
Books Forum

Brains: plastic, demented, undisciplined

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The brain is a diplomatic arena where neuroscientists, social scientists, and humanities scholars negotiate novel visions of the human. This Books Forum reviews four recent publications trying to make sense of neuroscientific facts and a manual on how social researchers can get involved in their making.

Brain scientists have examined the malleability of their research object at least since Donald Hebb explained the mechanism for synaptic plasticity in *The Organization of Behavior* (1949), often summarized by Siegrid Löwel's famous phrase "cells that fire together, wire together." In recent years, sociologists and anthropologists of science have taken the discovery of a second form of plasticity, adult neurogenesis, since the 1990s as an incentive to rethink what it means that our brains change over time and in relation to the environments we inhabit. Cameron Brintzer reviews three books addressing the significance of neuroplasticity: Tobias Rees' *Plastic Reason*, Victoria Pitts-Taylor's *The Brain's Body*, and David

Bates and Nima Bassiri's edited volume *Plasticity and Pathology*. Brintzer asks what philosophical difference it makes to each of these authors whether we change our minds due to the rewiring of synapses or the birth of new brain cells.

Neurogenesis or not, adult brains also atrophy as humans age and Alzheimer's disease accelerates this process. In 2013, Margaret Lock published her much debated book about the making and remaking of this kind of dementia, now rapidly approaching the due date for book reviews. Since the BioSocieties Books Forum collects whole bodies of literature on a particular topic rather than reviewing isolated publications as they come out, we occasionally lag behind but Laura Keuck's discussion of *The Alzheimer Conundrum* profits from hindsight. Examining both Lock's monography and its reception, Keuck identifies two prevalent readings: one analytic, highlighting Alzheimer researchers' production of new facts; the other normative, calling for alternative approaches to such fact making.

The last review of this forum presents a how-to book – almost a piece of self-help literature for troubled interdisciplinarians working in the borderlands between social and neurosciences. Felicity Callard and Des Fitzgerald's *Rethinking Interdisciplinarity* shares their hard-won lessons from collaborating with brain researchers, including acceptance of rather than rebellion against disciplinary hierarchies, eventually enabling a subversion of the neurosciences with their own methodological toolkit. Their manual

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taught our reviewer Matthew Wade not to be a “playa hater,” but to consider awkward but productive collaborations across academic inequalities. While the facts of neuroplasticity and Alzheimer’s have been established by brain researchers alone, such a collaborative model – should it succeed against all odds – would include

anthropologists and sociologists not just in the interpretation, but also in the fabrication of neuroscientific knowledge.

Reference

Hebb, D.O. (1949) *The Organization of Behavior*. New York: Wiley.