Q&A with Joshua Aronson

SPEAKER IN THE WOMEN AND STEM SERIES TALKS ABOUT HIS FAMILY, RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, AND MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE

What drew you into this field?

I always loved psychology as an undergraduate. I was absolutely intent on not following in my father’s footsteps—for he’s an eminent social psychologist [Dr. Elliot Aronson]—and my mom’s a psychologist, too. I think everyone in my family is genetically tuned to the social psychological, make-the-world-a-better-place wavelength, but I thought I’d be a clinical psychologist. I took a year and did internships in clinical psychology and very quickly realized that I didn’t want to do that because I felt like I couldn’t control anything. I couldn’t just sit back and watch as people’s lives stayed entrenched in their problems, and that didn’t feel right to me. So I went back to the university, took a graduate course in experimental social

I had the pleasure of sitting down with Dr. Joshua Aronson, Associate Professor of Applied Psychology at New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, and co-author of the article on stereotype threat that launched an entire field of research, to discuss the challenges and rewards of a career in academia. What follows are his reflections on entering the field of social psychology, insights gained from moving his stereotype threat research from the lab to the field, and why he is convinced that he has found the best teacher in the entire world.
psychology and just felt like, “I like this.” My need to control and manipulate was very satisfied by that, and it was fun. It just seemed to come really naturally to me.

I went off to grad school and worked with professor Ned Jones [at Princeton University] who was one of the great attribution people. I didn’t love attribution as a thing to study but I really loved my mentor and learned a lot from him. We did some pretty cool studies together that nobody has ever read. That first project with my advisor was related, now that I think about it, to the stuff that I eventually did. It was about how teachers determine how smart their students are when they’re in the process of teaching them. So it’s a really interesting attributional problem: I’m, in a way, inducing your behavior but then I have the attributional task of asking, “Are you smart?” That’s an interesting motivational and inferential process that happened and what we found was really interesting: If your job is to help somebody become smarter versus just boosting their performance you’ll be more attentive to signs of learning. Now when I think about the educational paradigm in this country, it’s incredibly relevant. I’m surprised it hasn’t been cited more because we’ve shifted from a school system that is about teaching kids important stuff to one that has as its prime directive to get test scores up. Much of what we found in that paper is being played out in schools across the country now. That is, if you’re not going to get your test score up, I’m not going to think much of you. It’s tragic in some ways but it’s interesting to me how the very framework I studied many, many years ago is now front and center in education. Yet we’re pushing harder and harder on students even though the effects are not that good, and we should have known. Had they read that study…!

Has transitioning from conducting studies in the lab to the field influenced how you think about the problems you study?

Often when you go into the field you realize you’ve been studying the wrong thing in the lab. [Social psychologist] Bob Cialdini tells this great story of how he’s analyzing his data in the basement of the Ohio State psych department, which is located under the football stadium, and he’s thinking, “How can I get this effect to go from .07 to p< .05?” Meanwhile, the whole place is shaking and he thinks to himself, “Maybe I’m studying the wrong thing.” That was my experience when I went from the lab into the school -- that although I really believe in what I’m doing, maybe I’m studying the wrong thing. The stuff we found in the lab on stereotype threat and the little tweaks that we do are really important. And really good teachers do this stuff all the time. But there’s so much more that happens in classrooms that social psychologists haven’t really thought about and I think have been embarrassed, in a way, to think about. It’s been a wonderful experience to see that there are big things going on that we’re not even studying.

I am excited about hopefully getting to be on the forefront of that kind of thing.

Along those lines, what advice would you have for researchers who are interested in moving in the direction of translational research?

What happens when you become a faculty member is you stop running your own subjects. Every year you get farther away from the people that you talk about in your research. So what I’ve found, and which has been really eye-opening, is to go to where the phenomena are. If you’re studying a problem, definitely bring it into the lab but get into the field so that you’re not removed from the phenomenon as it occurs in the real world. It’s a great way to get ideas, too. The first time I went into a school, all these hypotheses just starting springing up in my head. So that would be my advice: Don’t become a one-trick pony where all you do is lab work. Learn to do it well but then stay connected to the phenomenon and to the larger problem so that you really know what you’re talking about.

Can you describe what your research method looks like when you’re in the field? Are you mainly observing students and teachers?

Sometimes. I went back to school as a high school teacher last year. I wanted to be Bob Cialdini. He’s one of my favorites because no one does a progression of studies better than Bob Cialdini. But it’s not the best thing about him. The best thing about
him is that he learned which questions to ask by going into the field and hanging out with the people who were natural persuaders. And I held that up as sort of a gutsy, man-in-full kind of psychologist. I’d been saying that for a few years and then I found myself thinking, “You really ought to start walking the walk.” So I took the opportunity to teach high school for a year and it was really hard but really eye-opening.

You never look at a phenomenon the same way once you’ve been inside it and I think it’s made me infinitely wiser. And I don’t accept certain arguments anymore. For example, in the education world, we sort of have a really intense blame game going on. So before it was “the schools are bad.” Then it was “the parents are bad” and “the kids are stupid.” And now it’s the teachers’ turn. Everyone’s angry at the teachers: “They’re greedy, lazy, and can’t get the test scores up.” I think anyone who says that should immediately be signed up to be a teacher because you cannot maintain the opinion that it’s your fault after being a teacher.

