The Great Handbook Scam

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Not long ago, the editor of a publishing company approached me about editing a *Handbook of Human Memory* that would cover the field. I said that there was no need; Tulving and Craik had published *The Oxford Handbook of Memory* in 2000. Why did we need another one? Undeterred, the friendly editor asked if I wouldn’t have constructed a handbook different from the *OHOM* volume. Yes, I opined, I guess I would have. (I’m not Craik or Tulving, after all, although their handbook is excellent). “Aha, then you have new ideas and you should create your own handbook!” my friend said. I took a pass. Still, the field could have had (and probably will have) another handbook of human memory in the near future.

This experience leads to the interesting question of why psychology (and, for all I know, all other active scientific fields) has so many handbooks, encyclopedias, dictionaries, “companions,” and other reference volumes. I figured out the game a while back and will use this column to relate my observations.

Several years ago I received a letter from Alice Healy and Robert Proctor inviting me to write a chapter for *The Comprehensive Handbook of Psychology*, under the general editorship of Irving Weiner and to be published by John S. Wiley and Sons. This was planned to be a 12-volume behemoth that would seem to live up to its name and be comprehensive. Healy and Proctor were to be responsible for Volume 4, “Experimental Psychology,” and they wanted me to write a chapter on “Episodic and Autobiographical Memory.” I agreed and asked Elizabeth J. Marsh (a post-doctoral fellow at Washington University in St. Louis at that time, now an assistant professor at Duke) to join me as co-author. Life rambled on.

A few months later I got another invitation from Doug Medin. This time he was asking me to write a chapter on “Kinds of Memory” for the third edition of *Stevens’ Handbook of Experimental Psychology*. The publisher would be – John S. Wiley and Sons. Again! How could that be? Wasn’t Wiley already publishing the “Comprehensive Handbook”? Indeed, Wiley was planning to publish two fat handbooks on psychology at about the same time – 16 volumes worth – which raises some interesting questions: If Weiner’s *Handbook* was to be “comprehensive” and needed only one volume to cover experimental psychology, how come the Stevens’ Handbook would have four volumes on this topic? More importantly, was a revision of the Stevens’ *Handbook* really necessary? Let me digress a moment.

The *Handbook of Experimental Psychology* was first published in 1951 and edited by S. S. Stevens (although there had been similarly named works prior to this time). Stevens’ handbook was a *tour de force* and served as the core reference volume of the field for perhaps the next 15 years, with *tout le monde* in the field reading it. In 1988 Wiley published a second edition, edited by Atkinson, Herrnstein, Lindzey and Luce. It was also excellent, although I suspect that it was less generally read than the first edition; a glut of edited books and reference works was flowing into the market by the late 1980s.
Now, to return to my question: If 38 years elapsed between the publication of the first and second editions, did we really need a third edition after only 14 years? Well, in a way the question is irrelevant, because no one polled members of the field to ask. Wiley was publishing it because they could – they owned the rights – and because they would, presumably, turn a tidy profit. The third edition would be published under the general editorship of Hal Pashler, but with an additional editor like Doug Medin for each of the four volumes. The third edition also looked outstanding, in prospect, with excellent editors and authors.

At any rate, because I was asked to write essentially the same chapter for two handbooks published at the same time by the same company, it got me to thinking about why so many handbooks, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and other reference books get published every year in our field. It seems strange, especially when most of are never read nowadays, and their publication usually does not cause even an intellectual ripple in the great ocean of psychology.

I reflected a while and then composed the following e-mail message to Professor Medin, although I have excerpted from the original here:

Dear Doug –

Thanks for your letter offering me the chance to write yet another chapter in yet another series of edited volumes that no one will ever read. I refer to your recent letter offering me the chance to write for *Stevens’ Handbook, 3e* …

I am used to John Wiley and Sons being the master of these kinds of unread books, but in checking my correspondence, I notice that they are really piling on unfairly. A couple of months ago I got a letter from Alice Healy and Robert Proctor asking me to write a chapter on memory for a 12-volume (!!!) series entitled “The Comprehensive Handbook of Psychology,” also published by Wiley. So, with four more volumes for the *Stevens’ Handbook*, they would be publishing 16 volumes of unread material simultaneously. And those are only two ventures for which I’ve been invited to write. Maybe they have several more psychology handbooks in the works.

So, John Wiley and his boys seem to be really putting it to the reading public, for no good reason, except that they can. Here is the scam, as I see it, which is not unique to them. Step 1 is to come up with a good title, like *Stevens’ Handbook of Experimental Psychology*, or *The Comprehensive Handbook of Psychology*, etc. Step 2 is to find some great editors and to pay them a bit – the editors together probably get around $20,000 to $30,000 total, I bet, a pittance for publishing four volumes. Step 3 is for the editors to cajole their friends into writing for the book, for the pathetic kind of fame and glory that is the coin of the academic realm. (Certainly not for money. At least none is mentioned in your letter or the one from Healy and Proctor). Step 4 is to publish the books and to sell them at very high prices to around 2,000 libraries. (No individuals buy these things any more). Step 5 is to pocket all the profits, which are huge, since the academic labor is nearly free. Step 6 is for the company executives to chuckle over how dumb academics are to fall for this scam every time around. Step 7 is to begin plans for the next round of Handbooks.
It is a great scheme for making money, and the field of psychology is neither helped nor harmed. No one reads these things. (Did the chapters in the last Handbook really get cited very much? You say so, but I’d be surprised). Of course, Wiley is not the only offender here. There are lots.

