.

APSSC: What suggestions do you have for choosing an area of study within a field as large and diverse as psychology?

C.T.: Follow your heart and interests, as well as your opportunities. If there are lots of jobs in research on the tree sloth, that should not be the only reason you take up sloth studies; you want to really care about the little critters. (They are pretty interesting, actually.) But more than anything, I always advise “taking the professor” and not just the course. A great, inspiring teacher can send you on an exciting path of study you might never have imagined for yourself.

APSSC: Writing and publishing are often anxiety provoking events for graduate students. You have had a lot of experience as a writer and editor; what do you know now about this process that you wish you would have known earlier in your career?

C.T.: Nothing. I learned the crucial lesson at the outset from my PT editors: “The key to good writing is rewriting. And rewriting. And rewriting. And then being open to good editing.” Don’t be word proud — everyone can learn from a good editor; I still am learning. And, as my editor used to shout at us, “Eschew obfuscation!” Yes, even in journal articles.

APSSC: Your textbooks, popular writing, and your handbook of essays and reviews (Psychobabble and Biobunk), encourage critical thought. What’s the best way to promote healthy skepticism in others?

C.T.: I wish I knew. If I did, Alan Kraut would immediately hire me on as Minister of Skepticism in charge of eradicating the weeds of psychobabble from the cultural landscape. It’s hard enough to promote healthy skepticism in ourselves, let alone others. Nonetheless, we can begin by understanding the mental barriers to skepticism and critical thinking: conformity, groupthink, cognitive biases, self-serving biases, and so on. The second step is to identify and practice the mental skills involved in critical and scientific thinking. And the third step for us as scientists, educators, and writers is to convey the message that “healthy skepticism” is not just about debunking people’s favorite beliefs and being a grinch; it’s about replacing outmoded, sometimes self-defeating or dangerously wrong beliefs with better ones to live by. Ultimately, promoting “healthy skepticism” in others means not making them feel foolish or stupid for holding the beliefs they do. Another way of saying that is: don’t put them into a state of dissonance.

APSSC: *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by ME)*, your recent book with Elliot Aronson, shows that dissonance is alive and well in many public spheres, as well as in many research labs! What advice would you give to new researchers to allow them to recognize and avoid their own cognitive dissonance with regard to their work?

C.T.: Do not fear it: It’s a sign that you might be wrong, and don’t fear being wrong. To admit a mistake, to realize your hypothesis is flawed, or to face the fact that you have reached a dead end does not mean you are stupid or incompetent. It just means you were wrong — important information if you are going to do better work and if science is to advance. Psychologists are no different from anyone else in being inclined to cling to ideas that are way past their shelf life. By denying disconfirming (dissonant) evidence, we can preserve our self-esteem and feelings of competence. When you know how dissonance works, though, you recognize its uncomfortable pangs and can override the impulse to suppress, deny, or trivialize information you don’t like. Writing this book with Elliot has sure helped me!

APSSC: Many scientists complain that the media often misrepresent psychological information to the general public. You have extensive experience conveying psychological science to the public through your columns, consulting, editing, and interviews; what have these experiences taught you about how to navigate interactions with the media?

C.T.: The media do often get it wrong. The reporter is usually writing on a deadline, and there is no time to check your quote; often the interviewer knows little or nothing about the topic. But “the media” are as varied as psychologists, and many interviewers are very competent. So know what you are getting into.

Are you being interviewed by a magazine, newspaper, or blogger you trust and respect or by a tabloid that will make you feel guilty in the morning? Will you get a chance to clarify your comments? (With magazines, yes; with everyone else, probably not.) Most of all: know what you want to tell rather than waiting to see if the reporter will ask you about it. Know in advance what your talking points are, and make them clear and succinct; stick to the subject and your findings. Don't encumber your main points with qualifications and doubts and alternative hypotheses, as you might talk to a colleague.

APSSC: What do you see in the future for the field of psychology?

C.T.: Just about everyone in this series has answered that the field is rapidly moving toward the kind of interdisciplinary perspective that appealed to me so much in grad school. People are working across professional boundaries and specialties in order to understand and solve important problems, theoretical and applied.

To this rosy answer, I would add a cautionary concern. Psychological scientists have long been fighting "psychobabble," psychological theories or claims that have no empirical evidence behind them. I think one challenge for the future of psychology, in this era of the biomedical revolution, is to be just as vigilant about "biobunk," theories or claims that sound sciency because someone is waving an fMRI or other kind of brain technology. But you can do bad science with good equipment, and all the fancy equipment in the world cannot substitute for critical thinking and sound scientific methods. I hope that psychological scientists will fight the impulse toward biological reductionism and oversimplification.

APSSC: Is there a question that you wish I had asked? What would your answer have been?

C.T.: "What are the most important lessons that psychological science can teach students and the public?" and I'd answer: "Why it is so important to develop a skeptical sixth sense. Why, in assessing popular claims in these deregulated times, you want to follow the money: who's funding, who's profiting. And why it is imperative to keep questioning received wisdom and notions that 'everyone' takes for granted."

APSSC: Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions and for your myriad contributions to the field of psychology.