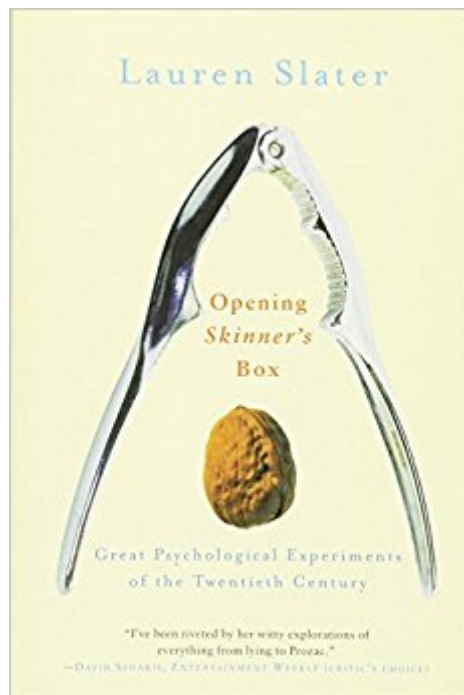




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# Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments Of The Twentieth Century



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

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. Copyright © 2004 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Lauren Slater (born 1963) is an American psychologist and writer, who has written books such as *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*, *Prozac Diary*, *The \$60,000 Dog: My Life with Animals*, etc. She wrote in the Introduction to this 2004 book, "When I studied psychology in graduate school... [I] read the classic psychological experiments where they had been housed---in academic journals, mostly, replete with quantified data and black-bar graphs---and it seemed somewhat sad to me... that these insightful and dramatic stories were reduced to the flatness that characterizes most scientific reports, and had therefore utterly failed to capture what only real narrative can---theme, desire, plot,

history... The experiments described in this book... deserve to be not only reported on as research, but also celebrated as story, which is what I have tried here to do... My hope is that some of these experiments will be more fully taken in by readers now that they have been translated into narrative form." (Pg. 2-3) She notes that B.F. Skinner "was passionate about being passionless; he started to speak of his own life solely in terms of its 'reinforcers.' To his wife, he wouldn't say, 'I love you.' He would say, 'Thank you for positively reinforcing me today.'" (Pg. 14) Of Stanley Milgram's famous experiment<sup>Â</sup> ], she says, "if Milgram had created a situation so all embracing and solidly persuasive, then he would have achieved one hundred percent obedience. But he achieved sixty-five percent, which means that thirty five percent defied the experimenter and the situation. Why? WHY? This is a question no social psychologist can answer. It is at this critical juncture that social psychology breaks down. It can tell you about aggregate behavior, but it can tell you nothing about the naysayers." (Pg. 47) Discussing the famous 'Lost in the Mall' experiment of Elizabeth Loftus<sup>Â</sup> ,The Myth of Repressed Memory], she quotes psychiatrist Judith Herman, who said, "'It's a cute experiment that tells us exactly the opposite of what Loftus thinks she's telling us. Loftus thinks she's telling us that peoples' memories can't be relied upon, but look at her data. Seventy-five percent of her subjects did not confabulate. They were reliable.' ... Loftus knows her reputation in some circles. It doesn't seem to bother her... When I ask her about Herman's comment... and the implication that, therefore, most survivors are telling the truth, she snorts, 'I think twenty-five percent is a VERY significant minority... Furthermore, Lost in the Mall became a springboard for other false memory experiments that got as much as a fifty percent or even higher confabulation rate.'" (Pg. 188-189) She points out, "Prozac... is a drug hailed for its supposed specificity... The truth of the matter is, though, that no one really knows where or how Prozac operates in the brain; no one understands its mechanisms... like lobotomy, no one knows quite Prozac cures... When doctors prescribe a Prozac pill, they are acting ... blindly but in great faith, with a real desire to heal, and with at least as much wish as fact." (Pg. 237-238) Although one can disagree with some of Slater's characterizations and quotations, this is nevertheless a very lively and engaging book, that will interest nearly anyone interested in psychological research.

a very good read. It was assignment for class but I actually enjoyed it. It will really make you think. don't want to give anything away I really recommend it.

Should be required reading for all SW, psych, nursing or med students- as well as anyone whose doctor has recommended psychotropic medication; a cautionary tale.

The author has a unique way of tying history together in a way that seems like fiction. Very well written and interesting.

Fantastic book. A new favorite.

The book did have writing marks as listed, but I got it at an affordable price for class.

Bought the book used and it came in a great condition and it was cheap. Love it

was helpful for class.

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