

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

By James E. Alcock. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2018.

Reviewed by Austin W. Blum, MD, JD

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Key words: cognition; cognitive psychology; false beliefs; social psychology

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.

Disclosures of financial or other potential conflicts of interest: None.

Forensic Psychiatry: Fundamentals and Clinical Practice

Edited by Basant Puri and Ian H. Treasaden. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press; 2017. 954 pp, \$215.

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.

Part 3 examines the specific interactions of the legal system with mental health. It begins with a description of the criminal justice system found in England and Wales. Chapter 65 is especially informative as it discusses specific sentencing for mentally ill offenders with easy-to-follow tables. There is a later discussion on specific defenses applicable for mentally ill offenders, with Chapter 70 describing the history and implementation of the “not guilty by insanity” plea.

Part 4 details the clinical assessment process in forensics, with Chapters 89 and 90 covering risk and violence assessments. These assessments are applicable to other fields in psychiatry by providing objective tools to help create risk management plans. Parts 4 and 5 discuss the clinical responsibilities of forensic psychiatrists. These responsibilities include writing a medico-legal report, being an expert witness, and presenting formally in court. Each step is carefully discussed in layman’s terms, which provides insight into the process for those unfamiliar. For example, Chapter 93 provides guidelines and considerations for report writing as well as examples that help reinforce the language and content expected in medicolegal documents.

Part 6 reviews treatment modalities within a level of care discussion. This part again discusses risk assessments while highlighting the U.K. level of care model for forensic populations. This part also includes discussions on managing severe personality disorders in a hospital and community setting. The discussions of specific therapy modalities (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, psychodynamic psychotherapy, family therapy, etc.) provide a unique perspective on how these therapies are used within the forensic population. Part 7 continues the discussion of levels of care by addressing the U.K. prison system and the prevalence of mental illness within it. This part highlights unique aspects of correctional psychiatry, such as the treatment of women and those less abled in the prison setting. This part’s most captivating chapter is a case example of HMP Grendon, an English prison that has become a novel personality disorder treatment center.

Part 8 covers the victims of violence, including torture, with a chapter dedicated to PTSD that encompasses prior discussions on the topic. Part 9 dives into the interplay of civil law and forensic psychiatry with thought provoking discussions on abortion and euthanasia. These topics are highly relevant in our current sociopolitical landscape. The discussion on abortion is particularly informative and encourages a conversation regarding the mental health impacts related to abortion.

Part 10 provides an overview of general ethics considerations, such as consent, confidentiality, and duty to warn. The duty to warn chapter is enlightening as it details the unique and contrasting legal obligations psychiatrists in the United States and United Kingdom face when deciding to report potential threats from patients. Finally, Part 11 concludes the text with a brief comparison of mental health laws found in other English-speaking countries.

Forensic Psychiatry captures the essence of the field and its practice in one accessible text. One possible drawback of providing such sheer depth of information is that chapters may become disjointed at times with few clear transitions between chapters within each part. The text partially mitigates this concern with repeatedly presenting key topics throughout the text to provide a sense of cohesion through building on prior discussions. Ultimately, this text is a reliable reference and guide to exploring the world of forensic psychiatry for all levels of training and expertise.

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The Roots of Modern Psychology and Law

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Reviewed by Stephen L. Weiner, MD

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The Roots of Modern Psychology and Law is a collection of stories about the rise of psychology and law in post-war America. Psychologists Thomas Grisso and Stanley L. Brodsky, who served as editors of the collection, expertly arranged the stories into a simple but compelling format. They gave twelve psychology and law luminaries one chapter each to tell their version of events, discussing where they were when these two fields began to interact in the modern era and the role they played in bringing the fields together.

The result is an engaging 221-page narrative history in which each chapter author gives a first-person account of how their career influenced, and was influenced by, the psychology and law movement. Chapter authors explain the rise of subfields, including jury research, therapeutic jurisprudence, and predictions of violence, with candor and simplicity.

Drs. Grisso and Stanley made another interesting editorial choice. They arranged the chapters by subject instead of chronology. The first six chapters cover psychological science and the law (eyewitness testimony, civil commitment, mental health law), while the last six are more practice-based (correctional psychology, psycholegal capacity, community psychology).

Broadly speaking, the advent of the American Psychology and Law Society (AP-LS) in 1971 serves as a launch point for each author's account. The stories then march on into the present day. In this way, the same historical period is described in each of the twelve chapters. The result of this approach depends on the reader. For those familiar with the history of modern psychology and law, the chapters will feel like victory laps. Novices will appreciate the repetition of names, dates, and key events.

Dr. Grisso authors the first chapter, titled "The Evolution of Psychology and Law." In an academic, third-person voice that distinguishes it from the rest of the book, Dr. Grisso recounts the history of how these two fields merged. He starts in the late 1890s with the birth of legal psychology, presses on through the dormant period (1930-1960), and arrives in the modern era (1960s onward). It is an excellent historical primer for the following twelve chapters. In fact, it is almost too good; if this book were a history of modern psychology and law, Dr. Grisso reveals the whole plot before the book begins.

