What does it mean to know something?

John Marzillier, psychologist and writer

George Orwell suggested that a writer often writes out of the ‘desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity’. This collection of 12 essays by the distinguished social scientist Jerome Kagan bears out Orwell’s observation. Citing another famous essayist, Montaigne, who was preoccupied with the question ‘What do I know?’, Kagan asked himself a slightly different question: What does it mean to know something? Drawing upon his prodigious knowledge of the social sciences, he answers the question in essays that range from the basic structure of human knowledge (schemata and words) through the relationship between brain and mind (what genes actually tell us, for example) to topics such as the family, education, expectations and feelings. He ends with an essay entitled ‘Does a moral person behave morally?’.

In each of these essays facts abound but never intrude. We are not subjected to the tiresome litany of reference lists or footnotes. Instead, suggested readings are appended under chapter headings at the end of the text. That sensible decision made the book a pleasure to read. Each essay stands on its own, and it is possible, and probably best, to read one essay and reflect upon it before moving on to the next. Like all good essays they will repay repeated reading.

What I thought is truly valuable about this book is the way Kagan is able to draw upon a breadth and depth of knowledge that comes from a lifetime of academic work and to marshal the facts into lucid and intelligent arguments that a non-specialist can follow. He is an elegant writer and he knows how to frame a sentence for maximum effect. On genes he writes: ‘…it is true that without genes humans would be nothing. But because no genes code for water, it is equally true we would be nothing if we were only genes.’ He does not shy away from sensitive or difficult topics. But he is never bombastic or polemical. Even when he demolishes the mistaken interpretations of research scientists, as he does in his analysis of the use blood-flow measures in MRI scanners, he does so with a degree of sympathy to the difficulty of the task.

The overriding impression I came away with was of a wise and thoughtful writer and of a book that will appeal to all those who want to know what psychology has to offer and, above all, why the mind matters.

A battle cry echoing from media portals

Newsgagents and general bookstores have found their shelves sagging under an influx in trade books describing online interactions and behaviours in recent years, and there is frequently a focus on the negative repercussions of such technologies, particularly for children. The Cyber Effect was recently added to this emerging trend, covering similar topics to those already explored in other texts (including the potential detrimental impact of technology on attention, health, romance and interpersonal interactions, as well as warnings of dark net activities, cyberbullying, online predators and addictions).

The Cyber Effect takes as one of its recurring themes that ‘technology is not good or bad in its own right. It is neutral...’. While Melvin Kranzberg’s laws of technology are not cited in Aiken’s book, there are prominent similarities between Aiken’s message and Kranzberg’s First Law – ‘Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral’. Both Aiken and Kranzberg warn that the longer-term effects are frequently unknown when the technologies are first implemented and that aspects of behaviour and societal factors can be highly influential on the eventual consequences and evaluation of advances. Indeed, the book repeatedly laments the lack of academic research on the exposure to certain technologies, using this as a battle-cry for suggestions based on personal observations and case studies gleaned through media portals. There is very limited inclusion of the findings of over two decades of scholarly studies in cyberpsychology, and only occasional mention of the much broader research in developmental, cognitive, social and health psychology that provides insights into technology’s potential impact on human behaviour and abilities.

Aiken writes in a highly accessible manner, which will certainly make assimilation of the message easier for those without a psychological background. It is unfortunate that the book tends strongly towards the description of negative aspects of technology and online life – while it posits that the beneficial aspects of technology are already widely presented by marketing professionals and therefore a book focusing on negative aspects is required to restore equilibrium, it could more accurately be argued that many of the popular psychology books in this field do favour examination of the negative consequences of technology use. Consequently, a more positive approach may have been the more appropriate one, to inform parents and other technology users that psychology has also identified a legion of benefits to users, especially children.

As an academic working in this field of study, I am far from the targeted audience for this book, and it is difficult to concur with an approach that favours extensive speculation, despite the absence of longitudinal research for some topics. Potentially the greatest strength of this text is that it may increase awareness by parents of potential threats to children online, or may encourage users to take more caution with their personal data. Conversely, it is also possible that the majority of those who purchase or read this book are already anxious about such matters, and the book serves to reinforce concern while failing to offer clear description of the counterpoints to this perspective.

See also www.thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/csicyber-effect
Reviewed by Gráinne Kirwan,
Lecturer in Psychology and Co-Chair of the MSc in Cyberpsychology, Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology

Looking at systems that produce inhumane and immoral acts

Albert Bandura needs no introduction. A leading figure in modern psychology, the founder of social cognitive theory is a permanent fixture on most, if not all, developmental and social psychology teaching syllabuses. In his latest book, Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves, Bandura examines the psychological processes underpinning how and why individuals are able to selectively distance themselves from their harmful conduct. In contrast to traditional psychological accounts of morality that focus solely on the individual decision-making, Bandura focuses on understanding the social systems wherein large scale inhumane and immoral acts occur.

