

10

A TILLER IN THE GREENING OF RELATIONSHIP SCIENCE

Jeffry A. Simpson

University of Minnesota

Elliot Aronson is my academic grandfather and my connection to Kurt Lewin, and those two facts have always been a source of pride. Though I never worked with Elliot, I almost feel as if I did through contacts I have had with some of his former students (e.g., Ellen Berscheid, Marti Hope Gonzales) and with his colleagues over the years at Minnesota, Texas, and Santa Cruz.

My first “contact” with Elliot was similar to the experience of many people in our field. During my junior year of high school, I took a psychology course as a break from the drudgery of physics, chemistry, and math. The textbook was a typical one—thorough to the point of being encyclopedic, but stale and awfully dry. During the first week of class, our teacher, who happened to be getting a PhD in social psychology, pulled three of us aside and asked us to read a “new book” along with the regular text. It was something called *The Social Animal*. Mind you, I was not a slacker, but neither was I a sucker, and I wasn’t eager to tackle two dry encyclopedias. The thought of having to read yet another textbook alongside the regular book seemed a bit excessive—until I read the first page of that new book. Whoa! I had never seen or heard of a textbook that read like an intriguing and suspenseful novel. It was fascinating to realize that one could do interesting and important scientific experiments with participants who occasionally behaved in some pretty

strange and unexpected ways. And the unique way in which Elliot set the stage and recounted the unfolding drama as people struggled to rationalize and justify their actions, especially in stressful or socially difficult situations, was mesmerizing. I was 17, and I was hooked.

When I ventured to the University of Minnesota for graduate school in the fall of 1981, Elliot entered my life once again. In the 1960s, he had spent several years on the faculty at Minnesota, where he helped define the "Minnesota tradition" in social psychology. Compelling stories of Elliot, his imaginative experiments, and his lively lab meetings were, of course, part of the lore at Minnesota, and many of us felt a direct and personal connection to that history. While in graduate school, I developed three indelible impressions of Elliot. First and perhaps foremost, he was the consummate experimental social psychologist who, unlike anyone before or since, fused art and science in his work. We didn't need to read the author line on a paper to know when Elliot was its ingenious mastermind; the style, flair, stage direction, and drama of the research gave him away. Second, Elliot was a devoted applier in the Lewinian tradition. In our courses, many of us teach our students that behavior depends on both the person and the current environment, and that one should ultimately use theory and experimental methods to solve important societal problems. What most of us teach, however, is not always what many of us practice. Throughout his career, Elliot lived Lewin's creed that nothing is as practical as a good theory, that tackling tough, applied social problems was a central mission of our field, and that what is learned in field settings can and should be used in reciprocal fashion to inform and refine our theories. Third, Elliot was one of the first great communicators and public ambassadors of social psychology. Not only did he introduce many of us to the wonders of our field, but, years before it became fashionable to do so, he took the time to communicate to the wider public all that social psychology had to offer.

Elliot also taught all of us some valuable principles about how rigorous and psychologically engaging research can and should be conducted. We all learned, for example, that studies ought to be high in experimental realism if not always high in mundane realism (Aronson, Brewer, & Carlsmith, 1985; Aronson, Carlsmith, & Ellsworth, 1976; Aronson, Ellsworth, Carlsmith, & Gonzales, 1990; also see Ellsworth, this volume). When individuals participate in studies, they need to be engaged in the unfolding experimental procedures, script, and drama. (We actually have an informal rule in our research lab: No participant should *ever* be thinking about lunch or what she or he will do after the study ends. Everyone should be completely engrossed in—and perhaps trying to make it through—the next 45 minutes.) And when done right,

social situations in experiments unfold like well-scripted plays in which different people assume different roles, and everyone, including the experimenter, has an important part to enact. To this day, my students and I still draft detailed scripts before we conduct every experiment.

