The Rhetoric of Pop Psychology

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A couple of years ago, just one simple quiz could determine how racist you are. Such was the sudden ubiquity of the implicit association test, or IAT, a diagnostic tool purporting to measure one's unconscious biases. While it can be calibrated to gauge any number of hidden prejudices, the IAT has most commonly been used to determine lurking racial attitudes. And during Barack Obama's second term, the IAT, which was developed in 1995, found a new life online. NPR calmly instructed its liberal readers what to do if they flunked it; *The Washington Post* wrote up what an aggregate of test results allegedly told us about America; even Hillary Clinton brought up the concept of implicit bias, in her 2016 debates with Donald Trump.

My own results have been lost to the maw of online history, so you'll have to trust me that the test—which took about 15 minutes to complete—informed me that I did not appear to have any unconscious racial biases. Not that I felt particularly proud of this: It seemed obvious that I shouldn't attribute too much insight to an online test self-administered at home, in the middle of my workday. Perhaps the IAT worked in some contexts, but from my vantage point it didn't seem all too dissimilar to a *BuzzFeed* quiz asserting which Hogwarts house I belonged to, especially since online tests professing the capacity to diagram personality have been a mainstay of my Internet experience since the days of dial-up.

Which made it basically unsurprising when, a few years later, new research popped up suggesting that the IAT's claims had been drastically overstated. The IAT was "good for predicting individual behavior in the aggregate, and the correlations are small," Tony Greenwald, one of the test's creators, acknowledged to *Vox*'s German Lopez. In other words, a person would have to take the test dozens of times in order to arrive at any conclusions about their underlying biases, something clearly at odds with the IAT's appeal as viral content. ("This One Simple Quiz, Administered Between 12 and 36 Times in a Neutral Setting, May Determine Whether You're a Racist—but Maybe Not" just doesn't have the same catchiness.)

But thousands—if not millions—of people had already read about the IAT's jaw-dropping claims and had casually adjusted their ideas about how racial attitudes persist throughout polite society. Plenty of individual actors, such as Malcolm Gladwell and *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof had credulously reaffirmed the IAT's claims, only to hush up in light of this contradictory evidence. Moreover, the IAT's reach extended far beyond some viral articles or the plumping of some careers. Over the years, it has been adopted by corporations as part of their diversity training and is even used to instruct police officers on how to walk their beats.

Ergo, the very uncomfortable question not just for the IAT's champions but also for everyday citizens like you and me: If the data supporting the test was so demonstrably thin, and yet its use became so widespread and normalized, then what other examples of shoddy science have been injected into mainstream culture, despite a similar inefficacy? How can anyone be sure that the solutions meant to improve some aspect of our increasingly complicated lives are based on anything more than a convincing snapshot of ideal results and widely circulated received wisdom? And how might we suss out the charlatans trying to jam all this down our throats?

Enter Jesse Singal, the author of *The Quick Fix*, a recent book aimed at dissecting some of the most popular—and phony—behavioral science ideas that have been adopted in recent years across American life. In 2014, Singal was the editor of "The Science of Us," *New York* magazine's science vertical, where it was his job, he writes, "to find new, interesting behavioral science research to write about every day of the week and to do so in a rigorous, sometimes skeptical manner." Because of his educational background in statistics, he was familiar with "the differences between good and bad research" and the ways that data can be massaged to support a desired conclusion.

Even so, his professional skepticism was radicalized following a tip from a source who alerted him to the IAT's inefficacy. "I had credulously accepted these claims because I had figured that if almost the entire discipline of social psychology had embraced this innovation as a cutting-edge tool in the fight against racism, and a multitude of organizations had followed suit, all these people must have known what they were doing," he writes. Popular behavioral science's grip on cultural consciousness has led to "many half-baked ideas," Singal concludes, "ideas that may not be 100% bunk but are severely overhyped [and] are being enthusiastically spread, despite a lack of hard evidence in their favor."

