



## education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

July 17, 2010

ISSN 1094-5296

Lilienfeld, Scott O.; Lynn, Steve Jay ; Ruscio, John & Beyenstein, Barry L. (2010) *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology: Shattering Misconceptions About Human Behavior*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

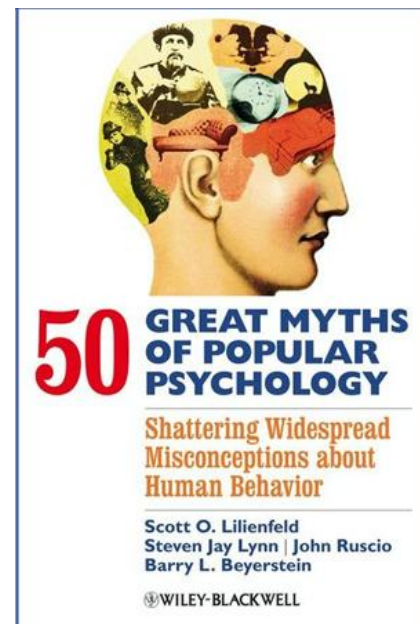
Pp. 352

ISBN 978-1-4051-3112-4

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In the popular television program “Myth Busters” Jamie Hyneman, Adam Savage and their colleagues gleefully test, and mostly demolish, a wide variety of urban legends and other popular *myth*conceptions. Scott O. Lilienfeld, Steve Jay Lynn, John Ruscio and Barry L. Beyenstein set out to do the same for psychological folk lore, a great deal of which has a strong hold on how people think about and conduct important human activities, education included. The result is every bit as entertaining, and informative, as the television show. Contained in the book, however, as some important lessons for psychology and how it is taught that pass without mention by the authors.



Citation: Scott, Catherine. (2010 July 17) Review of *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology* by Lilienfeld, Scott O.; Lynn, Steve Jay ; Ruscio, John & Beyenstein, Barry L. . *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev939.pdf>

The authors begin with a discussion of why we believe nonsense. Mostly, we do this because it appeals to common sense and fits with what we already know or believe. A variety of logical fallacies, perceptual illusions and cognitive biases rally to the service of perpetuating fallacies. Regrettably, however, we also sometimes believe these because at some point or other an expert has assured us that we should.

The authors also include tools for evaluating ideas, claims, and arguments. These would certainly be of use for those of us dedicated to keeping our thinking honest or who would like to provide students with some myth-proofing. The language employed is simple and clear, so that even high school students should find the tools accessible.

## Education and Psychological Myths

There are many more than 50 myths discussed in the book. The main 50 are organised by themes, including myths about brain power (the brain and perception); from womb to tomb (development and aging); teaching old dogs new tricks (intelligence and learning); and the social animal (interpersonal behaviour). At the end of each sub-section covering an individual myth is a list of anti-factoids about related matters and their factual antidotes. By this means a considerable range of topics is covered.

Each section generally starts with evidence about the percentages of people, students included, who cleave to the particular myth. This is followed by the search for the origins of the myth and how it became widely accepted. The authors then demolish the myth, providing the research evidence that shows its inaccuracy or downright fallaciousness. There are plenty of references for follow-up discussion and evidence, plus a list of websites that feature more information about psychomythology.

The sections on learning, the brain, memory, and intelligence are of particular utility for educators of all types. Popular education beliefs about learning styles, the central place of self esteem in student attainment, dyslexia, intelligence tests,

and even test taking are scrutinised, and the evidence against them presented. Included is an examination of the popular belief that females and males are so extraordinarily different that they are scarcely from the same species, and certainly not from the same planet (but from Venus and Mars, respectively). This myth and the lack of evidence for it are of significance for educators because many have been sold on the idea that boys and girls learn so differently that different pedagogies are required. As with the other myths listed, including “learning styles” and other apologies for the need to create different pedagogies for different groups (Scott, 2010), this is an education red herring and a grand great waster of time, energy, and commitment. The evidence presented by the authors suggests that differences between girls/women and boys/men are mostly very small and of no practical significance. Rather than coming from Venus and Mars, women and men hail instead from North and South Dakota.

In the longest individual section, the authors bravely, I am tempted to say, address the truth about the consequences of sexual abuse of children. While certain branches of clinical psychology and popular media—the Oprah show included—have perpetrated a view of the outcomes of abuse as entirely destructive with tragic and inescapable consequences for all sufferers, the relevant research showcases instead the resilience of children and the general human capacity to recover and move on from trauma. This is of significance for educators because of the extreme levels of energy and effort expended to prevent even the remotest possibility of children encountering sexual predators, including in schools. These have had considerable negative impacts on schools, relationships between adults and other adults, and adults and children, and the freedom of movement that children are now allowed, or more properly, no longer allowed (Piper and Stronach, 2008). It can be argued that the unintended harm done by the obsession with preventing abuse far outweighs that which it was designed to prevent.

## The Origins of Common Sense: How Psychology is Complicit

The origins of commonsense, the repository of the myths discussed in the book, are many but, as eminent economist John Maynard Keynes observed, much of it consists of the lingering ghosts of (outdated and/or disproven) academic discourse past. Psychology and its cognate disciplines have been a potent source of the commonsense myths that the authors and others like them, now toil to correct. Many of the short segments on the various myths start with mention of the work of a past – or not so past – psychologist or similar investigator whose work produced the initial seeds of the myth. Founding fathers of mythology include Freud, whose picture of the human unconscious and its functioning has been a potent source of misunderstandings of human behaviour since it was first published (Morss, 1990).