PREPARING THE GROUND FOR RELATIONSHIP SCIENCE

Many people who know Elliot and the field of social psychology know about these accomplishments. What many people may not know, however, is that Elliot Aronson was an important tiller in the greening of relationship science (see Berscheid, 1999). He was *not* a gardener, mind you, because he did not actually plant the seeds that became the green fields—the foundation—of modern relationship science. But the field might not have become as lush and verdant as it did without his initial inspiration.

To begin with, Elliot motivated and inspired the first generation of relationship researchers to do creative studies and to think outside the box. Indeed, one of Elliot's earliest graduate students, my former coadvisor Ellen Berscheid, played a pivotal role in launching and nurturing the relationships field. Second, Elliot gave the study of interpersonal phenomena credibility both within and beyond social psychology. He did so through his masterful prose and storytelling in *The Social Animal*. He did so through the types of issues and problems he chose to study, particularly during the early part of his career. He did so through the clever studies he conducted, several of which generated extremely interesting and counterintuitive findings. And he did so through occasional excursions out of the lab to tackle important social problems, such as how to integrate classrooms (the Jigsaw Classroom) and how to promote energy efficiency (Aronson & Gonzales, 1990; Gonzales, Aronson, & Costanzo, 1988) and safe-sex practices (Aronson, Fried, & Stone, 1991; Stone, Aronson, Crain, Winslow, & Fried, 1994), long before it was either common or fashionable to do so.

Third and even more important, some of Elliot's early research gave the seeds of relationship science fertile ground in which to grow. For example, his early investigations into the sources of interpersonal attraction granted legitimacy to the study of relationships at a time when social psychology was dominated by laboratory-based experimentalists, and when some public figures (such as William Proxmire, the former senator from Wisconsin) were arguing that an understanding of relationships was better left to poets or Dear Abby than to science and theory testing. Just when attraction and relationship research was beginning to be viewed as frivolous, Elliot was *validating* the study of attraction, intimacy, and the ties that bind people together. His actions

had an important impact on senior scholars within social psychology, many of whom held the opinion that "if Elliot thinks it's worthwhile, it probably is." With this foundation, Ellen Berscheid and Elaine Walster (Hatfield) wrote a seminal book on interpersonal attraction (Berscheid & Walster, 1969), which solidified the study of interpersonal relationships and was a precursor to relationship science.

Elliot's early research on cognitive dissonance also drew the attention and imagination of young psychologists who otherwise might never have ventured into social psychology or the scientific study of relationships. During the early 1980s, I was one of those people. Elliot's early dissonance work shifted theoretical attention away from simple exchange or reinforcement explanations of social behavior toward Lewin-inspired *motivational* approaches (e.g., cognitive consistency models). Beginning with his famous "severity of initiation" experiment (Aronson & Mills, 1959), in which people who had to "suffer" to join a boring discussion group actually liked the group better than those who didn't suffer, Elliot moved interpersonal attraction away from cut-and-dried reinforcement-centered models of the resources that are exchanged in relationships (see Byrne, 1961; Homans, 1961) toward more dynamic, motivational models that addressed how deep-seated motives, needs, and dispositions sometimes alter perceptions and behavior in rationalizing (but not always rational) ways.

In doing so, Elliot documented some interesting boundary conditions of several important attraction effects. This included his groundbreaking work on gain-loss theory (Aronson & Linder, 1965), which proposed that the pattern of positive and negative events experienced across time is more important in determining attraction to another person than is the total number of positive and negative events. In this research, participants ("subjects" in those days) interacted with an experimental accomplice (a "confederate") in a series of seven brief conversations. After each interaction, the participant overheard the confederate sharing her impressions of the participant with the experimenter. In keeping with the manipulation of the independent variable, participants overheard the confederate expressing either a positive attitude toward the participant after each of the seven brief interactions, a negative attitude after each of the interactions, a negative attitude that gradually became positive across the series of seven interactions, or an initially positive attitude that gradually became negative as the interactions progressed. This study had all the features of a classic high-impact experiment: high experimental realism, real and engaging social interactions, an elaborate and carefully crafted script, and artful and appropriate deception. Contrary to predictions derived from reinforcement theory, Elliot and

Darwin Linder predicted that the least attractive individuals should be those with whom things start out positively but end negatively, whereas the most attractive people should be those who have little laudatory to say at the outset but gradually come around. This is precisely what was found: Attraction is not based on the total amount of positive or negative feedback we receive from others; instead, it depends on the specific pattern of positive versus negative feedback.