Well, back to your question, will I write a chapter on “Kinds of Memory” (Kinds of Memory?? Really?) for the Stevens’ Handbook? Well, since I am a dumb academic, probably so, but I do have a question. Since I already have agreed to write a very similar chapter for the Comprehensive Handbook of Psychology, can I use more or less the same chapter for the Stevens’ Handbook of Experimental Psychology, 3e? After all, since practically no one will read either one, no one will ever know. I’ll give them somewhat different titles, so it won’t look like duplicate publication on my vita, and I can change them around a bit. Maybe put semantic memory ahead of episodic memory in the Comprehensive Handbook and reverse them in the Stevens’ Handbook, that kind of thing. (Well, more than that.) Still, my question is, since there would be no copyright problem with the publisher, can I use parts of one chapter in the other chapter? I’ll cc Hal Pashler for his thoughts, and the other editors for their amusement.

Thanks for thinking of me, of course, to write for the Handbook.

Cheers, Roddy

P.S. Should the subtitle of the Pashler et al. Handbook be “The Noncomprehensive Handbook of Psychology”? 

P.P.S. If I say YES, can you tell me the other chapters and authors? I’m not sure what I should cover in a “Kinds of Memory” chapter. Memory for lunch, memory for dinner, memory of old girlfriends? That sort of thing?

As noted, there are two basic reasons these handbooks and other reference books get published. First, libraries will a buy multi-volume reference tome with a great name, although I’m told that my estimate of 2,000 is overly generous. Maybe 500-1,000 is more like it. After all, is some librarian at Vanderbilt or another of our great university libraries going to look at the title The Comprehensive Handbook of Psychology (what a great name!) and decide not to buy it, even if it is $900 or $1000? Of course not. So, a market exists for buyers even if the market for readers approaches zero. No publisher thinks individuals will buy these things unless they really do fill a need, as the Oxford Handbook of Memory did and does. Individuals might buy the Stevens’ Handbook, but buying an expensive 12-volume handbook is unlikely, even if it is outstanding (and it is, I think, now that I have it).

The second reason, as noted, is that the companies publishing the handbooks essentially get free labor in writing them. They rely on the fact that we academics are pathetic creatures who believe we should not be paid for our work, and we agree with them. The offer to write for these encyclopedias, handbooks, etc., usually amounts to peanuts, maybe $100. And Wiley and his boys didn’t even offer that (although we did get free copies of the books). The editors at Wiley and other companies know they can count on us to write to see our names in print, to have our precious thoughts spread across their pages. Such is the vainglory of the academic – we want others to see our words in print as much as we want to see it ourselves.
Of course, being a pathetic academic, I did agree to write the chapter for the *Stevens’ Handbook*, but I asked for two concessions. First, that I could name the chapter “Varieties of Memory” and second, that I could have co-authors. Everyone agreed. My co-authors were to be Elizabeth Marsh (again) and Stephanie Lee (a graduate student). All 16 volumes have now appeared and you can rush to your library to see them. They really are two sets of outstanding books, well worth reading. Wiley does an excellent job in producing these books.

I don’t mean to pick on Wiley, not at all. It was just my experience with this company that opened my eyes. But look at most any academic publishing company and they are producing handbooks, encyclopedias, etc., to beat the band. Cambridge has them (in fact, I’m overdue for an article for their new *Handbook of Consciousness*); Oxford does too (e.g., the six volume *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, published in co-operation with APA, with yours truly as one of the senior editors). Blackwell, publisher of APS journals, is handbooking social psychology now, and surely other fields will follow. Psychology Press, for whom I am a consulting editor, also has handbooks. I have contributed to the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Pergamon), *The Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science* (Nature Publishing Group), *The Encyclopedia of Education* and *The Encyclopedia of Learning and Memory* (both Macmillan), *The International Handbook of Psychology* (Sage), among many others. Most of these reference books, and certainly Wiley’s, are truly excellent. They deserve many readers, but I suspect they don’t have them. Still, I can safely predict that the next decade will see many more handbooks and other reference works published in psychology, for the reasons given above.

Some footnotes to this story. Wiley must have gotten cold feet about the adjective “comprehensive” for the Weiner handbook. Maybe reviewers pointed out topics omitted. Anyway, it wound up being *The Handbook of Psychology* (2002). And recall how I agreed to write for the *Stevens’ Handbook* if I could change the name of my chapter from “Kinds of Memory” to “Varieties of Memory” (which sounded better to me; kinds seemed a lame word). Since this remained the title through eight drafts, the copyedited manuscript stage, the galley proofs, and right through final page proofs (when publishers are under the obligation not to change a word the authors have written without their permission), imagine my surprise when, upon receiving the four-volume set, I discovered that my chapter had been renamed “Kinds of Memory!”

Much correspondence with editors at Wiley never did lead me to uncover how or why the title was changed, but other authors suffered the same fate. As I mentioned, Wiley was good enough to provide authors a copy of these handbooks, and I can report that I own 16 volumes of some of the finest chapters that (almost) no one will ever read.

I would like to write more on this topic, but I have to stop now. I am way behind schedule on writing an article on “Measures of Learning and Memory” (with a graduate student, Jeff Karpicke) for the *Handbook of Social Research Methods*. Elsevier is publishing this one and it will be really pricey (an Elsevier trademark). Jeff and I are not being paid for writing our article, of course. No matter. I’m sure it will be a great handbook. You’ll want to buy it and read it, right?