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Review of the World Bank World Development Report, *Mind, Society, and Behavior*

Daniel A. Wagner

University of Pennsylvania, wagner@literacy.upenn.edu

Katharine W. Buek

University of Pennsylvania, kabuek@gse.upenn.edu

Alejandro Adler

University of Pennsylvania, aadler@sas.upenn.edu

Nathan M. Castillo


University of Pennsylvania, ncast@gse.upenn.edu

Fatima T. Zahra

University of Pennsylvania, fzahra@gse.upenn.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Recommended Citation

Wagner, Daniel A.; Buek, Katharine W.; Adler, Alejandro; Castillo, Nathan M.; Zahra, Fatima T.; Lee, Jinsol; Chittamuru, Deepti; and Lee, Selene S., "Review of the World Bank World Development Report, *Mind, Society, and Behavior*" (2016). *Journal Articles (Literacy.org)*. 4.

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Review of the World Bank World Development Report, *Mind, Society, and Behavior*

Abstract

The World Development Report is an annual World Bank publication that highlights the latest research and trends in international development programming. This major review carries substantial weight in setting the policy and program agenda for donor and recipient agencies around the world. The 2015 *Mind, Society, and Behavior* report is remarkable in that, in a field typically driven by economic principles and interventions, it focuses on the human cognitive processes that underlie social and economic decision making. This important, but often neglected, perspective is a substantial contribution to the development discussion. The report represents a noteworthy effort in identifying and compiling rigorous and up-to-date psychological research on human needs, motivations, and biases to inform key recommendations for development policy and programming investments.

Disciplines

Cognitive Psychology | Comparative Psychology | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Psychology | International and Comparative Education

Author(s)

Daniel A. Wagner, Katharine W. Buek, Alejandro Adler, Nathan M. Castillo, Fatima T. Zahra, Jinsol Lee, Deepti Chittamuru, and Selene S. Lee

Book Reviews

Mind, Society, and Behavior by World Bank. World Development Report. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2015. 215 pp.

The World Development Report is an annual World Bank publication that highlights the latest research and trends in international development programming. This major review carries substantial weight in setting the policy and program agenda for donor and recipient agencies around the world. The 2015 *Mind, Society, and Behavior* report is remarkable in that, in a field typically driven by economic principles and interventions, it focuses on the human cognitive processes that underlie social and economic decision making. This important, but often neglected, perspective is a substantial contribution to the development discussion. The report represents a noteworthy effort in identifying and compiling rigorous and up-to-date psychological research on human needs, motivations, and biases to inform key recommendations for development policy and programming investments.

A close reading of the report reveals three important methodological and conceptual limitations, however. First, the report draws broad conclusions about development investments from a highly selective set of studies, highlighting specific findings rather than synthesizing across the larger body of evidence. Second, the report generalizes the findings of individual studies in order to make broad-based recommendations for development in diverse contexts and populations. Third, much of the key evidence presented—on which global policy recommendations are based—derives from studies conducted in Western high-income nations. We discuss each of these points below, along with specific examples. Finally, the last section of the report, which addresses the preconceptions of development professionals, is highlighted.

First, the sampling of research studies included in the report is overly selective. The authors emphasize research findings that may appear particularly attractive to development professionals, without incorporating the broader body of evidence into their conclusions. For instance, the authors discuss the importance of “framing” in the presentation of financial information to aid individuals in making better monetary decisions. While such framing effects have been found in some contexts and populations, a number of other studies (not included in the publication) have identified important exceptions to such effects. Naomi Mandel (“Shifting Selves and Decision Making: The Effects of Self-Construal Priming on Consumer Risk-Taking,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 30 [2003]: 30–40), for example, found that in situations that activate a sense of interdependence, individuals are more risk seeking. By contrast, in situations that are more independence oriented, individuals tend to be more risk averse. By relying on a selective sample of findings, the authors overlook potentially important sources of variation in human decision making.

