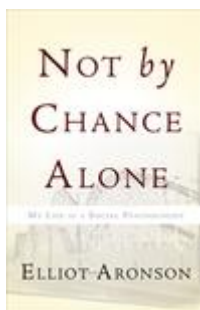


## Elliot Aronson and the Life of Becoming

A review of



**Not by Chance Alone: My Life as a Social Psychologist**

by Elliot Aronson

New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010. 284 pp. ISBN 978-0-465-01833-8.

\$27.50



---

Reviewed by

[John T. Chibnall](#)

This book is best considered as a gift to psychology. At nearly 80 years of age, Elliot Aronson has graciously published his autobiography. This means that, not only are we given the opportunity to appreciate Aronson's life journey, but we also receive yet another opportunity to learn from him. One example will demonstrate this prevailing feature of *Not by Chance Alone: My Life as a Social Psychologist*.

Since the book is written chronologically, Aronson does not have the opportunity to mention *The Social Animal* (Aronson & Aronson, 2007) until near the end of Chapter 8. Characteristically, for this autobiography is exceedingly modest in relation to the towering achievements of its author, Aronson devotes little more than a page to it. He does, however, note that the most gratifying result of *The Social Animal* has been the correspondence from psychologists who divulge that it was this book that decided their career choice. Well, I must admit that I have been telling my friends and colleagues that very story about myself for

nearly 30 years now! Certainly, it was not by chance alone that Aronson's books, teaching, writing, and research have influenced generations of psychologists in the pursuit of truth, knowledge, and justice.

As the foundation for his life story, Aronson makes clear his belief that every life progresses on its course through interactions of luck, opportunity, talent, and intuition. More important, these interactions played themselves out in Aronson's own life beneath an overarching philosophy of "becoming": in other words, that "human personalities and abilities are not carved in stone" (p. xiii), that bad luck does not change the fact that all people can grow and improve, and that a fundamental belief in the "power of change and self-improvement" (p. xiv) allows all of us to transcend the tired rationalization of "that's just the way things are." It is this approach that Aronson reveals to be the dominant theme of his life and the message he wishes to convey to every person who has ever looked to him as "teacher."

Aronson's descriptions of his formative years growing up in Revere, Massachusetts, are fascinating and enlightening with respect to the directions taken in his life. The facts that Aronson was poor, Jewish, shy, intellectually impoverished, and raised during the height of the Great Depression by beleaguered parents are discussed with poignancy, feeling, and humor, and without a trace of self-pity. The influence of these circumstances on his thinking began early, and he describes the first rumblings of his destiny in the context of sitting on a curb as a young boy having just endured yet another anti-Semitic drubbing and wondering about the origins of such ethnic hatred and, more important, how it might be changed.

Later, as a teenager, Aronson worked on the Revere Beach boardwalk, where his experiences with "boardwalk morality" provided early exposure to the relativism of human behavior (when is it "stealing" and when is it "making things even?"), the falsity of labeling people (who are the "villains," the "phonies"?), and the realization that human beings were infinitely more complex than he wanted them to be. Perhaps most dramatically, Aronson's first personal accomplishment, discovering that he was an excellent boardwalk "mike man" (a lucrative post traditionally reserved only for adult men, and charming schmoozers at that), was a pivotal moment in his appreciation for "becoming" and the power of social context to influence such transformations.

Aronson's description of his early college education is "learning to love to learn" (p. 47). In addition to divulging some of the incredible realities of his early education (like sleeping in cars and eating from friends' plates in the campus cafeteria), he conveys with all the joy and dismay of youthful discovery his initiation into the world of ideology, the distortion of reality for political ends, and the "monumental importance" (p. 50) of protecting civil liberties. Thankfully for the future of psychology, Aronson describes the singular chance of attending Abraham Maslow's introductory psychology class (he had been having coffee with "an attractive young woman" and went along only in the hopes of using the crowded lecture hall as a screen for an attempt at some hand holding!; p. 53) for a lecture on racial/ethnic prejudice. His major changed overnight from economics to psychology. It is

clear that Aronson's subsequent association with Maslow was instrumental in developing his belief in the power of psychology for transformation and transcendence, a "third force" (beyond behaviorism and psychoanalysis) that tries to understand and influence human motivation, social behavior, and the capacity for positive change.

