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Book Review

Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *SuperFreakonomics* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2009). 270 pp. $29.99 (hardcover) $15.99 (paper) $9.99 (Kindle). ISBN: 978-0-06-088957-9

Reviewed by James W. Gentry, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

I listened to *Freakonomics* on audiotape borrowed from the library and liked it sufficiently to spring for the sequel *SuperFreakonomics.* The authors place great emphasis on the role of incentives in generating human behaviors. One does not need to read the first book in order to enjoy the second book, as the latter is just an extension of the first that focuses on new issues. I do recommend reading both books as they are thought provoking, which is my highest praise for scholarly communication in any form. For those of you nonreaders (of books; obviously you are reading this), you can get a version of the first book on digital video disc (and on Netflix), but I think this is clearly the case where the book is far, far better than the movie.

In the opening section of *SuperFreakonomics* ("An Explanatory Note"), the authors give credit to Levitt's senior colleague at the University of Chicago, Gary Becker, for developing the "economic approach" they use. They note this approach is a method of analysis, not based on assumptions about particular motivations but focused on behaviors driven by a much richer set of values and preferences. They argue that the use of the methodology gives them the ability to examine the world a bit differently. They state that the reader may find a few things to quarrel with, and that they would be disappointed if he or she does not. This orientation is truly in keeping with the annual Macromarketing Conference experience.

I can testify that I did find things to quarrel with in the two books. In the first book, the authors attribute the drop in crime rate in the last two decades to Roe v. Wade using the logic that unwanted children are more likely to end up as criminals. As part of their evidence, Levitt and Dubner discuss Ceausescu's elimination of abortions in Romania and the subsequent increase in crime. Obviously, there are multiple explanations available for that crime rise. Similarly, there is still much discussion of reasons for the drop in crime in the United States. The authors dealt with the most common explanations given by politicians: the increase in the number of police on the street and the increased number of miscreants in prison, discounting the former through their analyses while giving some minimal credence to the latter reason. An article appearing in *The Economist* (2011) discussed this phenomenon, mentioning both the rationale provided by the authors and the possible reasons for why the authors' theory had largely been dismissed. New reasons given in the article include the "Obama effect" (the presence of a black president has inspired a significant number of young black men to be less violent), the reduced levels of lead in gasoline starting in the 1970s and 1980s, and the role of the Internet and video games in absorbing teen time. My favorite explanation (the changing demographics of the United States, resulting in fewer young males of prime crime commission age) was not favored by the authors' analyses but I did not find their arguments totally convincing. Nonetheless, their analyses and discussions were very thought provoking.

Similarly, in the second book, the authors' discussion of gender issues is a bit simplistic, especially when compared to Baumeister's (2010) more even-handed discussion of the issues, which took over 250 pages compared to the three pages in *SuperFreakonomics*. On the other hand, the authors do provide some very interesting new (to me anyway) material on gender, including a discussion of Jensen and Oster's (2009) research on how the role of women has changed in India due to the accessibility of cable TV, as assessed by a very systematic natural experiment. Additionally, they provide anecdotal evidence to support a contention of sex discrimination focusing on the career success of individuals who have had sex changes. The authors explore some fairly standard topics but make use of some off-the-wall contexts to make the discussion far more vivid.

One key to the book being an enjoyable read is the wide-ranging nature of topics covered. Prostitutes get quite a bit of coverage, with much of it dealing with a study by Sudhir Venkatesh, a sociologist at Columbia University (and the son of long-time macromarketing contributor, Alladi Venkatesh from University of California, Irvine). Levitt and Dubner draw provocative conclusions including that pimps provide more value added to their clients than do realtors, and that a Chicago street prostitute is more likely to have sex with a cop than to be arrested by one.

Other discussions include terrorists and their relatively upscale backgrounds. The authors suggest that, in order to avoid detection, they start savings accounts and buy life insurance. Levitt and Dubner provide criticisms of the effectiveness of hospitals and of car seats for children. They argue convincingly that the much cheaper seat belt is just as effective. They discuss research that questions previous findings about altruism and cover public policy changes intended to help society but which had the opposite effect. For instance, the Americans with Dis-

abilities Act actually resulted in fewer jobs for Americans with disabilities. Charging for trash pickup based on volume, a seemingly sensible encouragement of recycling, caused rat problems in German sewers, because people flushed so much garbage, and resulted in backyard trash burning in Ireland.

Readers who have seen Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* may have spent some time thinking about when in history they would have liked to have lived. The authors provide the answer that in terms of warfare, crime, income, education, transportation, worker safety, and health "the 21st century is far more hospitable to the average human than any earlier time" (p. 133).

Macromarketers partial to marketing history will find many topics in the book of interest. The authors' discussion of pollution starts with New York City, in the late nineteenth century. The problem was the horse-drawn vehicles; horse accidents were more likely than car accidents today. Five million pounds of horse manure a day were generated, not to mention the methane gas emissions. Trolleys and the automobile solved these problems but motorized transportation led to our current pollution issues, which too may be solved by technological advances (with their possible dark sides).

The strength of the book is that the problems facing society are covered from a very systematic, even macro, perspective. Though the authors claim that their analyses are micro in nature because of the focus on individuals and their responses to incentives, macromarketers will approve of the systematic consideration of issues undertaken. And, though you may discount the authors' rationale at points, you will find the book quite thought provoking.

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