

E. David Klonsky

December 16, 2011



University of British Columbia

www.PEBL.org

What does your research focus on?

Over the past several years, my research has focused on understanding and assessing motivations for non-suicidal self-injury and attempted suicide, as well as the role of emotion in psychopathology. Findings from these projects have led me to develop a new line of research on the classification and assessment of emotional experience. For example, how can we best understand, differentiate, and operationalize emotional reactivity and emotion regulation? Are there primary emotions (e.g., sad, glad, mad, and scared) that can be understood and predicted through a parsimonious, evolutionarily grounded theory?

What drew you to this line of research? Why is it exciting to you?

Suicide and self-injury are extraordinarily important behaviors to understand and prevent. There is urgency to get the science right because lives and livelihoods are at stake. The fact that these behaviors can seem quite counterintuitive means there is still much we do not understand about the psychology and physiology of physical and emotional pain. Regarding my interest in emotion, I see people first and foremost as emotional beings. Understanding emotion is key to understanding everything else about people that one might find interesting.

Who were/are your mentors or psychological influences?

Tom Oltmanns and Eric Turkheimer were wonderful graduate mentors; I arrived at graduate school

eager but quite naïve and young, and I graduated on the cusp of developing my own independent program of research. It is amazing how much they taught me in 6 years. I also owe a great deal to Amy Bertelson and Richard Kurtz, who mentored my first independent research while I was an undergraduate at Washington University in St. Louis. Matthew Nock offered me great advice and support as I transitioned from graduate student to assistant professor and built my first research lab. I also feel very lucky and am incredibly grateful to have had such supportive colleagues at Stony Brook University, where I took my first faculty job. Joanne Davila, Dan Klein, Dan O’Leary, Sue O’Leary, and Marv Goldfried, among many others, helped guide me through my stressful and formative first years as an assistant professor. In terms of influences, my philosophy of knowledge is greatly influenced by Richard Feynman and Paul Meehl.

To what do you attribute your success in the science?

I feel I am too new and have accomplished too little to reflect upon my “success.” But to answer the question anyway, without a doubt I owe a great deal to the mentors listed above. In addition, I had superb graduate students at Stony Brook — Catherine (Cassie) Glenn, Anna Weinberg, and Alexis May — who helped me build my first research lab. I can’t overstate their contribution. I also have learned a lot about emotion in psychopathology from collaborations and discussions with Greg Hajcak. As Paul Pilkonis is fond of saying, the Lone Ranger would not make a good academic. No one succeeds alone. I also think my parents instilled in me early on the importance of asking questions. I still own my copy of *Charlie Brown’s Super Book of Questions and Answers*, which they bought for me when I was 6 years old. They inscribed messages inside the front cover about how proud they were of me and the importance of always asking questions. Perhaps this helped set me on a path towards a life of scientific inquiry.

What’s your future research agenda?

One of the wonderful things about academia is that when we think of questions that interest us we are free to pursue them. So in the long term, I look forward to discovering many new and exciting questions to pursue. In the near future, I plan to greatly expand my research on the classification and measurement of emotional experience, and I just received a grant on this topic. I am also expanding my research on suicide, and particularly how and why people transition from suicidal ideation to suicide attempts.

Any advice for even younger psychological scientists? What would you tell someone just now entering graduate school or getting their PhD?

If you love research, and that is what you want to talk about when you’re having beers on a Friday evening, then this is the job for you. The independence is wonderful, the flexibility is wonderful, and it is a fortunate thing to be paid to do something you love. At the same time, there are many stresses and demands that expand well beyond the typical 9-to-5 schedule. So if you don’t love research, this job will make you miserable.

What publication you are most proud of or feel has been most important to your career?

Klonsky, E.D. (2007). The functions of deliberate self-injury: A review of the evidence. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 27, 226-239. It is simply a straightforward review of empirical studies examining

the functions of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). But there is

so much misinformation about NSSI — for instance, that NSSI is a type of suicide attempt, a form of manipulation, a sure sign of borderline personality disorder, a manifestation of early abuse — and I feel the paper has played an important role in separating wheat from chaff, and highlighting for both researchers and clinicians that NSSI is most often a private behavior performed to quickly reduce overwhelming negative emotion.