Cognition in the Real World: The benefits of context.

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Undergraduate students typically choose psychology to learn about *people*. Psychologists, however, can (and often do) spend entire careers sacrificing ecological validity for the deepest understanding of a specific, isolated process, hunting differences measured in the low tens of milliseconds (see Hommel, 2011, for an interesting discussion of task-psychology versus cognitive psychology). Even in social cognition, which should be about real human interactions, the pursuit of controlled experimental design means real people are often substituted with dolls and avatars (something I am certainly guilty of). Ultimately, some phenomena revealed using such methods may not matter much outside of the research community and may not replicate outside of the lab. Cognition in the Real World (henceforth, CITRW) provides an alternative prism through which to view a field which can sometimes appear disconnected from everyday experience. It will get students talking about phenomena, but phenomena in people, their jobs, and their societies (and economies). Occasionally, it makes cognitive science coffee-table talk.

CITRW is unusual. First, it is a cross between a textbook and edited volume (there are multiple authors). Second, it eschews the organisation of material along traditional lines (attention, perception, memory, etc) in favour of a thematic approach. Here, the reader learns about the attention through hazard perception, and decision making through recent economic history (e.g. the credit crunch). Dual-representation theories of memory are described through studies of emotional trauma and PTSD (one of the best chapters in my view).

Third, CITRW always gives readers a context to hang knowledge on, be it sarcasm, drawing, music, or any other identifiable and ‘real’ behaviour or phenomena.There are also

comparatively few on-page distractions and ‘side-quests’ to break the rhythm. Its chapters are meant to be *read*, rather than referred to. An interesting by-product is it’s a more interesting read for the tutor (CITRW does better than most at avoiding the forced familiarity found in more exclamation-mark-littered titles).

Often the benefits of this approach are clear. A case in point is the chapter on surrogate decision making (decisions made for others, such as sick loved ones, suddenly unable to communicate their wishes). Couching themes such as egocentric biases and future-self decisions in terms of acute health crises works superbly as a framing device, serves up tasty moral dilemmas for the reader, and leads neatly on to an investigation of the intriguing decision gap between what health professionals– the experts – would advise others to do and what they would do themselves. The relationship between face recognition and passport control is similarly appropriate, though of more niche interest. Perhaps some topics are naturally easier to carry outside the lab than others. Indeed, perhaps this is why textbooks of this type are uncommon; sometimes it is hard to find the applications for all the effects that interest the cognitive scientist.

Just as it is important to know what CITRW is, it is important to know what CITRW is not. It is not a full-coverage reference text for the student to find something about *anything*, nor does it try to be. It is happy to avoid ‘staples’ where they are not relevant to the selected theme (no reference anywhere to the Muller-Lyer illusion, for example). For some it will be a companion rather than core textbook, served in chapter-sized slices with final-year electives, or as additional reading for core modules. On the other hand, for those whose modules take a more applied slant, this could have centre stage.

CITRW is a departure from the standard notion of a reference textbook. By focusing on real-world application, this departure is in a sense necessary – it cannot be a complete

guide to all things that psychologists are interested in when many of those things are decidedly *not* about ‘in the wild’ phenomena. The question it throws up, though entirely indirectly, is what cognitive science is actually for. Is it about understanding the internal processes and what humans are, or to model and explain real human behaviour and performance in real conditions? If it is the latter, then more textbooks should do what CITRW does. In the meantime, CITRW has carved out a relatively unique space on the shelf.

References

Hommel, B. (2011) The Simon Effect as tool and heuristic. *Acta Psychologica, 136*(2), 189–202.