

It's Absolutely Impossible? A Longitudinal Study of One Psychologist's Response to Conventional Naysayers

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t can't be done!" "You won't be able to do it!" "Your plans are pure fantasy!" "Why don't you try something more reasonable?" "Shouldn't you be more realistic?" "Don't you think your luck has run out?"

How many ambitions have been squelched by such cynical exclamations and rhetorical questions? How often has a great idea been nipped in the bud? Sometimes these comments are motivated by envy and thus reflect the personal ego needs of the speaker. But more often such remarks come from well-meaning people who only seek to give you the best possible advice. They are merely warning you that your ideas or plans go against conventional wisdom or that they do not conform to what is normally expected. The discouraging comment is being altruistically dispensed to save you grief, to help you avoid bitter disappointment. Yet in terms of adverse consequences, the motives behind the admonitions probably matter very little. Whether the person who utters these warnings is pusillanimous or magnanimous, the net effect is the same. Recipients of such free advice feel the pressure to abandon their dreams or inspirations. And often they do so. That abandonment is not only their loss, but society's, too. The world will then have to wait a bit longer before someone else with the same idea has whatever it takes to run the gauntlet of naysayers.

Fortunately, I have conducted an extremely ambitious longitudinal study that specifically addresses this issue. The study is not ambitious in terms of sample size. On the contrary, it is merely a single-case ($N = 1$) investigation. Nor is the investigation ambitious in terms of its duration. After all, this longitudinal inquiry has been going on only for a few decades (albeit future waves of data collection are still planned). Rather, what makes the study ambitious is that to pursue his highly distinctive vision, the single participant was obliged to put his whole professional career at stake. Nowadays, in fact, it is questionable whether the study would pass muster with the Human Subjects Committee. The ethical ambiguities are not ameliorated by the fact that this high-risk investigation tested but one simple hypothesis: Unlike crime, defying the crowd can indeed pay.¹

Method

SAMPLE

The lone research participant was Dean Keith Simonton (henceforth referred to as DKS).² This participant was recruited for the investigation during his senior year in college. This is a little later than the norm for most psychological studies, which most often sample sophomores enrolled in introductory psychology courses. Also contrary to standard protocol, DKS was not randomly chosen from the general population of students. Instead, he was chosen because he met three rigorous criteria.³

Criterion 1: A Previous History of Defying the Crowd

This stipulation was imposed to ensure that I would be likely to see additional episodes of such behavior during the course of the partici-

¹I realize that this hypothesis may seem outdated given Sternberg and Lubart's (1995) book *Defying the Crowd: Cultivating Creativity in a Culture of Conformity*, not even considering this book that you are currently reading. Nonetheless, none of these books then existed, although I suspect that Sternberg probably had some of the same ideas in incipient form about the same time that this longitudinal study was initiated.

²The use of such initials is common practice in single-case studies, most often to maintain the anonymity of the participant. The usage here has a different basis, however. Because the participant and investigator happen to be both intimate friends and close relatives, referring to the former as DKS permits the latter to display more scientific disinterest. The practice also avoids the negative impression provoked by excessive use of the first-person pronoun (unhappily capitalized in English).

³More truthfully, I used a "convenience sample," DKS being the only person available. But that minor departure from the specified procedures has no impact on the validity of the reported findings.

pant's career development. DKS had demonstrated many instances of refusing to conform to the expectations of others. In junior high school, for instance, DKS received a discouraging reaction when he told a school counselor of his desire to sign up for college-preparatory courses. DKS was informed that this would be foolish, given his excellent performance in shop classes and his socioeconomic background. (He came from a working-class home, his father having dropped out of high school.) DKS insisted anyway. He thought he could do it, his counselor's misgivings notwithstanding. He persisted because he wanted to become a teacher some day. This episode is typical of many others that occurred throughout his schooling.

