



No One Wins and Everyone Loses: Power Struggles in Shaping Behavioral Genetics

A Review of

Misbehaving Science: Controversy and the Development of Behavioral Genetics

by Aaron Panofsky

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 321 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-05831-3 (hardcover); ISBN 978-0-226-05845-0 (paperback); ISBN 978-0-226-05859-7 (e-Book). \$85.00, hardcover; \$27.50, paperback

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0039393>

Reviewed by

Erin E. Young 

Are we “who we are” because of our genes or are human beings something greater than the sum of our biological parts? Are we merely victims of our genetic makeup? What does this mean about free will, choice, and personal responsibility? These are the types of questions that behavioral genetics seeks to answer. In *Misbehaving Science*, we get a glimpse into the dramatic emergence and tumultuous development of a field where the scientific findings are often overshadowed by the possible implications for human nature.

The study of behavioral genetics was founded on the supposition that individual traits (physical, mental, and psychological) could be explained by innate factors outside the boundaries of our conscious awareness. For some, the idea that “we” represent the sum total of our inherited biology is reassuring, while for others, the idea seems to reduce the human condition to a living version of binary code with little place for a discussion of environment, choice, or personal responsibility. As such, the field has experienced its share of controversies from the proposed underpinnings of intellect to the inherited propensity for violent crime. While the players and issues of contention have evolved over time, the field seems to be defined by a lack of agreement and, as Panofsky portrays from the first chapter, sometimes looks more like the Wild West than a group of ivory tower-dwelling academics.

This book is intended for a broad audience including students and faculty in any of the varied subfields, which Panofsky terms the *archipelagos*, that make up behavioral genetics. Anyone with an interest in the intersection of science and society, from political science to public policy, will be hooked from the first chapter. It is full of the kind of scientific evidence-based reasoning that academics long for, but it also doesn’t cut the scientists any slack. The

book is not a book about “genetics” or “genomics” per se but rather tells the story of what happens when a field of science fails to conform to social norms. Psychologists, in particular, will appreciate the illustration of social, emotional, and cognitive processes at work in this evolving field.

In the introduction, the field of behavioral genetics is described as failing to follow the expected path of conflict resolution where a controversy emerges and then a scientific consensus is eventually reached and everyone takes a deep breath before moving on to the next big discovery. Instead, controversies or scientific disagreements are never completely reduced to ashes and continue to flare up. As a person in this field, at various times the book made me squirm in my seat, roll my eyes in exasperation, and question how my contributions will be viewed in the future context of the field.

In the 1960s, behavioral geneticists had a public relations problem. After World War II, they needed to differentiate themselves as a scientific field from the eugenics, racism, and genetic fatalism that had become a part of postwar consciousness (Alper & Beckwith, 1993). Animal researchers perpetuated interest in their scientific endeavors by highlighting application to human behavior while offering scientific legitimacy to their human research counterparts in return. However, the specter of eugenics was difficult to shake. As a group, they seemed to agree that the pursuit of scientific discovery in their field depended on avoiding the political controversies of the time. In this situation, the field functioned as a predictable scientific unit by resolving internal conflict and presenting a united front. Readers of *Misbehaving Science* need not worry, as with any good soap opera or melodrama, this peaceful agreement is relatively short-lived. The same scenario plays out over and over, with an academic finding that catches the public interest leading to the appropriation of the findings to serve political purpose and then followed by an entire field of scientists attempting to manage the fallout. While the proactive approach taken in the middle of the 20th century helped to establish the field as legitimate science, this reactive approach results in fracturing within the field.

There are always going to be “camps” or “schools of thought” within any given field of science. Panofsky uses an extreme example of a field in which resolution and consensus within the group are not accepted as a necessity. He depends heavily on Bourdieu’s theory that ongoing conflict is inevitable, even vital, to establishing authority, which in this case translates to the scientific equivalent of “street cred” (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007). Further, Panofsky suggests that when the normal process of controversy-to-resolution is not eventually followed by consensus, a scientific field can become fractured. The social and politically charged nature of the findings within behavioral genetics widens the divide between scientific “camps” and makes the conflicts even more contentious. In *Misbehaving Science*, the focus on historical dysfunction within the field and the cast of players acting as agents of misbehavior makes for an undeniably compelling read.

References

- Alper, J. S., & Beckwith, J. (1993). Genetic fatalism and social policy: The implications of behavior genetics research. *The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, 66, 511–524.
- Sallaz, J. J., & Zavisca, J. (2007). Bourdieu in American sociology, 1980–2004. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33, 21–41. [PsycINFO →](#)