Mass psychogenic illness, or more spooky?

The Falling, directed by Carol Morley, is centred on an epidemic of fainting at an English girls’ school in the 1960s. Two teenage girls – Lydia and Abbie – are best buddies, but then Abbie loses her virginity to a boy, leaving Lydia feeling abandoned and jealous. Abbie tries to explain what sex is like – ‘it’s a little death… it takes you to another place’ … Lydia is desperate to escape into that other place. All is not right in her world – her dad ran off, her horny brother is into the occult, and her emotionally distant mother is agoraphobic. Lydia then faints in a class, in a rather dramatic fashion, and soon other girls are following suit. Even a young art teacher succumbs to the spell. Are the girls faking it to get attention? Is it mass hysteria? An outbreak of the libido from the unconscious? Or has the charismatic Lydia become some sort of portal or channel for occult energy from the environment?

Morley has previously explored ‘mass psychogenic illness’ (‘psychogenic’ means illnesses where there’s a mental cause for physical symptoms) in a short film called The Madness of the Dance, in which a professor of medical humanities takes us on a tour of the condition: the dancing manias of the Middle Ages [Editor’s note: see also the July 2009 ‘Looking back’ piece by John Waller, tinyurl.com/ke6xvu9], outbreaks of biting and mewing like cats among young nuns, epidemics of laughing among Tanzanian factory workers, and so on.

What’s going on in such cases? They seem to involve what psychologists call the placebo or nocebo effect – our bodies and immune systems are highly connected to our emotions and imaginations, and physical symptoms like nervous tics or compulsive laughter can spread between people through a sort of sympathy and suggestibility.

The preacher Jonathan Edwards observed this phenomenon in the mass ecstasy of the First Great Awakening in 18th-century America, during which congregations fainted, screamed, sobbed, laughed and danced wildly. In his masterpiece Religious Affections, Edwards tried to discern what was genuinely spiritual in these mass ecstatic outbursts, and what was psychological or pathological. He suggested that sometimes it is more the influence of custom or imitation than a genuine visitation of the Spirit. I’ve been in the middle of highly charismatic services in Wales, with people fainting and rolling on the floor, and had some experiences like that myself. Definitely, people are following a script, and the physical symptoms are triggered by their expectations (they came to get down, as it were). But there may be something more at work, too...

Such outbreaks of ecstasy can also occur outside the church, for example in raves. In the 1990s, at the same time as the Toronto Blessing, acid house and trance music spread across the UK, including to the Hacienda, where Carol Morley regularly went. I wonder if her interest in this area partly stems from that experience of ‘the madness of the dance’ – it’s certainly what got me interested in this area. Think of, say, Beatlemania, or the Jitter-Bug, or girls screaming as Elvis twitches and sings ‘well bless my soul, what’s wrong with me, I’m itching like a man in a fuzzy tree…’ Such outbreaks clearly have social determinants: they can be a reaction to overly rigid, hierarchical or depressing social conditions, a reaction to the discontents of civilisation, to the role you are expected to play – this was ably explored by Erika Bourgignon in her 1973 book Religion, Altered States of Experience and Social Change. Humans need ways to lose themselves, to go beyond the ego and go to ‘another place’, and if their culture doesn’t give them that, nature will find a way.

Is there anything spiritual in such occurrences, or are they just regressions to primitive or infantile stages of development, as Freud would suggest? Morley tries to keep such questions open and ambiguous in her film, to balance medical explanations with more spiritual explanations – that the outbreak is somehow connected with the occult, with ley-lines, with a numinous energy in nature. But it was interesting, in an audience Q&A for the film which I attended at the London Film Festival last year, how the possibility that this is also a film ‘about’ spiritual energy was completely ignored. There’s a common idea in every culture (except the modern secular West) that nature is infused with spiritual energy, and we can tap into it and access its power, either consciously – through worship or meditation or drugs or sex or magic – or unconsciously and accidentally, through spiritual experiences, near-death trauma, or sudden epidemics like dancing manias.