Criterion 2: Unusual or Unconventional Interests

This criterion was chosen to guarantee that the participant in the single-case study would not have an easy time "fitting in." Obviously, if someone has no interests other than those that fit neatly with some mainstream topic in the discipline, conformity pressures are minimal, and there is no need whatsoever to rebel against the norms. In the case of DKS, he was simultaneously interested in both the sciences and the humanities. In fact, when he applied to college, he wavered between chemistry and history as majors. From his elementary school days, he had been an amateur chemist and naturalist, with some dabbling in physics and astronomy, too. Yet he also performed in drama productions in both high school and college, played rhythm guitar in rock groups, wrote poetry (albeit very bad stuff, in my opinion), and created artworks in various media (e.g., one of his pastels was chosen to decorate the principal's office at his high school). He was also an avid reader, using his hard-earned money from a job at a car wash to purchase the anthology *Great Books of the Western World* (Hutchins, 1952), a collection he still owns and reads. Trying to incorporate all of these interests and abilities into a coherent career path was not going to be easy, yet DKS really wanted to do so. The greater the integration, the more enjoyable his career was likely to be.

Criterion 3: Demonstrated Scientific Potential

Clearly, it does no good to defy the crowd to pursue unusual interests if someone has no potential of making some scientific contribution to the discipline. If someone lacks the talent or commitment to do science, then all will be wasted effort. DKS satisfied this criterion reasonably well. For at least a decade prior to his recruitment as the research participant, he had shown a high degree of promise as a future behavioral scientist. In junior high school, for example, DKS was chosen to partic-

ipate in a special summer program designed by the Los Angeles City School District to cultivate young scientific talent. By the time he graduated from high school he had received special awards in both the natural and the social sciences. As a consequence of these accomplishments, he obtained a financial "free ride" in both college and graduate school, in the latter case supported by a Fellowship from the National Science Foundation.

TESTS AND MEASURES

Having chosen DKS as the participant in this single-case longitudinal investigation, the next step was to expose him to various kinds of *in vivo* assessments. In one way or another these would test his commitment to his own peculiar mission as a scientist or psychologist. The details about these trials are described in the Results section, yet I should point out that a preliminary test was run to make sure that DKS was the appropriate research participant. He had applied to various graduate programs in social psychology and waited eagerly for the outcome.

Eventually, two distinguished social psychologists telephoned DKS just 2 days apart. Each psychologist represented a prestigious university (Harvard and Stanford). Both told him that he was admitted and that they were enthusiastic about his accepting their admission offer. But when DKS made it very explicit that he wished to study the social psychology of creativity, the representative of one institution backtracked and strongly suggested that maybe there was not such a good fit after all. That institution was Stanford. The representative of the other institution made no judgment other than saying that students often change their interests during the course of their graduate study. That institution was Harvard. So, DKS chose Harvard over Stanford largely because he at least had a reasonable prospect of pursuing his major interest.⁴ Of course, this outcome is not too surprising. At the time he was making this decision, Stanford's psychology department was quite mainstream, and its faculty had few interdisciplinary interests. In contrast, the social psychology program at Harvard was still housed in the highly interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations, a unit that included sociologists and cultural anthropologists along with personality, developmental, and social psychologists. Harvard would therefore be more likely to support DKS's unconventional ideas.

⁴Years later, DKS learned the wisdom of his decision. Some psychologists who had earned their doctorates at Stanford University in the 1970s told him that it would have been extremely unlikely that he would have been able to do the research that was the eventual basis for his Harvard doctoral dissertation. Both the methodology and the subject matter would have departed too drastically from the mainstream.

Results

The data collected during this longitudinal study can be presented in two sections. The first deals with the period of graduate training and the second with the period of career development.

GRADUATE TRAINING

When DKS began the Harvard graduate program in 1970, he found himself quickly disappointed. One problem was that the Department of Social Relations was in the process of falling apart. Sociology had just left, and cultural anthropology was soon to follow. By the time DKS finished graduate school, in fact, the psychologists from the various sub-disciplines had merged to form the Department of Psychology and Social Relations. The interdisciplinary environment he had anticipated had vanished. Accordingly, if he was going to obtain a broad understanding of the phenomena that interested him, he was going to have to do it alone. However, this was not going to be easy, because the social psychology program was heavy on course requirements and light on the mentoring of individual research (unless it happened to be part of a faculty member's research program). Many of the required courses and seminars seemed totally peripheral, even irrelevant, at least as far as DKS was concerned. As a consequence, he put in minimal effort, just enough to get passing grades. Moreover, his comportment in class was often less than ideal. Feeling like an outsider looking on a discipline whose methodological and theoretical commitments he could not always accept, he often found himself challenging his professors during discussion. Once he interrupted a professor's presentation so frequently with critical remarks that the seminar was terminated early, the professor refusing to continue. Admittedly, this interruption was not a solo operation. This was the heyday of the Vietnam War, when it was commonplace not to "trust anyone over 30" and to "question authority." But DKS was widely considered the worst of the bunch, a genuine "rebel without a cause."

