

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

HARRY COLLINS and ROBERT EVANS, *Rethinking Expertise*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 159 p., + index.

In part because I testify as an “expert witness” in court cases with some regularity, I hoped to learn something about who gets counted by whom as an “expert” from *Rethinking Expertise*. I thought that the promise made by the book blurb that “Harry Collins and Robert Evans offer a radical new perspective on the role of expertise in the practice of science and the public evaluation of technology” was likely hyperbole, but I did expect at least some increase in my understanding of “expertise” from this book.

I was, alas, disappointed. Collins and Evans do not make clear the old conception of “expertise,” which they aim to replace. Having finished reading this book, I was still wondering, and turned to what is a prime exemplar of a “democratic” alternative to reliance on “experts,” Wikipedia. There, I read that “an expert can be, by virtue of training, education, profession, publication or experience, believed to have special knowledge of a subject beyond that of the average person.” I don’t much care for the agentless and grammatically passive construction of this specification, but – especially since it includes “experience” in the list of bases of expertise – I don’t see that Collins and Evans have better specified, rethought, or otherwise transcended it.

Collins and Evans push against credentials as a necessary or sufficient basis for being accepted as an “expert.” Both I and the anonymous author(s) of the Wikipedia definition are in accord with them on that point. There are persons with professional credentials whose judgments are not relied upon by their colleagues or by governments. The work of such persons is prototypically rejected by mainstream publications in the field in which their credentials were awarded, or is peripheral in ways that one of the tools of the first wave of the sociology of science, cocitation clusters, can show.

Collins and Evans exhibit little interest in peripheral but credentialed non-experts. They show much more interest in those who become accepted as “experts” about something without having professional credentials. The two examples they trot out over and over are Cumbrian sheep farmers who rejected claims by government scientists about radioactivity being harmless or negligible in their sheep pastures (Brian Wynne, *Environmental Magazine*, 1989, vol. 31, no. 2), and “AIDS sufferers” who forced their

way into the US Federal Drug Agency's process of approving drugs (Steven Epstein, *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism and the Politics of Knowledge*).

The sheep farmers' "We know what we know" was eventually substantiated, and the instance may have encouraged some caution in rejecting claims by "laypersons" about harms. The treatment activists pushing to get drugs out of clinical trials into the bodies of HIV+ individuals seems to have had a wider impact in legitimating the involvement of those affected by a disease in the process of approving drugs for the disease. (I must pause to point out that "AIDS sufferers" is misleading in that many members of what became the Treatment Activist Group formed within the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power [ACT-UP] did not have AIDS diagnoses and I greatly doubt that any of them described themselves as "sufferers.")

The great success of the ACT-UP campaign to get drugs into bodies is that a very toxic drug, AZT, was administered in excessive doses. The drug was approved before clinical trials demonstrated more than a short-term clinical benefit and at doses that were not only inefficacious but harmful. The answer to the "Cui bono?" (Who benefits?) question for AZT, and some other drugs of dubious benefit which have had expedited approval, is the drug companies.

Call me cynical, but I wonder if the treatment activists would have succeeded if a certain effect of what they successfully advocated was not to lower the cost for pharmaceutical manufacturers of getting their patented drugs approved so that more profits could be reaped sooner.

Beyond that, I think that Collins and Evans are mistaken about the extent to which the treatment activists' qualification was based on experience suffering AIDS. Moreover, they are vague about the "real contributions to the science that were warmly embraced by the scientists" (53). Knowing that double-blind protocols are being violated is important information (like recognizing sheep sickening on grass which was not supposed to be contaminated with radioactivity), but this seems to me to be a part of the study of compliance (or non-compliance), not part of the study of HIV or of drug efficacy and toxicity.

Collins and Evans make much of a distinction between "interactional expertise" and "contributory expertise." Those with the former may be able to evaluate claims (sociologists of science and the sheep-raisers have this) but the top tier of expertise is made up of those who do the science. The boundaries between "interactional expertise" and "contributory expertise" seem very fuzzy to me, especially beyond "science." Collins and Evans are enamored with Michael Polanyi's notions about tacit knowledge in science and with the performance of physical tasks (science laboratory conduct in particular).

From my observations of laboratory life, those who are doing the procedures are technicians. The heads of labs tend not to be hands-on experimenters. They evaluate results in ways that strike me as being rather like what Collins and Evans label “interactional expertise,” though I can easily see and make an argument that the scientists have different kinds of tacit knowledge to judge which results are significant and reportable.

I find the “Periodic Table of Expertise” around which Rethinking Expertise is organized unheuristic. Beyond the chutzpah of calling it a “periodic table,” the vertical axis does not seem to me even or ordinal specification. The rows for “specialist expertise” and “metaexpertise” are ordinal (increasing from left to right), although the fourth and final row of the chart begs the question that I thought was central to the discourse of experience without credentials (and credentials without experience conceptualized by recognized experts as sufficient or credible).

As an exercise in rescuing the authority of science from, among other things, undermining by the history and sociology of scientific knowledge, I judge this book a failure. This is not to dismiss it as lacking some wise cautions about claims to and exercise of expertise, but I doubt that the book will alter (let alone revolutionize!) how sociologists understand and try to explain the bases for expert authority or rescue what the authors consider genuine expertise from the cacophony of assertions made about technology, product safety, product efficacy, etc. in contemporary societies, especially in advance of anything close to a consensus among the experts. As Collins and Evans repeatedly write, political decisions are made at a speed much faster than scientific consensus can be forged.

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