

How to write book review

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How to write a book review Perhaps the best way to offer guidelines on how to write a book review is to give you an example of the kind of instructions and guidelines we (i.

e. theacademicstaff) would be given by journals who invite us to review books for them. So, here are the instructions given to authors by the ' Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders'. " A book review should be an objective and tactful evaluation of a book. The review should offer logic and fact in support of its evaluations. Without being just an abstract of the book, the review should indicate the nature and scope of the book's content. It should indicate the goals of the author, the techniques used to achieve those goals, and the success of those techniques.

You may also discuss how the book relates to its field and how it compares to other books in the field. It is important for your review to discuss what audience the book or other media best serves and to state whether the reviewer recommends it. The review should attempt to place the book within a context (e. g. , Is this a new approach? One that builds on an earlier one?). Reviews should attempt to convey a flavor of the book overall (i. e.

, not just summarize the table of contents. Quotes (see below - AQ: are there examples to be provided?) can often help in this process. If you feel that the book does not merit a review in the Journal please let us know - there is no requirement that we review every book received and it is perfectly acceptable to do a negative review! " nd here is an example of an actual review written by Dermot Bowler and published in the European Journal of Disorders of Communication (Volume 31, pp 210-213). Note, however, that

this review is somewhat longer than your word-limit permits. SAMPLE REVIEW (reproduced with permission of the author): Review of Baron-Cohen, S. (1995).

Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind. Cambridge, MA. : MIT Press. The integration of a range of theoretical perspectives to provide a coherent scientific account of a natural phenomenon is an easy task only for those who have never had to do it. In this volume, Simon Baron-Cohen has attempted such a difficult exercise by integrating currently fashionable modularist cognitivescienceaccounts of the social dysfunction found in people with autism into neuropsychological and evolutionary frameworks. In the first three Chapters of the book, he aims to persuade us firstly that the explanation of the behaviour of other people using the mentalistic language of folk-psychology(John took his umbrella with him because he thought it might rain) is both highly efficient and evolutionarily advantageous to a species such as ourselves that relies heavily on social organisation for survival. In Chapter 4, he generates a model of development which can account for the emergence of the capacity to mindread in non-autistic children and, taking the well documented deficits in autism of lack of protodeclarative pointing, lack of symbolic play and thefailureto understand that another person can act in accordance with a belief that the observer knows to be false, their failure to develop in children with autism.

His account draws heavily on Fodor's (1983) notion that the mind is made up of independent domain-specific modules, the outputs of which interact to yield mental life and behaviour. He also develops earlier accounts such as that of Leslie and Roth (1993), which posit a specific modular mechanism <https://assignbuster.com/how-to-write-book-review/>

that enables people to understand minds. Specifically, Baron-Cohen outlines four modular systems that are necessary for the process he calls 'mindreading'. The first of these he terms an intentionality detector (ID) which is triggered by stimuli exhibiting self-propelled motion and computes desire- or goal-based dyadic representations. The second is the eye direction detector (EDD) which is fired by eye-like stimuli and generates representations of the contents of agents' visual fields. Mechanism number three is called the shared attention mechanism (SAM) which takes input from ID and ED to compute triadic representations of the kind 'Daddy sees I see the cat at the window'. Finally, there is the theory of mind mechanism (ToMM), a term borrowed from Leslie's work, which takes inputs from SAM and knowledge of mental states and their consequences which can be used in a hypothetico-deductive way by someone possessing a full 'theory of mind'.

In Chapters 4 and 5 of the book, Baron-Cohen marshals a considerable body of evidence in support of the existence of these modules and of their selective breakdown in autism. Briefly, he argues that ID and ED are functional in autism, although he acknowledges that there are still considerable gaps in the evidence. By contrast, SAM and ToMM are severely impaired. In Chapter 6, he draws together evidence from neuropsychological and neurological studies on humans and other species to attempt to localise these modular systems in the brain. In the final two Chapters, he develops the theme that the capacity to read minds depends crucially on the ability to decode information from the eyes of others, and returns to the theme that this capacity can best be understood within an evolutionary framework. As I

said at the outset, *Mindreading* is a tour de force, in that it draws together evidence from a variety of fields with the aim of providing a coherent picture of the phenomenon of how homo sapiens can account for and predict the behaviour of her conspecifics by means of reference to hypothetical internal mental states. Baron-Cohen's account is worthy of our admiration not just because it describes the current state of scientific play, but also because it permits us to generate propositions which, when tested against data, will refine and improve our understanding.

