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Book Reviews

A Quarter Century of Book Reviews in *The American Journal of Psychology*

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I feel privileged to be in my 26th year of editing the book review section of *The American Journal of Psychology* (*AJP*). Although *AJP* had its origins as the first psychology journal, when I began my editorship in 1985 psychology was enmeshed in an interdisciplinary science. Consequently, I extended the reach of the book reviews to other disciplines of cognitive science and beyond. From my limited vantage point, the response has been positive. But we still have room to expand our influence, as we have not yet joined bloggers and other denizens of the growing instant communication media by creating Facebook and Twitter followings.

When I began, I believed that writing a book review for *AJP* would be more attractive if reviewers were given more journal space than in a typical review and were asked to provide an overview of the state of the art in the relevant field as well as how the book fit or advanced the state of the art. Although only five to seven of these comprehensive reviews per issue have been published, each one updates the current activity in one of the many varieties of relevant research specialties.

However, it became difficult to enlist book reviewers once I had exhausted various favors or good will by friends and colleagues. Even committed reviewers asked to be relieved of their duties if their assigned book proved to be a loser. One novel practice I instituted is that of cross-reviews by authors of related

books. Authors want to have their books not only read but also reviewed, and they will even review another book if theirs is reviewed in turn. Given the plethora of books being written, it was possible to find two related books and offer this contingency to the authors. This proposition does not violate our professional ethics because neither reviewer would be influenced by the other's review since both authors would not see the reviews of their books until their publication. Now is an appropriate moment to thank the many reviewers who have made my editorship so rewarding and the book review section so successful.

What purpose do book reviews serve? This question brought to mind the anecdote of the arrogant professor who, when asked whether he had read so-and-so's new book, replied, "Read it? Hell, I haven't even lectured on it yet!"

There are a plethora of reasons to justify the enterprise of book reviews, but I will discuss just one relating to confirmation bias, which our science has yet to purge from its practices. Book reviews can alert readers to how scientific creeds in the media and in the science itself might yet be challenged. One of my favorite examples is a book I reviewed by Adrian Wenner and Patrick Wells (1990). Their diary described their sensitization to confirmation bias in research and theory concerning language in insects (Massaro, 1992). Beginning as members of the bee language school, they garnered substantial grant

support, conference invitations, and good will from their colleagues. Once they initiated experiments that putatively removed confirmation bias, they were surprised by the negative findings. Their colleagues were incensed that Wenner and Wells would not only interpret their new results as negative but also to try to pawn them off onto the scientific community. No longer did the heretical authors experience good will toward their research. They were excommunicated from the community of those who study the language of insects. Colleagues from within that community proceeded to “invalidate” their negative findings and to add new positive ones, or so they argued.

The bee researchers should not have been surprised. Conscientious scientists have been ridiculed for contrary findings at least since Lazzaro Spallanzani’s 18th-century discovery that bats navigate via their ears and probably as recently as Dan Shechtman’s receipt of the 2011 Nobel Prize for chemistry. In 1982, it was “known” that atoms were packed inside crystals in symmetric patterns that could repeat. When Shechtman’s tests revealed the opposite outcome, this controversial discovery led to his dismissal from his research group, and he became the object of scientism (cf. racism or sexism) for at least a decade. His remark on learning of his Nobel Prize can be added to the many lessons history can teach us. As Shechtman observed, “The main lesson that I have learned over time is that a good scientist is a humble and listening scientist and not one that is sure 100 percent in what he reads in the textbooks” (Chang, 2011, p. A8).

Novelists, philosophers, and scientists have revealed the ills of confirmation bias. More than a century ago, Leo Tolstoy cautioned us, “The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of doubt, what is laid before him” (Tolstoy, 1894, chapter 3).

As noted by Jonathan Evans (2012) and Keith Stanovich (2012) in their recent reviews of each other’s books, the last few decades of empirical and theoretical study of thinking have led to the acceptance of dual process theories. The distinction between the two processes involves various contrasts such as automatic versus reflective thinking, intuitive versus

deliberate thinking, and fast versus slow thinking. We would hope that confirmation bias would not be a factor in deliberate, reflective, slow thinking, but it obviously is. Thus, there appears to be no easy cure.

T. C. Chamberlain (1965), Karl Popper (1959), and John Platt (1964) have prescribed methods to help prevent confirmation bias, but in practice it seems that it is too easy to conclude that, as many pundits of the market economy proclaim, “This time is different.” Given that our science is a human enterprise, it cannot be expected to be perfect. Despite its frailties and the uncertainty about so many issues, perhaps our science is more or less what Winston Churchill (1947) said about democracy: “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” I trust that book reviews provide a forum for discussion that adds an additional safeguard against falling into the abyss of confirmation bias and strengthens our government of scientific inquiry.

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