Later, Aronson describes his association with a wonderful cast of influential characters (including his wife Vera) in graduate school at Wesleyan and Stanford. At Wesleyan, he worked with David McClelland, with whom he created the first nonverbal measure of achievement motivation, a construct that remains important to this day. He was exposed to Aron Gurwitsch, who taught him critical thinking and an appreciation for the scientific method, not to mention the power and satisfaction of mentoring. At Stanford, despite early misgivings that could have easily led him elsewhere, he worked with Leon Festinger, the originator of the theory of cognitive dissonance. The study of "social influence" (p. 108) would never be the same.

Aronson's early work in cognitive dissonance not only crystallized his nascent appreciation for the study of human social behavior, but it also produced some of the most enduring research in social psychology. My cursory glance at the published literature in social psychology revealed three 2010 papers on cognitive dissonance that cited Aronson's 1959 "initiation" research (Aronson & Mills, 1959), and two of these papers were in the discipline's premier journal, the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

From his early successes at Stanford, Aronson describes how he honed his experimental technique for studying social behavior in the laboratory without sacrificing scientific rigor or realism. From that point on, he tells us, "something ignited in my soul" (p. 117), and it is this passion and dedication that will make the example of *Not by Chance Alone* so promising to budding psychologists and to those who teach them.

Aronson also provides a whirlwind tour through his most productive years as a professor. Beginning at Harvard in the Social Relations Department (where he had his first exposure to the "self-importance" and "puffery" that can dominate in academia; p. 124), Aronson discovered the self-concept principle of cognitive dissonance, thereby transforming the theory of cognitive dissonance away from *attitudes* and toward the *self*, and leading to several landmark studies, including the classic "forbidden-toy" experiment (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1963).

The Harvard experience was notable for several additional professional and personal moments. On the professional side, his discussions with his colleague Gordon Allport were significant in sharpening his methodological approach to the study of social behavior; he met Stanley Milgram, who was just then embarking on his famous "obedience to authority" research; and he met Timothy Leary, whose "unique" approach to solving society's ills Aronson wisely eschewed.

On the personal side, it was during this time that Aronson lost his beloved brother Jason to cancer, at a time when Aronson's son Joshua was about to be born. This story is told with all the poignancy of a devoted younger brother. In his own words, from a recurring

dream, Aronson tells us that he was now “on a fast train,” “alone,” but securely waving to his brother, his guide, his mentor, remaining behind “forever at the station” (p. 165).

In his faculty positions at the University of Minnesota and the University of Texas, Aronson’s achievements were notable for his work in attraction, including the famous “pratfall” experiment (Aronson, Willerman, & Floyd, 1966), which culminated in the gain–loss theory of attraction; and his conceptual work on the methodology of social psychology, including his differentiation between “mundane” and “experimental” realism (p. 190), a distinction that continues to guide experimental social psychology to this day. Texas was also an activist awakening, during the tumultuous period of 1965–1974, where Aronson was involved in bringing reason to antiwar demonstrations and justice to equal housing law.

His “simple field experiment” (p. 199) regarding the latter, which remains a classic, involved sending minority and Caucasian students out into the streets of Austin to rent apartments, the conclusive results of which we are all too familiar with. His success with the Jigsaw Classroom is explained in detail, including the ability of this instructional approach to reduce stereotyping, improve learning, enhance empathy for outgroup members, and reduce dysfunctional classroom behavior (e.g., Lucker, Rosenfield, Sikes, & Aronson, 1976).

Sadly, Aronson also chronicles the rejection of the Jigsaw Classroom by the mainstream American educational system, a victim of the very political ideologies that he sought to countervail. There is also a discussion of Aronson’s involvement in T-groups (sensitivity training or “encounter” groups) and the exploration of social judgment processes as a source of “awakening” regarding interpersonal problem solving and communication of feelings. It was, after all, the Age of Aquarius; more seriously, however, Aronson’s descriptions of how T-groups made him a better father, husband, colleague, and teacher are heartfelt glimpses into his own process of becoming.