We seem to access this energy via altered states of consciousness, and it also sometimes involves certain places – pilgrimage sites, particular mountains or fields. The modern, secular, mechanistic culture of the West defined itself against this idea, and debunked successive traces of it – whether that be Descartes’ ‘animal spirits’, élan vital of Vitalism, Mesmer’s ‘vital fluid’, or the entire ‘spiritual energy’ industry of the New Age. That ‘exorcism of spirits’ from secular culture was not altogether a bad thing, because the concept was often used as a means to exploit or control the gullible. And yet we’re still haunted by the ancient idea of spiritual energy – Freud called it the libido, Max Weber called it charisma, William James spoke of ‘energy’ that can be accessed through spiritual experiences or the ‘subliminal self’, while today’s more cautious psychologists still reach for terms like ‘mental capital’, ‘pool of attentional resources’ or ‘psychic energy’.

No one has ever found this energy or empirically measured it, so it’s easy to dismiss it as woo-woo, a vestige of the animist past we have thankfully left behind. Personally, I am inclined to believe this energy exists in nature and is connected to our consciousness, and that we can align ourselves with it through spiritual practice. But I may very well be wrong. We should simply admit that we don’t yet know – as the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi recently noted, psychology doesn’t even have a working understanding of ordinary consciousness yet, let alone altered states of consciousness.

What is certainly the case is that some film-makers are exploring this shadowy area in interesting films – I have written a piece about ‘the art of trance’ in the films of David Lynch, Fellini, Kubrick and others. Peter Weir explores it beautifully in Picnic at Hanging Rock, which is all about the dark numinous power of nature. In recent British cinema, films by Ben Oakley and Pawel Pawlikowski explore this dreamy terrain.

Morley’s film explores this zone too. It’s not just about mass psychogenic illness… it’s possibly bit more spooky than that.

Reviewed by Jules Evans who is Policy Director, Centre for the History of the Emotions at Queen Mary, University of London. He co-directs the History of Emotions Blog [https://emotionsblog.history.qmul.ac.uk]. An extended version of this review was originally published there, and reproduced on our own website.
A compelling view of what makes us violent

Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships
Alan Page Fiske & Tage Shakti Rai (Foreword by Steven Pinker)

One of the most frequently asked questions in psychology is ‘What motivates humans to commit violence against each other?’. Fiske and Rai’s virtuous violence theory (VVT) is an intriguing and compelling take on answering this question. Their hypothesis is ‘most violence is morally motivated. Morality is about regulating social relationships and violence is one way to regulate relationships.’ Initially it would appear difficult to understand how violence could be seen as moral. When considered in the light of a relational models framework, supported by a wealth of ethnographic cases, historical examples and classical literature, the argument is both powerful and persuasive.

By their nature the examples and discussions of violence are quite graphic, covering some difficult areas [rape, torture and initiation rites, including FGM]. However, the fact that the authors do not avoid these areas and can demonstrate the applicability of VVT to make sense of the motivations behind these actions shows the utility of their hypothesis.

The first few chapters outlining the theory’s applicability raised some questions. There is a short dividing piece at this point where authors delineate the first half of the book as considering the easy questions, where motivation for violence and understanding how VVT applies is fairly black and white. The second half is then introduced as intending to both answer some of the questions raised and focus on the harder questions, where in the abstract VVT makes sense, but the cases can be harder to view objectively.

The authors state upfront that they do not condone violence; they are keen to clarify that the discussions and examples included are for illustrative purposes and that they feel all violence to be immoral. The later chapters of the book reinforce this, demonstrating how VVT can be applied in the real world not only to understand violence but how its incidence can be reduced, using examples from American gang culture. The last chapter progresses further, suggesting a number of questions for future researchers in this area, including expanding on the theory itself, and providing some intriguing food for thought. While one book can’t expect to fully answer such a broad question as ‘What motivates humans to commit violence?’, this one certainly provides a large piece of the puzzle.