Not surprisingly, more than once a faculty member advised DKS that he might be better off withdrawing from the graduate program. If DKS couldn't make his ideas conform to those of the faculty, what was the point of him staying anyway? Furthermore, DKS was repeatedly told that his research ideas were not going to go anywhere. Creativity was a dead subject in general and had no place in social psychology anyway. Creativity may not even be a psychological phenomenon, at least not in science, as proven by the occurrence of multiples (i.e., where two or more scientists independently make the same discovery). Besides all

this, the social psychology of creativity could not be studied using mainstream methodologies, namely, laboratory experiments. DKS was explicitly warned that his research would not possibly get accepted in the most prestigious journals of his discipline and that it certainly would never make it into the American Psychological Association's *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (JPSP)*. By the early 1970s, *JPSP* seldom published research on creativity, and the few articles that did appear on that subject invariably used conventional methods. If DKS did not publish in *JPSP*, he could not expect to have a successful academic career as a psychologist.

Everything was going to come to a head at the end of the second year in graduate school. Then DKS would have to pass the Doctoral General Exams. If he failed to do so, he was out of the program, with an "exit" MA at best. Because all students in the same class had to take the same exams at the same time, they formed a study group to prepare for the big event. Surprisingly, given his academic performance to date, DKS declined to participate. By studying the recommended reading on his own, he would have more control over his precious time, permitting him to continue the pursuit of his outside interests. One nice feature about the exams was that the essays were all typed and numbered so that they could be graded anonymously by a faculty committee. That meant that if DKS bit his lip and conformed to the norms for but a single day, he could avoid revealing his identity and thus be assured that his knowledge would be assessed without preconceptions created by his aberrant academic performance. It worked beautifully. Not only did DKS pass, he also "passed with distinction," receiving the highest score in his class!

That occurred in 1972, and afterward the picture brightened considerably. The faculty realized that whatever faults DKS may have had, ignorance of the field was not one of them. In addition, certain external events began to leave him more intellectual breathing space. For instance, McGuire (1973), a former editor of *JPSP*, had published an article in which he argued for more theoretical and methodological openness in the field. In particular, he argued for a "new paradigm . . . deriving hypotheses from a systems theory of social and cognitive structures that takes into account multiple and bidirectional causality among social variables," one in which "hypotheses testing will be done in multivariate correlational designs with naturally fluctuating variables" (p. 446). As Elms (1975) was to point out 2 years later, social psychology was undergoing a "crisis of confidence" with respect to its paradigmatic commitments. This growing disintegration of the disciplinary consensus was coupled with the addition of David Kenny to the graduate program. Having just received his PhD under Donald Campbell, Kenny was both methodologically sophisticated and substantively flexible. He was thus willing to take on DKS as his first graduate student.

