Book Review: The Trouble With Depending on Experts

Two recent books make an impassioned case that in recent years, politics has tainted both health policy and science.

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In April 2020, David Zweig went out with his daughter to meet another parent and child, while dutifully remaining 6 feet apart to follow Covid guidelines. The little group cycled along a dirt trail near the Bronx, the kids chatting happily together. When they got home, Zweig noticed that the girl's face shone. The next day, he watched her slowly get back to what had become normal during the pandemic, she and her brother, "wilting in the gray light of their school-issued Chromebooks."

He began to think about how many other families were affected across New York and the rest of the country. The moment spurred him to start researching what was going on with the government's response to Covid-19, probing the rationale underlying the nationwide school closures.

Zweig, a journalist with a background in fact-checking, was so disturbed that he began writing to school administrators and scientists, questioning the origins of obscure data points that informed policy. The resulting book, "An Abundance of Caution: American Schools, the Virus, and a Story of Bad Decisions,'' is a blazing indictment of public health officials, politicians, and journalists alike: During the pandemic, the risks to children from the virus were low and U.S. schools need not have to be shuttered for as long as they were, he argues. Their closure affected more than 50 million students, hit disabled children and disadvantaged families the hardest, and has had long-term consequences.

Zweig's book, along with Jacob Hale Russell and Dennis Patterson's recent "The Weaponization of Expertise: How Elites Fuel Populism,'' are impassioned accounts contending that in recent years, politics has tainted health policy and science. In both books, the pandemic plays a key part. The events of 2020 and beyond prompt Zweig's dogged probing of government policy and underlie Russell and Patterson's wider questioning of the position of experts in society. Their critiques offer illuminating assessments of the role of scientific expertise in public life.

Zweig's book brings back the confusion of the pandemic's early days, when nobody knew how the virus spread and panic abounded. New York's then-governor, Andrew Cuomo, was reassuring

citizens in nightly broadcasts in which he promised to “follow the science.” Schools initially closed for two weeks — and in some areas remained closed for almost two years, in sharp contrast to Europe, where schools in many countries re-opened after just a few months.

Across the U.S., children stayed at home, staring at laptops. Those who did not have computers missed out on months of learning. Even when schools reopened, the environment was stifling. Zweig evokes the otherworldly behaviors small children were obliged to adopt. In some cases, toddlers wore masks, while schoolkids had their faces covered all day, with physical barriers on their desks, forbidden to talk during lunchtime. “To be clear, none of these interventions had any high-quality empirical evidence behind them,” Zweig writes.

Some groups suffered more than others. Domestic abuse skyrocketed as children stayed in close quarters with violent relatives; the rate of child suicides rose. Adults caring for kids with severe disabilities went months without respite, and one psychiatrist told Zweig that she had been obliged to hospitalize a parent. “While the children themselves suffered, one of the lesser-told stories was the strain and terrible hardship school closures inflicted on families as a whole,” Zweig observes.

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The pandemic’s beginning was full of unknowns but as time went on, information built up. Zweig notes, multiple times, that Europe offered an alternative path. Its schools had opened after a few months, without a significant impact on the virus’ spread. Yet reports on safe re-openings in Sweden or Denmark were few and far between in the U.S. media, or emphasized the unbreachable differences between Europe and the U.S. rather than opportunities to learn lessons.

As well as devoting an entire chapter to Europe, Zweig returns to this policy split again and again, and again, somewhat repetitively. “Not only did we not open schools when they did, but even a month after the Europeans opened their schools, when our inadvertent guinea pigs then gave the ‘all OK’ signal, we still didn’t open,” he writes.

There was also variation by region and state, with blue districts more likely than red to impose harsh restrictions or keep schools closed. Zweig notes that even within districts, counties that voted Democrat had longer school closures than those that leaned Republican.

The pandemic response is not the only area of public policy and behavior that has become politicized. Referring to the work of the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, Zweig sees the pandemic response as part of a wider trend towards what Haidt calls “safetyism” — an ideology that prioritizes safety, underpins the rise in trigger warnings and safe spaces, and forms part of leftist thinking. “While people of all political persuasions have their irrational fears, during the

pandemic the Left's fears were expressly focused on COVID, in particular around schools, and children in general," Zweig writes. "And the public acknowledgment — or performance — of that fear was very much a signal of one's membership in the Left."

Zweig and the authors of "The Weaponization of Expertise" have much in common. While Zweig ventures forth into the depths of one case study, Russell and Patterson, two law professors at Rutgers University, elucidate the many other ways in which they believe expertise has gone awry. Anthony Fauci pops up in both books, as a bureaucrat or a figure perceived as "a shopworn DC creature," but while the government's response to the pandemic forms the backdrop to their thesis, Russell and Patterson want to make a broader point: experts have misused their authority, deployed their credentials to suppress dissent, and fed a public distrust that has backfired and led to populism.

The book's subtitle — "How Elites Fuel Populism" — underscores the authors' central claim. Elites dominate public policy, academia, and the media, they argue, and embody qualities of condescension, technocratic paternalism, and intellectual tyranny. "The hallmark of an elite," they write, "is academic credentials," and elites have promoted "a climate of censorship and cancellation" at academic institutions.

It was the elites, the authors note, who urged people during the pandemic to just "follow the science." But that wasn't an isolated case. In 2016, for example, Hillary Clinton, a leading representative of the elite, famously described Trump's supporters as "a basket of deplorables."