Second, the authors overgeneralize the findings of individual studies to a broad range of diverse contexts and populations. For example, the authors’ argument that the poor lack the “mental bandwidth” to make important decisions as a result of their poverty is based on a single study by Anandi Mani, Sendhil Mullainathan,

Eldar Shafir, and Jiaying Zhao (“Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function,” *Science* 341, no. 6149 [2013]: 976–80). The study consisted of four experiments conducted with American shoppers in a mall in New Jersey and a field study with sugarcane farmers in Tamil Nadu, India. The Indian farmers showed impaired performance on cognitive assessments before harvest—a time of relative deprivation and high “stress”—compared to after the harvest. The authors claim that the farmers’ lower cognitive performance under stress supports a claim of low cognitive bandwidth and that this finding should give generalized guidance to other development projects with low-income populations worldwide. Yet, a paper by Jelte M. Wicherts and Annemarie Zand Scholten (“Comment on ‘Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function,’” *Science* 342, no. 6163 [2013]: 1169), not cited in the report, strongly critiqued Mani’s research design and measurement tools. Further, the report often overgeneralizes findings from narrow randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to the larger development context. Methodologically speaking, RCTs are known as the “gold standard” for evaluation research because of their strength in permitting causal inferences. However, it is highly problematic to generalize RCT findings from one context to another because such studies are carefully tailored to a particular intervention and study sample (Nathan M. Castillo and Daniel A. Wagner, “Gold Standard? The Use of Randomized Controlled Trials for International Educational Policy,” *Comparative Education Review* 58 [2014]: 166–73).

Third, the report relies heavily on findings from studies conducted in Western industrialized nations to support recommendations for policies and programs to be implemented in low-income countries. For example, the report’s discussion of early childhood development describes neurological and social correlates of poverty using research that has been conducted primarily with American children. The authors seem to assume that associations that have been found between behaviors and outcomes among low-income populations in the United States also hold for low-income populations around the world. In reality, cross-cultural studies often show that both parenting behaviors and related child development outcomes may be experienced and interpreted very differently across cultures. For instance, a study by Xinyin Chen, Paul D. Hastings, Kenneth H. Rubin, Huichang Chen, Guozhen Cen, and Shannon L. Stewart (“Child-Rearing Attitudes and Behavioral Inhibition in Chinese and Canadian Toddlers: A Cross-Cultural Study,” *Developmental Psychology* 34 [1998]: 677–86) found that toddlers’ inhibition was positively correlated with mothers’ punishment orientation and negatively correlated with mothers’ acceptance and encouragement among Canadian children but that these relationships were just the opposite for Chinese children. *Mind, Society, and Behavior* sometimes overlooks the findings of cross-cultural research.

The final section of the report represents one of its key strengths—applying psychological theory to the improvement of development work. In particular, this section examines biases in development professionals’ planning and decision making. On the basis of a survey carried out for the report, the authors found that World Bank professionals held inaccurate beliefs about the ability of aid recipients to perceive and take control over their own lives. Also, World Bank staff consistently misinterpreted data that contradicted their professional commitments to certain development strategies and policies. For example, one section of the survey of World Bank staff found that the likelihood of allocating additional resources to a failing

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project directly increased with the amount of resources that had already been invested in the project. These studies demonstrate key differences in the values and decision making of World Bank professionals relative to those they aim to help. It is to the report's credit that such biases are being acknowledged and empirically examined.

Overall, the authors of *Mind, Society, and Behavior* are to be commended for bringing the subject of cognition and decision making into the consciousness of the development community. Beyond the limitations mentioned above, readers of this World Development Report will find thought-provoking perspectives on innovative and promising behavioral approaches to international development.

DANIEL A. WAGNER
KATHARINE W. BUEK
ALEJANDRO ADLER
NATHAN M. CASTILLO
FATIMA TUZ ZAHRA
JINSOL LEE
DEEPTI CHITTAMURU
SELENE LEE
University of Pennsylvania

Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism through Literacy Education by Paul Feigenbaum. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015. 248 pp. \$40.00 (paper). ISBN-13 978-0809333783.

Around the time I finished reading Paul Feigenbaum's book *Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism through Literacy Education*, DeRay McKesson announced his candidacy for mayor of Baltimore. McKesson rose to fame as one of the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement and the main architect of a 10-point plan to end police violence known as Project Zero. He has used social media (and, especially, Twitter) to advance the civil rights movement in substantial, meaningful ways. In the process, he has built a serious reputation and a full-fledged career, so much so that, despite his late entry into the race, as of this writing, he is one of the most serious contenders in Baltimore.

McKesson's announcement raises a number of questions. Is activism more effective inside or outside of the system? What can we achieve as individuals, and what can we achieve collectively? How does our ability to use our facilities with multiple literacies affect our ability to exercise our rights as (American) citizens and, by extension, dismantle or reinforce the institutions that oppress us? What is the role of imagination in social change?

Feigenbaum admirably deals with these questions and more in his volume, which explores the role of collaboration, imagination, and activism in achieving social justice. More fundamentally, though, the author examines what it means to pursue the thorny work of combating oppression in solidarity with those who have been disenfranchised because of their lack of access to literacy education.