What good are book reviews? It seems that writing book reviews is an undervalued scholarly activity at many academic institutions. Based on an informal poll, credit is not always ascribed for doing book reviews when tenure and promotion decisions are made. This raises several troubling questions for faculty members, as well as for practitioners and for our profession as a whole. First, we wondered how faculty members are able to advance their own and others’ knowledge without critically reading and discussing the most recent ideas being published in book format. It is as if, once we have our degrees, we need no longer participate in the activity we expect of our students every day—to read books and respond critically to them. Second, it seems a little ironic that faculty rely on book reviews (formal and informal) for making adoption decisions for their courses but have no incentive for sharing their evaluations with professional colleagues. The economy of doing this through book reviews is, of course, one attested to by the use of book reviews for adoption decisions. Third, and perhaps more ironically, publishing a scholarly book is highly regarded in many institutions, but reading those books and discussing them is not.

In this article, we will discuss the possible reasons for the undervaluation of book reviews. More importantly, we will explore some of the valuable contributions of the book review process for the reviewers of books, for the consumers of those reviews, and for the vitality of I-O psychology as a profession. In short, the reason we argue that book reviews are undervalued is that their important contributions are not fully appreciated. In particular, critical, well-informed reviews may establish broadly understood and accepted criteria for evaluating science and practice, which we believe to be important to the development of a profession and its members.

Currency

One of the most obvious benefits of book reviews is their use for quick and critical looks at the latest practices and scientific approaches in the field. Keeping current in one’s field is considered an important responsibility of professional occupations (see Lowman, 1998, p. 166). Imagine the MD who
has never learned to use MRI scans for diagnosing soft tissue pathology. Such a practitioner might actually get by in his or her work, up to a point, but certainly professional reputation would suffer if this lack of currency were known, and his or her ethical conduct would be suspect. Consider also applied research scientists in academic settings who rely solely on a few journals for currency. In I-O psychology, this would preclude many important sources of ideas from a number of publishers of scholarship. Subsequently, missing appropriate research questions and excluding important sources of prior research could be fatal flaws in their research programs. For both scientists and practitioners, then, book reviews provide an important source of current information.

Unfortunately, it is often difficult to find time and motivation for keeping abreast of recent developments. Book reviews of popular books provide practitioners with a time-efficient and condensed discussion of the ideas likely to be circulating among their clients. For applied scientists more generally, being aware of important scholarly and practice trends can prove invaluable, both for addressing problems using commonly understood, legitimized language (e.g. buzzwords) and for generating important new research threads and practices. Witness for example recent research on work teams, knowledge management, and executive coaching (to name a few), which probably received significant impetus from challenges faced by practitioners. These problems and the trends they disclose often appear in popular management books and cutting-edge scholarly volumes before they appear elsewhere. Reviews of these books are therefore bellwethers for important trends, providing timely familiarity with emerging concepts.

In addition, because of their critical approach, currency can be gained through an understanding of the reviewer’s point of view. This is analogous to having critical conversations with expert colleagues prior to making decisions about implementing or otherwise dealing with trendy new “solutions.” Taken together, book reviews provide time-efficient sources of critical evaluations regarding practical and scientific trends.

Modeling Important Behaviors and Citizenship

Given the potential value of book reviews for keeping abreast of important new ideas and applications, it is also ironic that academic scholars may be unwilling (often thanks to institutional pressures) to provide this service to practitioners. Again, book reviews seem vital from a practitioner point of view in order to keep current with ideas that are circulating among clients, usually in the form of business books. Similarly, among our academic colleagues, critical reviews of scholarly books may help to advance the field through knowledge dissemination, as well as through the posing of new research questions. A quick glance at book review sections of major journals will reveal some interesting research questions being posed.
In addition to advancing the individual careers of those who formulate and test these new ideas, our view is that this sort of professional citizenship is an important indicator of the vitality of our field. In fact, for change agents in the knowledge management field, having key professionals model involvement in critical analysis of knowledge being disseminated may be an important research question of its own. Similarly, understanding how reviewers serve as “filters” in the management of knowledge may help to make knowledge dissemination more parsimonious and, ultimately, more successful.

Establishing Broadly Accepted Criteria

An even more potentially important contribution of book reviews is the evolving definition of broadly understood and accepted criteria for practice and scholarship. Implicit in any book review are the criteria against which a reviewer evaluates a volume. These criteria may include particularistic (e.g., the reviewer doesn’t like the use of jargon) or professionally irrelevant (e.g., the edited volume has poorly integrated chapters) criteria. However, some criteria may be important indicators of broadly held or accepted notions about the basis for professional practice. For one obvious example of this sort of substantive professional criterion, a reviewer may criticize an author for basing prescriptive statements on anecdote, rather than data. This indicates that the reviewer holds systematically derived, aggregated data to be essential prior to making prescriptive statements. Many I-O psychologists would readily agree with this criterion. In this case, the reviewers’ remarks help newcomers and outsiders understand the implications of our existing, “empirically driven” paradigm.

However, some substantive professional criteria may actually emerge from the process of critical review. For example, in reviewing a scholarly volume on performance appraisal, a reviewer may argue that the author did not account for phenomena that, in the reviewer’s experience, were a common part of performance appraisals in practice. This not only poses an important research question or helps to more broadly define existing theories of models of performance appraisal, this criticism implies that research should meet the standard of dealing with commonplace characteristics of the phenomenon of interest. Although many would agree with this criterion, it is not commonly included as a criterion in the evaluation of scholarly research, for example in blind review rating forms for refereed journals. As such, it represents an emergent criterion for the profession.

Once such emergent criteria gain currency through mechanisms like book reviews, editorial decisions about paper acceptance/rejection, and professional discussions around a current issue, they have the opportunity to become broadly accepted or rejected. But in any case, the profession is enlivened by the debate.
So Why the Low Rating?

Given these important potential contributions to individuals, research in the field, and development of the profession, why are book reviews generally given a low (or no) weight in evaluating scholarly productivity? We can see no good reason. Advancing knowledge comes in many forms and, as we have argued, reviewing is an important form. To some extent, it is up to the faculty members applying for tenure to make the case for the value of the contributions they make to advancing knowledge. But the lack of explicit inclusion of book reviews in university documents also creates an institutional pressure to choose other, listed activities and to avoid doing book reviews. Similarly, busy practitioners have found ways to influence the definitions of performance and excellence in their organizations to include doing book reviews as “knowledge creation” and “knowledge sharing” contributions.

Questions to Pose Decision Makers

So, you may ask, what’s to be done? The answer is that we do not have directive answers, but can suggest some questions for our professional colleagues to ask of their decision makers. We suggest posing the questions stated or implied in the headings of this article, to wit:

1. What good does it serve for individual scientists, practitioners, and people seeking promotion to read book reviews? How about to write them?
2. What good are book reviews to our profession?
3. Why do book reviews typically receive lower valuation ratings in organizational reward systems than other organizational contributions and activities for professional development?
4. Should we try to improve the status of book reviews as a professional activity?

We may find that the conclusions we have reached are generally accepted or may find that other views and ideas are dominant. Most importantly, we suspect many people have simply not thought much about these issues before, and we believe they are potentially important for our profession.

Regardless, we would love to hear how you answer these questions. Please contact us at robertjones@smsu.edu, fleenorj@leaders.ccl.org, or lsummers1@nc.rr.com. If we get substantial responses, we will get back to you in a future TIP.

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