

Intuitive Judgments of Change. Linda Silka. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1989, 214 pages, \$49.00 hard.

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"All things make room for others, and nothing remains still" (Heracleitus, *Maxim*; ca. 500 B.C.; as quoted by Plato, *Cratylus*, Section 402A.) . . . or so it seems . . .

Intuitive Judgments of Change is a thought-provoking essay on the manner in which ordinary people judge whether or not another person or some general condition of the larger social world (e.g., the crime rate) has changed. The text is a successful mixture of relevant anecdotes, survey research findings, and the results of the author's own experimental research. Her conclusion is that we are quick to see change in social conditions but slow to see change in other individuals.

Silka's book is "an original"; I know of no one else who has taken judgments of change as a subject of an extensive psychological study. The tendency in psychological research has been just the opposite, to examine how people look for and find evidence for stability and consistency across people, situations, and times. The author provides a wealth of examples in which socially significant decisions were based on (or justified by) policy makers' perceptions that something had changed. And, while reading the book, I was reminded of dozens of personally relevant experiences that involved perceptions that something had changed as the primary basis for my own actions.

As an empirical psychologist, I found two of the author's conclusions particularly intriguing. First, she cleverly shows that by adding information about the time at which events occurred in a person's life, that it is possible to alter the common social psychological finding of perceptions of stability in character to the perception that changes have occurred. In other words, she has demonstrated that there is a critical "missing dimension" in the experimental materials provided to laboratory subjects in most research on social judgment and that this factor is a primary determinant of judgments of personality and causal attributions. Second, I was intrigued by her claims that we exhibit a general "nostalgic fallacy" in our evaluations of the social world. Namely, there is a pervasive tendency to see that our social world has changed during our lifetimes and "gone down hill" on several moral and practical dimensions. I am convinced by her arguments that there is a bias to see the past as rosier than the present. The author provides several explanations for the occurrence of the "nostalgic fallacy"; and concludes that a primary source of the bias is our *failure* to think in terms of proportions of bad events and, instead, to reason in terms of apparent frequencies without conditioning our impressions on the growth of the population of potential bad events. She also provides evidence that her respondents were most comfortable when they could rely on clichés to describe general aspects of the social world. However, I still wondered why the "nostalgic fallacy" takes the form of exaggerating the frequency of bad events today in comparison to yesterday, rather

than an even-handed exaggeration of the rate at which good and bad events occur or even an optimistic "Polyanna fallacy"?

The author's comprehensive explanation for our tendencies to perceive change takes the form of a cognitive psychological framework that attributes perceptions of change to the joint effects of judgment habits, naïve theories we hold about the phenomena being judged, and the selected types of evidence that are available to us through direct experience and indirect reports such as newspaper articles. Her analysis provides a rich, although necessarily speculative (given the limited body of empirical research), collection of explanations for judgments of change.

The volume has one final virtue: it is well-written and it does a beautiful job of integrating anecdotes and everyday life, newspaper reports, and the results of social science research. But, most important, Silka has identified a focal question—What causes us to judge that something has changed?—that could initiate a new field of research in the behavioral and policy sciences.