Nevertheless, admirable as this attempt at integration of a range of perspectives might be, a reviewer is duty bound to point out unstated assumptions, weaknesses in analysis, un-expressed counter-arguments and problems of interpretation in an author's exposition. To this end I will now try to clarify what I see as the three major areas of weakness in this book. The first concerns Baron-Cohen's overall modularist orientation. Although accounts of psychological functioning that see behaviour as caused by discrete mental processes that are self-contained, domain-specific, automatic, impenetrable to conscious analysis and localised in specific brain sites has a respectable history, it is not, as its originator, Jerry Fodor would have us believe, the only game in town. It is quite possible to argue that the relationship between the categories we use to analyse behaviour and categories of brain state may be more subtle and more complex than a simple one-to-one correspondence, and that localisation of function may be the result either of anatomical happenstance or may not be a serious contender, given the global and integrated manner in which some neuroscientists think brains work. Readers who might be tempted to call a

child 'SAM-impaired' or 'IDD-but-not-EDD-impaired' should read Bates et al. s (1988) critique of modularism, as well as of what she termed in a 1993 talk 'thing-in-a-box neurology', before forming such opinions.

My second problem with the book concerns the way in which evidence is presented in support of the argument. Baron-Cohen draws on a wide range of evidence to support the four main planks in his argument; evolutionary, cognitive, neuropsychological/neurological and cultural. Evolutionary evidence is notoriously difficult to assess, since it inevitably has a post-hoc element to it. This is all the more true of the evolution of behavioural adaptations, since they do not leave fossil records that can allow us to detect non-advantageous changes that have died out. I am also worried by arguments that infer survival value and evolutionary success on the basis of the widespread use of a particular behaviour. Baron-Cohen attributes the survival of Homo Sapiens to the fact that we have developed mindreading skills. But many other organisms - from a-social HIV through bees to the social great apes - are evolutionarily successful without mindreading skills.

Moreover, I am suspicious about evolutionary accounts that argue that increasingly complex social organisation in primates led to the development of mind-reading skills. This is as if the behaviours called forth by the survival demands of living in complex societies produced a gene that coded for a brain structure that made a particular social behaviour possible. In my view, there is a worrying circularity about all this, not to mention a whiff of Lamarckianism. On the cognitive front, there is undoubtedly an impressive amount of evidence that supports Baron-Cohen's case, evidence which he presents cogently and skilfully. Indeed, this is the strongest and most

closely-argued section of the book. However, there are worrying instances where counter-evidence is either glossed over (e. g.

Ozonoff et al's, 1991 evidence on the possession of mindreading skills in high-functioning individuals with autism) or relegated to footnotes (Ozonoff et al's, 1991 failure to replicate Baron-Cohen et al's, 1986 picture sequencing task). There are other instances where evidence appears to be presented where none exists - for example in his discussion of non-autistic people's use of mental state terms when describing Heider and Simmel's (1944) cartoon sequence. At the time the book was written, no published data existed on the use of this instrument with people with autism (but see Bowler ; amp; Thommen, 1995), although a less than careful reading of this text might lead one to conclude that there had been. My third set of reservations centre on often inconsistent or imprecise use of terminology. For example, is it justifiable to speak of a module such as ID as 'interpreting' stimuli, rather than just generating output when such stimuli are present and not when they are not? On pp126-127, the discussion slides from 'psychopathology' to 'neuropathology' without explanation. In this section also, I am certain that blind people would not welcome being labelled as having a psychopathology. Examples can also be found of references cited in the text but not in the reference list at the back.

All these shortcomings suggest a hasty compilation of the volume. A little more time spent on reflection, exposition and the more technical aspects of production would have paid dividends here. Most of the reservations I have expressed so far all seem to stem from the most major problem of this book, namely its length, or rather the mis-match between its length and the aims <https://assignbuster.com/how-to-write-book-review/>

the author has set himself. Baron-Cohen acknowledges that he faced a difficult task in trying to write for experts in biological and cognitive sciences, students of psychology and the general reader. Trying to please this four-faceted audience is a difficult enough task; it is even more difficult when the debate has to be engaged at several levels of academic discourse. It is well-nigh impossible in an essay of about 120 pages of printed text. Its very length constrains the book to contain a little, albeit very important, knowledge.

However, a little knowledge can be a very dangerous thing. Although I would recommend this book to anyone with a personal, scientific or clinical interest in autism, to avoid danger, I would also recommend that it be consumed with some complementary material. The best I can suggest is a paper by the author himself (Baron-Cohen, 1994), which is accompanied by several commentaries and a reply by the author that gives a better flavour of the subtleties of the field than does the volume under review here.