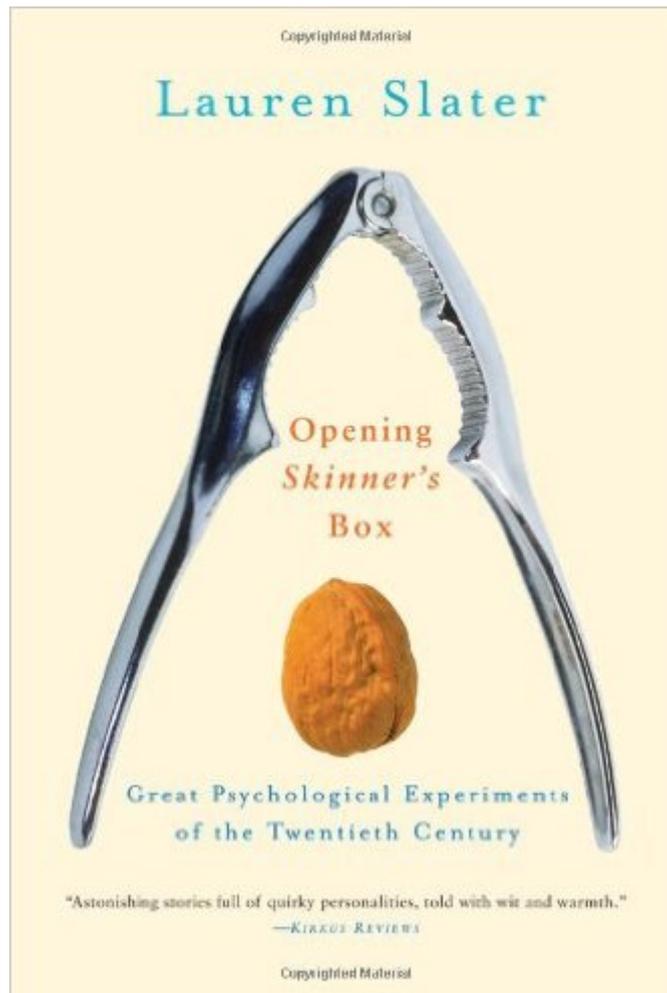


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Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments Of The Twentieth Century



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.

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Customer Reviews

This type of book needed to be done, but this foray into the "real" people and ideas behind the most influential psychological experiments is entirely disappointing. I am a professor who teaches psychology and hoped to gain insight for my classes. Instead, I found a disturbing account by a author who couldn't get past her own self-absorption. It may have been entertaining to read a subjective account of an author's experiences with these famed individuals, if Slater's own troubled personality hadn't been so evident. Anyone going through a psychology program has been taught about the history of psychology, which includes an evaluation of different approaches, such as behaviorism, and also includes the ethical issues of earlier experiments like Milgram's. We also know that prominent psychologists are very "human" and often very flawed individuals. However, Slater's portrayals of the people she interviewed for this book are unsympathetic to the point of being cruel. For example, Skinner's aging and mourning daughter is "a little too passionate about

dear old dad."The use of an electric defibrillator to attempt to revive Stanley Milgram during a heart attack was compared to his "shock" experiments, while his body is described as "flailing like a fish's."Harry Harlow's wife died of breast cancer, and is described as "turning a saffron yellow, her mouth pulled back in a masked grimace, her teeth peculiarly sharp looking, monkey teeth, mad." This was evidently, to bring in a "monkey" image to his wife's illness and premature death.Sometimes, Slater is merely annoying, as when she says she "hoped" that Harry Harlow held his wife's hand in the doctor's office, or says she "imagines" that Rosenhan was "smug" while trying to get himself committed to a mental hospital.

After reading how controversial Opening Skinner's Box is, I had to read the book myself. Some of the people interviewed in the book are claiming to have been incorrectly quoted, and some psychologists take issue with Slater's scholarship and conclusions. Having been warned not to take the facts too seriously, I thought it would still be intriguing to consider the deeper questions posed by the scientists who performed the experiments described in the book.And it was intriguing. Slater debunks the myth that B.F. Skinner raised his first child in a "box" in order to conduct an elaborate behavior experiment on her. The box turns out to have been a high-tech playpen designed and built by the doting father that Skinner apparently was. Another famous experiment which revealed that most people would torture another if encouraged by a benign authority figure was especially chilling in light of the Abu Ghraib torture by American guards.However, I came away with the distinct impression that Slater is a nut. Slater seemed especially enthusiastic about recreating an experiment in which normal people pretended to be demented enough to enter a mental hospital, then reverted to normal behavior and waited to see how long it would be before they would be discharged. Slater checked into some eight different hospitals. She also took some of the anti-psychotic meds she was prescribed rather than tossing them.She reveals that she was unable to recreate the experiment strictly, because under the original conditions, the pseudo-patients would be truthful after being admitted, but Slater actually had a mental hospital stay in her past, so she lied. And I simply didn't believe that bit about biting the ten-year-old chocolate bar in the Skinner House at first.

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