

The brain neuroplastic

'I sing the brain neuroplastic' should perhaps be the title of this somehow very American book. For Doidge, Walt Whitman's 'all-baffling brain' is entirely comprehensible in terms of neuroplasticity, which he uses to explain behaviours as diverse as obsessive compulsive disorder, love, chronic pain, internet pornography, recovery from stroke and autism.

Doidge wants to make radical claims about the brain, and in part uses the old trick of attacking a straw man, which was described well in a review in the *New York Times*: 'In classical

neuroscience, the adult brain was considered an immutable machine, as wonderfully precise as a clock in a locked case. Every part had a specific purpose, none could be replaced or repaired, and the machine was destined to tick in unchanging rhythm until its gears corroded with age.' If anyone ever truly thought that, how did they explain learning and memory? And even if the clockwise brain is ridiculous, equally absurd is its overly liberal converse of an infinitely plastic brain, 'as malleable as a lump of wet clay' as that same review said.

Neuroplasticity is everywhere now, and this book is a good guide to its gurus, its logic and its jargon. Children, for instance, no longer learn arithmetic but instead undergo 'brain training' (as a recent newspaper advert put it), a training that seems merely to mean playing with a hand-held gadget that provides feedback while doing arithmetic problems. Much of neuroplasticity, brain re-mapping or whatever seems to be using a new metaphor to redescribe, for the age of MRI, the old psychological truths of learning depending on its consequences, depth of processing helping memory, attention underpinning perception, and ten thousand hours of practice improving skill. The underlying mechanisms may fascinate neuroscientists, but need not necessarily interest psychologists, any more than computer hardware necessarily interests those using software. Even if brains are a necessary precondition for such processes, psychologists probably don't need to buy into the neurobabble unless they are sexing up grant applications, or persuading sceptical university administrators that psychology is actually serious science. Intriguingly, Doidge is a psychoanalyst, and for him Freud was the first to describe psychotherapy as 'neuroplastic therapy'. Should your behaviour change from reading this review, then perhaps I also am a 'neuroplastician'...

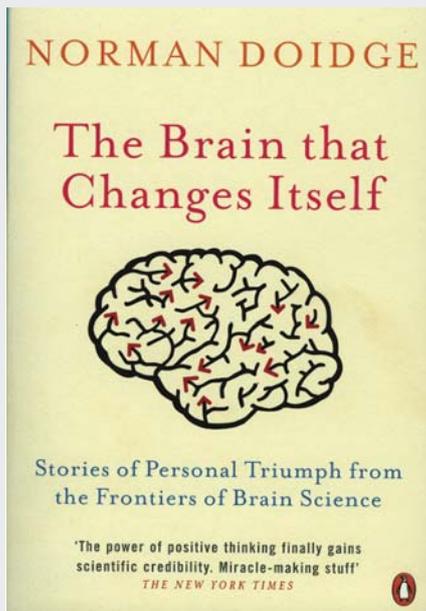
Overall this book is intriguing, infuriating, fascinating, absurd, credulous, wrong and misleading in parts, mainly by trying to satisfy different audiences. Scientific readers won't like the cutesy, intimate stories of 'personal triumph from the frontiers of brain science', replete with sweeping over-generalisations and little critical assessment. The triumphs are of the patients (whose rare diseases are undiagnosed by dismissive doctors but have miraculous recoveries) and the scientists (who are derided geniuses, rejecting conventional academia, whose ideas are both attacked and neglected until vindication results from the miraculous recoveries of those same patients). Neither will the book satisfy the halt, the lame and those suffering a myriad of neural afflictions, who will gain little from the technical diversions, and may be sadly misled with false hope of new dawns. When cures fail to appear, the interpretation may well be that the patients' brains simply didn't sufficiently want to change.

The cover quotes the *New York Times* as saying, 'the power of positive thinking finally gains scientific credibility'. The reference to Norman Vincent Peale's 1950s evangelical best-seller runs the risk that lack of improvement may be attributed to a failure of attitude, of not having sufficient of what, at Peale's death, Bill Clinton called, 'the wondrously American value of optimism'. Not to recover would be un-American, and the patient once more the problem.

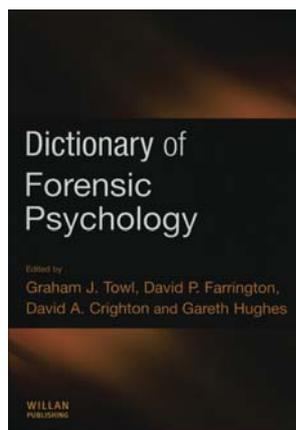
| Penguin; 2008; Pb £9.99

Reviewed by Chris McManus

who is Professor of Psychology and Medical Education, University College London



The Brain that Changes Itself:
Stories of Personal Triumph from
the Frontiers of Brain Science
Norman Doidge



More than a dictionary

Dictionary of Forensic Psychology
Graham J. Towl, David P. Farrington, David A. Crighton & Gareth Hughes (Eds.)

The book starts with an introduction to the Division of Forensic Psychology, monitoring its launch in 1977 to its current status within the British Psychological Society. Written by leading academic and practising forensic psychologists, it provides accessible descriptions of everyday terminology, including over 300 terms relating to forensic psychology, such as *offending behaviour interventions* and *recidivism prediction*.

