Existential and poetic

The English poet Alexander Pope believed that our task as human beings was not to explain life, the universe and everything, but to explore the microcosm that is the self. ‘Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; The proper study of Mankind is Man.’

Professor John Hull, whose loss of sight changed his life for ever, follows in this Delphic tradition. An academic theologian by profession, Hull records every detail of the experience of losing his sight and coming to terms with the fact that he is now a blind man. Unsurprisingly, given his religious persuasion, Hull consciously or unconsciously adopts the position of those who believe that adjustment to sight loss can only be achieved by being reborn as a new person, rather than by acquiring alternative means of maintaining a continuity of personal identity.

From a psychological perspective, Hull employs phenomenology and introspection: methods alien to modern psychologists. So that, rather than arriving at general truths applicable to a blind population, he instead gives us a vivid portrayal of his own experiences and changing beliefs, initially through his words in Touching the Rock (1990, Sheldon Press) and now through images, thanks to James Spinney and Peter Middleton’s screenplay and visual interpretation of the book.

The film immerses the viewer in dark, out-of-focus images and odd perspectives that disorient and draw one’s experience as close to that of Hull as one could imagine. Sometimes the screen goes black; at other times it is simply pure white, and it caused this viewer to drift off into a private reverie on more than one occasion. As a consequence of this I missed some bits, but the fact that it happened at all testifies to the technical success of the film in addressing Hull’s contention that dreaming and waking are variations of consciousness that remain a mystery.

I was reminded of Kierkegaard’s concept of a subjective truth when Hull describes how space, time, objects and people become devoid of meaning and reality as his visual memory fades. For a number of years Hull becomes withdrawn and fearful as he strives to regain his personal identity through minute examination of his experiences. With the loss of visual information about objective reality, he finds that his very self becomes unmoored and when he turns inwards for answers he initially finds nothing more than further confusion.

Nonetheless, after years of struggle Hull eventually experiences his Damascene moment and, as a result, he reframes the curse of blindness as the divine revelation that it is a gift, albeit an unwanted one. However, the film ends before showing us how he uses that gift, other than by communicating his journey to us.

Lip-sync acted from Hull’s own audio tapes, the actors Dan Renton Skinner as John Hull, and Simone Kirby as his wife Marilyn, present as a highly plausible loving couple living in fear that their unwanted one. However, the film ends before showing us how he uses that gift, other than communicating his journey to us.

The film is playing throughout the UK and is available on demand. See www.notesonblindness.co.uk for information, including the virtual reality experience

Reviewed by Dr Allan Dodds who is Former Director of The Blind Mobility Research Unit, University of Nottingham

Death is the only certainty in life, yet most of us feel unprepared when the bell tolls. The thought of death, of our loved ones and eventually our own, is so unsettling that most of us don’t dwell on it until the final hour. The death of our nearest and dearest can encompass the compass of our lives in many ways.

Here, Richard Gross provides a comprehensive overview of the research literature on grief. As the experience and manifestation of grief involves personal, social and cultural factors, he explores bereavement and the concomitant emotions it unleashes through myriad lenses. For a developmental view, Gross looks at stage theorists and explores the links between adult grief and early attachment relationships. The book also discusses models of grief and examines how familial, social, religious and cultural dynamics impact its expression.

Gross explains how our unique kinship with the deceased could result in different experiences and also examines gender differences and ‘disenfranchised’ forms of grief that do not necessarily have societal sanction or support. A final chapter is on the loss of pets and our ubiquitous fear of death.

In a reasonably concise volume, the book lives up to its name by trying to understand grief in its entirety. Written in an accessible style, it provides a holistic sweep of past and recent research. This book would be an asset to those who work with bereaved individuals, but it may have been enriched by some first-person accounts, as a purely academic view cannot quite convey the intensity of emotions that can engulf a bereaved individual. Even if we are extremely sensitive and have excellent perspective-taking skills, being bereaved is very different from how we might imagine it to be.

Richard Gross
Understanding Grief
 Routledge; 2016; Pb £24.99
Reviewed by Aruna Sankaranarayanan, Director, PRAYATNA, a centre for children with learning difficulties in India
Apposite and appealing

The App Generation: How Today’s Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy, and Imagination in a Digital World

Howard Gardner & Katie Davis

Most readers of this text, I expect, will belong to the so-called ‘App Generation’. As one who is well past it, I was curious to see what the authors had to say. Basically the argument is set out in the preface to the second edition (published in 2014) (not the first edition) where the authors have had time to reflect on what they have achieved and what the critics have made of it.