But it isn't a history book in the traditional sense. Since this book is a narrative history, the what and when matter only in the context of who and why. And in this collection, the chapter authors supply richly detailed answers to those who and why questions. We learn about friendships, marriages, and *eureka* moments. We learn the root of *eureka* itself, and we learn about the diligence those moments of discovery required.

Dr. Elizabeth Loftus, the chapter author on eyewitness testimony, "lived and breathed" semantic memory after finishing her PhD at Stanford (p 33). "But," she writes, "I wanted to do research that had more obvious social relevance" (p 33). She considered her latent "personal interest in legal cases" and resolved

to study the memory of witnesses to crimes (p 33). Not long after, she secured funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation to study accident witnesses. This led to another *eureka* moment. Leading questions, she discovered, could "contaminate memory" (p 34). After she published her findings in a 1974 *Psychology Today* article, "... my phone was ringing off the hook ... I began to consult on legal cases and to appear in courtrooms as an expert witness..." (p 35).

We also learn about historical, systemic injustice in American mental health care. Sadly, decades of dogma that minimized patients' rights cemented the barriers to progress sought by each author. In "Correctional Psychology," Dr. Brodsky describes his early encounters with locked facilities. "I was alone on the 11:00 PM to 7:00 AM shift prior to the days of psychotropic drugs ... Every hour, as instructed, I pulled out my ring of skeleton keys ... and ran a key along the bottom of the bare feet of patients to see if they were alive" (p 179).

Change was slow to come. Five years after Judge Frank M. Johnson of the Middle District of Alabama found correctional facilities of Alabama to be "constitutionally barbaric" in 1971, Dr. Brodsky's attempts to address correctional psychology were met with "an openly hostile and resistant prison system" (p 186).

One author reveals his own brush with the legal system and how it shaped his career. In "Forensic Mental Health Services and Competence to Stand Trial," Dr. Ronald Roesch writes about the time he broke into a golf course and stole golf clubs. The judge considered Roesch's academic record and lack of prior offenses and sentenced the 19-year-old to probation. "Here," Dr. Roesch writes, "was an example of diversion before diversion was common ... Judge Gooding's diversion decision set me on a career path in psychology and law in which I have tried to create similar opportunities for others..." (p 128).

If the founding of the AP-LS in 1974 acts as the book's historical anchor, then Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in 1962 and the concurrent wave of social justice movements serve as its moral anchor. Indeed, the desire to create a more equitable future is echoed throughout the book. For example, in "Applying Social Psychology to the Law and the Legal Process," Dr. Michael J. Saks writes, "I was eager to deploy psychology's discovered phenomena, theories, and research methods in the service of helping to make the world better through psychology" (p 46).

As an example of that deployment, Dr. Saks describes a legal case in which key evidence hinged on the analysis of a “handwriting examiner” (p 52). While working on the case, he discovered that there was no evidence to suggest one could be an expert at identifying handwriting in the first place. To wit, Dr. Saks helped reveal “the larger problem of a forensic science that had no science and no data undergirding it ...” (p 52). He cites the advent of DNA typing, and *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc.*, 509 U.S. 579 (1993), which raised the barrier of admissibility of expert evidence from consensus within a field to demonstrated validity, as key developments in the scientific reformation of forensic science. The scholarly momentum that drove such developments was due in no small part to researchers like Dr. Saks and the rest of the chapter authors.

In sum, *The Roots of Modern Psychology and Law* offers a novel approach to modern psycholegal history. It situates the reader in many contexts (social, moral, personal) without sacrificing readability. It is erudite but also heartfelt. It makes a powerful case for the narrative history model, and it is a must-read for those interested in the sample intersection of psychology and law.

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Tiger King: When the Fascination Fades, What Can We Learn from Joe Exotic et al?

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Reviewed by Chandler Hicks, DO and Cathleen Cerny-Suelzer, MD

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Directed by Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin and released March 20, 2020, on Netflix, the seven-part series *Tiger King* details the niche community of big cat collectors and conservationists by focusing on four individuals: Joe Exotic, Carole Baskin, Bhagavan “Doc” Antle, and Jeff Lowe. The notoriety of the show led to many proposed spin-offs, including the

planned CBS adaptation starring Nicolas Cage as Joe Exotic. Why did *Tiger King* capture the fascination of a nation in lockdown? In addition to its colorful personalities, perhaps it is the extreme measures big cat enthusiasts will take to protect their livelihood, including stalking, cyberbullying, and murder for hire. *Tiger King* is toxic masculinity in tiger’s stripes.

The titular star of the series is the Tiger King himself, Joe Maldonado-Passage (née Schreibvogel), aka Joe Exotic. Mr. Exotic is the former owner of G.W. Zoo in Wynnewood, Oklahoma, which at one point housed over 227 big cats and 50 species of animals. Joe captures the audience with his polarizing personality. Dressed in flamboyant sequined button-ups, Joe is not your typical conservative Oklahoman. He is a homosexual, polygamist, former presidential and gubernatorial candidate who uses his grandiose persona to blur the lines between reality and absurdism. Known for breeding big cats and hosting cub petting events, Joe draws the attention of animal rights activists, who view his activities as animal exploitation.