All this gave DKS the wiggle room he needed. In 1973 he wrote his required special topic paper, "Time-Series and Longitudinal Analyses of Archival Data: A Suggestion for the Social Psychology of Innovation." With typical interdisciplinary flair, this paper combined cultural anthropology (cross-cultural research methodology), economics (econometric models), history (cliometrics), sociology (theories of sociocultural change), psychoanalysis (psychohistory), and psychology (psychometrics and research on creativity and genius). This paper led immediately to his thesis proposal. Although the oral defense did not go all that well (for narrative, see Simonton, 1990)—skepticism about the feasibility and value of the project was rampant—the proposal eventually passed. He finished the dissertation a year later, on August 5, 1974. Titled "The Social Psychology of Creativity: An Archival Data Analysis," it represented the first example of the research program that DKS wished to pursue for the rest of his career. He was compelled to hurry, though, for he had to load up a truck to move all of his belongings to where he was going to assume the responsibilities of his first academic job. Classes were to begin soon thereafter, and his career had begun.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The position was in the psychology department at the University of Arkansas. This was not his first choice. He had hoped to get a position closer to California and would have liked to be affiliated with an institution with a research reputation more like that of Harvard, Stanford, Yale, or Michigan. But he had to be realistic. The job market for new faculty was in the doldrums in those days, and things would likely not be better for a fresh PhD with such unconventional research interests. To be sure, DKS also had been invited for interviews at Cornell University, Wellesley College, and the University of California at Davis, but these visits did not produce job offers. Although DKS did receive subsequent interview inquiries from Yale and Johns Hopkins, these came after he had already accepted the position at Arkansas. Besides, the faculty in his new department made it very clear that he would not have to compromise his research program, so long as something was published somewhere. He certainly did not have to publish all (or even any) of his research in *JPSP*.

This latitude turned out to be especially critical, because DKS discovered something a bit disconcerting during the course of his job interview at Arkansas. It was revealed that the author of one "letter of recommendation" had observed that DKS had some very interesting ideas but that these ideas would certainly not be publishable in any prestigious journal, including *JPSP*. With a letter of support like that, DKS could not possibly expect to win a position at a major research

university. It began to look like the worst-case scenario was actually the best-case scenario. If the author of this letter was correct, there was no way DKS could hope for more. Furthermore, even if the letter's author was wrong in his prediction, the best option for DKS was to use Arkansas as a springboard for his career advancement.

Happily, the adverse prediction was disproved shortly after he began his teaching duties in Arkansas. DKS had converted three chapters from his dissertation into journal articles, and all three were accepted for publication, two of them in high-impact journals. Indeed, one of these journals was none other than *JPSP*, which on December 16, 1974, decided to publish an article titled "Sociocultural Context of Individual Creativity: A Transhistorical Time-Series Analysis" (Simonton, 1975). Within a short time, other publications accumulated on the DKS curriculum vita, so that in less than 2 years when he ventured into the job market a second time, he had nearly a dozen articles published or in press. He ended up much closer to home, in the psychology department at the Davis campus of the University of California, the same department that declined to offer him a position when he was in his final year at Harvard.

The longitudinal study did not end here. Instead, DKS was exposed to various naturalistic interventions to see if he would ever compromise his research. For example, when he was subjected to a midcareer evaluation to determine his prospects for eventual promotion to a tenured associate professorship, some of his colleagues insisted that he needed to publish investigations using more conventional methods (viz., laboratory experiments). This DKS refused to do, seeing it as an imposition on his academic freedom as well as his scientific integrity (albeit since getting tenure he has published studies using more mainstream techniques; e.g., Simonton, 1985, 1986a). Furthermore, DKS would often have to endure the most brutal evaluations on the part of manuscript referees. One reviewer even proclaimed that one of DKS's manuscripts was the worst one ever read in his or her entire career! Needless to say, DKS has probably accumulated more rejection letters than most psychologists of his cohort. Yet he did not allow these rejections to stop him. He simply revised the manuscript and resubmitted it to another journal. Some of his best articles went through two or more editorial cycles before finding a home. This was not necessarily a bad thing; the article almost always got much better as a direct result. One manuscript was improved so much by the rounds of submission and rejection that he ended up submitting the revision to a journal better than the three others that had refused publication. It was accepted! The lesson here is clear: Perseverance works—at least when coupled with a willingness to accommodate constructive criticisms.

Even when the initial evaluations all went extremely well, DKS

sometimes encountered strangely negative editorial comments. In 1979 two referees determined that a manuscript submitted to *JPSP* for publication was acceptable without *any* revision, a truly rare event in anyone's career. Yet the editor could not resist saying in his acceptance letter that "it is possible that your well may be running dry; the present paper begins to show signs of strain." Because DKS had to include this letter with the materials he submitted when he was going up for tenure, he asked the editor, as politely as possible, to write a revised letter with that comment omitted. This request was necessary because during his tenure appraisal some members of his department also feared he was going to "run dry." After all, when DKS used up all the information available in the histories, biographies, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and anthologies, what else was he going to do with his time? Evidently, the entire record and repository of human civilization couldn't possibly contain as much information as was available from college sophomores in laboratory experiments!