The text weaves its way through three main issues: (a) the effects of technology on our modern lives – contrasting the experiences of an older person (Howard Gardner), a younger one (assistant professor Katie Davis), a much younger one (Katie’s sister, Molly, aged 16 at the time of writing and, occasionally, an even younger one – Oscar, Howard’s grandson, aged six; (b) the nature of different kinds of apps – labelled app-dependent and app-enabling; and (c) the roles of apps in relationship to personal identity, intimacy and imagination.

For a person like myself who, like Howard Gardner, has lived through the development of personal computers from their origins in the 1970s, to the mobile phone and the all-encompassing apps of today, it was good to reflect on both the positive and the negative side of what has been achieved. Seen from the point of view of the four protagonists – Howard, Katie, Molly and Oscar – we get a picture of the beginnings of the new technology, its midpoint and its ubiquitous nature today.

As noted above, two main kinds of apps are distinguished. App-dependent apps are used when we (children and adults) use their apps as ‘a starting point, endpoint and everything in between’. Such apps are what we use to look up the weather, to find a restaurant, to search for the answer to a question. Such apps imply that everything can be answered immediately and efficiently. Enabling apps are used to develop new experiences and areas of knowledge, meaningful relationships and creative expression.

Gardner and Davis explore app-dependence and app-enablement with respect to three areas of experience that are particularly salient for young people: their sense of personal identity (Chapter 4), the intimacy they experience in their relationships (Chapter 5), and the ways they express their imagination (Chapter 6). Apparently, the youth of today ‘take care to present a socially desirable, polished self on line: many students identify the tightening of personal boundaries as they are forced to differentiate their parents more. Apps allow children to take shortcuts in how they carry out their interpersonal relationships; these shortcuts make interacting with others much quicker, easier and less risky.

Today, apps that support art, music and photography are readily available – but, according to these authors, ‘an app mentality can lead to unwillingness to stretch beyond the functionality of the software and the packaged sources that come with google search’. However, in another chapter, the authors compare children’s artwork and short stories produced today with that produced in the 1960s. Here they find more complexity in the artworks of today, not only in how they are painted but also in the techniques used to produce them but different changes are reported for children’s fiction. Here there is a shift to more conventional texts, despite an increase in less formal wording.

As expected, any book by Howard Gardner and colleagues is a pleasure to read. Many points are further expanded and discussed in end-of-chapter notes. Nonetheless, I have some criticisms. The arguments outlined in this text are based on data drawn from the authors’ studies of teachers and students with different-sized samples – mainly in New England and ‘a smaller sample’ in Bermuda – together with brief one-sentence summaries of other relevant publications. An appendix outlines the procedures and the sample sizes, but it provides no data. Thought-provoking? Readable? Yes – in spades. But without the data it is hard to judge the validity of the conclusions.

Reviewed by James Hartley, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Keele University

A holistic approach to sex offending

Sex Offenders: A Criminal Career Approach

Arjan Blackland & Patrick Lussier (Eds.)

Current literature takes a clinical approach to sex offending by exploring how individual pathologies, childhood trauma, cognitive distortions, low victim empathy, deviant sexual preferences, poor attachment style and sexual regulation create a typology of patterns linked to sexual offending. This text, however, merges biopsychosocial and criminological perspectives, raising the debate that current theories and methods of research are outdated. It draws on evidence that considers the individual offender’s etiology and the developmental precursors that a criminal career involves, to determine why and how such individuals partake in sex offences. Longitudinal studies are used to build a holistic view that challenges the differences used to separate the ways in which sex and non-sex crimes are managed today.

The criminal career approach aims to conceptualise the development and offending trajectory of each individual in order to merge preventative strategies of sexual offending with those of non-sexual offence crimes. Typographical theories aimed at early prevention and maturational theories are combined in order to modify sex offenders’ criminal careers at certain ages and career stages, in the pursuit of building guidance on policy as to where efforts should be targeted and how current interventions can be revised.