Inherent in such widespread near-bunk is a fealty to what Singal dubs Primeworld: "a worldview fixated on the idea that people's behavior is largely driven—and can be affected by—subtle forces." Adherents of Primeworld believe, naturally, in the outsized value of "primes," the "unconscious influences" that allegedly "affect our behavior in surprisingly powerful ways"—one cited 2011 study claims, for example, that "a single exposure to the American flag shifts toward Republicanism up to 8 months later." Rather than acknowledging the intersecting factors that exert influence on us, such believers think that gigantic social systems and structures can be improved with simple solutions that typically pursue the optimization of individual human behavior, rather than any deeper societal correction—what Singal deems "cute, cost-effective interventions by psychologists," aka the titular quick fixes. (Ergo, according to such logic, we might limit Republicanism by removing American flag from public display, rather than expanding voting rights.)

So *The Quick Fix* investigates similarly dubious, similarly widespread claims, such as the importance of teaching self-esteem to children or the confidence-giving benefits of power posing (standing in a posture associated with "power," such as thrusting your chest out or putting your feet up on a table). Each chapter is structured identically: Singal introduces a popularized concept, marshals its supporting evidence, then presents a larger body of evidence pointing out

why the concept is bullshit or, at the very least, exaggerated. The choice of topics, then, becomes key. Singal's larger argument is that the spread of bad research is incentivized by current conditions in the media and corporate philanthropy, but since no one actor (or set of actors) can be held solely responsible for this overarching trend—there is no Sackler-esque culprit as to why society consistently falls for a nice story—he instead chooses to concentrate on deflating the iffy narratives that have sprung from that research.

Underlining this is the dirty reality that many of these catchy studies, and their claims about the subtle forces supposedly conditioning our behavior, cannot be replicated on attempt, rendering them essentially useless. One meaty chapter dedicated to the replication crisis lays out the quality control rotting out the entire field of bombshell psychological studies, enabled by a news and academic infrastructure that prioritizes virality over facts. At the end he admits the problem is fixing itself, but there's still value in navigating how we got here. His point is that concepts like the IAT aren't just ineffective, but that reliance on them has also demonstrably led us astray, as better solutions—or even better ways of *thinking* about solutions—are ignored. In some of his cases, that's clear, like when he lays out how the idea of the "super predator," a violent underclass of (typically Black) youths, took hold in the 1990s because of shoddy science and racist logic, at the expense of an entire generation.

But for the most part, Singal struggles to connect his topics to any broader view about what's wrong with society or its prevailing conventional wisdom. Instead of offering a comprehensive critique, he often comes off as someone attempting to settle scores, while taking care to position himself as someone who really gets what's going on—even as his suggestions for how we might "do better" can often strike a reader as naive. That's one thing if you're arguing on Twitter, but it's not nearly enough to sustain a text that groans and shudders under the weight of so much data without ever proving anything beyond "we've got problems, and there may be answers."

In one chapter, Singal lays out how the concept of "grit"—the ability of students "to tenaciously attack difficult problems they encounter rather than give up"—has gained traction in educational circles, which seek to measure and encourage that quality in underperforming students. The idea's current popularity is largely attributable to Angela Duckworth, a MacArthur grant–winning social psychologist whose book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* became a *New York Times* best seller, and whose suggestions about how to maximize this highly important trait were pursued by the Obama administration and charter schools across the country. (Apart from predicting how students might perform in school, Duckworth even used grit to predict how West Point cadets would supposedly fare in basic training.)

To spare you a summary of the tonnage of evidence that Singal cites against it, let's simply say that whether grit can be measured, improved, or used to predict anything at all is highly questionable; even Duckworth acknowledges its limitations. But the bigger problem is what happened when grit became a business. Even though, in some cases, grit might correlate with educational performance, other factors, like nutrition or family stability, are more important, as Singal points out. And yet, because grit is a catchy concept that plays into the American notion of self-reliance and hard work, the enterprise of "improving grit" has flourished as a cottage industry for get-rich-quick schemers. "A serious effort to make life less unfair for neglected kids

would likely require enacting bigger, more ambitious redistributive social programs—social programs that are very unlikely to be enacted given the state of twenty-first-century American politics," Singal writes. "Grit, by contrast, is a quick fix."