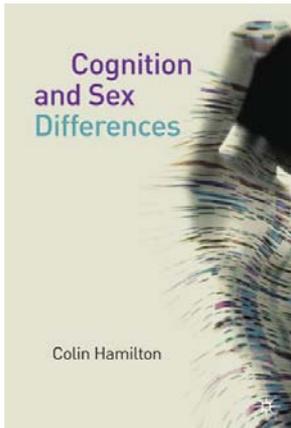
The book also provides an array of key texts and sources for each term for the interested reader as well as listing related entries from within the dictionary and providing details about other professional bodies such as the probation service and the Ministry of Justice. Particularly useful was the format of the definition – each entry had both a brief punchy definition, followed by a longer explanation (500–1500 words). These factors make the book more than just a dictionary, they make it a useful mapping or reference document for anyone interested or working in the area of forensic psychology.

Overall, a really interesting read.

| Willan; 2008; Pb £22.99

Reviewed by Samantha L. Heaton

who is an assistant psychologist at Rampton Hospital



Importance of process

Cognition and Sex Differences
Colin Hamilton

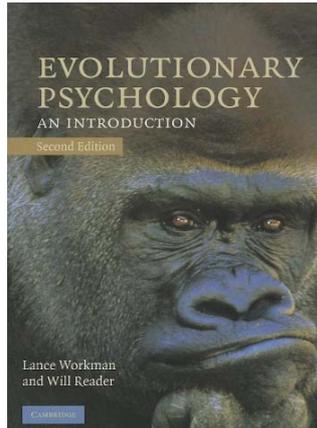
Understanding differences in cognition is useful across many domains of psychological practice. Here Colin Hamilton considers individual differences in cognition from various perspectives (evolutionary, hormonal, socio-cultural, etc.).

From the outset Hamilton argues the benefit of taking a *process orientation* when considering cognitive functioning, proposing that this will lead to far greater understanding of the sources individual difference. He demonstrates this argument well throughout, considering research findings not just in terms of what they indicate about task performance, but what they might mean in relation to underlying processes. Several chapters are finished with a 'Research to do' section, making for an interesting and thought-provoking read.

This objective and comprehensive book considers differences both between and within the sexes, preventing the reader from feeling that the point of research in this area is to polarise men and women. It also acknowledges the interaction of cognition with other areas of psychological and social functioning, highlighting the importance of taking the big picture into account when considering cognitive functioning.

Palgrave Macmillan; 2008;
Pb £19.99

Reviewed by Leanne Gregory
who is an assistant
psychologist, NHS Greater
Glasgow and Clyde



An intriguing area

**Evolutionary Psychology:
An Introduction (2nd edn)**
Lance Workman & Will
Reader

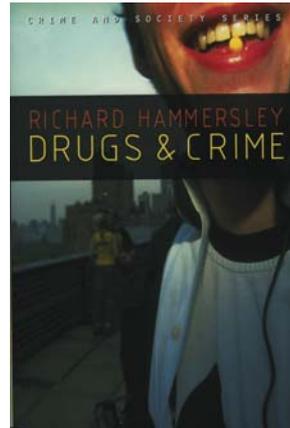
Although an area of psychology I enjoyed a great deal during my undergraduate degree, evolutionary psychology was not one I'd explored further. Like many students, I found learning about sexual selection and mate choice fascinating, even if I did not agree with the reduction of human beings to simply a product of natural selection, or what seemed to be convenient excuses for less than favourable sexual behaviour. I knew little about evolutionary psychology's arguments in other areas of human behaviour.

This easy-to-read textbook provides an excellent introduction to evolutionary explanations for many psychological phenomena. With coverage of topics not usually featuring on the undergraduate degree syllabus (e.g. arguments around psychopathology and culture), Workman and Reader manage to engage the Darwinian novice and make an intriguing area of psychology even more compelling.

I'm sure that anyone new to the area would find this book both accessible and wide-ranging.

Cambridge University Press;
2008; Pb £27.99

Reviewed by Vicki Bradshaw
who is with City & Hackney
Primary Care Trust



A breath of fresh air

Drugs and Crime
Richard Hammersley

With this book, Hammersley ferociously dispels any long-standing notions of a straightforward causal relationship between drugs and crime, whereby it is often taken for granted that drugs are the root of all evil, and crime ultimately results from and feeds such habits. Instead, he offers a reassessment of the nature of these two issues with evidence from a vast range of research spanning the last century, to bring about an understanding not only of the nature of drugs and crime, but also of the social constructions of these concepts and of the nature of the perceived links between the two.

Key topics include drug classification and the reasons for such classifications in society, the life course of drug problems and offending behaviour, regulation of illicit drugs, and use prevention. Perhaps most importantly,

Hammersley devotes a chapter to addressing poverty and social exclusion, which he argues are the key drivers of both drugs and crime.

Hammersley questions what we as readers 'know' about drugs and crime, allowing a re-examination of some of the well-established preconceptions, and a consideration of alternative explanations for such links, including complex social and psychological contexts. He argues that a link between these issues cannot be as straightforward as we may be led to believe.

With an innovative combination of scientific and phenomenological approaches this text is a breath of fresh air for students and academics alike, providing a neutral basis from which to develop thinking and research within this highly influential area of study.

Polity Press; 2008; Pb £17.99

Reviewed by Helen Henshaw
who is a PhD student at the
University of Leicester

just in

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