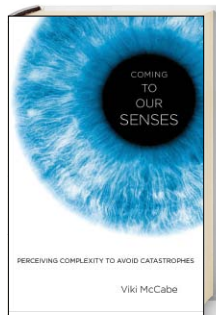


A THEORY ABOUT THEORIES

Coming to Our Senses: Perceiving Complexity to Avoid Catastrophes

by Viki McCabe. Oxford University Press, 2014 (\$29.95)



Sometimes our theories about the world take on a life of their own. We take them so seriously that we ignore the properties of our environment that generated those theories in the first place.

A cognitive psychologist and visiting scholar at the University of California, Los

Angeles, McCabe believes this tendency often gets out of hand, contributing to many of modern society's tragedies and ills: the Great Recession of 2008, for example, driven by a focus on derivatives rather than by the actual value of commodities, or the death of more than 1,000 people in Hurricane Katrina, caused by faulty theories about the effectiveness of levees instead of observations about how complex natural drainage systems work.

McCabe's take on this phenomenon is unique and fresh. Drawing on both scientific research and news stories, she demonstrates three things: first, that our mental life is often out of touch with the physical reality around us; second, that we sometimes make better judgments about the complexities in our environment when we rely on intuitions—hunches informed by unconscious perceptions—instead of analytical thinking; and third, that people are complex, dynamic systems nested in a world of complex, dynamic systems.

The book is excellent at reminding us of the importance of complex systems in virtually every aspect of our lives. Even when our intentions are good, McCabe notes, a simple intervention—removing the wolves from Yellowstone National Park to make cattle safer—can destroy an entire ecosystem, resulting in dead trees, erosion and flooding.

At times, though, McCabe goes too far in her defense of intuition. When she tells us, for example, the story of a woman who had a bad feeling about an old man and young girl in a convenience store, she speculates that the woman's

unease was an unconscious reaction to the irregular “yoked movements” of the pair. Sure enough, the man turned out to be a kidnapper and pedophile, but this is not evidence for the power of intuition; it is just an anecdote. Extensive research on intuition yields a complex picture. Generally speaking, analytical thinking seems to be every bit as valuable as intuition. Each may serve us well, depending on the circumstances.

As a researcher, I also found myself bothered at times by what seemed to be an emotional undertone in the book. McCabe often conveys the impression

that our failure to pay closer attention to the complex systems of nature is *unjust*—that our reliance on theory causes millions of people to suffer and even threatens the very existence of the human race. Yet our cogitations also help many people to survive and prosper.

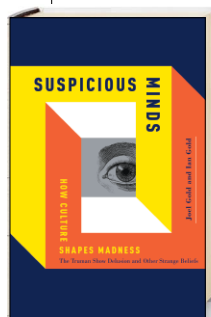
Although McCabe has produced a fascinating book, she misses a fundamental point: namely that theories, including her own, become *part* of complex systems; they are not separate from them. In a sense, theories are just more data, helping us make the best decisions we can.

—Robert Epstein

THE MADDENING CROWD

Suspicious Minds: How Culture Shapes Madness

by Joel Gold and Ian Gold. Simon & Schuster, 2014 (\$26)



In 2003 “Albert” entered Bellevue Hospital’s psychiatric emergency room. A 26-year-old assembly worker, he was convinced that his life was the focal point of a television show. He entered Bellevue after a fracas at the United Nations, where he had gone to demand asylum from his televised life.

For psychiatrist Joel Gold, Albert was the first in a series of patients convinced he lived his entire existence on TV, circumstances that proved eerily similar to those depicted in the film *The Truman Show*. These patients prompted Gold and his brother, philosopher Ian Gold, to investigate how culture influences the content of delusional thinking. *Suspicious Minds* is the result of that research, which led them to lay out a theory for understanding psychosis through a social lens.

The Golds begin by reviewing the history and theories of madness, dwelling in particular on hints of interpersonal deficits in people with delusions. For example, individuals with psychoses struggle to understand other people’s mental states. Schizophrenia, too, seems to have a social component: immigrants who face discrimination and urbanites in very populous cities face heightened risk of the disorder.

Drawing on such evidence, the Golds hypothesize that everyone employs a

“suspicion system” to read and respond to social situations, but some individuals experience delusions when their personal threat detector breaks down. For some, this system may be faulty from birth or broken through severe social strain. Individuals with amygdala deficits may struggle to decode facial expressions such as fear or anger. Delusions then occur when a person tries to make sense of inappropriately perceived social threats; for example, a delusion of grandeur is a way for someone who feels lost in a crowd to puff up his or her status.

The authors stud their carefully compiled evidence with historical and current case studies. These are the most poignant passages in the book, including an overstressed 24-year-old medical student who abandons her studies to try to raise the dead at Ground Zero and a devoted husband whose 30-year marriage collapses when a series of strokes leaves him obsessively jealous. The Golds suggest that the content of these delusions reflects the reigning zeitgeist—whereas a schizophrenic Englishman in the 19th century feared French spies and pneumatic machinery, a contemporary patient fears iPads and the NSA.

The importance placed on time-sensitive cultural influence may be the weakest argument presented here, eclipsed by the more intriguing ideas about suspicion and immediate social context. Altogether, though, the authors offer a fascinating and intimate portrait of psychosis. Rather than reducing mental illness to mutations and misfiring neurotransmitters, *Suspicious Minds* reminds readers that otherwise healthy people can experience delusional impulses driven by insecurity or stress. In the Golds’ conception of psychosis, the line between mental health and illness is very fine indeed.

—Daisy Yuhas