Consumed as a series of bullet points, Singal's argument is hard to quarrel with. (I also agree that we should enact bigger, more ambitious redistributive social programs, and that success in school is not just a matter of who "tries hard.") Still, this chapter presented an issue that nagged at me. Singal spends so much time disputing the evidence supporting grit's illusory value that he fails to convincingly demonstrate how deep "the grit problem" really runs. "Grit is everywhere," he claims at the start of the chapter: Obama's Department of Education "expressed a lot of enthusiasm" about grit; *The Sacramento Bee* reported that some California schools were grading students in grit; and Singal refers to the Knowledge Is Power Program, a network of more than 200 charter schools in the country that have incorporated grit as a "character strength" to be cultivated in their students.

A smattering of examples, sure, but does that add up to "everywhere"? Without hard data about how widely adopted grit really is, all we can do is take Singal's word for it. That's a problem, given that the premise of his book is that our overreliance on supposedly "expert" assertions allows shoddy behavioral science to spread. There's a glaring disparity between the urgency of Singal's prose and the proof he offers that many of his cases (in this instance, the grit industry) are a widespread problem, especially compared with the far more serious problems we already know we face: our decades of <u>defunding public education</u>, for example.

Another example is Singal's chapter on the explosion of the self-esteem economy, in which he asserts that if you grew up (or raised a child) during the 1980s or '90s, you "likely" remember the incessant messaging that "self-esteem was just about the most important thing society could give a young person." In fact, he writes, it was taken so seriously that "numerous states would allocate taxpayer money specifically toward self-esteem programs." But the only example he cites is a $245,000 line item in California's 1986 state budget, allocated for a task force meant to explore how to "apply self-esteem to a range of social problems"—a number that is laughably minuscule within the larger context of misappropriated public funds. He admits that it's "difficult to estimate" the actual size of the self-esteem economy—the broader self-help industry, of which self-esteem is just one facet, was estimated to bring in about $10 billion in 2016. Yet despite providing no overall number, he continues laying out evidence that the benefits of teaching self-esteem are largely overstated—until doubling back, right near the end, with the concession that there is "*some* truth to the idea that when people get too down on themselves, it can cause harm and hinder their performance and happiness, and that it's possible to prevent this from happening with certain types of efforts."

Pardon my nonscientific response, but no shit. Singal's tendency to admit that at least some of the hokum behavioral science discussed in *The Quick Fix* possesses some merit—just not the merit its proponents claim—prompts the question of why he's so interested in this issue in the first place. If it's just to show that he's capable of finding the perfect unoccupied center on an array of topics that other people are getting slightly wrong, and that may have some cumulative effect on us all (though that cumulative effect is yet unknown, because we'd need more studies

and research to figure it out), well, congratulations. Nuance and thoughtfulness are worthwhile pursuits, but it's possible to split hairs so finely that you end up saying nothing at all.

If you have a previous familiarity with Singal, most likely it's because of his "When Children Say They're Transgender," a 2018 cover story for *The Atlantic* in which he looked at young people who pursue gender transition but eventually change their mind. The article set off a social media firestorm: Singal was accused of transphobia, given his long history of writing about trans issues despite being a cisgendered male, and because his article expressed a lot of seemingly nuanced second-guessing about contemporary standards in trans health care for young people that nonetheless synced up with more explicitly hateful agendas. (The wave of anti-trans legislation currently up for approval across the United States has been spurred by a disingenuous need to "protect children" by preventing them from accessing gender-affirming health care.) Singal's habitual defense is that his identity shouldn't prevent him from writing truthfully about a contested subject. While he has repeatedly expressed dismay that conservative politicians have co-opted his *Atlantic* article in the service of their anti-trans legislation, he also notes that "there isn't much I can do about it—the article says what it says, and people are either going to read it closely and honestly, or not," in a 2019 Substack post. "And many people aren't. In conclusion: sigh."

