

## BOOKS, THE CHILDREN OF THE BRAIN

# 'Blink'

On March 30, 1981, John Hinckley fired six bullets from short range at President Reagan and his entourage. Four people were hit; the bullet that ricocheted into Reagan's chest narrowly missed his heart. Total duration of the attack: 1.8 seconds. By the time other bodyguards responded, Hinckley had emptied his gun and the attack was over.

On the night of Feb. 3, 1999, Amadou Diallo, an African immigrant, was standing in front of his apartment building in the south Bronx, taking in the night. Up drove four plainclothes police officers, all white. As they approached him, Mr. Diallo turned to go back into the building and then took the wallet from his pocket, seemingly to show it to the officers. Within seconds, the officers discharged their weapons a total of 41 times, thinking that Mr. Diallo had a gun in his hand.

Malcolm Gladwell, the author of "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking" (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2005) makes the point that much happens before we become aware that it is happening—and even when we are aware, we may not have a sensible response.

Mr. Gladwell says that the mind reading required of Mr. Reagan's bodyguards and Mr. Diallo's attackers failed, in the first case because of lack of time and in the second case because of a series of wrong assumptions. Improvement in reaction time may be limited, but the Secret Service could have placed more distance between the president and the knot of reporters in which Mr. Hinckley was standing. If they had done so, they might have had an additional second or two to notice something strange about Mr. Hinckley and to stop the attack before it started.

In the case of Mr. Diallo, Mr. Gladwell dissects in great detail the series of mistaken assumptions that allowed a peaceful

man enjoying the night in front of his home to be perceived as an armed and dangerous prowler ready to attack.

Much can be done to improve our assumptions and behaviors. Sometimes the change required is fairly minimal: Violence declines when police officers confront potentially violent situations alone, rather than with a partner. Most of us tend to be more cautious when we have to make decisions alone.

Although these two examples demonstrate failures in instantaneous decision making, most of "Blink" focuses on the surprising accuracy of many snap judgments.

The authenticity of an apparently ancient Greek statue is a case in point. Detailed scientific analysis of the marble convinced the curators of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles that the statue was authentic, and

they purchased it for \$10 million. Shortly thereafter, three art experts independently examined the statue, and each instantly knew it was a fake, even though they were unable to verbalize rational reasons to support their intuition. Further investigation proved the statue to be a forgery.

Good psychiatrists (and good used-car salesmen, as the author points out) sometimes read their clients' minds by reading faces. We psychiatrists study faces the same way we study many of our patient's characteristics, as part of the mental status examination. "Blink" presents the work of researchers who have done exhaustive studies of every facial muscle and every facial expression, trying to understand the individual's frame of mind. The resulting Facial Action Coding System, a 500-page document, is a veritable encyclopedia of facial expressions.

According to Mr. Gladwell, those who have mastered it "gain an extraordinary level of insight into the messages we send each other when we look into one another's eyes." In other words, making sense of



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A little more distance, and 1 or 2 more seconds of reaction time, might have enabled bodyguards to stop John Hinckley's assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan.

a social situation is a matter of reading the faces in front of us.

Not that everyone can read faces. The case is made here, based on good psychiatric research, that individuals suffering from autism lack this ability. "Their first-impression apparatus is fundamentally disabled, and the way that people with autism see the world gives us a very good sense of what happens when our mind reading faculties fail," Mr. Gladwell writes.

These faculties fail more often in situations of stress. Unfortunately, stress is high when the police confront the mentally ill and others in situations that could lead to violence. In San Diego, we have repeatedly mourned psychiatric patients who were killed when confronting armed officers. Perhaps better mind reading techniques will lead to better outcomes. This book presents examples of better training that aborts unnecessary violence.

Mind reading and "thin-slicing" go together. Thin-slicing refers to our often unconscious ability to find patterns in situations and behaviors based on very narrow slices of experience.

This book presents extraordinary studies of couples, showing that observing their interaction for a very short time can be highly predictive of the outcome of their relationship. John Gottman, Ph.D., of the department of psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle, videotaped married couples engaging in innocuous dialogue for an hour. By painstakingly scoring every emotion each member of the couple exhibited, minute by minute, Dr. Gottman discovered an algorithm that predicted, with 95% accuracy, which couples would be divorced within 15 years.

But then he started slicing those hour-long interactions more and more thinly. He found that a 15-minute conversation was almost as highly predictive of future divorce as the hour-long conversation. Then an associate of his found that a 3-minute slice was highly predictive as well.

Mind reading and thin-slicing appear well suited for war games, as indicated in one of the most telling chapters. For one event in 2002, a skillful thin-slicing strate-

gist was placed in charge of the "rebel" forces to be defeated by the superior military power and intelligence capabilities of the United States. His surprising actions gave him an unexpected early victory.

Did military leaders analyze the rebel's victory and learn from their mistakes? They did not. Instead, they replayed the game, this time changing the rules so the rebel forces wouldn't be permitted the same creative and surprising actions. Then they congratulated themselves on their subsequent victory and went on to invade Iraq for real. Unfortunately, our military leaders were unable to convince their real-life adversaries to follow that convenient change in rules, and the expected rout turned into a quagmire.

Thin-slicing has also been applied to the admission of patients presenting to the emergency department with chest pain. Emergency physicians are tempted to conduct every possible test and analyze every sign and symptom, but many items of medical information may be confusing and misleading, and focusing on fewer pieces of information can lead to a more accurate result. Studies have shown that a patient with an abnormal ECG, angina pain, fluid in the lungs, and very low systolic blood pressure requires admission to the intensive care unit. Patients suffering one, two, or three of these manifestations require less intensive hospital care. Those without these manifestations may not require hospital care at all.

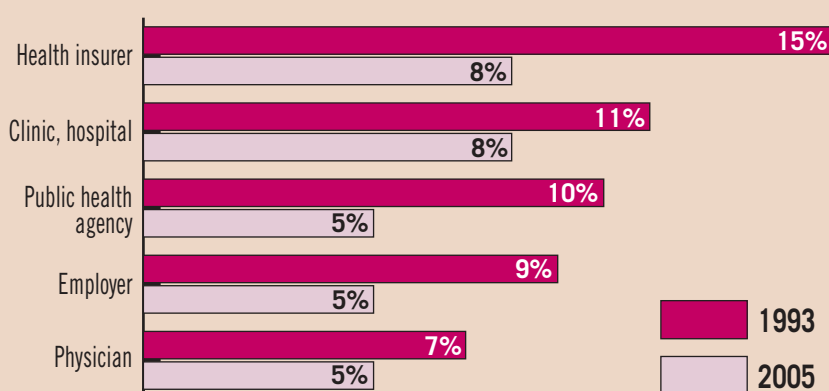
Although Mr. Gladwell doesn't mention it, the thinking presented in this book is currently being used in psychiatric therapies. There's good evidence that patients suffering from disorganized schizophrenia benefit from cognitive enhancement treatments that encourage "gist thinking" to focus their attention away from irrelevant ideas.

"Blink" is a well-written, well-researched, and well-thought-out work that deserves the attention of every psychiatrist who enjoys new ideas. ■

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### DATA WATCH

#### Complaints of Improper Disclosure Have Declined



Note: Based on a 1993 survey of 1,000 adults and a 2005 nationwide survey of 1,012 adults.  
Sources: Louis Harris and Associates (1993), Harris Interactive (2005)