

Book review

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Gozli, D. *Experimental psychology and human agency*. Switzerland: Springer, 2019, 202 pp. £40-55, ISBN 978-3-030-20421-1.

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Before criticising others, it is useful to walk a mile in their shoes. “Because that way, when you criticize them, you are a mile away from them and you have their shoes.”¹ Davood Gozli has walked quite a few miles in the shoes of an experimental psychologist in his career. After distancing himself from the field, however, he is now indeed a mile away and his *Experimental Psychology and Human Agency* (Gozli, 2019) presents an impressive take on contemporary experimental psychology by adopting the decidedly detached perspective of a pure critic.

The theme of critique is remarkable in this work because it comes on two different layers. On an overarching level, the book makes a vibrant plea to take a step back and re-consider the virtue of purely theoretical work on topics that are typically assessed by empirical research. Even though the individual examples come from the realm of cognitive psychology, the arguments put forward by the book can be enlightening for any discipline with a strong focus on empirical work. This is especially apparent in the first chapters of the volume: What starts off as a thorough search for alternative explanations of selected experimental findings soon culminates in a breathtaking meta-scientific analysis of current research practices. Perhaps surprisingly, this discussion does not draw on common contemporary narratives—those revolving around replicability and similar issues—but rather it draws on a sharp, insightful analysis of how often current research misses the mark on a theoretical level. The limited progress on a theoretical level looms particularly strongly when scrutinising experimental paradigms as well as the broader context of the experimental method itself for potential alternative explanations. Even though selected alternative explanations are commonly discussed in the published literature and as part of the reviewing process that precedes eventual publication, the author argues that experimental psychologists often find themselves entrenched in technicalities of their research paradigms so that broader confounds, partly arising due to the experimental situation itself, are often overlooked.

Discussions among specialists should therefore be supplemented by thorough philosophical analysis, which may in turn help to highlight potential relevance of certain findings for understanding human thought and behaviour. This philosophical analysis should be especially mindful of the role of tasks as the “core engine” of experimental psychology as well as sociocultural influences on the outcome of experimental work. The argument further reflects on the context in which most contemporary research takes place, such as typical short-lived grant-research-publication cycles that select for research productivity rather than research quality, common practices of how to conceive and interpret experiments, and paradigmaticity—and the impact of this context on what research is being carried out.

For the author, these factors fueled his decision to break with his profession. *Experimental Psychology and Human Agency* does not intend to deliver a final coup de grace to current empirical psychology, however. Instead, it aims at providing a rich and thought-provoking view of the avenues that lie ahead to make this science a better one. It is a momentous call to broaden one’s own perspective and to re-think the basics of an established scientific discipline.

It is impressive that, in light of such fundamental criticism, the book does not stop at such meta-theoretical arguments but applies the overarching rationale to several fields of research. To this end, the main part of the book houses six chapters that are dedicated to a second, more mundane level of critique. This part is addressed at specialists in the field of cognitive psychology, and the author gives a detailed overview of the current state of research on a rather eclectic list of subjects—ranging from tasks and choice behaviour, to rule violations and sense of agency. For each of these topics, he pictures the state of the art vividly and with remarkable attention to methodological detail. This scrutiny of current research then leads to a striking number of unique, well-considered views on these topics, challenging mainstream interpretations of several basic phenomena. Ironically, by doing so, this book might serve as a treasure trove for those who, for whatever reason, stick to the productivity-oriented research circus that is criticised in the first place. Still, even in the later chapters this critique lurks between the lines and sets the discussion into context.

What really makes this book stand out is its intense personal character. It is a deeply moving testimony by an observer who cares for a field of research and who hopes to shape it for the better. Its insistent appeal to the reader leaves a lasting impression. This book makes you re-consider choices—research-related choices, career choices, and life choices alike—and it comes with the call to make better ones, to conduct better research, be it empirical or theoretical. Let us make experimental psychology a better science and listen to this call!

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Note

1. Often ascribed to Jack Handey's *Deep Thoughts* commentary series on Saturday Night Live (shorturl.at/CIRT0).

Reference

- Gozli, D. (2019). *Experimental psychology and human agency*. Springer.