It's true that a lot of people can seem unpleasant when they call him out, but this is a perennial tendency of online argumentation. And rather than considering why some of his work might be misinterpreted, he instead parlays his at-siege disposition into increased popularity as a so-called rational truth-teller in our hyper-partisan times—a cool, collected information authority who knows the value of science. This public role has led to a lucrative writing career, from a well-read Substack (Sample headline: "Republican Bills Attempting To Ban Critical Race Theory Are Bad, But So Is Media Fearmongering About Them") to the *Blocked and Reported* podcast he cohosts with former *Stranger* writer Katie Herzog, which generates over $27,000 a month in Patreon donations.

As far as highly visible public commentators go, Singal is not quite a pure creation of "the discourse," nor is he an obvious troll. Unfortunately, his unshakable belief in the clarity of his own discernment, and his talent for self-promotion, does not correlate with any necessity for his perspective. Singal is such a lightning rod for online attention that one might presume *The Quick Fix* would itself be a rhetorical lightning rod wrenching the out-of-control discourse back to a saner, more rational level. Instead, it's exceptionally tedious, and largely inessential.

The Quick Fix is slightly more convincing when it addresses race. Singal is hardly the first writer to break down the fallacy of the "super predator" myth, but just because it's now widely recognized as a myth does not mean there isn't value in examining how it got so far. And the chapter on the implicit bias test does a reasonable job of laying out how *explicit* bias across institutions and society is still more of a concern, which makes the obsession with individual correction somewhat shortsighted.

It's not that any especially insightful arguments are marshaled here, but since racism is a fairly evergreen and dominant American issue, these chapters examine something with real proximity to all of our lives. Still, even Singal can't resist a convenient narrative, despite his assertions

otherwise, such as in a passage where he brushes off the existence of microaggressions by citing a Cato Institute study that claims 77 percent of Black people don't find the statement that "America is a melting pot" to be offensive. Setting aside the rich irony of citing a Cato Institute study on the subject of bias, there are microaggressions more damning than "America is a melting pot," but Singal zeroes in on the one that seems obviously overblown as a way of waving them all off. And he broadly claims that "implicit bias is often *the way* we talk about racial incidents in America now," when it's just… not, unless you're cherry-picking your conversations.

Thus the book's rhetorical failing: In attempting to neutrally assess the bullshit truisms permeating American society, Singal also ends up mistakenly asserting his own truism that we're often guided by what *feels* like common sense but is really just the myopia of our own perspective. There are too many instances where he glibly asserts something about how "we" live, or how society supposedly works, all of which only add up to a poorly observed portrait of the world around him, not any real set of dictums about "us." As a writer or pundit, you are what you pay attention to, and with this book and his work elsewhere, Singal presents his fixations as dire problems to be solved. But his inability to charitably or accurately assess the interconnecting factors that have created all this bunk science cast him as another devotee of the Primeworld he bemoans, so concerned with calling out the bad actors that he misses the bigger picture.

In this, he is not alone. What unifies many of our extremely online public thinkers is their ability to seriously distort exactly who is talking about anything, and how much any of it matters, because of their obsession with unregulated social media dialogue. The assumed intellectual bankruptcy of one's opponents is not actually an excuse to contort one's views toward whatever is most likely to piss them off—and yet in our present intellectual climate, where these public debates have the histrionically nitpicky tone of a message-board flame war, the confidence that one is obviously right derives largely from the certainty that someone else is obviously wrong. Singal's disappointment with modern discourse is understandable. His perpetual smugness, and ongoing surprise that more people can't just see the world the way he does, is not.