Who guards the guardians?
The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership
Dennis Tourish

Within the book’s 11 chapters, Tourish collates research on transformational leadership providing a wealth of information that progresses into suggestions for new ways of thinking about leadership. There are three sections: the first looks at the theoretical aspect of transformational leadership, the second provides case studies of the effects of unmonitored leaders whose decisions have not been questioned by others, and the third section looks at other ways of perceiving leadership.

Extending upon previous articles he has written, Tourish writes in a style that invokes interest and a desire to know more. He clearly has a depth of knowledge and has undertaken qualitative analysis of interview scripts examining the spoken themes of some of the bankers involved in the banking crisis.
It is extremely readable and creates a spotlight upon the dangers of having unregulated power and the negative impact this has on employees, organisations and society.

At the end of each chapter there are discussion points that are suitable for lecturers to use with their students, making it an ideal educational book, but they are also helpful as general thinking points for any reader. It is typically an occupational psychology subject but it is highly relevant to all interested in the impact of leadership on organisations.

The final chapter proposes alternative ways of thinking about leadership, looking at social systems in which leaders reside. Successful organisations are not just the result of one person and require collaboration rather than control. Tourish’s thinking seems to be synonymous with that of Abraham Lincoln, who wanted people around him with opposing views, who were not afraid to speak their minds to formulate stronger decisions.

Voting behaviour
Human Zoo Election Special
Radio 4

This is an extended special edition on the election from the Human Zoo, the Radio 4 programme that looks at psychology through an experimental lens. Various experiments were discussed that, it was argued, demonstrated irrational behaviour, and unconscious influences on voting intentions. For example, given clear evidence that crime has reduced did not convince any participants to change their mind that crime levels are rising; but participants asked about climate change in an overheated room were more convinced that climate change is a problem. However, the programme did not address whether any of these effects could be considered lasting or robust, or how they might related to specific voting patterns. In real life, voting behaviour may be too complicated a concept to be captured in a laboratory.

In the May issue ‘Reviews’ section, Professor Rory O’Connor gave a moving and personal account of his involvement with the BBC programme Life After Suicide. Unfortunately, we illustrated it with a photo of his identical twin, Professor Daryl O’Connor. This was a particularly unforgivable slip by our editor, given that he’s been telling people recently that it is lazy to say they can’t tell the O’Connor twins apart, because they’re really not that similar. He would like to apologise profusely to both O’Connors, and point you to a handy primer on the difference between the two: tinyurl.com/thatisrory and tinyurl.com/thatisdaryl.
Depth, strength and potential
Positive Psychology in Search for Meaning
Dmitry A. Leontiev [Ed.]

Positive Psychology in Search for Meaning, edited by Dmitry A. Leontiev, is a collection of academic works collated to explore the concept of meaning within the larger field of positive psychology. These papers were originally published in the Journal of Positive Psychology, in November, 2013. Positive psychology and ‘meaning’ are introduced as two increasingly relevant concepts in modern psychological research. The central theme of meaning is outlined as a connector of disparate interpretations, being both rigorously academic and flexibly humanistic. Leontiev argues that the search for meaning within human experiences is an old one, and that the multitudes of traditional theories that spar with it (Freudian, post-Freudian, Vygotskian, post-Vygotskian) all obscure any clarity in definition for modern researchers. Collectively, the assembled works aim to build a modern concept of ‘meaning’ and integrate it within the current psychological lexicon.

This is achieved by first exploring the nature of personal meaning, and the importance of individual consideration and wider multifaceted characteristics of any interpretation of such. The title then leads the reader through the qualities of meaning within the human experience (including the role of intuition and motivation), draws a clear distinction between ‘meaning’ and ‘happiness’, before outlining measurement tools to aid future research. Overall, these chapters lay a solid foundation that demonstrates the depth, strength and potential prevalent under this research topic.