The authors of this text request further research aimed specifically at understanding the commonalities between sex and non-sex offending and propose refinements in risk assessment and treatment in this area. This book offers new insights into sexual offending in an accessible, informing and engaging style and is highly relevant to students, practitioners and researchers in the fields of forensic and criminological psychology alike.

Reviewed by Louise Mullins who is an undergraduate psychology student and voluntary worker on a sex offender treatment programme
Images of terrorism are present daily, with the questions 'What causes it?' and 'How can we prevent radicalisation?'. A complex, emotive subject that challenges beliefs and feelings on individual and societal levels, where explanations are often simplistic, inaccurate and biased. For example, the psychological literature shows there is no evidence that terrorist acts can be explained by mental illness or by some form of psychological deviance. Koomen and Van Der Pligt’s book definitely provides us with explanations and answers.

Highlighting the difficulties and inconsistencies describing ‘terrorism’, the authors use the Global Terrorism Database definition: ‘the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation’. They use a multifactorial model to describe the polarisation, radicalisation and terrorist violence pathway, and subsequent chapters examine each variable in detail. Organised using helpful chapter sub-headings, results from a wide range of interesting studies are summarised to support their model, with a reference list at the end.

Whilst reviewing the book, broadcast and social media went into commentary overload about radicalisation and terrorism links to the Orlando shootings, the murder of Jo Cox and the EU debate. I became aware just how much the book’s content was relevant and explaining this for me, particularly chapters on stereotyping, threats and social identity.

The book’s key message is the importance of psychological understanding. The role of context, beliefs and emotions in shaping behaviour is clear. Counter-terrorism strategies must be guided by our knowledge of individual, cultural, social, political and economic factors.

I would definitely recommend this book to psychologists and related disciplines. I’d also strongly suggest it should be on the bookshelves of policy makers, as well as police and security specialists.

I Routledge, 2016; Pb £31.99
Reviewed by Ged Baines who is Lead Consultant Forensic Clinical Psychologist, Secure & Criminal Justice Services, Norwich Clinic, Norwich

woody allen meets friends

The billboard for The Spoils proclaimed this as a dark new comedy play that delves into the everyday lives of an emotionally charged set of characters. I jumped at the opportunity to see it, considering the saturation of musical razzmatazz elsewhere on the West End. Nevertheless, this play also offered glitz, since it was written by and starred the American actor Jesse Eisenberg of The Social Network, and Kunal Nayyar of The Big Bang Theory.

The fast-paced, quick-witted script is perfect at portraying the dysfunctional relationship between the protagonist, Ben (Eisenberg) and his flatmate, Kalyan (Nayyar). Ben presents himself as an existential film-maker who is working on a ‘new kind of art form that doesn’t yet have a name’ (cue rolled-eyes). Of course, in reality he spends much of his time smoking weed, whilst struggling to find his own artistic ideas and narrative. Kalyan, on the other hand, is a Nepalese immigrant trying to make it in the financial world to better his life chances.

Their economic and class backgrounds could not be more different, yet their lives have somehow come together in a peculiar friendship based on dependency and control. Ben holds much of that control. They live in his flat, which his father bought, and he allows Kalyan to live rent-free as an act of good will towards his ‘underprivileged’ friend.

However, Ben depends on the emotional support that Kalyan provides, despite being frustrated at his aspirations to make it in the Western world, which Ben himself rejects. Kalyan consistently gains our sympathy as he seems to bear the brunt of Ben’s discontent and struggles in his own attempts to ‘succeed’. Not to give too much away, the arrival of Ben’s old high school crush triggers a series of evolving (and surreal) events… Ben can take these as an opportunity of self-reflection and change, or he can retreat further into his own emotional turmoil.

I imagine that if Woody Allen wrote an episode of Friends, then The Spoils would be close to what is produced: a portrayal of inner conflict, friendship and control in a witty format. What makes this play stand out is that Ben is not a likeable character and there are no explanations, or excuses, for why he behaves the way he does towards others. This is a welcome break from the often over-dramatised, saccharine parade of plays that seek to tell an uplifting tale of the extraordinary and unusual. Although focused on Ben, the play delicately interweaves the narratives of Kalyan (and others) producing something that addresses the normal, almost mundane, existential struggles of ‘everyday’ people. With these insights, we can start to think about why so many of us feel so unhappy within the wider framework of race, class and economics. Ironically though, at £65 a ticket this production was likely to have been inaccessible for many, but it was nonetheless entertaining and certainly worth a watch.

