



# Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century

By Lauren Slater

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**Through ten examples of ingenious experiments by some of psychology's most innovative thinkers, Lauren Slater traces the evolution of the century's most pressing concerns?free will, authoritarianism, conformity, and morality.**

Beginning with B. F. Skinner and the legend of a child raised in a box, Slater takes us from a deep empathy with Stanley Milgram's obedience subjects to a funny and disturbing re-creation of an experiment questioning the validity of psychiatric diagnosis. Previously described only in academic journals and textbooks, these often daring experiments have never before been narrated as stories, chock-full of plot, wit, personality, and theme.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Psychologist Slater's account of 10 of the most influential-and controversial-experimental forays into the mind's inner workings is neither clinical nor dispassionate. Slater (*Lying, a Metaphorical Memoir*) is a relentlessly inquisitive eccentric somewhat in the mold of Janet Malcolm, and her examinations of such (in)famous experiments as Stanley Milgram's "electric shock" obedience studies and Harry Harlow's "wire monkey" attachment researches are defiantly personal, even intimate. Slater takes the often bleak news about the predictability and malleability of human behavior revealed by such theorists as B.F. Skinner deeply to heart, and her book is as much urgent reassessment as historical re-creation. The brilliant chapter on David Rosenhan's experiment, in which volunteers presented vague symptoms at psychiatric facilities and were immediately admitted, proving that the diagnosis of "mental illness" is a largely contextual affair, is the most flamboyant and revealing example of Slater's method. She is not only frank about her own experiences as a patient in psychiatric institutions but-as she does elsewhere-she reproduces the experiment personally. That Slater-after an average office visit of less than a quarter-hour-is prescribed a variety of drugs rather than being locked up does show a change in clinical methodology, but confirms Rosenhan's thesis. This combination of expert scientific and historical context, tough-minded reporting and daringly subjective re-creation serves to illuminate and humanize a sometimes arcane subject. If this leads to occasionally florid prose, and a chapter on "repressed memory" scourge Elizabeth Loftus in which Slater's ambivalence shades toward outright hostility, this is still one of the most informative and readable recent books on psychology. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From The New England Journal of Medicine

Toward the end of the 18th century, Immanuel Kant argued that psychology could never be a science, because the mind, being immaterial, could not be measured. But less than 100 years later, Wilhelm Wundt established the first psychological laboratory to study aspects of sensation and perception, and by the early 1930s, the scope of psychology as a quantitative, experimental science had progressively extended to include "higher" mental processes (feeling and desire as well as cognition), personality, social interaction, development, and psychopathology. Then the boom was lowered. Around the time of World War I, John B. Watson had argued that psychology would never be a science as long as it focused on people's private mental states. In the late 1930s, B.F. Skinner, Watson's spiritual heir, redefined psychology as a science of behavior whose sole method was to trace the functional relations between observable stimuli in the environment and organisms' observable responses to them. In this book, Lauren Slater, a psychologist and popular writer (her previous books include *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* [New York: Random House, 2000]), offers an account of psychology's progress since Skinner. After a chapter on Skinner himself, she considers nine other landmarks in the history of psychology after World War II: Milgram's experiments regarding obedience to authority, Rosenhan's notorious "pseudopatient" study, Darley and Latane's research on bystander intervention, Festinger's analysis of cognitive dissonance in a flying-saucer cult, Harlow's exploration of attachment in monkeys, Alexander's analysis of environmental factors in morphine addiction, Loftus's "lost in the mall" demonstration of false memory, Moniz's invention of psychosurgery, and Kandel's work on the neural basis of learning in the marine snail *Aplysia*. In each chapter, Slater provides a narrative account of the work, lays out its background and sequelae, interviews some of the experimenters and other authorities, and reflects on its wider implications. Slater's book has already aroused controversy. Reports in the New York Times and elsewhere suggest that at points Slater may have taken too many liberties with her material. Skinner's daughter Deborah has objected to Slater's account of her experience in the Air Crib. Several of Slater's interviewees have disputed her quotations from them, and some of the episodes she recounts call for

a certain amount of skepticism on the part of a reader. But *Opening Skinner's Box* is not a scholarly monograph; it is clearly an exercise in creative nonfiction, so perhaps we should give its author some leeway in that respect. More disturbing are what appear to be fundamental misunderstandings of the progress that Slater describes. For example, Slater is surprised to find that the original "Skinner boxes" are not black. But the black box in question is not a piece of laboratory apparatus at all; rather, the term refers to a conception of the behaving organism as a device that collects stimuli and emits responses but whose inner workings, mental or biologic, need not be examined. We do not learn that the postwar hegemony of Skinner's system was actually challenged from within, by investigators who explored the cognitive and biologic constraints on what animals could learn -- findings that indeed opened up Skinner's box and reoriented psychology toward the mind and mental life. Slater's book is engaging, provocative, and even fun to read. But it can be read profitably only by someone who is already familiar with the material it discusses and who is prepared by virtue of this independent knowledge to engage with the author. In the last chapter, Slater laments that she failed to find Deborah Skinner, though it turns out that Deborah is alive and well and living in London. For all her looking, it seems that Slater has failed to find contemporary psychology as well. Experimental psychology is not, as Slater concludes, "all about doing good." And it is not heading "inevitably, ineluctably" toward biology, either. It is all about knowing how our minds work, which includes the biologic but also the social basis of mental life. In this sense, postwar psychology did indeed open up Skinner's box. But a naive reader would not necessarily understand, from this book alone, precisely how that feat was accomplished.

*John F. Kihlstrom, Ph.D.*

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From [Booklist](#)

"What if?" Perhaps no two words have had a greater capacity for motivating explorers and experimenters to delve into the unknown. When posed by some of the twentieth century's most famous psychologists, this tiny question has yielded tremendous results. From B. F. Skinner's notorious study of behaviorism to Alexander's controversial analysis of addiction, 10 of psychology's most audacious experiments are revisited in Slater's fascinating investigation. The study of human nature, psychology is paradoxically reported in dispassionate terms, its cold objectivity exacting great personal costs. Slater, a psychologist who has written extensively about her own treatments for mental illness--most memorably in *Prozac Diary* (1998)--wanted to change all that, to reconnect with the patients and physicians who contributed so significantly to our understanding of human behavior. Passionately and poetically, she humanizes the calculating inspiration and inhumane consequences such experimentation conferred. At times facile, even glib, Slater is nonetheless grounded in her research and conclusions and does succeed in bringing a refreshingly honest, and human, perspective to an all-too-often detached clinical science. *Carol Haggas*

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