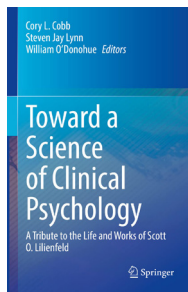


**BOOK AND
MULTIMEDIA
REVIEW**

Toward a Science of Clinical Psychology: A Tribute to the Life and Works of Scott O. Lilienfeld

Tana Dineen
tanadineen@gmail.com



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It seems appropriate to begin this review with the disclosure that I have a Ph.D. in cognitive psychology and was, for many years, a licensed clinical psychologist. I left the profession in 1993 to take a cold, hard look at what it had become and long ago dismissed the notion that clinical psychology is headed in the direction of becoming a science.

It wasn't the title that attracted me to this book; what drew my attention was the subtitle - *A Tribute to the Life and Works of Scott O. Lilienfeld*.

The name rang a bell; I found myself recalling vividly how, in the 1990s, this outspoken psychologist was sounding alarms about harmful therapies, openly questioning pervasive psychological "truths", and stressing the importance of distinguishing between science and pseudo(or junk)science. He had been critiquing from inside the profession many of the things I was more brutally challenging from outside. I had never met him, so I was curious to learn more about him and about those who were, a quarter century later, paying tribute to him.

The impetus for the creation of this book was his death on September 30, 2020, at age 59, from pancreatic cancer. Having recently become intrigued by eulogy writing as a particularly powerful literary form, I was rather hoping that it would read like a collection of eulogies.

It certainly starts off that way. The *Preface*, jointly written by three colleagues, each of whom was both a friend and frequent collaborator, reads like an uncommonly well-written eulogy. It presents Scott Lilienfeld as a preeminent scholar imbued with exceptional intellect and integrity, a long list of human qualities, and a mission to educate a wide audience, within and outside his profession, on the virtues of a scientific mindset.

The book is an anthology. Structured in five sections, it is comprised of a total of twenty-one chapters, most of which are co-authored by three or more people. So, naturally, there is no uniform flow. The writing styles range from the informal and personal to the academic and topic-focused. It is not an easy read, nor is it an easy book to review.

On my first read-through, I was inclined to skim chapters that seemed too dense. When I reached the end, I wasn't sure of my overall reaction. But, based on the number of post-its I'd stuck onto pages, it was obvious that I'd gained something from reading it.

So, I set myself the task of reading the book again, this time looking more closely at those chapters I had initially skimmed, reflecting on each section and identifying in each a single chapter that had evoked a particularly strong reaction and, then, asking myself what makes this book a worthwhile read.

Section 1, *Personal Reflections*, is comprised of three chapters, each written by someone whose relationship, both personal and professional, with Scott Lilienfeld was



particularly close. In each, he comes across as a beloved, prolific “workaholic” for whom no boundary existed between life and work - or work and play. Choosing only one chapter to comment on wasn’t easy; however, the one that kept drawing me back was the chapter written by his wife, Candice Basterfield. She affectionately describes him as a generalist in a climate of specialists who, while in love with psychology, was concerned about trends toward ideological uniformity and orthodoxy. In paying homage to him, she provides a sweeping review of his education, academic career, research, teaching, mentoring, writing, and courageous forays into ideological battlefields. Toward the end of the chapter, she draws attention to something he had said in an address to a Division of the American Psychological Association (APA) back in 1998:

...as academic clinical psychologists we have not done enough to popularize our findings and to communicate the scientific side of our discipline to the general public...we have done little to assist the public with distinguishing those practices within popular psychology that are scientific from those that are not. (p.14)

This quote stuck with me. As I was reading, it would often pop into my head, alerting me to a theme that runs through this book.

Section II, *Science and Pseudoscience in Clinical Psychology* is comprised of four chapters that might well be considered “the meat” of this book. Selecting just one to comment on proved impossible, so, ultimately, I had to limit myself to commenting briefly on the first chapter and then focusing on the third.

The first chapter gets across the importance of understanding science, its limitations, the dangers of *scientism* - an all-too-prevalent, irrationally positive view of science that turns it into something akin to a faith, and the importance of rationalism (a major component of which is criticism) in addressing questions and examining beliefs. The authors state that “a good part of Lilienfeld’s work can be construed as an attempt to understand science and what might interfere with good science, as well as to apply this understanding to real-world problems.” (p.51) And they identify as major influences on his work the thinking of meta-scientists Carl Sagan and Karl Popper and the body of work directed at countering cognitive limitations such as “confirmation bias”.

