Belief: What It Means to Believe and Why Our Convictions Are so Compelling


Reviewed by Austin W. Blum, MD, JD

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James E. Alcock, PhD is no stranger to the power of belief. In the opening pages of the aptly titled Belief: What It Means to Believe and Why Our Convictions Are So Compelling, Alcock describes how belief shapes everything we do: how we treat ourselves and others, whether we support a particular political party or not, and whether we follow the tenets of a particular religion or none at all. Beliefs, Alcock notes, have inspired humans to create great artistic works, to explore the unknown, and to dedicate their lives to the welfare of the poor, sick, and oppressed. Beliefs also motivate untold causes of human misery, war, terrorism, and suicide among them. Knowing how important beliefs are to all of us, Alcock dedicates this 600-page work to explicating how we come to believe what we do.

At the heart of Alcock’s psychological framework is what he calls the “Belief Engine”: the set of cognitive processes by which our brains take in information from the environment, combine it with information from memory, and generate new beliefs or reinforce old ones. While the Belief Engine operates well most of the time, it is also vulnerable to well-known biases. Our brain’s remarkable tendency to search for patterns, for instance, may lead us to find connections in both meaningful and meaningless events. In the latter case, when the brain’s pattern-detection system is too active, forms of magical thinking may result. Examples include a belief in extrasensory perception, the paranormal, or miracle cures.

Belief is the culmination of a lifetime of thinking about this topic. Alcock is a professor of psychology at York University in Toronto and has been a noted critic of parapsychology since the 1970s. He is a fellow and member of the executive council of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. He has published extensively on the psychology of belief, including in his previous books Science and Supernature and Parapsychology: Science or Magic? Alcock is also an amateur magician.

The current book is divided into six parts on the power of belief, the Belief Engine, belief stability and change, knowing ourselves, belief in a world beyond, and vetting belief. Following a brief introductory chapter, Alcock describes the processes underpinning the Belief Engine (perceiving, remembering, learning, feeling, and thinking) and how they may go awry. The chapter on perception, for instance, shows how our brains easily misinterpret sensory information, leading people to see faces on Mars or hear supposed satanic lyrics in Led Zeppelin. Having established how beliefs are formed, Alcock describes why they are often so difficult to change. One reason is that we tend to look for evidence that supports our beliefs while ignoring disconfirming evidence, a phenomenon known as confirmation bias. Alcock then catalogs a variety of beliefs that people may hold about themselves or the external world, with chapters on folk remedies and alternative medicine, magic and superstition, religion, illusory experiences, and the paranormal (among others). Finally, in a short concluding chapter, Alcock offers eight rules to help us become better critical thinkers, the first two of which are “beware: we can all be fooled” and “be wary of your intuitions” (p 531).

Belief is a work of striking scope. It is well-written, engaging, and contains more than 70 pages of references. Alcock has presented a wealth of psychological data in a manner that will interest both a general audience and those with training in the field.

Although the book was not written for forensic psychiatrists or psychologists, they will find that it contains much to consider that is relevant to these fields. Alcock touches upon forensic topics such as the motivations of terrorism, the perils of lie detection (we are much worse at it than we might think), and the unreliability of eyewitness memory. He also discusses the use of hypnosis to recover “hidden” memories of childhood sexual abuse (a therapy briefly popular in the 1980s and the 1990s) and explains why this practice is now understood to be highly questionable scientifically. If Belief has a central lesson for forensic readers, it may be that we all have our blind spots.
Although it is well-researched, given its intended audience, *Belief* should not be taken as a comprehensive guide to the behaviors that it describes. Curiously, *Belief* does not discuss the evolutionary roots of the Belief Engine, a topic approached in at least one other popular science book (Michael Shermer’s *The Believing Brain*) and in Alcock’s own 1995 article of the same name. By putting the Belief Engine in its evolutionary context, Alcock could show how this imperfect system may nevertheless be adaptive in certain situations. Finally, although the number of problematic beliefs described in this book is truly staggering, a discussion of hate groups and political extremism in the modern era is notably absent.

*Belief* provides an up-to-date account of how the brain constructs beliefs, how we may be led astray by characteristic errors and distortions, and how we can use critical thinking to correct our mistakes. It is also a sort of far-ranging encyclopedia of human beliefs, some of which may be encountered in legal or forensic settings.

While it is unlikely to change forensic psychiatric practice, *Belief* is sure to be appreciated and enjoyed by readers with a skeptical bent.

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**Forensic Psychiatry: Fundamentals and Clinical Practice**


*Reviewed by Harbir Walia, DO*

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**Key words:** textbook; general forensic concepts; risk assessment; basic sciences; PTSD

*Forensic Psychiatry: Fundamentals and Clinical Practice* simultaneously provides a comprehensive and up-to-date review of key concepts in the specialty while emphasizing commonly overlooked topics in forensic psychiatry, such as foundational neuroscience and neuroimaging. Editors Basant Puri and Ian H. Treasaden (both faculty of Imperial College London School of Medicine, United Kingdom) have brought together an impressive set of expert contributors, drawing primarily from fellow U.K.-based forensic practitioners. This text serves as a reference and refresher for seasoned forensic practitioners and a welcoming introduction to the field for trainees. The text is written within the context of the British legal system but is largely applicable to the general field of forensic psychiatry, including its practice in the United States.

The text is divided into 11 parts that each cover important topics and concepts in the field. Part 1 provides an overview of the basic sciences. It emphasizes important advancements and developments in fields of neurobiology, neuroimaging, and genetics in the context of forensic psychiatry. This section is instrumental in establishing the foundations for understanding common clinical presentations in forensic psychiatry. The section begins with clearly labeled figures to help guide the discussion on neuroanatomy. This leads to a brief review of neurochemistry with an emphasis on serotonin metabolization and thyroid function and their significance in psychopathy and aggression. Chapters 3 and 4 are especially pertinent to understanding psychopathy and aggression with examples of changes in structure and neural activation found in the brains of those with violent tendencies.

The chapters in Part 1 addressing the psychology of memory, development, aggression, and violence provide a foundation to better appreciate later discussions in the book on clinical forensic psychiatry and assessments. Chapter 10 on the psychology of aggression and violence is particularly helpful as it describes various models and perspectives to better understand how violence manifests. Part 1 also includes a chapter supporting the need for cultural formulations, especially when working with marginalized groups.

Part 2 details clinical forensic psychiatry and comprises the bulk of the text. This section begins with an introduction of the interplay of psychiatry and law in the United Kingdom and then discusses specific areas of interest in forensic psychiatry. This part is helpful in emphasizing common presentations or concepts that can be applied to other psychiatric subspecialties, such as consult liaison, emergency, addiction, and correctional psychiatry. These topics include assessing, managing, and treating aggression/violence, malingering, PTSD, and substance use. This part is successful in covering well-documented and researched topics in forensic psychiatry, such as psychosis and law, while also highlighting less discussed topics like deaf offenders with psychiatric needs.