Each chapter in the book examines a different contemporary – and highly controversial – social issue; including violent media, the gun industry, irresponsible financial actions of corporations, capital punishment, terrorism and environmental sustainability. Bandura outlines the morally dubious practices conducted by individuals and institutions at the heart of these issues and then
employs agentic theory to explain how they are able to ‘disengage’ from their actions in order to maintain and preserve self-image. For example, in the chapter examining capital punishment, Bandura explains how moral disengagement is needed at every stage of the judicial process – from policy makers to jurors to executioners – in order for the systemic decision to be made to take human life.

As a psychologist interested in media effects, the most interesting chapter to me personally was that centred on the entertainment industry and media violence. In this chapter, Bandura revisits some of his most famous work demonstrating the propensity of children to imitate violent behaviour (i.e. the Bobo Doll study). However, the focus in this chapter is not on the research itself, but the challenges faced by Bandura and his colleagues when trying to make policy makers acknowledge their findings. Here, Bandura draws on a range of psychological theories to explain the reluctance of government and the entertainment industry to take notice of research findings (that violent media may play some role in shaping violent behaviour) and change policy accordingly. With research impact high on the agenda of most academics, the chapter serves as cautionary tale of how difficult it can be to turn knowledge into practice – especially where there may be financial incentives for maintaining the morally dubious status quo.

The fresh and enlightened perspective that Bandura offers to understanding social morality engages the reader from start to finish, appealing to a diverse and wide-ranging audience. The book would also be a useful teaching aid due to its focus on real-world topical issues [encompassing everything from the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to the financial crash of 2007] that may assist student comprehension of the more complex social psychological theories underpinning moral disengagement. Moreover, the book is persuasively written and there can be little doubt about which side of the social and political debate Bandura stands on. One cannot help but wonder: If psychology can be used to understand these controversial moral and social issues – can it be used to overcome them and create a more humane society?

See also p.38, and read a chapter on our website at https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/disengagement-morality

Reviewed by Dr Beth T. Bell, Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychological and Social Sciences, York St John University
Bewildered and excluded

Seventeen years ago regarding the investigative interviewing of vulnerable people Becky Milne and I said in our book that ‘no research exists... Something must be done about this’. During the intervening years some steps have been taken to improve matters.

In 2002 the government in England and Wales first published relevant guidance [largely based on psychological research and called ‘Achieving Best Evidence’]. More recently, after novel work in South Africa, it introduced the use of intermediaries to assist communication between vulnerable persons and the police/courts. Furthermore, the Advocacy Training Council recently established ‘The Advocate’s Gateway’ [TAG] to improve the justice systems’ approach to vulnerable victims, witnesses and defendants – who are overrepresented in such systems.

This book contains chapters relating to the TAG’s first conference, some of which mention the growing body of relevant knowledge derived from work by psychologists on (i) how inexpertly vulnerable people are questioned by untrained police and advocates and (ii) what psychological research tells us about the contents of relevant training. One key psychological chapter mentions a recent case in which the Court of Appeal said that judges have a duty to intervene when questioning is poor (a topic that for several years I presented on to Scottish judges, informing them of psychological research on what actually are poor questions). Some chapters focus more on ‘the law’ and here the co-editors could have been more assertive in guiding authors away from repetition. A chapter mentions the next challenge for psychologists, which is to conduct research to help improve the use of interpreters – in a parlous state around the world. Another demonstrates how sketching helps vulnerable people to recall.

In her preface Penny Cooper rightly states that bewildered and excluded from effective participation is how vulnerable people usually feel about justice. At last things are improving. In his postscript His Honour Judge Topolski notes that such improvements are due to ‘the pioneering, persistent and courageous work of a few’ – the lead editor of this book and some psychologists are among these few.

Reviewed by Professor Ray Bull [University of Derby], President of the European Association of Psychology and Law

My shelfie... Emily Hutchinson (Associate Editor for Books, and Director of EJH Consulting)

Nancy Kline: Time to Think
I first read this book 10 years ago, as I was training to be a coach, and remember immediately connecting with it. Then it gathered dust on my shelf until I spent three days with Nancy Kline on her Thinking Partnership course. This has blown my mind, as the simplicity of what the book contains belies the truth and power of her approach. I’m now reading more of her work and know that this is going to have a big impact on the way that I work. Allowing people the time to think in the presence of full attention is a wonderful thing.

Alex Haslam, Michael J. Platow, and Steve Reicher: The New Psychology of Leadership
There is an abundance of books around leadership, and thankfully the more current approaches recognise that a leader is not a leader without a follower, and hence what is important is the social dynamic between the two. This book is a robust analysis of social psychological reasons why a leader’s membership and representation of a group are the crucial elements in their being effective. This approach allows for diversity of both leaders and followers and provides a focus for development efforts around relationships and authenticity.

