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NOTES ON PSYCHOLOGY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

BY

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NOTES ON PSYCHOLOGY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Queen's University of Belfast is the only university in Northern Ireland. Founded as a constituent college of the Royal University of Ireland in 1845, it was separated from that institution in 1908 and granted full university status. At present the University receives its primary financial support from the Government of Ulster, and it has grown to include six colleges. The student body numbers approximately 5,000 men and women. Degrees are awarded in a wide range of fields, including agriculture, law, medicine, and theology.

The main campus is located about one mile from downtown Belfast; however, the University's growth has been such that various departments and buildings are spread out in quarters as far as a mile away. The Psychology Department occupies a row of four stately and spacious houses on a beautifully landscaped and tree-shaded suburban street. The administrative offices of the Department are at 1 Lennoxvale. While many universities in the United Kingdom have taken over former residences to meet their expanding space needs, few of the houses are as elegant, well maintained, and desirably located as those at Belfast. Moreover, the Department has another distinction with regard to space in that classroom, office, and laboratory accommodations are fully adequate to meet their needs.

The Psychology Department was established in 1946; the Chair, created in 1958, has been held by Professor George Seth since its establishment. There are now twelve staff positions on the Belfast faculty but only ten are filled. In fact, recruiting of qualified faculty members is considered by Seth to constitute the most serious problem facing the Department. In addition to being geographically removed from major British centers of teaching and research, the professional isolation in Belfast is intensified by the sheer cost and inconvenience of a ship or plane trip "across the water" to England or Scotland. The situation also is complicated by the fact that Belfast is the primary employment area for psychologists who are natives of Northern Ireland and do not wish to leave the country. Seth is quite concerned about the possible intellectual inbreeding and sterility which may result if Belfast graduates are appointed to the faculty. Last, but not least, within the past couple of years the Department has suffered the loss of at least two excellent people, one through emigration to Canada and the other to London. As a means of circumventing these difficulties and providing at least an interim solution, there is a keen interest in appointing visiting professors from the US or

other countries.

It is rather interesting that, in spite of faculty shortages, Seth does not plan to limit the number of students enrolling in psychology. At present there are over 700 students enrolled in various courses, a number which Seth claims exceeds the psychology enrollment of any department in the UK. One cannot help but speculate as to the problems which this situation will create in the future.

Reportedly, the Department is moving toward a specialization in educational and clinical psychology, even though this may not be clearly apparent when one considers the interests of the present staff. Clinical training is provided by a rather excellent Department of Psychology in the Medical School rather than by Seth's Department. Seth himself has a background in educational and child psychology, although he apparently has not been active in research for some time. He is, however, the current president of the British Psychological Society. Dr. R.G.A. Stretch, who emigrated to Canada last year, probably was the strongest and most active investigator in the Department. Just prior to his departure, Stretch finished the establishment of a complete and sophisticated laboratory for operant conditioning studies. This laboratory was equipped under a grant from the Medical Research Council for the study of the effects of stress in pregnant rats on the behavior of offspring. While this work did not really get underway before Stretch's departure, the equipment has remained with the University. One of Stretch's former students, Mr. D. Blackman, who was recently appointed to the faculty as an Assistant Lecturer, has taken over the laboratory and is doing a doctoral dissertation in the area of operant conditioning.

The Belfast Department has a relatively small but well-equipped animal facility. Mr. Robert N. Hughes, a newly appointed lecturer, recently has taken over the animal laboratory for his studies in comparative psychology. In many respects Hughes might best be characterized as a naturalist. His primary interest is in studying normal development and establishing behavioral parameters for various species of animals commonly used for laboratory research. In essence, Hughes contends that psychologists have far too little information on and understanding of the animals which are subjected to experimental manipulation in university laboratories.

Hughes recently has initiated a series of studies on exploratory behavior of the rat. At present he is observing and systematically recording the exploratory behavior patterns

of rats in novel and familiar surroundings. His apparatus consists of two identical boxes which are separated by a partition. Animals are put in one side of the box for 24 hours to become accustomed to their surroundings. After this time, periodic measures of exploratory behavior are made, and the partition separating the boxes is then removed. The primary variable being manipulated at present is the age of the animals. A single strain of rats is being used, and Hughes has gone to great lengths to ensure that the animal's behavior is not influenced by the investigator. Thus, he does not enter the animal room and all contact is through apparatus controlled from an adjoining room. Visual observation of the rats is carried out through a one-way screen. After a variety of baseline data is obtained for isolated animals, the influence of social facilitation will be examined with pairs of animals. This will be followed by studies designed to determine the influence of visual and olfactory cues on exploratory behavior.