These fears were clearly unjustified. Since those premonitions were expressed, DKS has added more than 200 publications to his CV. It is significant that this output was accomplished without any grant support. It is not that he never tried. Shortly after he was promoted to associate professor in 1980, he made a serious effort to send grant proposals to every funding agency he could think of, both public and private. Each one was shot down. DKS soon learned that it required only one evaluator to dislike one's ideas for funding to be denied, no matter how worthy the proposal was in the minds of the other evaluators. Furthermore, funding was quite obviously confined to research projects that departed less drastically from the mainstream. The most common criticism was that the proposed research could not possibly be carried out, or, if it could, the results would not be worth publishing in any respected journal. These remarks would later evoke many ironic smiles when the research described in these rejected proposals was later accepted for publication in top-tier psychology journals. Nevertheless, DKS had learned his lesson. If he wanted to make substantial contributions to his field, writing grant proposals would not get him where he wanted to go.

As part of this longitudinal study, I kept a detailed record of everything DKS published. In 1982 there appeared an uncharacteristic dip in his output—only one publication, and that only a brief comment in the *American Psychologist*. That was the price he paid for wasting time writing grant proposals that, at best, were "approved but not funded." The count for 1982 contrasts greatly with his normal annual output ($p < .001$). Between 1975 and 2000, he averaged about 8 publications per year, and twice he could claim 18 publications in a single year. These publications include 8 books and more than 3 dozen publications in top journals, including the American Psychological Association's own *American Psy-*

chologist, Psychological Review, Psychological Bulletin, Psychological Methods, Developmental Psychology, Psychology of Aging, and, most astonishingly, JPSP! In fact, DKS has now published more articles in the leading journals than the Harvard professor who predicted that he would not publish any!

These publications have earned DKS a considerable amount of professional recognition.⁵ More pertinent to this study's initial hypothesis, however, is that DKS also earns an excellent income. He has progressed steadily through the academic ranks, often obtaining accelerated advancements and promotions, so that he now stands at the top of the regular pay scale in University of California's professorial series. This yields an annual salary nearly twice as high as the median income for full professors with appointments in the psychology departments of U.S. research universities. Better yet, prize and award monies, consulting fees, honoraria, and royalties amply supplement this regular salary. Ergo, it is decidedly proven that "defying the crowd pays," QED.

Interestingly, when I permitted DKS to read a first draft of this report, he immediately protested the foregoing conclusion. It sounded too mercenary, as if he does what he does to make money. Although he recognizes the need to earn a living, his primary motivation comes from neither the financial rewards nor the professional awards. Rather, he immensely loves what he does. DKS has devoted his life and career to the scientific study of exceptional creators and leaders, geniuses and talents, masterpieces and historic events—what he has called *significant samples* (Simonton, 1999). Hence, his research "subjects" or "participants" have recognizable names or identities: (a) individuals like Confucius, Isaac Newton, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Marian Anderson; (b) products like *Hamlet*, *Citizen Kane*, the *Origin of Species*, and Symphony No. 5 in C Minor; and (c) events like the Golden Age of Greece, the multiple discovery of Mendelian genetics, the defeat of Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg, and King George III's 1788 lapse into insanity. These personalities, accomplishments, and occurrences span almost all civilizations and historical periods and encompass virtually every domain of achievement, from composers to presidents and from patents to motion pictures. All of his subjects are intrinsically fascinating, so much so that they invariably earn entries in encyclopedias and biographical diction-

⁵Complete documentation of his awards and honors, both national and international, and for both research and teaching, is provided at DKS's home page at <http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/Simonton>. Admittedly, the fact that DKS was asked to write this chapter could itself be considered tentative evidence that he had "made it" as a psychologist. Yet I find this evidence overly contingent on the opinion of this book's editor, whose judgment may be off base in the current case (however correct with respect to the remaining contributors to this collection).

aries. Certainly these cases are far more interesting than those most typical of psychological research. In addition, DKS uses his significant samples to test what he considers to be extremely important hypotheses about the psychology of genius, creativity, leadership, and talent. These tests have yielded a large inventory of fascinating findings (Simonton, 1984, 1994a).

