

Present state of academic psychology

Psychology Survey, No. 1. Edited by B. M. Foss. Pp. 220. (George Allen and Unwin: London, 1978.) Hardback £5.50; paperback £2.50.

WHAT is the perfect introductory text for psychology students? The selection pressures of the market should by now have weeded out the unfit, and we ought to be approaching a form well adapted to the British students' needs. The American form, with its pictures and snippets of information, seems fairly stable, but the comprehensiveness of such products at a shallow level is unsuitable for most British introductory courses. Usually our lectures and tutorials are not part of a single planned course, and tutors, left to devise their own essay titles, naturally look out for up-to-date surveys of currently fashionable topics. The *Annual Review of Psychology* is too heavy and unselective, and the professional review articles, such as those published in *Psychological Bulletin*, involve too drastic a plunge in at the deep end.

It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a market for books of introductory reviews. Early examples were the present editor's *New Horizons in Psychology* (at slightly too elementary a level) and the *British Medical Bulletin's Experimental Psychology* of 1964, followed in 1971 by *Cognitive Psychology*. Recently several publishers have issued series of short paperbacks, each on a special topic within psychology, but these have been uneven in standard; and buying even half a set would be expensive. In the book under review, we have the beginning of what may prove an ideal solution. It is the first of an annual volume of reviews, designed, judging from the contents, to throw the student in just out of his depth. It is, therefore, for the beginner who can rely on personal guidance if necessary, and not for someone setting out on his or her own. Each year, to keep the series fresh, there will be a new editor; and providing we can be kept up to date by suitable recycling of topics, the enterprise deserves to be very successful.

In this volume there are 14 chapters of about 15 pages, each by a different author who is a well known specialist in his field. The titles, in order, are, Visual Selective Attention, Verbal Remembering, Conditioning, Mental Imagery, Psychophysiology, Cognitive Effects of Cortical Lesions, Experimental Child Psychology, Sex Differences, Behaviour Modification, Human

Learning, Cross-Cultural Studies, The Bases of Fluent Reading, Occupational Psychology, and Environmental Psychology. There is thus a gradual shift from the 'core' subjects, highly organised areas currently under tough minded experimental scrutiny, to applied areas of research. In core subjects the reviewer's problem (generally solved remarkably well) is to get across, in a brief and simple form, the involved theories that make sense of the experimental work and that mark the boundaries of the area. Applied areas, on the other hand, are bounded by the set of practical problems that define them, and within such an area different approaches are possible; the result is diffuse, and short reviews inevitably seem selective and sketchy. In all cases,

however, the student is given a start, and a useful list of references.

The reader is left to work out the thread that holds the chapters together. Michael Eysenck, author of *Human Memory*, finds encouragement in "the emergence of general theories that have considerable application outside the limitation of a specific experimental task", but there is not much sign of this in the book and one feels by the end that the areas of psychology, like games, share no more than a family resemblance. That, no doubt, accurately reflects the present state of academic psychology.

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Physiological psychology

A NOTABLE feature of this set of books on the central nervous system and behaviour is that each is written by one author, an unusual and welcome event now that so many books consist of collections of previously published papers, accounts of conference proceedings, or chapters by writers whose only common link is an editor. A single author can avoid the well known problems of multi-author works—repetition, abrupt change of style, and the difficulty in developing a point of view by sustained argument. The advantages of going-it-alone certainly show in the present selection, albeit to different extents. In *A Primer of Psychophysiology* (Freeman: San Francisco and Reading; hardback £8.90, paperback £4.40), James Hasset presents a brief, clear and bouncy account of an approach to behaviour that is neglected in most British psychology departments. What is psychophysiology? After rejecting definitions that simply refer to the methods used by psychophysicists, for example, recording the EEG, he settles for "a strategy for studying human behaviour and experience". Now many will argue that the strategy is no more than a reflection of the methods used, and the bulk of the book is certainly devoted to a straightforward description—whose usefulness should not be underestimated—of such things as the electrical properties of the skin, respiration, cardiovascular states, pupillary changes, muscle tone, eye movements, and the gross electrical activity of the brain, together with detailed accounts of how to measure

them. It is undeniable that the measurements correlate well with psychological states such as fear, tension, anger, curiosity, embarrassment, arousal, and habituation, to name only a few, but the reader who is looking for some mechanistic or conceptual explanation of our behaviour will be dissatisfied. Psychophysiology may have useful applications, for example, in the therapeutic use of biofeedback or revealing individual differences and psychiatric conditions, but the book does not show whether it has explained anything important.

On the Texture of Brains (Springer: Berlin; DM16.30, \$7.50), by V. Braitenberg, is equally slim, but there the resemblance ends. It is a collection of eight short essays whose collective message is that "the structure of brains is information about the world", by which the author means not that we can understand the world from brain structure but that the structure of the brain has to reflect certain features of the world in order for the organism to deal with its spatial environment. It is an attempt to understand behaviour in terms of neuroanatomy. A crucial point is that not all levels of anatomical analysis are equally informative. To understand a brain by gross dissection is like trying to understand a text by dividing it into chapters; to analyse it by studying the structure of individual cells is about as helpful as examining prose in terms of the letters of the alphabet. The right approach, it is maintained, is to study how cells are connected. By so doing we find that the basic design is remarkably similar from insects to man. Complexity and variety of behaviour are therefore a product of the total number of cells and their interconnections, rather like the dif-