Norman Dodge: The Brain That Changes Itself
Back in my undergrad psychology course I was fascinated by perception and how the brain processes stimuli. This is a beautifully written summary of the history of discoveries about neuroplasticity, written in a very applied way by using multiple case studies of individuals who have made amazing recoveries. We frequently underestimate the brilliance of biology, and this book has highlighted that to me.

Mark Williams & Danny Penman: Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World
I could have chosen any of a number of excellent books about Mindfulness. Busyness is becoming a bigger and bigger problem in life, and finding ways to get a bit of headspace consequently becomes more important. Mindfulness is something that helps me, personally, and the research supporting its benefits from psychological and physical health to being able to perform optimally is ever growing.

Marcus Buckingham: Now Discover Your Strengths
Allowing and supporting individuals to focus on what they find energising and naturally motivating seems such an obvious concept, until you realise how rarely it truly happens within organisations. Buckingham is a great storyteller and simply describes the concept of working with strengths.

Tim Harford: Adapt
A behavioural economist examines the need for organisations to be adaptive to the changes in their environment in order to survive and thrive. The analogy reminds me of the need to be constantly scanning the environment, experimenting with new and different ideas and approaches.

Daniel Pink: Drive
Turns conventional views of motivation within organisations on their head. The fact that monetary reward can de-motivate can release organisations to be more creative about how they engage their people and also encourages them to treat people as individuals rather than homogeneous beings who will all follow a certain carrot.
I am a psychologist, who for has many years worked at two Polish universities and two in Germany. However, amassing points for publishing research on problems of little significance, conference ‘tourism’, and scrambling up the academic career ladder are not what I wanted to devote my life to. So I began to write books popularising psychology and to work with business.

About 10 years ago I decided to write a modest book devoted to some of the myths prevalent in the teaching and understanding of psychology which I had notoriously come up against. This was partly for my own benefit, to categorise and brush up my own knowledge. It really was intended to be a modest little book, but during the course of writing the amount of material increased at an alarming rate as I uncovered more and more distortions and pseudoscience in what we usually call psychology. When the book had already reached over 400 pages, and I had used barely a third of the available material, I decided to publish it as *Psychology Gone Wrong: The Dark Sides of Science and Therapy*, the first volume of a trilogy. *Psychology Led Astray* is the second volume of this trilogy.

**What inspired you to write the book?**

When you see blatant deception being practised on innocent and gullible people, and how these fraudsters go unpunished, you have to ask yourself – how on earth is this possible? Why does nobody expose them? Why, instead of condemnation, these people are treated with respect and admiration in society? That’s when it becomes necessary to expose them and show that the emperor has no clothes. I don’t know how to combat these fraudsters, but I can write (at least my readers tell me so), so that’s why I wrote a book about it. What I’m about to say may seem unpolitical, but it’s honest. Uppermost in my mind were negative emotions – anger and a rejection of injustice – and only later came compassion for all those who had been damaged by dishonest psychologists and psychotherapists.

**What sets this book apart from other books in this field?**

Most authors today attempt to create their own original concept and sell it to their readers. As a result, our discipline resembles a garden choked with weeds, in which each gardener looks after his own plant and it is difficult to see which of them is useful. The ‘weeds’ described in my book include the use of unproven or even harmful psychological therapies, theories formulated on incomplete or sometimes faked results, and instances where overlapping theoretical constructs can lead to misunderstandings or confusion. This book is a guide to that garden, showing which plants are weeds, which are edible, which are medicinal and which are decorative. In contrast to many others, this book helps to clean up the garden.
Which books have had a strong influence on your ideas or your career?

I admire authors with intellectual courage. Elizabeth Loftus is one of them. The publication of her books brought personal death threats, but she nevertheless continued her studies. Another role model for me is the exceptionally professional Scott O. Lilienfeld who, in a series of books, exposed the pseudoscience prevalent in psychology. As can be seen in *Psychology Led Astray*, Richard Feynman’s approach to science has had a big influence on me, although this mainly concerns books about him or collections of his diffuse sayings, rather than his own publications. And it is impossible not to include Stanislav Andreski, a sociologist of Polish descent, who wrote the intellectually courageous book *Social Sciences as Sorcery*. Also on the list must be Jeffrey Masson’s *Against Therapy*, containing a lifetime of experience. And of course Tana Dineen, whose book *Manufacturing Victims* added to the legions of her enemies.

What future developments can we expect from you?