Positive Psychology in Search for Meaning reads and flows well, harnessing a structure that compels further reading with an interlocking and complementary approach to chapter organisation. The title follows the convention of academic journal writing and is well supported by empirical evidence, yet remains largely accessible, to the credit of the writers. The text is most suited for those with a background understanding of positive psychology and interest in wider philosophical questions of the human experience – but is equally accessible to curious newcomers to the field. An interesting interpretation of established and modern psychological principles.

Reviewed by Rory McDonald who is a researcher and writer at the University of Central Lancashire

Stranger than fiction
The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst
Sky Atlantic

The 2010 film All Good Things (available on DVD) came and went without anyone much noticing. Despite the star power of Ryan Gosling and Kirsten Dunst, viewers did not engage with the fictionalised story of a multi-millionaire property investor’s involvement in the disappearance of his wife, and murder of a neighbour. Now that film’s director, Andrew Jarecki, has ditched the fiction and returned to the same subject in the six-part series The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst [Sky Atlantic]. This time he has a winner on his hands.

It seems unlikely that the series would have been made if Durst hadn’t put himself forward for interview. He tells Jarecki his lawyers have advised him against it. No wonder. Durst’s life story is genuinely stranger than fiction. The series examines his life largely in chronological order, from childhood onwards. Jarecki gains interviews with most of the key players, with a few notable exceptions. The more we hear about Durst, and the more we see of him on camera, the stranger he seems. On occasions, he seems to find human interaction alien; at others, anything but. How far can his behaviour be accounted for by undoubtedly traumatic childhood events, and the freedoms available to those who have unlimited wealth? Is he all cold calculation, or is Durst a stranger even to himself?

At times, Jarecki can’t resist making his points more forcefully than evidence will allow, and he dramatises certain key moments. Sometimes these are effective – in one scene we see Durst’s wife Kathie board the Manhattan-bound train alone late at night (as Durst has maintained she did one night in January 1982). The next time we see this scene, no one gets on and the train doors whoosh shut with a brutal finality. Occasionally these dramatisations seem voyeuristic, and veer too close to entertainment for comfort. But we are gradually presented with an accumulation of evidence that seem to lead to only one conclusion.

The series has been compared to the podcast Serial, which followed a journalist’s investigation of a murder and the possible unsafe conviction of Adnan Syed. But the similarity is only skin deep. The Jinx is on a whole different scale than the more homespun Serial, and needs to be: the lives of many people have been irrevocably changed by Robert Durst.

Spoiler alert: don’t Google if you want maximum enjoyment. There are at least three genuine jaw-dropping moments, the final one of which was widely reported. The last scene leaves the viewer reeling. And it’s a certainty that we will be seeing Durst on our screens again, one way or another.

Reviewed by Kate Johnstone who is a postgraduate student at UCL and Associate Editor [Reviews]
This thoroughly informative book focuses on the topic of inaccurate information among the current state of research in the areas of language, memory and education. It strongly encourages the notion of interdisciplinary research, trying to bridge the gap between the cognitive and educational sciences in this field, and I believe it succeeds in doing so.

The 19 chapters in the book describe almost every conceivable angle on the topic, written by 40 contributors worldwide and not only covering the various theoretical perspectives, but also highlighting the diversified methodological approaches in a profound effort to bring together related research from different fields. By doing so, it provides a valuable and up-to-date resource for anyone working in the area of misinformation and knowledge acquisition.

Some chapters describe the behavioural consequences of relying on misinformation. A particularly good contribution was on correcting misinformation and the challenges for education and cognitive science. This situated research on inaccurate information among contemporary debates such as the misinformed link between autism and the MMR vaccine, and its ‘continued influence effect’ on memory. There was also an excellent section on the variety of epistemological perspectives on misinformation.

