A primer for rational inquiry

Question: What do holocaust-deniers and creationists have in common? Answer: There are striking similarities in their styles of reasoning. Both find specific errors in the huge mass of relevant scholarly work and then infer that the scholars’ wider conclusions must be wrong. Both quote leading scholars out of context and try to make it look as though they support views other than the ones they actually hold. And both use honest debate among scholars to suggest that they are in doubt about the reality of the major phenomenon (i.e. the holocaust or evolution, respectively) and that they cannot get their stories straight.

Michael Shermer takes the view that we should confront the holocaust deniers and evolution deniers (as he calls creationists), rather than ignore them. For example, Shermer says, the myths that the Nazis mass-produced soap from the bodies of Jews, and that Dachau was an extermination camp, are based on simple errors of scholarship that have now been corrected. However, because scholars are understandably reluctant to address the arguments of the holocaust deniers, the myths held by the public do not get corrected and it becomes easy for the holocaust deniers to then claim they are exposing lies peddled by the ‘establishment’.

Unfortunately, intelligence and education do not confer automatic protection against the possession of weird beliefs (Shermer’s book includes a variety of other phenomena, such as satanic abuse panics, belief in alien abductions, belief in theories of racial superiority – Afrocentrism, as well as white superiority – and the personality cult surrounding the objectivist thinker Ayn Rand). The weird beliefs held by some intelligent people tend to be different to those held by the less intelligent, but, as Shermer says: ‘Smart people believe weird things because they are skilled at defending beliefs they arrived at for non-smart reasons.’ Shermer’s final chapter examines a number of variables that might relate to the holding of weird beliefs and membership of cults. As well as intelligence and education, these include age, gender, personality and locus of control. The area appears to be somewhat underexplored, but among the results presented here there are a few strong findings. For example, cult membership includes both smart and non-smart people, as well as both men and women. With regard to the latter, however, women are more likely to join ‘spiritual’ cults whereas ‘men (presumably in the US) are more likely to join anti-government groups’. Shermer also notes that the American public’s views on evolution/creationism do not seem to have shifted since the Gallup organisation began regularly polling them in 1982. However, people with higher incomes and higher education levels are more likely to say that evidence supports the theory of evolution, as are younger people (though in other domains age-effects are decidedly mixed).

Despite the limited protection that intelligence and education offer against weird beliefs, it may help to understand more about the kind of thinking errors that lead to the latter. In this regard, Shermer’s excellent book is a manual for clear thinking in that he discusses the nature of scepticism, the distinction between science and pseudo-science, and some of the reasoning fallacies that prevent people from rejecting weird beliefs. These chapters in particular would make an excellent primer for students learning about rational inquiry, but more than that I would recommend this book to anyone who cares about clear thinking.

Souvenir Press; 2007; Pb £12.99
Reviewed by David Hardman
who is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at London Metropolitan University

Engaging depth
Understanding Trauma: Integrating Biological, Clinical, and Cultural Perspectives
Laurence J. Kirmayer, Robert Lemerlson & Mark Barad (Eds.)

This is an excellent, in-depth overview of the most recent findings of trauma research. The 21 chapters – each by an eminent researcher from areas as diverse as neuroscience, clinical science, and cultural anthropology – present a range of interesting, relevant and valuable information.

There are three sections, covering effects of early life stress on the development of neural systems; clinical approaches to the treatment of trauma; and cultural analyses of personal, social, and political responses to massive trauma and genocide. Though each section will have greater relevance to professionals from specific interest groups, the other two sections must not be neglected as they work together in presenting critical and creative challenges for the trauma worker. For example, Kirmayer’s chapter on the failures of imagination serves to remind us of the challenges facing clinicians in reducing the patient’s story to mere symptoms that require intervention. The breadth and depth of material included in this book are intellectually engaging, and facilitate a better understanding of trauma research.

