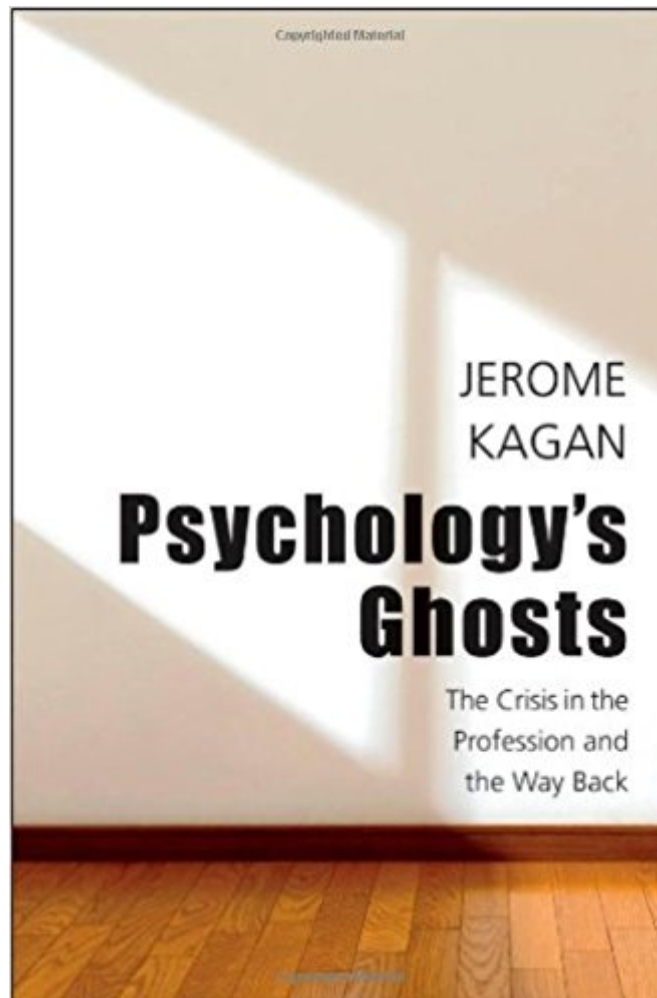


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Psychology's Ghosts: The Crisis In The Profession And The Way Back



Synopsis

This book is the product of years of thought and a profound concern for the state of contemporary psychology. Jerome Kagan, a theorist and leading researcher, examines popular practices and assumptions held by many psychologists. He uncovers a variety of problems that, troublingly, are largely ignored by investigators and clinicians. Yet solutions are available, Kagan maintains, and his reasoned suggestions point the way to a better understanding of the mind and mental illness. Kagan identifies four problems in contemporary psychology: the indifference to the setting in which observations are gathered, including the age, class, and cultural background of participants and the procedure that provides the evidence (he questions, for example, the assumption that similar verbal reports of well-being reflect similar psychological states); the habit of basing inferences on single measures rather than patterns of measures (even though every action, reply, or biological response can result from more than one set of conditions); the defining of mental illnesses by symptoms independent of their origin; and the treatment of mental disorders with drugs and forms of psychotherapy that are nonspecific to the diagnosed illness. The author's candid discussion will inspire the debate that is needed in a discipline seeking to fulfill its promises.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Psychology's Ghosts can be enjoyed by both experts and lay readers. For the latter, including persons suffering from some form of mental illness, the book represents a reliable and user friendly source of information about the present status of psychological and psychiatric research and clinical

practice. For the expert it provides a compass for rethinking one's own practice and research and for reorganizing this more consistently around the principle of beneficence." —Liana Giorgi, New York Journal of Books (Liana Giorgi New York Journal of Books) —With its detailed reassessments of well-entrenched principles (including John Bowlby's theory that the quality of the attachment between infant and mother has a profound and enduring impact on every child's future), *Psychology's Ghosts* should command the interest of anyone interested in the field. —Glenn Altschuler, The Jerusalem Post (Glenn Altschuler The Jerusalem Post) —He makes his case persuasively and readably, with extensive empirical support. For a public enamored of looking inward to genes, brain circuits and medications to find solutions to the problems that plague us privately and politically, the message that most of those solutions require us to look outward —to culture, class and context— can't be repeated often enough. —Carol Tavris, Wall Street Journal (Carol Tavris Wall Street Journal) —Kagan is thorough and precise in this remarkable book. He has a chapter of positive recommendations, but as he notes, he's not the first to point out these limitations, which have so far mostly been ignored. What he's basically calling for is some humility, and acknowledgement of complexity, differences and connections." —Bill Kowinski, North Coast Journal (Bill Kowinski North Coast Journal) —If anyone has the stature and wisdom to shake a finger at contemporary psychology and say "shame on you," it is Kagan . . . Though not all will agree with his contentions, few can argue with his intentions." —R.E. Osborne, Choice (R.E. Osborne Choice) —Jerome Kagan's own studies of human temperament from infancy to adulthood constitute a masterpiece of research in psychology, and his new book is crammed with fascinating information gleaned from a lifetime's acquaintance with the lab and the literature. The author is immensely informed, and fills his pages with references to myriad facets of Western culture. Slogging through *Psychology's Ghosts* can be hard work in places, but in the end the slog is well worth the effort." —Barry Gault, Commonweal (Barry Gault Commonweal) —An intellectual tour de force • —Kagan has written a provocative and challenging book. . . . *Psychology's Ghosts* . . . provide[s] a template for students and the profession to carefully consider whether our science matches our clinical practice. This consideration, in turn, provides a moment to determine whether we as psychologists feel a moral obligation to match science to practice for those we so zealously purport to serve. —Robert G. Frank, PsycCRITIQUES, American Psychological Association (Robert G. Frank PsycCRITIQUES, American Psychological Association)

Jerome Kagan is Professor of Psychology Emeritus, Harvard University, where he was co-director of the Mind/Brain Behavior Interfaculty Initiative. He is the author of nearly 400 papers and

numerous books. He lives in Belmont, MA.