Once I was involved with unpredictable behaviour, also known as ‘protean behaviour’. It should be noted that for the past decades psychology has had to contend with the unpredictable and fight for every percentage of unexplained variance, with unfavourable results. If we were to accept the fact that humans have the ability to generate random and unpredictable behaviour and to use that ability on a daily basis, then we would change our approach to research completely. Instead of seeking answers for what determines such behaviour, we would research why and when we become unpredictable. It might turn out that the nightmare of unexplained variance ceases to be the nightmare of psychology, just as in maths it is possible to describe certain phenomena exclusively by using the chaos theory, in physics we come to terms with the noisiness of elementary particles, and in logic we recognise Gödel’s incompleteness theorem. I would like to devote the third volume of my trilogy to equally fascinating concepts.

How to Win: Lessons from the Premier League provides candid insights into the psychology of elite professional football from both a player’s (The Secret Footballer – TSF) and practitioner’s (The Secret Psychologist – TSP) point of view. A consistent theme within the book is the ruthless nature of the professional game for all involved. This creates a highly pressurised working environment influencing people’s thoughts, feelings, emotions and behaviours. It is clear that to win, players and managers need to deal with a plethora of unpredictable psychosocial challenges, whilst one wrong decision can have serious negative consequences for their careers.

The book is not simply an amalgamation of anecdotes and stories from a career in football, rather TSF shows an understanding of concepts and studies in social and behavioural psychology. This understanding is used to underpin and support the points he makes adding credence to these arguments. TSP interjects at the end of each chapter to provide a practitioner’s perspective on the topic, at times providing further context or strategies and at others challenging TSF’s views.

The author’s relaxed and humorous writing style makes the book an engaging and easy read, whilst personal experiences are discussed with an honesty that anonymity allows. Tips and strategies are provided throughout, which the authors have used to help manage some of the challenges outlined. These would be useful for practitioners working in professional sport or individuals wanting to enhance their own playing or coaching.

Reviewed by Ross Shand, Chartered Psychologist, Leeds Beckett University
When Breath Becomes Air
– Paul Kalanithi (2016, Bodley Head)
A poignant memoir by the late Paul Kalanithi, a neurosurgeon who was diagnosed with widespread cancer. This was an moving book to read and I was touched by the personal journey the author shared from his diagnosis, to starting a family and eventually finding meaning. The book challenges readers to consider the role of professional vs. patient and the impact that a transition from health to illness has upon one’s personal identity.

A must for those interested in the social construction of health and illness. Over the years I’ve continually come back to this thought-provoking book which challenges me to view illness as a lived and personal experience for the individual. Books like this are vitally important as the biomedical model still dominates many approaches and interventions in the field of health and illness. Books like Making Sense of Illness help us to remember and champion the contributions of health psychology, medial anthropology and medical sociology to our understanding of the interaction between society, psychology and illness.

This well-known book calls for us not to just explore individual predictors of illness and mortality, but to examine the impact of inequality on factors such as health and illness. Essentially this book illustrates that cultivating equality can be beneficial to all of us.

Interweaves practical techniques for developing personal resilience with a strong academic underpinning. When I first read this book, I was studying cognitive behaviour therapy and was very surprised at the engaging style and tone of this text. This book has remained on my shelf for both a personal and academic perspective.

Still Alice is the fictional story of a highly successful woman diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer’s disease. Lisa Genova is a neuroscientist at Harvard University, who has used her insight into Alzheimer’s to skilfully inject realism and depth. You only need to look at the reviews of this book (and the subsequent film) to see how the book’s portrayal of Alzheimer’s resonates with those living with the condition and their families.

What to read...
when living with long-term illness

Behave is an interesting exploration of the life of Rosalie Rayner, second wife to the controversial Dr John Watson. Psychology was a new science in the beginning of the 19th century, and, despite the controversy, Watson is considered a pioneer in behavioural psychology.

Behave highlights their famous ‘Baby Albert’ experiment, which was an attempt to prove that fear is a conditioned response to stimuli, through methods that make uncomfortable reading. Science constitutes only a small part of the book, which quickly turns in to a romanticised tragedy, with a young woman’s hopes and aspirations quashed by her commitment to meeting her husband’s expectations. There is a strong theme of ambivalence surrounding Rosalie’s marriage and life choices. Dr Watson is portrayed as dominant and ruthless, yet fragile, something which elicited mixed feelings in me, too. There were moments when I found myself frustrated by Rosalie’s choices to end her career and education, her submission to raising her children under strict behaviourist principles.

Historical information about Rosalie Rayner is limited: she has few publications and there is not much known about her. Despite being fiction, this book gives a voice to the woman behind the ‘Father of Behaviourism’.

Reviewed by Lori Appleyard, an Assistant Psychologist

Giving a voice to the woman behind Watson

Behave
Andromeda
Romano-Lax
Soho Press; 2016; Pb £12.99

By Rebecca Stack, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University, and one of two new Associate Editors for this section. Rebecca’s teaching and research seek to understand psychological processes that occur between people, medicine, health and illness. She also teaches and conducts research into psychological wellbeing and resilience in people diagnosed with long-term illnesses.
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