

Storming the castle

One would be hard pressed to be working in psychological science these days and not have come across extensive reference to work in theory of mind (ToM). This volume collects chapters united in opposition to 'ToM-ism'; the set of assumptions ToM researchers are held to share. The goal, according to the back cover, is 'mercilessly documenting conceptual errors on which the approach is based and pseudo-problems it tries to answer'. It sounds like stirring stuff, and ToM-ism is surely a sinister sounding enough target.

So is this rising ToM-ophobia justified? Theory of mind is a framework for the study of the foundations of social interaction, and work within it draws on a diverse range of theoretical

positions, ranging from constructivist accounts focusing on individual learning, to accounts claiming early and reliably developing learning mechanisms shaped by evolution, as well as many variations in between. An increasingly broad range of empirical methods and approaches are employed, with a wide variety of populations. The framework 'got its major break' in developmental psychology, but now increasingly dovetails with other disciplines (brain imaging, computational modelling, neuropsychology, gerontology, etc.).

You might be thinking that it would be tricky to be simultaneously against all of those things. This may be because you are, as am I, looking at it from inside, at least insofar as you might share the basic assumption that an experimental approach can lead to answers to these kinds of question. The contributors attack this basic assumption, among other foundational tenets of ToM research specifically. Being within the framework is a problem, according to the book, because those within 'avoid sustained engagement' with alternative approaches.

This may be true, but despite being aimed at the entirety of ToM, the contributions themselves actually do little sustained engagement with individual theories. Indeed, as one contributor notes, detailed critique of specific theories would enter 'the very terms of the discourse which we have hitherto been concerned to reject' and would lose sight of the aim 'to disparage all theorizing of this peculiar kind'.

ToM theorists who appeal to evolutionary ideas receive particular scorn, accused of offering natural selection to solve certain problems, without an explanation of how natural selection achieves the solution. But this is 'lack of engagement' writ large; commentators who think that it must be 'miraculous' for natural selection to have access to information unavailable to individual learners just don't understand natural selection, and claiming there exist no defences of this idea is possible only insofar as one has not engaged with that literature. The 'failure to engage' charge runs both ways.

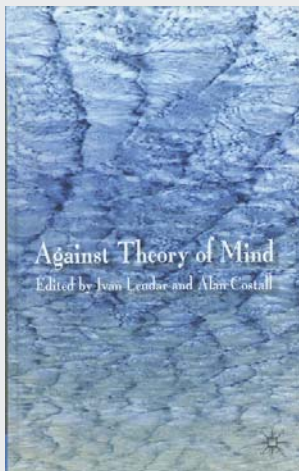
The key problem with all this is that ToM is a *framework* for research, not just one specific theory. Its assumptions may not have been defended to the satisfaction of some, but so it typically is with foundational assumptions. Indeed, later chapters of the volume go on to offer a range of alternative approaches to ToM, but explicit statement and defence of the foundational assumptions of these approaches is itself thin on the ground. Rather, the authors appear content to assume that documenting apparent problems with ToM is sufficient to bolster their own approaches. But it isn't; science is not a zero-sum game.

Historically, attacks on framework theories are inordinately difficult to mount. The critiques in this volume may in the long run prove correct, and ToM research may one day be an abandoned field. The editors discuss an analogy between 'enclosed frameworks' (such as ToM) and impregnable castles, never taken by direct assault, but found in time to have been quietly deserted. Despite this volume, my guess is that the citadel of ToM research will likely continue to be an engine of scientific progress on questions of social cognition. In the meantime, I'm reminded of Miracle Max's parting words to the heroes in the movie of *The Princess Bride*: 'Have fun storming the castle!'

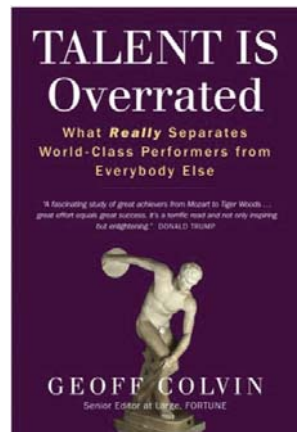
Macmillan; 2009; Hb £50.00

Reviewed by Tamsin German

who is Associate Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara



Against theory of mind
Ivan Leudar & Alan Costall
(Eds.)



A liberating thought?

Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else

Geoff Colvin

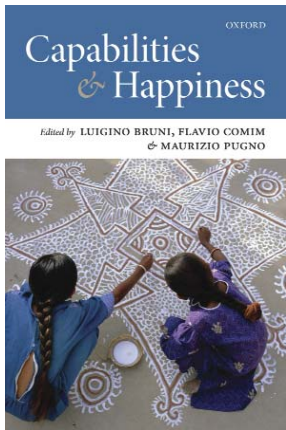
This book asserts that there is more to the 'talented' among us than talent alone. Tiger Woods is not just a good golfer. Jack Welch is not just a good business leader. Yes, they have an innate quality, a 'talent', but this alone is not enough. There is something external and not innate, and therefore controllable, manageable and which, once subject to deliberate, demanding, repeated practice with results, can be manipulated to push us to the next level of performance.