This initial gain-loss research inspired other important research on what happens when two people directly vie for the attention and affection of a third individual. Testing the “law of infidelity” derived from gain-loss theory, Ellen Berscheid, Tom Brothen, and William Graziano (1976) found that when two people compete for the affection of another individual and one suitor expresses consistently positive attitudes and the other expresses a “gain” in positive attitudes (i.e., moving from initially negative to positive), the consistently positive evaluator is liked more. This study was one of the first to highlight the context-dependent nature of attraction in settings that resemble typical, real-world interactions, and to show that competition was the key to their contrary findings. When two people compete for the attraction of another, they question the motives of a potential suitor who becomes increasingly flattering over time, and their suspicion undermines his or her personal appeal. Romantic competition can undermine the gain-loss effect when “infidelity” is at stake.

Another example of how Elliot shifted the theoretical focus of relationship research is his clever work on the pratfall effect (Aronson, Willerman, & Floyd, 1966), which demonstrated that small foibles (pratfalls) can make highly competent people even more likeable. Along with research revealing that the most attractive people are not necessarily those we choose to date (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966), Elliot’s pratfall research confirmed that slight imperfections in others are both reassuring and endearing, most likely because occasional slip-ups make those to whom we are drawn—including our partners—seem more approachable and within our grasp.

Elliot also infused the self-concept into major theories in social psychology, especially cognitive dissonance theory (Aronson, 2003). He did so by showing that cognitive dissonance theory makes the clearest predictions when an individual’s self-concept is threatened by his or her troublesome behaviors. He demonstrated, for instance, that people who have low self-esteem behave differently from those with high self-esteem in standard dissonance-inducing situations because dissonance is more strongly aroused in people with low self-esteem when they freely engage in actions that reflect positively on them (Aronson & Carlsmith,

1962). Elliot's experiment with Merrill Carlsmith was the first and most compelling demonstration that people who expect to perform poorly on a test, but who then are told that they performed well, actually change their correct answers in order to align their performance with their negative self-views. These initially counterintuitive findings were important in part because they laid the groundwork for the development of later *interpersonal* theories, including self-verification theory (e.g., Swann & Ely, 1984). According to self-verification theory, people should prefer to receive feedback that is consistent with their self-concepts, and when their self-concepts are negative, they should prefer negative over positive feedback. Though Bill Swann and his colleagues rarely cite Elliot and Merrill's classic study, they should. Even today, this study remains one of most powerful and vivid demonstrations of the need for self-consistency.

Elliot's early self-esteem findings also prepared the stage for Sandra Murray and her colleagues' research on self-esteem and dependency regulation processes (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). To be happy in relationships, people with low self-esteem must believe that their partners have foibles, too, so that the perceived gap between their negative self-evaluations and their evaluations of their partners remains sufficiently small (Murray et al., 2006). If they want to feel good about their relationships, those who have low self-esteem do not benefit from putting their partners on pedestals. Instead, they need to acknowledge their partners' shortcomings and pratfalls, which keeps their partners "in their league" and stabilizes their relationships.

THE TILLER'S LASTING INFLUENCE

Throughout his illustrious career, Elliot always followed his nose, conducting ingenious experiments that were designed to answer questions of deep interest to him. He did not concern himself with whether studying attraction might be viewed as strange or frivolous, even in the eyes of his close social psychologist colleagues. He tackled topics and issues because he found them challenging, fun, and highly relevant, and this motivation is of course reflected in his classic work in the areas of cognitive dissonance and attraction. Elliot's primary interest in intrapersonal processes, including the motive to reduce dissonance, resonated with scholars who were interested in the deeply interpersonal nature of our social lives. Moreover, the intrapersonal dynamics of consistency pressures that Elliot was so fond of investigating were eventually revealed to be important interpersonal dynamics, as documented by Bill Swann and colleagues in their research on self-verification processes. Elliot

tilled these fields because that was his passion. As he did so, he had little if any inkling that he was preparing the ground for the seeds of relationship science.

