

Thoughts about Feelings about Writings about Thinking about Thinking about Thinking (with little regard for thoughts about feelings)

**Social Metacognition**

Edited by Pablo Briñol and Kenneth G. DeMarree

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If you ponder the title of this review, think that it is perhaps overly convoluted, and *feel* that it is a bit silly and pretentious – you will have accurately grasped my response to having read **Social Metacognition**.

Briñol and DeMarree have edited a text divided into four sections with a total of 17 chapters by 33 contributing authors. Each chapter ends with a minimum of 50-75 references. I find it difficult to believe that a book that is informed by well over 1,000 scholarly articles did not leave me with more than a handful of interesting ideas. Many of the chapter titles are intriguing, “Metacognition in Stereotypes and Prejudice,” “People’s Thoughts About Their Personal Pasts and Futures,” “What Do I Think About Who I Am?” Unfortunately, the useful and challenging ideas and concepts contained within this book must be extricated from the majority of propositions, discussions, explanations and conclusions that are in fact, quite superficial.

“Metacognition refers to thinking about our own thinking” begins the preface, followed by a statement that the book addresses “important topics in social psychology.” An understanding of the motivations that drive human behaviors, both individually and in social contexts, is an important endeavor; and appreciating the cognitive processes that contribute to attitudes, biases, and internal dialogues (spoken and unconscious) resulting in decision-making, is a worthy field of exploration. The cognitive substrate of behavior warrants careful and detailed investigation and analysis. The study of metacognition goes beyond research on psychological insight and into a very detailed and complex attempt to discover the components of non-pathological cognition (i.e., there is no

discussion of cognition impaired by psychosis, depression, neurological disorder or toxicity).

Inherently, any attempt to conceptualize an understanding of human thought processes risks entering a Hofstadter-ian “Eternal Golden Braid”<sup>1</sup> of complexity and paradox – one cannot stand outside of human cognition to “think about thinking”. The authors of this book make a noble attempt to elucidate, but often fall into a pedantic and semantic quagmire. Rather simple and basic ideas are re-formulated in impressive new linguistic terms, justified by extensive citations. For example, what I interpret as meaning nothing more than that analyzing a person’s thought processes can help to foretell behavioral reactions is set forth, (p. 6) “Fortunately, reports based on introspection of secondary cognition often provide insight into metacognitive processes that are useful in predicting people’s judgments and behavior.” Imputing that (quite obviously) success is generally favored over failure is described as the result of decades of research (p. 123) “Both early and more recent theories of motivation (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Atkinson, 1957; Bandura, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Gollwitzer, 1990) suggest that people prefer goals that are desirable and feasible.”

**Social Metacognition** exhaustively (and rather repetitively) reviews the literature and summarizes different theories and “models” regarding “thinking about thinking.” The grasp of subtleties of cognitive processes is impressive. At the same time, an understanding how it is the integration of cognition and psychological processes that actually leads to human behavior is, at best, naïve.

The way that people think is obsessively deconstructed; yet it would appear that the authors know little about the impact of psychological defenses upon cognition. The chapters referring to a cognitive understanding of “confidence” and “over-confidence” raise interesting points – but ring hollow without any reference to an appreciation of the effects of narcissism. Discussions of bias and prejudice based upon analysis of cognitive styles – without any reference to repressed fear, anger or trauma – are inherently incomplete. A discussion of how people arrive at future expectations regarding themselves and external events includes a comment that will leave anyone with psychotherapeutic experience astounded, “Intuitively, it seems reasonable to expect that people would be accurate self-predictors because they possess self-expertise and, unlike meteorologists, they can influence future outcomes.”

It is also striking that the dense and narrow focus of this book does not directly address the simple fact that people can think *analytically*, i.e., based upon a logical evaluation of facts; and that people can think *impressionistically*, i.e., based upon affect, “intuition,” associations with past events (recalled and/or repressed). It is never clearly set forth that at any given time, depending upon the practical circumstances and the emotional environment and depending upon the constitutional characterological traits and the psycho-socially derived personality structure of the individual, the relative weight of analytical versus impressionistic thought processes will fluctuate; and in doing so, significantly impact end-result conclusions, decisions and behaviors. Despite all of the esoteric nomenclature, tortuous syntax and overwhelming number references

contained within this book in the name of exploring cognition, there appears to be a dearth of understanding of basic psychological principles. It was disappointing to have to reach page 271 to read, “egocentrism can be detrimental... lower self-esteem individuals propensity to underestimate their partners’ positive regard for them has been shown to have a wide range of negative consequences (see Murray et al., 2006).” I doubt that many reading this would need to “see Murray” to arrive at those conclusions.

At the same time that there is an extensive discussion and dissection of “attitudes” – essentially, the process of generalizing – it is also disconcerting that many of the authors grossly over-generalize their conclusions by only referring to and depending upon the *mean* results of studies and experiments, “X tends to lead to Y more often than Z” – without any discussion or explanations for (or the consequences of) the less frequent outcome or “outlier” results.

**Social Metacognition** contains some interesting thoughts about the process of thinking, unfortunately, often lost in academic jargon. After reading this book, I have been convinced that those who are obsessive think obsessively about their own thoughts in a rigid and ruminative, quasi-analytical manner; while outside of the “ivory tower” it remains that “truthiness”<sup>2</sup> reigns supreme.

<sup>1</sup> Hofstadter, Douglas R. (1999) [1979], *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, Basic Books, [ISBN 0-465-02656-7](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0465026567)

<sup>2</sup> ["The Colbert Report: Videos: The Word \(Truthiness\)"](https://www.colbertreport.com/videos/the-word-truthiness). October 17, 2005.

Abstract:

Reviews the book **Social Metacognition**, edited by Pablo Briñol and Kenneth G. DeMarree. This book is a highly technical, jargonistic exhaustive exposition of current ideas and concepts regarding the study of “thinking about thinking.” The 17 different chapters by multiple authors will be useful to some as an introduction to the field of metacognition. The work proposes some interesting ideas and theories addressing the processes by which cognition leads to behavior. The book reveals little depth of understanding regarding how emotion impacts behavior; there is a lack appreciation for the need to integrate knowledge of psychological defenses and characterological traits with a cognitive understanding of cognition.

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