The third chapter, *Intellectual Humility: Definitions, Questions, and Scott Lilienfeld as a Case Example*, begins by pointing out that humans are notoriously unaware of the pervasiveness of our own cognitive biases. It, then, introduces intellectual humility (IH) as one potential remedy

for this blind spot, summarizes efforts to conceptualize and measure it, and considers the implications training in IH could have for psychological science - academia generally - and for the future of society. Acknowledging Scott Lilienfeld’s contribution it presents him as someone who not only studied IH but took it so seriously that he came to embody it. This quote from the chapter captures something of what this means:

Lilienfeld strove to advance psychological science with an open mind and respectful voice. His writings and efforts reflect the imperative to question ‘conventional wisdom’ and maintain a stance of being open to findings that falsify our own cherished beliefs. (p.118)

Section III, *Assessment and Psychopathology*, is comprised of five chapters which, taken together, get across how data doesn’t speak for itself, numbers can mislead, measurement doesn’t necessarily make *it* real, and exploring what diagnostic labels mean (and whether they mean what we think they do) can be very, very tricky.

Because Scott Lilienfeld was an expert in the psychometric assessment of *psychopathy* - a familiar term that most everyone thinks they understand, I chose to focus on the chapter titled *The Nomological Net of Scott Lilienfeld’s Psychopathic Personality Inventory Scales*. The seven co-authors state upfront that it “reads more like an empirical-research journal publication than a ‘traditional’ chapter.” (p.253) Reporting on three research studies conducted by them, it definitely does read like an academic paper. But, as eventually I came to realize, that is not necessarily a bad thing. What this chapter manages to do, in a somewhat novel way, is introduce a research area to which Lilienfeld was a major contributor and demonstrate how this scholarly research is conducted and the thinking that goes into interpreting the data. It provides, also a glimpse into a broader area of scientific psychology - one that, in addition to taking a less slanted (good/bad) look at *psychopathy*, is exploring an alternative to the psychiatric (diagnostic) approach to personality disorders - and to psychopathology generally.

Section IV, *Psychotherapy: Critical Issues and New Directions*, is comprised of four chapters. The first provides an overview of how the APA has been developing clinical practice guidelines and identifying what are now termed “empirically supported treatments” (ESTs). It credits Scott Lilienfeld for his role in getting this to happen and for persuasively arguing that theoretical plausibility, along with effectiveness, needs to be shown. The next two focus on cognitive therapy (or cognitive behavior therapy), which is based on a theory developed within scientific psycholo-

gy and whose effectiveness is arguably well supported by research. The fourth chapter got my attention because of the pithy title, *When Psychotherapy Fails*. Scott Lilienfeld was well known for his “first do no harm” stance and for his tireless involvement in exposing the dark side of interventions such as recovered memory therapy and critical incident stress debriefing. This chapter begins with a reference to his 2007 landmark paper in which he argues that the field of psychology should prioritize efforts to identify harmful therapies. It then goes on to discuss some initiatives that have been taken and others that will need to be taken to ensure that all psychological interventions, including mainstream therapies, are examined for possible negative side effects.

Section V, *Controversies, Issues, and Future Directions*, is comprised of five chapters on diverse topics extending far beyond the clinical issues of the previous two sections. These chapters serve to highlight the astonishing breadth (and depth) of Scott Lilienfeld’s works and to draw attention to ongoing efforts to bolster the scientific side of psychology.

After reflecting on the scope of this closing section and accepting that it was impossible to summarize, I gave myself permission to comment briefly on one chapter

that I found particularly powerful. It puts the spotlight on the highly contentious, anger-laden, real-world topic of multiculturalism. And, in so doing, it gets across with exceptional clarity the essence of what Scott Lilienfeld was striving for and the magnitude of what he was up against. The chapter relays how, without pausing to consider what the word means or to subject this questionable sociopolitical framework to scientific scrutiny, the APA formally endorsed, then institutionalized, this ideology, thereby involving the profession in actively promoting it and turning psychologists into pseudo-experts and advocates. It then discusses the drastically simplistic understanding of multiculturalism that permeates every area of psychology and identifies dangerous pitfalls and major issues that even now receive little attention. Toward the end, it states clearly that “if the field of applied psychology wishes to establish itself as a credible scientific discipline it must begin to grapple seriously with the many concerns raised by critics of multiculturalism and not reflexively dismiss them as illegitimate or racist.” (p.338)

In a nutshell, what I gained from reading this book was the opportunity to become acquainted (finally) with Scott O. Lilienfeld. I consider that to have been a privilege.