

Book Title: Opening Skinner's Box

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Looking Beyond Our Presence: Some of the Roots of the Behavioral Disorders Field

Well – before I even get started I guess I've broken at least one of the rules related to this Book Club! The intent of this new site is to review “. . . new and classic, fiction and non-fiction written about children and youth with emotional and behavioral disorders”. This book says more about adults who surround children and youth than the youth themselves. It also speaks to the professional roots that constitute at least part of the foundation of our field of behavioral disorders.

Lauren Slater is a psychologist who takes the time to follow-up on the real facts behind many of the studies she was exposed to in graduate school. She sets out in this fascinating volume to identify several of the classic studies in contemporary psychology and to revisit them today from several perspectives; including the impact such studies had on society overall and the personal stories behind the science of the described research. In some cases, Slater even goes to the length of replicating the original in an updated manner.

But what are the stories she describes. She begins the collection with an overview of some of the classic work of B.F. Skinner, his rejection of traditional thoughts regarding free will and an interesting journey in exploring the rumor that Skinner's daughter faced a life of serious mental illness as a result of being raised in a Skinner box. From this beginning question Slater takes us on an interesting trip across several 20th Century studies in American psychology.

For example, the issue of social obedience was dramatically illustrated in the 1961 experiments conducted in New Haven, Connecticut in which volunteers responded to a simple ad reading “We Will Pay You \$4.00 for One Hour of Your Time. Persons Needed for a Study of Memory.” Little did the takers realize that they were going to participate in a classic study illustrating how most people are willing to subject others to significant degrees of pain in instructed to do so by someone in authority. This study, when published, seemed to explain to some extent some of the dynamics of Nazi Germany could be understood in the larger context of social obedience. More recent examples of Viet Nam seemed to ring of relevance as well. A second example from the collection that I found particularly intriguing was a reminder of the 1971 study “On Being Sane In Insane Places” conducted by D.L. Rosenhan and a collection of his friends in which the group of recent graduate school survivors had themselves admitted to a number of psychiatric facilities to see if they could fake psychiatric illness and if, after successfully being admitted, their scam would be detected by the mental health experts working in such facilities. Slater accurately reports the uproar within the mental health field that this study created when

published but goes beyond this by providing her version of a replication of this study today. Yes – you do have to read the book to get the ending!

I think this is a valuable book for professionals working in the field of behavioral disorders. Let's face it folks –our work is based on and affected by a slew of social forces that impact how others perceive the needs of students with behavioral disorders and the extent to which we have a responsibility to serve these students and their families. As I read the stories told in *Opening Skinner's Box* I was reminded of the social context in which many of the most important psychological experiments of the 20th century were conducted. These were not clearly defined experiments examining evidence-based inquiry under carefully controlled circumstances. There was and is a larger plot going on involving "big picture" questions in the social sciences. And so it goes . . .