Colvin and his endorsers would have you believe this is a research-based premise upon which he has stumbled, and now, he is liberating the world as masters of our talents. However, search through the 'Sources' section and you will find just a handful of peer-reviewed academic inputs, despite the plethora of research in psychology around the nature of deliberate practice with knowledge of results.

Thus, is what Colvin tells us really as mind-blowing and liberating as he claims? Probably not. But he writes in an inspiring way and uplifting way that is sure to appeal to the hopeful few who dream of the big time.

Nicholas Brealey; 2008;
Pb £12.99

Reviewed by Fidelma Butler
who is an occupational
psychologist in training



A good overall review

Capabilities and Happiness
Luigino Bruni, Flavio Comim & Maurizio Pugno (Eds.)

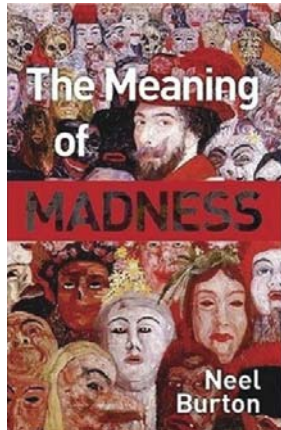
What makes us happy? The answer is still not clear despite centuries of searching. This book aims to provide an alternative to the traditional economic view of well-being as being linked to income – a view that, despite its limitations, has been fundamental to the development of social policy. The authors who have contributed to this book outline two alternative approaches to the understanding of well-being, and explore how these can be combined to provide a viable alternative to the purely economic perspective.

Overall, the collection is a good overview of the current state of understanding in the field of well-being, as well as effectively introducing the reader to the current controversies. Each chapter works well as an independent piece of work; however, as a whole, there is some repetition of the basic concepts throughout the book.

At times this book is hard work, but if you are willing to put in the work it will teach you most of what you need to know to understand this important topic.

| Oxford University Press; 2008; Hb £50.00

Reviewed by Evelyn Gibson
who is a clinical psychologist with Central and North West London NHS Trust



Appealing but marred

The Meaning of Madness
Neel Burton

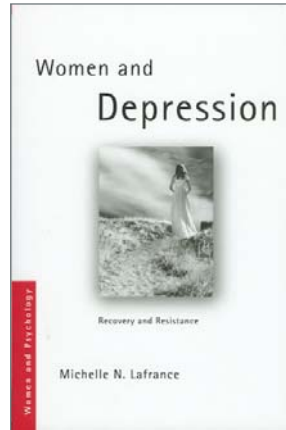
What is schizophrenia? The answer, Burton argues, involves Homer, Thomas Aquinas and Pinel as much as any diagnostic manual. His book offers essays on six aspects of mental illness: personality disorders, psychosis, depression, bipolar disorders, anxiety and suicide.

Each piece interleaves some essentials of psychiatry with discussion of the condition's cultural construction, literary history and philosophical implications. Burton's interdisciplinary approach is at its best in the opening chapter on personality. Here, accessible discussions of uniqueness and free will are used to explore the concept of a disorder of the self.

It is a shame, given the book's wide appeal, that the text is so badly produced. The verbatim repetition of paragraphs between essays is grating, and the omission of an index is vexing in a work of this scope. Some references are incomplete, and the proofing is poor – why is Nijinsky given two different birthdays in as many lines? The exasperated reader may be forgiven for finding a double edge in Burton's quotation of Shelley: 'Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'

| Acheron Press; 2009; £14.99

Reviewed by Joe Hickey
who is an assistant research psychologist with Suffolk Mental Health Partnership



Challenging pathology

Women and Depression: Recovery and Resistance
Michelle N. Lafrance

Lafrance turns a critical gaze upon the subject of women's depression and how women's distress is pathologised within biomedical frameworks. Her focus is on recovery and resistance to culturally dominant ways of understanding women's mental health.

Three major sections examine women's narratives of depression, experiences of recovery and the struggle to prioritise self-care in a culture where 'good' women's needs are often experienced as secondary. Within this structure, there lies a comprehensive and well-referenced account of the social forces implicated in women's depression, with an emphasis on power, violence, poverty and everyday demands

arising from women's social roles.

Centring women's experience, Lafrance provides substantial grounding in original data from her own research. Individual women's voices are woven through the text as powerful illustrations of her arguments. While the account she provides is engaging and compelling, I would have valued a more reflexive account of Lafrance's role in the research and greater detail on methodological rigour.

This is an important book for those seeking a comprehensive, scholarly and readable exploration of the impact of social inequalities on women's mental health.

| Routledge; 2009; Pb £16.95

Reviewed by Wendy Franks
who is a clinical psychologist in the NHS and a PhD student at the University of East Anglia

just in

Sample titles just in:

Childhood in a global perspective Karen Wells

Virtual selves, real people: A dialogue across disciplines

Richard S. Hallam

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