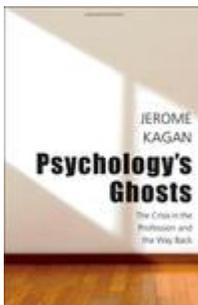


Psychology Reconstructed

A review of



Psychology's Ghosts: The Crisis in the Profession and the Way Back

by Jerome Kagan

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012. 392 pp. ISBN

978-0-300-17868-5. \$32.00



Reviewed by

[Robert G. Frank](#)

Only Jerome Kagan can introduce the topic of his book by comparing it to the domains of ancient Gaul:

The territory in the south is peopled with scientists trying to discover the events in the brain and body that are believed to be the foundations of psychological processes that emerge from a cascade of events that necessarily incorporate events in the environment. At the northern end are sociologists, economists, political scientists, and cultural anthropologists studying the phenomena produced by groups of individuals. The valley between contains psychologists who measure the properties of single agents nurturing the hope of providing bridges between their neighbors and themselves. (p. ix)

In *Psychology's Ghosts: The Crisis in the Profession and the Way Back*, Kagan argues that psychology evolved from a discipline that in its earliest stages emulated physics, studying the nature of perception and emotion, as well as experiences outside the brain. Now, 140ish years later, psychology focuses on questionnaires to examine mental states. Kagan criticizes this approach for several reasons. First, he believes that people are tempted to conceal negative traits. Second, most people lack adequate language to describe mental states. Last, he believes that findings from samples of Midwestern college students are too narrow to broadly generalize to other populations outside the United States such as Black 50-year-olds in South Africa or young Asians.

Kagan attacks attachment theory, a bedrock premise of American psychology derived in part from Freudian writings and the work of British analyst John Bowlby. Writing in the 1960s, Bowlby asserted that the quality of the maternal–infant experience in the first year of life had a continuous influence upon the child’s future development. Bowlby observed children reared in virtual isolation in orphanages in Eastern Europe to arrive at these conclusions. Kagan, in his typical scholarly approach, chastises Bowlby, saying, “Had Bowlby read more deeply in history he would have realized his exaggerated concern with the relation between the mother’s behavior and the infant’s future personality did not emerge in Europe until the eighteenth century” (p. 299).

Kagan cites studies of Israeli children raised for long periods of time in kibbutzes who were not subjected to isolation during childhood. These family-reared children displayed high levels of adaption and intelligence. Kagan also notes that thousands of young Chinese have survived being uprooted from their families and relocated to day care centers. These centers tended to be very sparse, often cold, with few, if any toys. Indeed, most would be classified as “moderately depriving.” Kagan notes:

There is no evidence, however, that this regimen produced large numbers of intellectually retarded adults, criminals, or mental patients. Many of the young Chinese who stood bravely against the government tanks in the 1989 Tiananmen Square had spent infant and early childhood years in one of these centers. (p. 301)

Kagan’s patience with his colleagues appears to be thin at the moment. After reviewing a number of studies demonstrating his point that early experience is a very weak predictor of adult adjustment, he returns to one of his dominant points, that social class is a significant predictor of future personality in the following manner:

By contrast the class in which a child is reared has a profound and well documented effect on future personality. These facts prompt the following hypothetical query. Suppose that one group of psychologists knew only the class of rearing of five thousand randomly selected thirty-year-olds and a second group of experts knew only their security of attachment and the affectionate sensitivity of their parents during the first two years of

childhood. The evidence suggests that the experts who only knew the child's social class would be far more accurate in their predictions of which thirty-year-olds were depressed, socially anxious, obese, incarcerated for a crime, addicted to alcohol, or an illicit drug, or dissatisfied with their job or marriage. Yet a sizeable number of talented psychologists continue to insist that the security or insecurity of an infant's attachment, based on the parent's behavior, extends indefinitely. *Pretty ideas do not die easily*. (pp. 306–307, emphasis added)

Kagan is concerned with the lack of specificity in psychological measures. His first chapter challenges the manner in which psychologists define what they measure. He notes that psychologists often vary between measuring behavioral and physiological reactions to situations. Biologists, he notes (choosing only one aspect of the discipline), study stable features such as genes, proteins, and other molecules. In contrast, psychologists

are not even close to an accord on the biological and psychological processes that are the foundations of the phenomena they wish to understand. These include aggressive actions, emotions, consciousness, regulation, morality, stress, and reward. None of these concepts specifies the setting in which the defining information was observed or the procedure that produced the evidence. Therefore, they both imply a generality across contexts and procedures that does not always occur and generate disagreements about the defining properties of these and other popular concepts. (pp. 5–6)