Reviewed by Anita Mehay who is a doctoral researcher and health psychologist in training at Royal Holloway, University of London
Memory in context

Contextualizing Human Memory: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding How Individuals and Groups Remember the Past
Charles Stone & Lucas Bietti (Eds.)

Is there such a thing as context-free memory? Can memory function in a social vacuum? Whilst it may be simplistic to claim that cognitive psychologists have traditionally viewed memory as being context-free, the role of context has tended to be seen as little more than an additional factor. In Contextualizing Human Memory Stone and Bietti have drawn together a collection of work that asserts the central role context plays in human memory.

Stone and Bietti recognise that ‘context’ can be an unhelpfully vague and amorphous concept: a term that can be invoked to describe anything and everything. This volume attempts to examine just what this thing ‘context’ is. What does it turn out to be? Lots of different things. Amongst other issues, the chapters focus on: cultural and socio-historical contexts; social interactions; joint activities; linguistic; nonverbal communication; and even the context of silence.

This is not simply a miscellaneous collection of essays. The chapters are organised in three main parts: cognitive and psychological perspectives on context; social and cultural perspectives; linguistic and philosophical perspectives (with emphasis on scaffolding). Although several different facets of context are examined, the overall themes are coherent and there is a common focus on the social context of remembering.

The volume’s emphasis in this regard serves to promote what one of the contributors (William Hirst) refers to as ‘the social turn’ in memory research.

In drawing attention to the importance and ambiguity of context, Stone and Bietti are building on the work of figures such as Frederic Bartlett and Susan Engel. There is also a strong Vygotskian influence, but this book is concerned less with reviewing historical issues and more with the present and future of interdisciplinary memory research. It highlights the scale of what context represents in memory research but also provides a strong case for its serious examination and indicates the kind of vital insights such an endeavour can yield.

Routledge; 2016; Hb £95.00
Reviewed by Andrew Hart who is a Lecturer at the University of Bradford

An excellent introduction

Free Will and the Brain: Neuroscientific, Philosophical and Legal Perspectives
Walter Glannon (Ed.)

A compilation of chapters from experts across a range of fields, Free Will and the Brain provides an array of insights into defining free will, determining its existence, implications and clinical relevance.

Glannon begins with an introductory chapter, in which he puts across his own views and opinions of the existence of free will, primarily based on conclusions of the chapters that follow. This overall summary gives the reader an easy-to-digest and informative entrance into the quite complex and somewhat deeply philosophical later chapters. Glannon’s claims do often seem to be based greatly on personal opinion, and the introduction feels relatively biased against neuroscientific explanations of free will.

The main body of the book consists of multiple chapters from different authors, each focused on discussing free will from a different perspective. Specific chapters discussing the implication of the notion of free will in neurological, psychological and mental disorders are particularly insightful and thought-provoking. Such real-world impacts provide an area of common interest to wide audiences from neuroscience, philosophy, psychology and law. Clinical and pathological examples of possible deficits in free will, as well as the consequences of lack of free will in terms of the law, make for a compelling and real-world relevant read.

Throughout many of the chapters, the authors focus heavily on the famous investigations of neuroscientist Libet into the existence of free will. It would have been refreshing to read about some of the many more recent neuroscientific findings in this field, which perhaps would have provided greater support to some of the biological arguments that are repeatedly criticised. This aspect again points towards a general bias against neuroscientific evidence throughout Free Will and the Brain.

Free Will and the Brain is an interesting and thought-inducing read, relevant to readers from a wide range of backgrounds. The unique structure breaks down what would otherwise be a very dense and complex discussion of a deeply philosophical debate. Although it only touches on the available biological literature, Glannon provides an excellent introduction to the notion of free will from multiple perspectives.

Cambridge University Press; 2015; Hb £65.00
Reviewed by Stacey A. Bedwell who is at Nottingham Trent University
Everywhere and nowhere
Dr Broks’ Casebook
BBC Radio 4

‘I had a patient, a very unusual case,’ says neuropsychologist Dr Paul Broks, as he introduces ‘Martin’, a man who fully believes he is dead. Dr Broks’ Casebook takes the listener on a psychological and philosophical hunt for ‘the self’, introducing each of the five episodes with an equally fascinating story of an individual whose sense of self is disrupted in some way.

