

Memories are made of this

The Psychology of Memory. (Basic Topics In Cognition Series.) By Alan Baddeley. Pp. xvii+430. (Harper and Row: London and New York, 1976.) Hardback £10.45; paperback £5.45.

AT LAST, a textbook on memory which one can recommend on its own, without three or four other volumes. The topic is a big one, ranging from the strange phenomena of clinical repression or 'photographic memory' at one end, to the effects of disrupting protein synthesis at the other. In the middle, there are groups of experimenters measuring the accuracy of memory in prescribed conditions; who are steadily building up the rules by which the system functions, whatever its physiological base. Even these groups are subdivided, some looking at associations between single items; some at memory for sentences and propositions; some at the similarities and differences of long-term and short-term retention; some at the importance of the particular form in which an event is encoded (roughly, perceived) at the time it occurred; and so on.

The difficulty is that each of these areas is still relatively unconnected with the others. All of them are advancing rapidly; it is hard enough to form a clear picture of the sense emerging from the mass of experiments in one field, without venturing into the others. Most books therefore concentrate on one sector, often doing it well. Yet the problem for the student or non-psychologist is that the picture he gets from such a book is one-sided. Even the slighter and more introductory texts often confine themselves to one approach, but merely replace detailed evidence by bald assertion. It is not surprising that even professional psychologists are sometimes unable to see the wood of progress for the trees of particular experiments.

Dr Baddeley's book, however, is different. It is not merely that his index mentions Freud as well as Ebbinghaus, Bartlett as well as Chomsky, acetylcholine as well as mnemonics. He could scarcely cover them all exhaustively; but the novel feature is that each field is mentioned appreciatively. His own most familiar area is perhaps that of long-term as against short-term memory, but he is sympathetic to all; and though the amount of space he

gives to each may get less as it becomes more remote from his own specialised expertise, the reader is left aware of every approach. Furthermore, the writing is beautifully lucid, and yet each point is based always on a well-selected experiment rather than generalities. He is also accurate, which cannot be taken for granted.

Such a book should appeal to anybody who is prepared to read nearly four hundred pages on memory; despite the clear and attractive style, it is all information rather than exhortation. Readers will therefore need to come to the book already convinced the subject is important. If, for example, they are doing an honours degree in psychology, or worried by the memory failures they meet in neurological practice, they cannot do better than pick on this book as their main source of information.

As favourable a review as this one is, some criticisms are still necessary as a guarantee of a proper standard. First, the sequence of topics is rather arbitrary, and one feels the chapters could be read in almost any order. This seems to stem from boredom with the conventional approach of starting with the arrival of a stimulus at the senses, and following it through. Perhaps this convention has some merit in the absence of any other organising principle.

Next, the distinction of short-term and long-term memory is surprisingly cavalier, and relies heavily on the very rapid forgetting of recent as opposed to more remote events. But this phenomenon, as has often been said, does not justify such a distinction. Dr Baddeley is now used to distinguishing far more than two kinds of memory; but some students will still be struggling with their tendency to parsimony, and could do with a clearer presentation of the reasons for abandoning a single homogeneous memory store.

Finally, the excellence of the book for teaching means that Dr Baddeley's own ideas have not been let loose. We could do with expansion of his brief suggestions about a modified interference theory, or about the role of talking to oneself for working memory during mental arithmetic. Perhaps a specialist monograph might follow? Yet this survey is itself a contribution to the subject since it reminds us all that research in this field has come a long way in twenty years.

Donald E. Broadbent

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