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Some, perhaps many readers, will dispute Russell and Patterson's depiction of elites, and their book is a polemic with plenty of sections that prompt questions or disagreement, but it is hard to argue with their broader argument. Presenting unconfirmed evidence as fact undermines expertise. In their view, "Expertise should rest on humility, doubt, skepticism, and open dialogue" — qualities they feel recent public discussions of science have lacked.

They begin with a critique of scientific research, a topic that became a lightning rod during the pandemic. Russell and Patterson take readers through a variety of problematic trends, from the researchers who select their models to obtain a desired outcome (a practice known as p-hacking) to an apparent reluctance by scientists to run large-scale randomized trials.

They also raise challenging questions about the nature of research itself. In one survey, a third of scientists admitted to "questionable practices" — and the authors cite an assertion that John Ioannidis, a professor of medicine and biomedical data science at Stanford University, famously made in 2005 that, if correct, is astounding: that most published research findings are simply

false. Ioannidis' claim remains contentious in academic circles, but the authors argue that because most research today is "focused on analyzing increasingly small effects," there is a much higher chance that such findings are "overwhelmed by noise" than in the past.

Some fields have more flaws than others, they write. Psychology, for example, has suffered from a replication crisis, in which researchers find they cannot reproduce the results of earlier experiments. The work of former Harvard psychologist Amy Cuddy is presented as an example of "pseudoscientific advice that claims to draw on robust evidence." Cuddy achieved widespread fame through a TED Talk promoting the idea of the power pose — a stance that could help people feel confident — but her study was later debunked.

Russell and Patterson attribute such sloppiness to researchers' search for surprising or interesting findings, and a tendency to say nothing about those that fail. The pressure to publish or perish has diminished science, they contend: "Cleverness has replaced careful and measured insight."

When expert knowledge enters the public sphere it loses further nuance, they maintain. A deep knowledge of one field does not qualify a researcher to speak more broadly on science, they note, chiming with a tendency Zweig also detected in the pandemic commentary. An article in The New York Times, for example —"How 132 Epidemiologists Are Deciding When to Send Their Children to School" — purported to showcase expert views. All were epidemiologists, but Zweig found that one worked with tobacco companies while another studied maternal health, and others had no children. As Russell and Patterson put it succinctly, if caustically: "'Experts say' in headlines is a pretty reliable indicator of an opinion piece masquerading as news or authority."

All too often, in their view, rather than enabling policymakers and members of the public to make better decisions, experts' credentials are deployed to "foreclose debate."

Russell and Patterson point to an array of recent scandals in which experts played a role. In Flint — the Michigan city in which high levels of lead were found in drinking water — state-funded analysts dismissed citizens' worries that something was off. Only when local people hired their own assessors to test water quality did it emerge that contaminants, including lead and bacteria causing Legionnaires' disease, had reached dangerous levels.

The authors acknowledge, however, that it was other experts whose scrutiny brought this discovery to light. "Our gripe is not with expertise," they write, adding that, "we have tried to make one basic point throughout this book: following expertise is not enough."

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lacked.

In truth, some of their examples are rather unfair. In 2008, parents and a legal advocacy organization uncovered a scheme in which corrupt judges in Luzerne, Pennsylvania, handed down harsh sentences on juvenile offenders in return for kickbacks from for-profit juvenile detention centers. The scandal was known as “kids for cash,” and more than 2,000 convictions were later overturned. Russell and Patterson note that the Judicial Conduct Board did nothing despite being aware of the problem. “The travesty of juvenile justice in Luzerne is hardly the only way in which its residents feel forgotten by America’s elite,” they write, “but it takes little imagination to see why you might lose trust in a system that literally sells your children to prisons for cash and then drags its heels in investigating the wrongdoing. ‘Trust the experts’ is hardly a reassuring rejoinder.”

But Russell and Patterson’s definition of “expert” in this case is too broad to be coherent. That board comprised judges, attorneys, and members of the public with different political affiliations. They were figures of authority in the community, not scholars or scientists. And their decision not to investigate the judges’ criminal activity is different from a scientist whose research guided the pandemic response with the best of intentions.

“The Weaponization of Expertise” arose from a course the two authors taught at Rutgers, and its latter sections, diving deep into philosophical history, may leave behind a reader not keen to revisit Karl Popper’s theories of science or the ideas of Thomas Kuhn.

Russell and Patterson gleefully puncture many of the beliefs, institutions, and leading lights in liberal thinking who “dismiss their critics without engaging them.”

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These arguments are charged and emotive. Russell and Patterson note in the acknowledgements that some of their friends and colleagues disagreed vigorously on reading sections of their book. But underlying their contrarianism is a desire for better, more robust scholarship. Overconfident expressions of expertise are everywhere, whereas real learning is complex and full of unsettled questions. “To be very clear, our criticism is not of expertise in itself, which has necessary and valuable insight to offer,” they write. “Rather, we are critical of its misuse to add a patina of

legitimacy and authority to elite assertions."

It may seem strange to turn a microscope on the flaws of science at a time when National Institutes of Health funding is under attack. But to all three authors, the mistakes of the pandemic should inspire a deeper reckoning in science that allows for more questions and freer debate.

With the benefit of hindsight, it was not unreasonable for experts to change their views about the value of masks during the pandemic or whether it was right to close schools for so long, Russell and Patterson write. "The problem is not just the reversals themselves but the original overconfidence expressed by their proponents, who should have better calibrated their level of certainty," they write. "Indeed, humility and a willingness to admit uncertainty when it exists would go a long way to improving elite credibility."

For Zweig, "it is my hope that during the next crisis" the public "not only tolerates but demands a robust debate if the government aims to rescind a basic right, such as for a child to attend school."

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