Martin, we are told, suffers from a condition known as Cotard’s syndrome. He says he doesn’t feel anything at all, his thoughts are not real and that his brain has rotted away – a real-life zombie if you like. Adam Zeman, Professor of Neurology at Exeter University, is brought in to explain what might be going on. One of his patients, Graham, has also been diagnosed with Cotard’s syndrome and is so convinced he is dead that he hangs himself in graveyards. Further investigation with neuroimaging reveals that his brain is behaving like that of someone who is in a coma – he has markedly less activity in the ‘default mode network’, a series of brain circuits that allows us to reflect on the past, imagine the future, and experience the present.

So, the producer asks, does this mean we’ve found the self? Dr Broks explains that the answer is not that simple and over the next four episodes he introduces us to Natalie, a woman who has a sudden onset of psychogenic amnesia and doesn’t know who she is any more; Laura, who suffers from sleep paralysis and experiences terrifying visitations at night; Joe, a man who experiences dramatic ‘out-of-body experiences’ as a result of his epilepsy; and Jason, a young man with anarchic hand syndrome, a condition in which one hand seems to behave outside of conscious control, stubbing out cigarettes or fighting the other hand.

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One hundred years after the beginning of the Battle of the Somme, when the British army suffered over 57,000 casualties, a third of them killed, on the first day, the Science Museum opened a fascinating exhibition entitled ‘Wounded: Conflict, Casualties and Care’.

Representing the British Psychological Society at the preview evening, I found that the exhibition covers protection (through luck, superstition, armour and equipment), first aid, life-saving equipment and rehabilitation, with many examples of talismans and charms, armour, gas masks, first aid kits, stretchers, anaesthetic and surgical equipment, as well as many examples of early prosthetic legs and arms (officers’ and soldiers’ arms were, rather disturbingly, of different quality!), and, one of the most grisly exhibits, a case full of glass eyes…

The opening of the exhibition by Science Museum Director, Ian Blectford, and Chair of Trustees, Dame Mary Archer, included an inspirational speech by Falklands War veteran, Simon Weston, who spoke at length about the hidden wounds of war. He was accompanied by the singing of three beautiful songs – with words by A.E. Housman set to music by the composer George Butterworth who, as an officer in the Durham Light Infantry, was killed by a German sniper during the Battle of the Somme in the early hours of 5 August 1916. The tenor Roderick Williams was accompanied by Iain Burnside.

Some 20 million people were left disabled, disfigured or traumatised by their experiences in the First World War, and it was these 20 million wounded that the exhibition had as its focus.

The exhibition was produced in association with the charities BLESMA (Limbless Veterans), Blind Veterans UK and Combat Stress (The Veterans’ Mental Health Charity). Thus, in addition to a focus on physical injury there was a large emphasis on the psychological effects of war. Even by the end of 1918, 30,000 war pensions had already been awarded for ‘shell shock’. The figure continued to rise thereafter.

For me, a highlight was a facsimile of the medical record of the document transferring the war poet, Lieutenant Wilfred Owen, for treatment at the Slateford Military Hospital at Craiglockhart in Edinburgh (now the home of the main building of Edinburgh Napier University). Following treatment at Craiglockhart, where he formed a close friendship with fellow officer, poet and author Siegfried Sassoon, Owen returned to the front to his unit, the 2nd Manchesters, where he was killed in action on 4 November 1918, almost one week to the hour before the signing of the Armistice.

Many, like Sassoon, were comparatively lucky, in that they survived, intact, with their lives; many, many were treated with psychotherapy for ‘neurasthenia’, ‘shell shock’ and other ‘not yet diagnosed neurological’ disorders; some were ‘treated’, in fairly barbaric fashion using, for example, Lewis Yelland’s electrofaradism machine, also on display; but the 306 who were shot at dawn were perhaps the unluckiest of all.

Post-traumatic stress, as we now term it, lives on. Thousands continue to suffer, and so the film and poetry by Combat Stress veterans that closes the exhibition was especially poignant.

The exhibition will run until 15 January 2018 (see http://sciencemuseum.org.uk/visitmuseum/Plan_your_visit/exhibitions/wounded). See also this month’s ‘Looking back’ article. Reviewed by Professor Jamie Hacker Hughes who is Vice President of the British Psychological Society