On his final stop as a full-time academician at the University of California at Santa Cruz, Aronson describes how he continued his applied research, focusing on energy conservation behavior and sexual behavior at the dawning of the AIDS crisis. Both areas of research were based in cognitive dissonance theory and culminated in the invention of the “hypocrisy paradigm” (e.g., Aronson, Fried, & Stone, 1991). This paradigm relies on using peoples’ self concepts (“I am a person of integrity”) against them in an effort to induce behavior that is consistent with a stated position, thereby reducing the hypocrisy inherent in not practicing what one preaches.

It was also in California where Aronson faced two of the most disturbing events of his career, and if there are sections in this most satisfying book that a reader may find irritating, these are the ones. The first involved his struggle with being branded a racist for his support of a controversial talk on race and IQ, a position he adopted not out of agreement with the speaker but out of his unfailing support for civil liberties. The other is a too-lengthy discussion of his encounter with gender politics at the university level regarding sexual harassment.

These experiences, late in his career, were unfortunately only too reinforcing of an idea that motivated Aronson's work from the beginning: "People who do crazy things are not necessarily crazy" (p. 209), and that this applies to human social behavior generally, irrespective of ideology. It is perhaps unfortunate that the book nearly concludes with these events. On the other hand, and ironically, what better examples could be used to illustrate the importance of the continued study and application of the psychology of social behavior?

Predictably, the winds of change blew for Aronson, as they must for all of us, and the final segments of the autobiography describe his transformation into a period of wisdom, of synthesizing the many fruits of his work in the social psychology trenches and sharing this inspiring life's work with the next generations. This was done, incidentally, while he was becoming blind. Characteristically, Aronson has turned his blindness on itself and has used it not as a source of self-pity but to focus that much more on the things that he can do, despite his blindness. We can all hope that, in the twilight of our lives and careers, we can answer the question "What was your favorite part?" as Aronson has: "Right now" (p. 261).

In the end, all that can be said after reading *Not by Chance Alone* is, "Thank you." This book celebrates the life and achievements of one of the foremost psychologists of our time, and it does so in a humble, moving, and enlightening way. It surveys some of the most dramatic and important discoveries in the history of social psychology and describes the passion that is at the heart of the social sciences, the passion that is embodied in Aronson's melding of his personal and professional drives to use psychology to improve human society and the "process of becoming" in individual lives.

How many of us owe our careers in psychology to the influence of Aronson? How many will do so in the future? The actual number is irrelevant, because simply asking the questions proves that his influence is incalculable. Throughout it all, his warmth, generosity of spirit, humility, and dedication to others are at least equal accomplishments: not by chance alone, to be sure.

---

## References

- Aronson, E., & Aronson, J. (2007). *The social animal* (10th ed.). New York, NY: Worth Publishers.
- Aronson, E., & Carlsmith, J. M. (1963). Effect of the severity of threat on the devaluation of forbidden behavior. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *66*, 584–588.

doi:10.1037/h0039901

PsycINFO

Article

Aronson, E., Fried, C., & Stone, J. (1991). Overcoming denial and increasing the intention to use condoms through the induction of hypocrisy. *American Journal of Public Health*, 81, 1636–1638. doi:10.2105/AJPH.81.12.1636 [PsycINFO](#) [Article](#)

Aronson, E., & Mills, J. (1959). The effect of severity of initiation on liking for a group. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 59, 177–181. doi:10.1037/h0047195 [PsycINFO](#) [Article](#)

Aronson, E., Willerman, B., & Floyd, J. (1966). The effect of a pratfall on increasing interpersonal attractiveness. *Psychonomic Science*, 4, 227–228. [PsycINFO](#)

Lucker, G. W., Rosenfield, D., Sikes, J., & Aronson, E. (1976). Performance in the interdependent classroom: A field study. *American Educational Research Journal*, 13, 115–123. [PsycINFO](#) [Article](#)

---