What I found most informative about the book were the detailed frameworks of when and how inaccuracies would lead to difficulties in comprehension and, always in an effort to try and link the areas of cognitive and educational sciences, the possible routes of remediation and intervention.

I would say the main endeavour of this book is to highlight the importance of acknowledging the significance of misconceptions in learning and knowledge acquisition, which the editors argue many studies have tended to ignore. It offers both an informed take on the theoretical and empirical perspectives, but also on the consequences of inaccuracies in information for knowledge acquisition. In this sense it is both timely and welcome.

Reviewed by Zayba Ghazali who is a PhD student at University College London
Scandi blanche
Force Majeure
Ruben Östlund (Director)

Force Majeure (on general release) finally arrives in UK cinemas via the Cannes Film Festival, where it won a prize in the ‘Un Certain Regard’ section, for original and different work. It is undoubtedly both.

We see the perfect family at the start of the perfect holiday. Handsome Swede Tomas (Johannes Bah Kuhnke) and his willowy wife Ebba (Lisa Loven Kongsli) ski the slopes of the French Alps with their beautiful pre-adolescent son and daughter. There’s comfortable exhaustion from a hard day’s skiing, and cute sulkiness from the boy. The only fly in the ointment is Tomas’s attachment to his iPhone.

Clearly, 90 minutes of this unadulterated harmony would be excruciating for the poor viewer. Fortunately, director Ruben Östlund knows what he’s about. A slightly unhinged arrangement of Vivaldi’s Four Seasons saws away beneath footage of the efforts the resort has to go to, to keep the slopes pristine. Then there’s the ominous nightly boom of cannons, fired to create controlled avalanches. It’s a metaphor that works on a number of levels: not just the gap between appearances and reality, but the tension between man and nature.

Eating lunch on an open-air veranda on their second day, the family are initially awed as what seems to be another controlled avalanche heads their way. This rapidly turns to terror as it picks up speed and size. The veil of civilisation is ripped away when we see the very different reactions of Tomas and Ebba to a life-threatening situation. The repercussions of this event accumulate with Tomas’s steadfast refusal to admit what happened.

At the heart of the drama is a question about masculinity, and how it is defined in 21st century Western countries. Is Tomas less of a man because of how he acted, or because he won’t admit his vulnerability? Is his true nature revealed by this event, or how he deals with it? Is Ebba a better person because her reaction was different, or because she’s a woman? Be warned: if you watch this film with a member of the opposite sex, you’re likely to have a big argument on the way home.

Visually, the film is a treat, not least because of Östlund’s tendency to shoot wide, allowing the eye to roam wherever it will. It also gives the close-ups far greater impact when he does use them. And all of the performances are terrific, especially Kuhnke’s. Östlund finds the perfect balance between the main characteristics associated with Scandinavian film-making: glacial coolness à la Bergman, and von Trier histrionics. A force to be reckoned with.

Highly recommended
Cognitive Therapy of Personality Disorders
Aaron T. Beck, Denise D. Davis & Arthur Freeman (Eds.)

This is the third edition of the widely used practitioner resource and builds well upon previous editions. It clearly describes common presentations and conceptualisations of 12 specific personality disorders, and provides detailed descriptions of clinical interventions, using case illustrations.

The authors extend the chapters on clinical interventions with comments on treatment goals, lifespan or developmental considerations, termination issues, common challenges in working with each disorder and tips for clinician self-care. Chapters on clinical interventions have been refreshed to integrate newer developments in the field of cognitive behavioural therapy that are relevant to personality disorders: motivational interviewing, mindfulness, values clarification, schema role plays and other experiential exercises.

Importantly, the authors add a chapter on clinical management, which acknowledges the challenges people with personality disorder commonly present to mental health teams and ways to address these. This adds a systemic perspective, crucial to the effectiveness of therapy.

Put together, these additions provide a comprehensive resource for both experienced and less experienced clinicians, and is highly recommended.
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