

Book reviews

The end of average: How to succeed in a world that values sameness

Todd Rose

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Review by Paolo Terni

This book is music to the ears of SF practitioners. The reader will find echoes of the foundational SF principles that “the client is the expert” or that “each case is different” on virtually every page. What follows is a sampling of random quotes taken from this compact treatise. “The central premise of this book is deceptively simple: no one is average” (p. 11). “There are many, equally valid ways to reach the same outcome; and [. . .] the particular pathway that is optimal for you depends on your own individuality” (p. 129). “The field [the science of the individual] rejects the average as a primary tool for understanding individuals, arguing instead that we can only understand individuals by focusing on individuality in its own right” (p. 12). If the book does not offer anything new for a SF practitioner in terms of “what would I be doing differently after reading this book?”, it does offer an indirect argument in support of the basic SF tenets.

The author, Todd Rose, is the Director of the Brain, Mind and Education Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education – a long way to go for a high school drop-out who before the age of 21 had held 10 different minimum wage jobs to support a wife and child. He is the perfect case study for the argument he makes in the book. In his own words: “At first, I felt like the solution was to strive to be the same as everyone

else – but that usually ended up in disaster. I failed class after class, and departed job after job. Eventually, I decided to stop trying to conform to the system and instead focused on figuring out how to make the system fit me. It worked [. . .]”. Rose discovered that he was the expert on his own life.

Rose’s main argument is that questionable assumptions about the new field of statistics were embraced in the nineteenth century and led to the now ingrained belief that we can use averages to understand individuals; an approach the author calls “averaganism”. However, no one is average, literally. For example, the US Air Force in 1950 measured more than 4,000 pilots in ten physical dimensions (e.g. arm length, chest size, etc). Not one single pilot was in the middle 30% on all ten dimensions. Not one. Averages are good for comparing groups, but they break down at the individual level, as any SF practitioner knows. In the previous century, using averages was better than nothing; but now, the author claims, the age of averaganism is over because we have the tools to build a science, a business environment and a society centered on individuals.

The book is structured in three parts: “the age of average”; “the principles of individuality”; and “the age of individuals”. The first part has the following chapters: “the invention of the average”; “how our world became standardized”; and “overthrowing average”. In the first chapter, the author explains why we came to rely so much on a statistical device originally designed to cancel out errors in measuring celestial bodies, something he manages to do brilliantly. The second chapter is mostly a brief history of Taylorism in business and in education; paradoxically his narrative feels too linear and standardised, lacking the nonlinearity and “jaggedness” that he advocates in other parts of the book. The third chapter has the goal of introducing the “science of the individual”. Again Mr. Rose puts forward some interesting critiques of the statistical methods used in psychology, but there is very little in terms of what to do instead. This is the chapter where SF practitioners could have contributed tons of pages – sadly, as often remarked in these reviews, authors who are

epistemologically well-aligned with SF seem to be totally unaware of its existence.

In part two the author presents his three principles of individuality. The first one is that talent is always jagged, that is most measures of human characteristics are an aggregate of different dimensions weakly related to one another (e.g., an IQ score is made up of several sub-scores: verbal reasoning, spatial reasoning . . .). The second one is that traits are a myth because they do not take context into account. The third principle is that of equifinality, the idea that there are different pathways and different paces, all equally effective, to reach the same outcome; in other words, each individual follows a unique path to his or her destination (again, a point that is very familiar to SF practitioners).

Unfortunately this part of the book suffers from the bad habit many authors have of building straw men in order to further their cause. I believe Rose misrepresents personality psychology. For example, I do not know of any researcher unaware of the fact that measures are constructs which aggregate different facets; the correlation between traits and actual behavioral occurrences is indeed around 0.3, but that is true of most measures in psychology, not only in personality psychology; and last but not least, rank order stability in personality traits is usually maintained in most contexts.

Again, the limitations Rose points out are something researchers are painfully aware of. For example, when I was a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, my supervisor – Professor Angela Duckworth, a 2013 recipient of the MacArthur foundation’s “genius award” and one of the foremost experts on the psychology of achievement, was working on one paper, among many, whose provisional title was: “Measures suck” (now published as: “Measurement matters: Assessing personal qualities other than cognitive ability for educational purposes”).

In part three the author explores possible alternatives to the averagism approach in business, society and education. This is where the book really shines. Mr. Rose’s area of expertise is education, and the chapter about how to reform the US

education system to fit individuals is particularly compelling. The chapter about business has three case studies – I was hoping for a little bit more, but it is a good enough starting point to get you thinking.

I believe that the author largely succeeds in his goal: “to liberate you, once and for all, from the tyranny of the average”. It can be a very comforting read for SF practitioners, even if I doubt any of us would need Mr. Rose’s book to radically focus on individuals. If anything, we can show him the way.