The history of Freud's work is instructive for the light it sheds on how psychological myths become common sense. Inarguably, Freud's ideas were a product of his times, and the metaphors he chose to describe the abstract notions with which he grappled were strongly influenced by ideas in circulation in contemporary thinking of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ideas expressed in the language of the times have an intuitive appeal: they "feel right," even if there is little to support them. Thus, Freud's description of the structure and function of the mind using a hydraulic model, which included conceptualising emotions as a sort of fluid, with the build up of "pressure" and the necessity for "release" as essential components, was consonant with major theories in the more prestigious mechanical sciences (think steam trains and mighty industrial machinery).

Those contemporary myths that have great influence on educators' thought and practice—"learning styles," "multiple intelligences"—are ones that also fit well with dominant cultural themes. The contemporary era is a hyper-individualist one. Individual freedom of action is the ultimate good and collective solutions to the challenges of human existence are regarded with fear and distrust. Old ways of doing things are by definition of little worth; old

knowledge is stale and useless; innovation is everything and its source is in the untrammelled activity of the individual imagination.

In educators' thinking, this translates to the belief that there are no general laws of learning and precepts of teaching that can guide practice everywhere and at all times, nor subject matter that ought to be central to any curriculum. To require students to submit to the discipline of, well, the disciplines is an outrageous assault on the unique psyche of the individual child and a recipe for tyranny and the crushing of creativity. Instead teachers must tailor their practice to the characteristics of each child, who is to embody the characteristics of the independent learner and “construct” his or her own version of the world. How to do this? Enter theories of “learning styles” and “multiple intelligences” to guide the teacher. Regrettably these theories both ignore the realities of the classroom and lack any scientific basis, as Lilienfeld and his co-authors document.

Freud's career provides another hint for how psychological myths get started. Freud was no mere toiler after truth but also craved prestige and fame. When considering how to express his ideas contemplated calling the positive principle in human psychology “the life force” (in opposition to thanatos, the death force). However, he decided to go for the more headline grabbing title of “eros,” thus spawning an era in which sex was said to be the basis of everything, much, some have observed, to the detriment of the general tone of Western culture, especially when combined with his other idea that repression is the root of pathology.

The temptation to pump up one's reputation or career prospects by hurrying into print probably underlies the origins of many psychological myths. Anything novel, contentious, sensational, or newsworthy in psychological research quickly finds its way into the popular press. This process is helped along by the media arms of universities, who see their job as getting the institution's name into the papers as often as possible. New developments in nematode histology are unlikely to make front page news; claims that playing Mozart to children increases their scholastic

attainment will. There is no incentive, then, to wait for the slow but necessary work of peer review and replication of the research: best be first to break the news!

Like many popular educational/psychological myths, the Mozart Effect has the virtue of promising a quick, easy solution to a difficult and complex problem. Its appeal means it catches on quickly and then what the authors call the “Bandwagon Bias” trundles onto the scene. Everyone believes the new idea because, well, everyone believes it. Evidence on the matter does not get a look in.

Once an idea, no matter how ill-founded, has made it into the public arena and aroused interest, the next stage in the promotion of its existence and further propagation begins. The authors refer to this as the “Popular Psychology Industry,” that international conglomerate that takes psychological chaff and turns it into self-help books, instructional videos and manuals, professional development courses, consultancy services, and other money-making concerns. Once there’s a buck to be made, truth takes a back seat.

While it a worthy goal for psychologists to wish to debunk the stale, discredited ghosts of theory and research past that have been reincarnated as common sense, it would also be very desirable for members of that profession to refrain from practices that perpetrate the promulgation of myths. It is not a good idea to try to convince people that their cherished beliefs are rubbish on the grounds that we experts know better, when we experts were the ones who launched the foolishness into the public arena in the first place. How likely is it, however, that, in the service of allowing the scientific method to do its slow and necessary work, most can resist getting their names in the paper, their faces on Oprah, and some extra cash in their consultancy accounts?

A prominent means, as Lilienfeld et al. point out, for psychological myth to become common sense is via incorporation into the plot lines and devices of movies and television shows. Freudian notions became widespread and popular because of Hollywood’s romance with

psychoanalysis and the subsequent inclusion of aspects of its theory in movie plots. The authors include many examples of the popularisation of psychological nonsenses through their appearance in popular entertainment.

A sort of vicious circle has been forged between psychology and fiction that the authors do not comment on, however. When I was a member of a psychology teachers' online discussion list, requests would routinely be posted for suggestions for a movie or television show to be used to illustrate some phenomenon or other to students. (I regret to report that I was once associated with an institution at which pre-service teachers took a subject that consisted entirely of viewing movies about teaching and schools, and discussing them afterwards.) I was not the only member of the list to occasionally express reservations about this practice. However, those of us who saw the dangers of blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction were the unpopular minority. The large percentage of students surveyed in the research reported in this book who believe various psychological fallacies, many of which are routinely encountered in movies and on television, cannot really be blamed for their apparent gullibility. After all they are highly likely to have been exposed in the classroom to some fictional story as credible evidence for a psychological fact. They have, in other words, been tacitly encouraged to believe that the entertainment media tell it as it is.

*50 Great Myths* is highly recommended to educators who, like the writer of this review, are pedants, defined as people who prefer their facts to be true. It contains a great deal of ammunition to counter the time-wasting, resource-consuming myths that clutter educators' thinking and prevent movement towards a teaching practice that serves the best interests of the largest possible number of students.

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### About the Reviewer

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