

Elliot Aronson: The Intersection of Art and Science

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Art is a word not often associated with psychological science. Psychologists — APS members especially — prefer to characterize themselves as rational and methodical arbiters of psychological inquiry as opposed to virtuosos or artisans whose trade depends on their unique subjectivity.

So the title of APS Fellow and Charter Member Elliot Aronson's William James Award address, "The Art of Doing Science in Social Psychology" was somewhat of a head-scratcher. But just as art is not typically an element of scientific psychology, Aronson is not your typical psychologist. Flanked by his son, Joshua, and his longtime collaborator, APS Fellow and Charter Member Carol Tavris, who interviewed him at the APS 19th Annual Convention, Aronson began to explain how art can and does intersect with science.

Waxing nostalgic about the path that led him to social psychology, Aronson described a Depression-era upbringing marked by extreme anti-Semitism toward his Orthodox Jewish family. On one occasion, after being beat up by local bullies, a nine-year-old Aronson began to reflect on his situation. Nursing a bloody nose and a split lip, he asked himself, "Why do those kids hate Jews so much? If they knew me better, and discovered what a sweet little boy I was, would they hate Jews any less?"

At the time, Aronson was unaware that the incident was a fortuitous precursor to a career in psychology. Being a self-described "Depression baby," he entered Brandeis University as an economics major because, as he later jested, "What's more practical than economics?"

But because a girl he liked was taking it, he chanced upon an introductory psychology class taught by Abraham Maslow. As it happened, Maslow began addressing the same questions of prejudice that Aronson had carried with him since childhood. Ecstatic at the prospect of a science that examined such pressing social concerns, he switched his major to psychology.

After graduating from Brandeis and completing a masters degree at Wesleyan University, Aronson went on to Stanford where he studied with Leon Festinger. Where Maslow had succeeded in imparting the humanistic aspect of psychology to Aronson, Festinger introduced him to the science behind psychology.

Until then, Aronson had never considered himself an experimentalist, but working with Festinger stoked an excitement about constructing experiments and instilled the belief that almost any question could be answered in the laboratory.

That Aronson found mentors in Maslow and Festinger was a harbinger of his versatile career to come. Unfortunately, the two psychologists were less flexible on their divergent views of human behavior, with both vocalizing their disdain for each other to Aronson. Because his father died when he was 17, he looked to these men as father figures and their disagreements created some conflicting emotions or, to be

more Aronsonian, cognitive dissonance.

Whether to relieve his dissonance or not, in his research Aronson began to integrate the humanism of Maslow with the science of Festinger (e.g. see *The Jigsaw Classroom*). He refers to the period that followed as the “golden age of social psychology,” in which the Solomon Asches, Stanley Milgrams, and, well, the Elliot Aronsons of the world were producing research that became the foundations of the field.

For Aronson, this was a prolific era, one in which his seminal book, *The Social Animal*, emerged. Aided by his reader-friendly writing style, Aronson was able to parlay his research career into several other books as well. The latest, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*, published earlier this year, details the complex psychological processes behind self-justification as well as the wide variety of diverse situations to which it can be applied.

The biggest challenge of conducting social psychological experiments, Aronson says, is that participants are themselves amateur social psychologists. They are savvy to the world around them and are particularly sensitive to feeling out what is expected of them by the experimenter.

So, Aronson became an artist of sorts. Rather than simply running through the motions of simulating the environment in which his subjects were studied, Aronson went out of his way to actually *create* an environment that would elicit behavior. He became the playwright, actor, and director in his experiments in order to sell the situation to his subjects. “If, for example, you want the participant to believe that you are nervous, you can’t just say it. You have to sweat, you have to wring your hands,” he explains.

Unfortunately, says Aronson, recent trends in social psychology have all but closed the curtain on the construction of high impact events in the laboratory. With the rise of institutional review boards and increased pressures to publish, psychologists today prefer less impactful, less time-consuming measures like questionnaires over embedding subjects into powerful situations and observing their reactions.

In searching for explanations behind the art of Aronson’s science, it would be easy to point to his difficult childhood or to the divergent tutelage of Maslow and Festinger. Perhaps it’s best not to try to dissect Aronson’s approach to research, however, and instead simply appreciate the *je ne c’est quoi*, the art of psychological science.

The William James Fellow Award is the highest honor bestowed by APS for contributions in basic behavioral research.