The author, Professor of Psychology Emeritus at Harvard University, draws on his career experiences, a wide-ranging review of scientific literature, and occasional references to historical and literary sources to: (1) reflect on the current state of psychology; (2) identify recurring problems with contemporary psychological research; (3) discuss the methodological strengths and weaknesses of different types of psychological research, and various ways that the results of such research can be misunderstood or misinterpreted; (4) compare and contrast mental diagnosis and treatment of the mentally ill with medical diagnosis and treatment of the physically ill; and (5) make suggestions and recommendations on how psychological research and practice can be better conducted, better evaluated, better understood, and more effectively applied. The author tempers his belief that psychology has much to offer with interesting observations about its limitations and thoughtful criticisms of its failings. The author conscientiously strives to make his criticisms of psychology constructive in nature, and offers specific suggestions and recommendations to address the limitations and failings in psychology that he identifies. In general, the author's observations, criticisms, suggestions, and recommendations are cogently presented and warrant serious consideration, even if the reader ultimately concludes they are not persuasive, in whole or in part. My only disappointment with the book was the inconsistent handling of the author's comments about the psychological motivations and thought processes of various individuals and groups. The author often cites memoirs, biographies, and other relevant sources to support his comments and observations about the motivations and thought processes of various individuals and groups. However, the author occasionally fails to cite any similar documentation or sources to make comments about the psychological motivations and thought process of other individuals and groups. Without such citations or references, the author's comments about psychological motivations and thought processes of some individuals and groups are merely speculative and not entitled to much weight. This book is not recommended for readers looking for a casual or general introduction to the current state of psychology. The author's discussion, analysis, conclusions, and recommendations will be better understood if the reader has some prior knowledge of, or experience with, psychology, psychological research, the scientific method, and the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. Any reader interested in the difficulties associated with trying to apply the scientific method to subjects beyond traditional sciences should consider also taking a look at Jim Manzi, *Uncontrolled: The Surprising Payoff of Trial-and-Error for Business, Politics, and Society*

VERY DRY READING. It is so boring and jumps from one topic to the next. If you have nothing else to read and just want to dissect some random topics because you have nothing better to do, still don't get this book.

In *Psychology's Ghosts* Professor Kagan makes four criticisms in four chapters of research and practice in psychology, and offers some guiding principles to improve both in a fifth chapter. The first chapter criticizes research in psychology for ignoring context. The second focuses on research that claims to measure and compare happiness across countries. The third chapter proposes a new way to classify mental illness; and the fourth criticizes treatment of mental illness, mainly for its reliance on drugs. Professor Kagan has a peripatetic writing style. He meanders through art, literature, history, lab results, and field observations to support his arguments. The reader can marvel at the breadth of Professor Kagan's knowledge, but often has to flip back several pages to remember what point Kagan is trying to make. For example, one of the principles Professor Kagan offers in chapter five is "Watch Out for Ethical Preferences." According to Kagan ethical premises that pervade psychology--and society--in North America and Europe are the need for a childhood free from stress and full of a mother's physical love. This launches a 20-page discourse that wanders through Maoist China, Israeli Kibbutzim, the ancient Maya, string theory, Galapagos finches, Freud, Bowlby, Adam Smith, John Locke, and a dissertation defense Kagan sat on 30 years ago. A reader without a deep and ready knowledge of psychological research will be at a loss to weigh the bits and pieces that Professor Kagan presents as evidence in support of his arguments. Furthermore Kagan steadfastly refuses to cite the type of evidence, quantitative results, that might help gauge the importance of the phenomena he is describing. Among all this erudition are also unsupported generalizations, sharp criticisms of modern society, and a Jeremiad or two. This wandering style will cause the reader's mind to start wandering as well, and his or her attention will falter from the book. After about an hour spent reading, the reader will feel that he/she has arrived nowhere. Looking at the reviews of Professor Kagan's other books, it appears that he might have covered some of this material previously. The other reviews also comment on his discursive style. So if you have read one of Kagan's other books, you probably know what to expect.

This is an easy read, at times a bit rambling as the examples mount, that presents many facts in data demonstrating psychology's shortcomings in its science and practice which are dilemmas for the field that must be addressed in the 21st century. In this sense, they are ghosts haunting psychology's progress. Much of the text presents psychology's failure to consider a greater human

context within which we find the person and psychopathology. Kagan draws upon multiple and cross-cultural sources to argue convincingly for a unified, increasingly efficacious and context-minded psychology. For example, the blunt instrument of psychopharmacological treatment for mental illness too often fails or makes matters worse because cultural and genetic backgrounds of patients are ignored. The author's command of knowledge brought to focus in this book clearly shows this leader in the field has done his homework, lending strong authority to his arguments for new thinking about what psychology is to be. This is a good book, not technically difficult, enjoyable in style truly, and indeed stimulating for those interested in new critical thinking about the field of psychology and its future.

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