One of Joe’s harshest critics is Carole Baskin, owner of Big Cat Rescue in Tampa Bay, Florida. Dressed in leopard print and flower crowns, Carole draws in viewers with her unassuming yet superficial kindness and the dark mystery of her second husband’s disappearance. Did Carole Baskin kill her husband and feed him to her tigers? We may never know, but a spirited debate about it rages online. While Carole and Joe denigrate each other, viewers are introduced to a third, equally enticing big cat collector, Bhagavan “Doc” Antle, owner of Myrtle Beach Safari. When he is not wrangling exotic animals for the likes of Britney Spears, Doc is using big cats to lure young women to his “harem” where they take care of the animals’ needs and allegedly, some of Doc’s other needs. Finally, there is the would-be-savior of G.W. Zoo, biker-jacket-loving, alleged ex-wife abuser Jeff Lowe. Mr. Lowe makes no apologies for living life to the fullest or for wanting an attractive nanny for his newborn. His involvement with the zoo leads to Joe Exotic’s eventual undoing on many levels. Most significantly, Mr. Lowe helps bring to light Joe’s plan to have Carole Baskin murdered.

Viewers watch as Carole wages a war against Joe’s breeding and cub petting activities through her social media platforms. He responds as a quintessential internet troll by using his own web series to increasingly cyberbully Carole, leaving a trail of hate that helped bring about his eventual demise. Joe’s efforts to bully Carole include verbal threats of violence, music

videos featuring Carole look-alikes engaged in questionable activities, and perhaps most condemning of all, a video of Joe shooting the head off a “Carole” blowup doll.

The courts have recently addressed cyberbullying, as it has become a more prevalent problem in the digital age. In *U.S. v. Sayer*, 748 F.3d 425 (1st Cir. 2014) and *Elonis v. U.S.*, 135 S. Ct. 2001 (2015),¹ the central question became delineating between free speech, “true threats,” and intent. In Joe’s case he was not formally charged with cyberbullying, however, his online persona became a prominent factor in his eventual conviction for the murder for hire of Carole. Joe Exotic’s behaviors, and the behaviors of many other male characters in *Tiger King*, are reminiscent of Incel and similar online communities where large cohorts of males use the internet as a sounding board for their misogynistic views and inciting (intentionally or not) violent outbursts. Incel stands for “involuntary celibates” and the most infamous incel was likely Elliot Rodger. In 2014, Mr. Rodger killed six people and injured several more in Isla Vista, California. The motive for Mr. Rodger’s attack was retribution for rejection by women.² A recent linguistic analysis concluded approximately 30 percent of online Incel threads contained misogynistic verbiage.³ Although Joe Exotic’s anger toward Carole was not based on sexual rejection by women, his tirades against her certainly echo the type of misogyny Incels and similar groups post online. Several other male *Tiger King* cast members also appear to hold misogynistic views toward women, contributing to an unchecked negative valence system. These communities breed negativity, which causes an echo chamber of anger, escalating to online threats of violence, and eventually may move beyond the keyboard as in the cases of Joe Exotic, Elliot Rodger, and others.

For the forensic psychiatrist, *Tiger King* can serve as a study in toxic masculinity. As demonstrated above, the male characters from the docuseries exhibit personality traits representative of other harmful subcultures, such as the Incels. Through their grandiose schemes, these individuals manipulate and hurt the people around them. Big cats are used as bait to draw in susceptible and easily controlled younger individuals. For Joe, this meant using big cats, money, drugs, and other superficial objects to attract younger men. For Bhagavan, this meant using big cats as a pretext to draw in young females whom he “mentors” over many years and makes dependent

on him for food, clothing, and shelter. Similarly, Jeff uses the flashy intoxicating power of big cats to engage in dubious business ventures and attract desirable women. The perspective of these men can be summed up with a quote from the series by Doc Antle, “men are pigs and women are sheep.”

What should not be lost in this cult of personalities is the exploitation of big cats and the saddening fact that more tigers exist in captivity in the United States (5,000–10,000) than in their natural habitat (4,000). What begins as a selfless motive to help big cats turns into a vicious power-hungry struggle. Big cats become the conduit for these toxic males to feed their egos. Over time, this subculture moves beyond a hobby or altruistic endeavor and into a world of obsession. The audience observes changes in behavior, increased tolerance, cravings, and withdrawal symptoms, similar to addiction, eventually leading to criminal behavior. As a result, the male characters’ identities appear strongly affiliated with this niche culture of big cat ownership. When Carole challenges their masculinity, we see an outcry of aggression and attempts to reassert dominance, consistent with the behavior of young boys and Incels.⁴ Forensic psychiatrists may benefit from the series by expanding their working knowledge of toxic masculinity and its various forms of expression given its propensity to incite violence. What is becoming clear in popular media is that the internet has become one of the largest and easiest realms in which to express toxic masculinity. Thus, psychiatrists may be increasingly tasked with completing violence risk assessments related to cyberbullying or online stalking or be asked to opine on the manner in which cyber activities may constitute or contribute to criminal behavior.

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