Admittedly, all of these tests require that vast stores of qualitative information be first converted into quantitative measurements, compiled in computer databases, and subjected to elaborate statistical analyses (Simonton, *in press*). But even here, DKS managed to make enjoyable what might otherwise be considered a tedious process. This playful opportunism was apparent in his inquiries concerning the 154 sonnets penned by William Shakespeare (e.g., Simonton, 1989). The computerized content analysis could not proceed without first placing the sonnets in machine-readable form. So the very first thing he did each morning after turning on his home computer was to key in a single sonnet. He thus accomplished 1/154th of the requisite task, while at the same time having a "poem of the day" to contemplate and appreciate. Even the statistical analyses usually turned into a welcome phase of excitement and exploration. Besides satisfying the long-standing curiosity about which of his hypotheses would survive empirical test, DKS often took great pleasure in looking at the residual errors of his prediction equations (e.g., Simonton, 1986b). Which cases had scores that fell right on the regression line and which departed from the norm, providing intriguing outliers that refused to conform to our psychological theories? The departures helped DKS better understand the genuine uniqueness of so many celebrities of civilization and history—another special asset of his decision to study famous personalities.

In addition, DKS reiterated the fact that his original rationale for entering the academic world was to become a teacher. One of the wonders of his research program is how well it contributes to his teaching. He now teaches a popular psychology course on Genius, Creativity, and Leadership and has recruited nearly 300 undergraduates to participate in his research. Just as significant, his extensive inquiries into the psychology of science have inspired his approach to teaching the capstone course on the history of psychology. DKS examines the major figures in the annals of our discipline from the standpoint of what psychologists have so far learned about the cognitive, developmental, dispositional, and social factors that contribute to success as an outstanding scientist (Simonton, 2002). Students taking the course have a term paper assignment in which they analyze a particular notable psychologist in terms of this psychological research (Simonton, 1994b). Students thereby learn how psychology can enhance our comprehension of those who have most contributed to psychology's emergence as a scientific disci-

pline. Along the way, students also learn what it takes to make their own contributions to the field.

In a nutshell, DKS claims that the pleasures he gets from research and teaching are far more critical than the checks he receives. Defying the crowd certainly pays, but the biggest portion of that payment is intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic rather than material. He asked me to include this clarification, and I have complied.

Discussion

Without doubt, this longitudinal study has many limitations.⁶ One patent shortcoming is that it is only a single-case inquiry. DKS may not necessarily be representative of all maverick psychologists. Another weakness is that it was a correlational rather than experimental study. It would have been advantageous to impose the various tests as active manipulations rather than just let things happen randomly (albeit the ethics of deliberately imposing such career obstacles would be questionable). Finally, it might be argued that it is premature to report these results now. According to his own empirical and theoretical research, DKS still has some good years ahead of him, and so his reputation (and earnings) will probably continue to grow (Simonton, 1991, 1992, 1997).

Yet putting these limitations aside, the career of DKS demonstrates the validity of the study's hypothesis for at least one psychologist who has attained more than the usual success. Hence, I decided to ask DKS four questions that might be of interest to future psychologists trying to decide whether they should defy the crowd, either in graduate school or as assistant professors. I will merely present his responses without comment. They pretty much speak for themselves.

1. WHAT, IF ANYTHING, WOULD YOU DO DIFFERENTLY NOW?

I guess I would have been both more diplomatic and more assertive when encountering obstacles to my chosen path.

⁶I must admit that the most serious liability of this longitudinal investigation is that it is actually a retrospective study. Thus, data reliability is contingent entirely on the accuracy of the participant's "autobiographical memory"—this when we have ample empirical evidence that such memories cannot be completely trusted. Even so, DKS informed me that these data reflect his best recollections. I can only hope that the episodes he recalled are replicated by future studies using a truly longitudinal design but with different research participants.