Cambridge University Press;
2007; Hb £55.00
Reviewed by Fred Gravestock
A gem for health psychologists

Paul Kennedy (Ed.)

Psychological Management of Physical Disabilities: A Practitioner’s Guide

This book is aimed at psychologists who are actively engaged in the management of people with chronic diseases and physical disabilities. It shows clearly the important role of health and clinical psychologists in rehabilitation, but it’s also valuable for another reason. For years, journals have failed to publish papers introducing new treatments and evaluating old ones, making it difficult to keep abreast of developments. Clinical practice has stagnated, and standard techniques are too often based on ‘word-of-mouth’ experience... and books like these.

This guide offers all the essentials, as well as expert opinions on the various theories and most importantly, details of the latest interventions. The only thing I missed were separate chapters on rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, cancer and AIDS.

Concise and well written, this is an excellent introduction to the subject for undergraduates and a useful review for all veterans who wish to check that they are up to date. I found it extremely informative and inspiring. Indeed, in my 30-year career, this is one of the most enjoyable academic texts I’ve read.

Reviewed by Ellen Goudsmit

Practical advice for the expert witness

Chris Pampin

Expert Witness Practice in the Civil Arena

Expert Witness Fees

These two concise books are nicely laid out and easy to follow and reference back to when necessary. Each includes definitions of key points in bold along the side, which signposts the reader and makes the text easy to follow. The books read as a series of answers to commonly asked questions.

Topics covered include: the role and power of the court over the expert witness, a review of how the expert is sought, review of payments and fees, what should be included in a report as well as practical advice on report writing. In addition, there is useful information on the copyright of the report once it’s finalised. The books also provide numerous web links and reference sources for additional information.

Bearing in mind the limitation that the books are for application in England and Wales, and not in other jurisdictions, here we have two useful reference guides to those in the field that also offer a solid overview to the beginner.

Reviewed by Maria Ward

Apogee of the medical model

Peter E. Nathan & Jack M. Gorman

A Guide to Treatments that Work (3rd edn)

At first glance, this is an impressive compendium of the efficacy and effectiveness of psychological and pharmacological evidenced-based treatments for a wide range of psychiatric disorders. The breadth of conditions covered is comprehensive, from the usual anxiety and depressive disorders to those less commonly found in a text on treating psychopathology, such as dementia and restless leg syndrome.

Each diagnostic category has a separate chapter summarising empirically validated pharmacological and psychological treatments. However on reflection, this is very much a psychiatric text that assumes its readers are not only comfortable with the reliability and validity of psychiatric diagnoses, but also find the categorical model an effective prerequisite to tailoring treatment interventions. Alternative models such as case formulation and transdiagnostic approaches simply don’t fit and are barely discussed. Equally innovative third-wave cognitive-behavioural treatments such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and ACT barely rate a mention because of the way evidence is weighted in favour of randomised controlled trials.

Recent articles and correspondence in The Psychologist, and more broadly, suggest there is a real paradigm shift occurring in the conceptualisation and classification of psychopathology; and in that context, this volume very much represents the apogee of the medical model and what it can tell us about understanding and managing human suffering.

Reviewed by Doug MacKie

Children’s Dreams: Notes from the Seminar Given in 1936–1940

C.G. Jung

Marvellous Minds: The Discovery of What Children Know

Michael Siegal

What is Mental Disorder?

Derek Bolton

Understanding Psychology as a Science: An Introduction to Scientific and Statistical Inference

Zoltan Dienes

How to Talk to Parents about Autism

Roy Sanders

The A–Z Guide to Good Mental Health

Jeremy Thomas and Tony Hughes

The Bullies: Understanding Bullies and Bullying

Dennis Lines

To review any of these books, e-mail psychologist@bps.org.uk

For a full list, see www.bps.org.uk/books

Send books for review to The Psychologist, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester

For more reviews, see the html version of ‘book reviews’ in the current month at www.thepsychologist.org.uk