Kagan demonstrates that problems in psychological measurement reflect the discipline's lack of a theory to address context. He rightly notes that measurements change as a function of context. For example, he states that the concept of *self* has three meanings, depending on measurement. For neuropsychologists, it is measured by brain activity. For those who prefer William James's approach, it is traits and social categories. For behaviorists, it is observed behaviors (see p. 18). Clearly, each approach yields a different description of self.

Kagan does not stop with theoretical issues. He also provides numerous empirical examples of how context modifies behavior. Moreover, he notes that two thirds of the articles published 2003–2007 in six leading American psychological journals reflected research conducted in English by Americans, most of them reporting studies in which American college students between the ages of 18 and 25 were the subjects. Most studies had fewer than 50 subjects drawn from European, African American, or Hispanic pedigree. These small samples had little generalizability to Asia or other parts of the world that represent the major population centers.

Kagan argues that human behavior and biological reactions occur in a context that is preceded by another event, expected or unexpected. He describes in substantial detail a number of studies demonstrating the correlation between a person's social class and IQ and

cognitive skills, and the inverse relationship between social class and a person's feelings of conflict, anxiety, envy, fatalism, and depression. Kagan scorns attempts to correct for social class through analysis of covariance. He quotes the mathematical statistician John Tukey: "Never bend the question to fit the most popular statistical techniques . . . too many psychologists who use the results of covariance analyses to make causal inferences ignore this warning" (p. 45).

As in his opening chapter, in his closing chapter, titled "Promising Reforms," Kagan provides an impressive tour of history, philosophy, and psychology. He mentions, among others, John Locke, Adam Smith, Mao Zedong, the oracle of Delphi, the psychologist John Garcia, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Plato, Johannes Brahms, John Maynard Keynes, and Francis Wayland, the 18th-century Baptist minister and president of Brown University. The book is worth reading just to see how he can work all these figures into one chapter!

This chapter is truly a measure of his genius and provides a journey through Kagan's integrative vision. It is here that he provides a glimpse of where psychology could go. He rightly recognizes that the path of psychology should not be conducted through an ever-narrowing analysis covariance. Kagan is inherently suspicious of superficial measures or statistical techniques. His prescription for psychology is for a discipline that is more systematic, more integrated, and much more theoretical.

Kagan applauds psychologists who have made major theoretical contributions that have received minimal attention. John Garcia (Garcia & Koelling, 1966) first described one of the most important but underappreciated contributions to the scientific literature in the 20th century, which has come to be known as *bait shyness*. This remarkable single-session classical conditioning paradigm has proven fundamental to evolutionary psychology. In contrast to many other psychologists, Garcia did not publish variants of his findings. Indeed, his published works are relatively meager, though he was voted into the National Academy of Science.

Kagan's book is not an easy read: It is an intellectual tour de force, a march of sorts, across the sea of psychology, history, and his own past. He often treats biology as a golden discipline, ignoring the behavioral aspects of biology that struggle with many of the same messy issues as does psychology. His powerful chapter "Missing Contexts" should convince senior psychologists as well as new graduate students that our approach to the science of psychology is seriously limited by our focus on the static individual instead of a more dynamic focus on the individual in a context of functionality.

Such differences are also found in mental health diagnoses. Kagan gives a great example by way of a vignette describing uneducated women in Costa Rica who become prostitutes in order to contribute to their family income. Because this is culturally acceptable in Costa Rica, they avoid bouts of shame or guilt, whereas prostitution is viewed as a serious crime in the United States. This is far different from the paradigm used in the United States, where disease is leached into all behaviors.

Kagan has written a provocative and challenging book. One of the more intriguing aspects of *Psychology's Ghosts* is that it does provide a template for students and the profession to carefully consider whether our science matches our clinical practice. This consideration, in turn, provides a moment to determine whether we as psychologists feel a moral obligation to match science to practice for those we so zealously purport to serve.

Reference

Garcia, J., & Koelling, R. (1966). Relation of cue to consequence in avoidance learning.

Psychonomic Science, 4, 123–124.

PsycINFO