Particularly when I was at Harvard, I would often “come on too strong,” sometimes even “flying off the handle.” This only polarized people, and sometimes alienated those who might otherwise have taken my side. If I could go back in a time machine and rewrite the true biography, I would lower the pitch and decibel level of my voice, firmly saying without adrenaline accompaniment something like, “I appreciate why you find that important for me to know (or do), and I really wish I could do so, but at present it doesn’t seem to have as much importance as some other things I must know (or do). Even so, I’ll try to come back to your suggestion in the future.” Whether I could pull this off without sounding insincere or ingratiating is another question altogether. Nonetheless, I must admit that after about a decade into my career, I formally apologized to the Harvard professor who received the biggest dose of my ire.

2. WHAT WERE THE COSTS TO YOU PROFESSIONALLY OF DEFYING THE ESTABLISHMENT?

My feelings here are mixed. On the one hand, being a “lone wolf” has definite negative consequences. Many psychologists still don’t feel that I’m doing psychology, and some still confuse what I do with psychohistory and psychobiography. So, if I had only “joined the pack,” I might have ended up at one of the top 10 research universities. I probably would also have been far more successful in my quest for extramural funding. These two consequences likely would have enabled me to attract more high-quality graduate students and therefore to acquire more intellectual successors than I do today. During the course of my career I’ve seen many young talents who had an intense interest in my research and yet who declined University of California at Davis’s admission offer because they were offered more money to go to a more prestigious university—to do what they did not find particularly to their liking. It would be nice to have had the cash and the name to motivate these talents to “keep the faith.” On the other hand, I’m doing as well as most ambitious psychologists could reasonably expect—and especially well for someone who wasn’t supposed to be “college material” or who had no chance of publishing in first-tier psychological journals. I don’t think I’m being complacent when I say that I have attained some degree of success. And, besides, I can live with myself, knowing I did my best to do what I do best.

3. WHAT WERE THE COSTS TO YOU PERSONALLY OF DEFYING THE ESTABLISHMENT?

At the personal level, too, the benefits far outnumber the costs. Naturally, my first 2 years in graduate school were extremely stressful, and

going up for tenure when you're a nonconformist is not a relaxing experience, particularly when your university must solicit letters from extramural experts who will evaluate your work. At times, my health and my personal relationships suffered. Yet, it is clear that I'm a far happier person "doing my own thing." If I had gone along with what everyone expected me to do, I probably would have had a midlife crisis motivated by a deep realization that I had sold myself short. Despite my Buddhist predilections, I'm not a believer in reincarnation, and accordingly I believe that if you can't be true to yourself in this life, there is no second chance.

4. WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE OTHER SCIENTISTS WHO CONSIDER FOLLOWING A SIMILAR PATH?

Given the potential obstacles and frustrations, the decision should not be taken lightly. So, by all means, be honest with yourself, almost brutally so. After all, this consideration requires the most objective self-appraisal. Yet if you know deep down that you have the ability and knowledge necessary to give your ideas the careful attention they deserve; if you know at your very core that your vision would enable you to realize most fully your potential as a human being, psychologist, and scientist; if you know that you have the persistence and patience to put up with all of those who tell you *it* can't be done or *you* can't do it; if you are willing to be a lone wolf and give up the security of belonging to the pack . . . if you can fulfill all these conditions, then I have one and only one recommendation: *Do it!* You owe it not just to yourself, but to psychology as a discipline.

After I informed DKS that the poststudy interview and debriefing session had been completed, he spontaneously volunteered one last comment. He said, "I hope that graduate students and younger colleagues with great creative ideas will benefit from the results of your longitudinal study." So do I.

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Robert Sternberg is a crowd defier who has lived to tell the tale. In the sometimes-cutthroat world of intelligence theory, his has often been (and continues to be) a loud voice of dissent. His theory of successful intelligence (which traces its roots to his own childhood fears of intelligence measures) managed to thoroughly alienate the old guard of intelligence, just as subsequent theories have made waves in their respective topics of study. Sternberg continues to enjoy what he calls "being on the fringe" as director of the Yale Center for the Psychology of Abilities, Competencies, and Expertise.