One of the primary indicators of influence in a field is how many careers and research programs an individual has affected, either directly or indirectly. On that indicator alone, Elliot scores several standard deviations above the mean. So thank you, Elliot, for drawing so many of us into social psychology. Thank you for inspiring us to think creatively and to conduct studies that are scientifically rigorous and psychologically meaningful and engaging to participants. Thank you for showing us how to take theories and findings born in the lab and to apply them in novel and insightful ways to address significant real-world problems. Thank you for showing us how to be complete academics. Thank you from the vibrant, verdant pastures of relationship science.

REFERENCES

- Aronson, E. (2003). Drifting my own way: Following my nose and heart. In R. Sternberg (Ed.), *Psychologists defying the crowd: Stories of those who battled the establishment and won* (pp. 3–31). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Aronson, E., Brewer, M., & Carlsmith, J. M. (1985). Experimentation in social psychology. In G. Lindzey & E. Aronson (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (3rd ed., Vol. 1, pp. 441–486). New York: Random House.
- Aronson, E., & Carlsmith, J. M. (1962). Performance expectancy as determinant of actual performance. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 66, 178–182.
- Aronson, E., Carlsmith, J. M., & Ellsworth, P. C. (1976). *Research methods in social psychology*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Aronson, E., Ellsworth, P. C., Carlsmith, J. M., & Gonzales, M. H. (1990). *Methods of research in social psychology* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Aronson, E., Fried, C. B., & Stone, J. (1991). Overcoming denial and increasing the use of condoms through the induction of hypocrisy. *American Journal of Public Health*, 81, 1636–1638.
- Aronson, E., & Gonzales, M. H. (1990). Alternative social influence processes applied to energy conservation. In J. Edwards, R. S. Tindale, L. Heath, & E. J. Posavac (Eds.), *Social psychological applications to social issues: Vol. 1. Social influence processes and prevention* (pp. 301–325). New York: Plenum Press.
- Aronson, E., & Linder, D. (1965). Gain and loss of esteem as determinants of interpersonal attractiveness. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1, 156–172.
- Aronson, E., & Mills, J. (1959). The effect of severity of initiation on liking for a group. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67, 31–36.

- Aronson, E., Willerman, B., & Floyd, J. (1966). The effect of a pratfall on increasing interpersonal attractiveness. *Psychonomic Science*, 4, 227-228.
- Berscheid, E. (1999). The greening of relationship science. *American Psychologist*, 54, 260-266.
- Berscheid, E., Brothen, T., & Graziano, W. G. (1976). Gain-loss theory and the "law of infidelity": Mr. Doting versus the admiring stranger. *Journal of Social and Personality Psychology*, 33, 709-718.
- Berscheid, E., & Walster, E. H. (1969). *Interpersonal attraction*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Byrne, D. (1961). Interpersonal attraction and attitude similarity. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 62, 713-715.
- Gonzales, M. H., Aronson, E., & Costanzo, M. (1988). Using social cognition and persuasion to promote energy conservation: A quasi-experiment. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 18(12), 1049-1066.
- Homans, G. C. (1961). *Social behavior: Its elementary forms*. New York: Harcourt Brace & World.
- Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., & Collins, N. L. (2006). Optimizing assurance: The risk regulation system in relationships. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132, 641-666.
- Stone, J., Aronson, E., Crain, A. L., Winslow, M. P., & Fried, C. B. (1994). Inducing hypocrisy as a means of encouraging young adults to use condoms. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20, 116-128.
- Swann, W. B., Jr., & Ely, R. J. (1984). A battle of wills: Self-verification versus behavioral confirmation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46, 1287-1302.
- Walster, E. H., Aronson, V., Abrahams, D., & Rottman, L. (1966). The importance of physical attractiveness in dating behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 4, 508-516.