

**Blink, The Power of Thinking without Thinking, by Malcolm Gladwell. London: Penguin Books 2006, 280 pages, \$15.99, ISBN 0316172324 (paperback).**

The publisher calls the author of this book, which was published in January 2005 as a hard cover book, “an intellectual adventurer” and “one of the world’s most original thinkers” (back cover of the paperback edition). Among Gladwell’s signature achievements are 10-year stints as a reporter and New York City bureau chief for the *Washington Post* and as a staff writer with the *New Yorker* magazine. Additionally, he wrote a previous popular science book called *The Tipping Point* (2002) that was translated into 25 languages and sold more than a million copies in the USA alone. So has *Blink* already. In fact, Gladwell has become a much sought-after speaker – “an accidental guru” (Sacks 2006) -- who is reported to command “in the neighborhood of \$40,000 per lecture” (Donadio 2006) for his insights. *Time* Magazine anointed him last year one of the “100 most influential people”. And the pseudonymous Noah Tall (2006) honored Gladwell with a rather funny send-off. What’s all the fuss about? Shall you, too, be influenced?

In *Blink*, Gladwell refines the recipe that made *The Tipping Point* a success: Take a bunch of academic studies speaking to a catchy issue – here, the occasional power of intuitive or snap judgements – summarize them in language that is understandable to half-way intelligent lay-people (1), and communicate them in narratives that are appealing to the same crowd (i.e., relate the issue in a conversational tone to love, marriage, gender, race, war, business, etc.)

Gladwell’s opening example is the J. Paul Getty Museum’s inability, back in 1983/84, to identify -- during 14 months of state-of-the-art analysis -- that the statue of a nude young male allegedly dating from the sixth century BC was a fake, a suspicion that some of the world’s foremost experts in that area had voiced clearly and loudly but were hard-pressed to rationalize in light of the seemingly hard evidence supplied by the advanced verification technologies that the Getty Museum had employed. The experts were right.

So is, to turn to one of Gladwell’s major running examples, the SPAFF (for specific affect) coding system that psychologist John Gottman has devised and those certified to use it. Applying his system to an hour of videotaped conversation of husband and wife talking, Gottman is reported to predict “with 95 percent accuracy whether that couple will still be married fifteen years later.” (p. 21) Even more impressively, an application of his system to 15 minutes of such a

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1 *Blink*, the few pages of annotated references at the end notwithstanding, is not an academic book. That poses the interesting question whether the standards of the academy apply. For example, in many respects Gladwell explores the same ground that Gigerenzer, Todd, and their collaborators (Gigerenzer & Todd 1999) have explored in their *Simple Heuristics That Make Us Smart* book and in their related publications. That fact notwithstanding, the book is only mentioned briefly (p. 11, p. 256) and in a rather perfunctory manner. One of Gladwell’s recent articles in *The New Yorker* dealt with plagiarism (Gladwell 2004). He seems to have decided that borrowing literally is unacceptable but borrowing ideas freely, and without attribution, from other people is fair game. To my mind that’s a troubling decision, and an idea that I would not accept from any of my students, however well they might present the idea.

conversation still results in about 90 percent successful predictions. So does, to mention another major example Gladwell features prominently, psychologist Paul Ekman's Facial Action Coding System (FACS) which reportedly allows him to make highly accurate inferences about our emotional, and other states, even if we might not want him to know.

What do SPAFF and FACS systems have to do with the power of intuitive or snap judgements? Gladwell's argument is that many of us can get often close to the truth – someone else's marriage is in deep trouble, someone else really detests us – through our own subconscious SPAFF and FACS personalized coding schemes and inference machines. These personalized schemes and machines allow us, for example, to make reasonably good inferences about people that we encounter in speed-dating events, or job interviews, or for that matter pretty much every other situation (e.g., by having a couple of glances at their bedrooms, or record collections, or offices). This fast and frugal decision making – this “thin-slicing” – is, moreover, not just a good approximation of a reasonable inference: It may – because it may allow us to strip away non-essential confounds – even be the best inference that we can make under the given circumstances. Less, in other words, can be more. That's the good news.

It is to Gladwell's credit that he also discusses the bad news: Our coding schemes and inference machines are not as reliable as we would want them to be (and as some people claim they are): Our powers to make fast and frugal judgments accurately, unfortunately, are often limited. Gladwell discusses “the dark side of thin-slicing” (p. 75) by way of examples as diverse as the Warren Harding error – the belief that people's height and/or looks signal something about their leadership abilities – and the Amadou Diallo shooting in 1999 – the case of four white police officers who misread as a terrifying black man one who was in fact really terrified. (Being the son of a Jamaican mother and an English father, Gladwell clearly knows a thing or two about what it means to live as person of color in the USA; indeed, he addresses the race issue in several other examples including the one that he claims got him started thinking about “the weird power of first impressions” (p. 264), or snap judgements – three police officers in pursuit of a rapist who, although he had no other feature in common with Gladwell, had been reported to have a large head of curly hair similar to the one that Gladwell sports.)

What Gladwell does not tell us, and here is where his ability to tell a good story seems to interfere with his ability to get to the essence of the issue, is how we develop our subconscious personalized coding schemes and inference machines. For Gladwell they exist, have good or bad consequences, and to some extent can be manipulated – “Our unconscious thinking is, in one critical respect, no different from our conscious thinking: in both, we are able to develop our rapid decision making with training and experience.” (p. 237) – but when all is said and done that's about as much as we learn here. To my mind, however, these are the interesting issues of the day and tantalizing answers to them exist (e.g., Goldberg 2001, 2005, and LeDoux 2002, soon to be reviewed on these pages). The fact that Gladwell does not address them is a pity.

But, maybe, that's asking too much. Overall I enjoyed reading the book. Gladwell is a talented writer and synthesizer of other people's ideas (and a talented marketer of his stuff; see [www.gladwell.com](http://www.gladwell.com), which, incidentally, contains a useful 5 page reading guide to *Blink*). While there is really nothing here that others have not already studied, Gladwell's ability to

communicate the exciting issues psychologists and economists explore these days is indeed remarkable. So is his ability to put together sentences. In addition, he reviews dozens of academic studies many of which I did not know (and some of which I definitely would like to read up on.) I assume that others will have a similar experience reading the book. To the extent that it is an easy-to-read primer of relevant research, to the extent that it inspires us (academics) to look beyond the narrow confines of our specialized studies, and to the extent that it will excite those who do not normally bother reading an academic article (2), Gladwell's contribution ought to be acknowledged for what it is: an entertaining tour d' horizon of modern research on why it makes sense, sometimes, to trust one's intuition.

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Andreas Ortmann  
Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education,  
Charles University  
Economics Institute,  
Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic  
P.O. Box 822  
Politických veznu 7  
CZ 111 21 Prague 1

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<sup>2</sup> Posner, in a scathing review for *The New Republic* worth reading (Posner 2005) even argued, parenthetically, that *Blink* was written for those that do not read books.

*Czech Republic*  
*E-mail address: andreas.ortmann@cerge-ei.cz*