We did an experiment where I would teach 2 or 3 different groups of students. I was the same guy in every situation but all it took was one student and he screwed up the whole feel of the classroom. I was an ineffective teacher in one situation —and I think I’m a pretty good teacher—but all of a sudden my power was gone in that situation. It’s something that I believed in the abstract as a social psychologist — that situations matter — but when you are part of the situation, and you feel powerless all of a sudden because of one kid, then you can no longer blame teachers. We’ve bell-curved the students; we’ve bell-curved the teachers. And I think if we really want to get it right we have to bell-curve the situation. We have to ask: What are the qualities of these situations that promote learning, engagement, happiness, and curiosity? Ask questions about the situation rather than about the individual player in the situation. I think that’s the only approach that makes sense to me now and I wouldn’t feel it with such conviction if I hadn’t played every single role in that drama.

Being in the field gives you great insight into possible solutions, too. I observe, teach, and do experiments in the high school. And the other way that I’m doing it is by finding out who is doing really great things in the classroom. I go to them and I put them under a microscope. What’s making them so successful? And the most gratifying experience I’ve had lately is finding who I think to be the best teacher I’ve ever seen in the world. I didn’t find her by looking at test scores; she found me because I gave a talk on encouraging girls in math and science. At the end of the talk she came up to me and said, “I do all of those things…I think I’m a very successful teacher.”

So I looked into her. She was Principal of the Year two years running in Maryland. When she came into her school as the principal, zero percent of the kids were scoring proficient on the statewide test. It’s this run-down little school. Most of the kids live in trailers and some of them have never met one of their parents because they’re in jail or because they were murdered. Within two and a half years, everyone’s proficient and 60% of the kids are scoring at advanced levels. Well, you do that in a lot of different ways but a lot of what she does are these little social psychological tweaks that shape the way the kids are seeing their life in the school. When you go to this school, you start envying these kids because they’re getting this first-class education. And it’s not the way the current administration would envision how you get high test scores. None of this Atkins diet way of getting to proficiency. There’s not a thing the kids do that doesn’t have meaning in some way, that doesn’t make them feel more connected to the school. It’s more like they’re doing science rather than just learning science. I could go on and on about how this works but the basic point is that it’s validated social psychology. It’s not the children’s fault. They come from low IQ parents and bad situations and poverty, but they can do just as well as anyone else because they have a teacher and mostly a principal who is willing to do anything to make their learning experience meaningful and to make them feel accepted. It’s something that every kid should get and very few do.
How did you become interested in studying women in STEM fields?
The women research came later for me. When I took a faculty position in Texas one of my first and best students, Catherine Good, heard me give a talk about the Steele and Aronson paper about Black students. She was in math education and immediately changed majors to start working with me. She wanted to do studies on women so that’s what we did. When we went into schools we studied all the kids. There were girls, Latinos, and Black kids. We just took whoever came and we got great effects with the girls. I have to say that at this point, now that I’m in schools a lot and read all the data, I think that to talk about women and math as a crisis bewilders me. I don’t think women are actively discriminated against as much as some reports have suggested. And, girls are better than men in every other way. If you look at all the data, they’re better writers and readers; they’re graduating from high school with higher grades; they’re going to college in higher numbers; they’re very effective leaders. I think that women are taking over and I think the numbers are looking great when you compare them to 30 years ago.

I asked a group of kids when I was teaching high school to probe what they thought about stereotypes. They hadn’t even heard that girls are not as good at math so things are really changing rapidly. The status of Blacks is a much bigger priority for me and it keeps me awake at night because when Black students fail, they end up in prison. It is just so sad and so unnecessary.

Besides the school principal in Maryland, what researchers, writers, or thinkers influence and inspire you?
So many of them. Carol Dweck’s learning versus performance orientation research was a big early influence. Claude [Steele] obviously. I went to work with him on self-affirmation and I resisted working on what he was then referring to as “stigma vulnerability” because I didn’t feel like I had any insights about that. Lo and behold, when I designed the first stereotype threat studies on the Black students and saw the effects, I was completely hooked. Interviewing every single one of those students and they had no clue that their brain had just been compromised by this little detail. So I haven’t gotten over that. My dad has been a huge influence. I think I share with him a certain boredom and impatience with trivial stuff. That if this is not the study that you always dreamed about doing then why are you doing it? I love the way he writes, the way he talks, and how he gets exuberant about stuff. Other [psychologists] include Bob Cialdini, Tim Wilson, and Dan Gilbert. Ed Deci and [Richard] Ryan, I love their stuff and how much care there is for human beings while at the same time it’s very hard-nosed science. There’s a choice one makes: Do you want to do social psychology or humanistic social psychology? I’ve always been attracted to not just seeing the world as it is and saying here’s why, but seeing what could be and saying why not? Psychology is not physics. It was borne out of a tradition of how are we going to understand people so that we can create a better world for them and I’m proud to be part of that tradition.

Given the positive mentoring experiences you’ve had, what advice do you have for graduate students?
As a graduate student your job is to spend as much time in the lab as possible and really understand how to do research. Work very hard. Gain the knowledge about your field and become proficient at the methodologies while in graduate school. And, don’t worry about having a big idea. Just study what you’re passionate about and find most interesting.

Amy Williams is a Ph.D. student in Social Psychology in the Department of Psychology at UCLA. Her research focuses on identifying and developing stereotype threat interventions that can be used to buffer against multiple forms of stereotype threat.