Mr. George A. Shouksmith, a Lecturer in the Department, joined the staff in 1964, after spending a number of years at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. While he is primarily responsible for the area of social psychology at Belfast, Shouksmith seems to have a rather wide range of interests. His early work was in the area of pilot selection for commercial airlines^{(1),(2)}. He also has worked in industrial activity sampling analysis and in student counselling. More recently, Shouksmith has turned to the problem-solving process. A recent study of individual nonverbal problem-solving has been published in Psychological Reports⁽³⁾. The aim of this investigation was to determine whether nonverbal problem-solving could be accounted for in terms of simple learning. Using a binary guessing game, Shouksmith found that under simple or uncomplicated experimental conditions his subject's learning curves followed the pattern for single

(1) Shouksmith, G., Command Qualities in Airline Pilots, Australian Jour. Psychology, 10, 351-356 (1958)

(2) A Validatory Criterion for a Group Selection Procedure, Australian Jour. Psychology, 12, 34-39 (1960)

(3) A Sequential Guessing Game for Studying Problem Solving, Psych. Rpts., 17, 127-130 (1965)

response learning. However, as the experimental conditions grew more complex, the learning process appeared best explained in terms of Gagne's construct of "concept learning."

Shouksmith is continuing his investigation of the problem-solving process with studies in which group influence and personality variables are systematically employed. His experimental task employs a series of cards bearing pictures of buried sticks. The sticks vary with respect to the length exposed above the surface of a "ground line," and they are also slanted at various angles from the vertical. The object of the experimental procedure is to determine the total length of each "stick" through a rather complex but logical procedure. While the research has not yet been completed, it would appear that not only are there individual-group differences, but distinctions between university and secondary school level subjects, male and female subjects, and on personality variables such as ascendancy-submission, conformity, etc.

Because of time limitations, it was not possible to visit the entire staff of the Psychology Department. Although none of the individuals listed below were reported to be actively engaged in large-scale research programs, they are listed in order to give some indication of the rather heterogeneous and broad range of interests represented at Belfast. Dr. Peter McEwen, Senior Lecturer - perception; Mr. Michael F. Moore, Lecturer - mathematical psychology; Mr. Rex Mitchell, Lecturer - programmed learning; Miss Doris Staines, Lecturer - industrial psychology; and a Mr. Herriott, who is interested in psycholinguistics.

It would appear that the most active research program at Belfast is centered in the Clinical Psychology Unit of the Medical School. This Unit is headed by J. Graham White, who holds an appointment as Lecturer in the Department of Mental Health (Psychiatry Department). Basically, the Unit is responsible for providing clinical services for the University Hospital, teaching of clinical psychology students, participating in the training of psychiatric residents, and research.

The Psychiatry Department was established in 1957, with clinical psychology being added in 1959. The first students entered the program in 1961. The present staff consists of three full-time psychologists, and a fourth will be added in the near future. There are a number of part-time and medical people who also participate in the clinical psychology training program.

White's Department offers a two-year course to prepare

postgraduate psychologists for work in the Hospital Service. Suitably qualified candidates work for an MSc degree by examination, which also includes a dissertation. No doctorates have been awarded any field of psychology at Belfast.

The Department takes a maximum of four students of clinical psychology at any one time. They are sponsored by the Northern Ireland Hospitals Authority and receive probationary psychologist appointments in the Health Service. These appointments are advertised in February of each year in the British Psychological Society's Appointments Memorandum. Students sponsored by other bodies also are accepted. Candidates are interviewed in April; the course starts on 1st October. Students accepting appointments as probationer psychologists are expected, on successful completion of the course, to serve two years as psychologists (basic grade) under the Northern Ireland Hospitals Authority.

During their first year, students receive instruction in the following subjects: neuroanatomy and neurophysiology, child and adult psychiatry, the work of the National and Northern Ireland Health Services, the theory of measurement and design of clinical experiments, the psychology of handicapped children, and clinical psychology.

In the first year clinical psychology consists of demonstrations, discussions, case conferences, and supervised practice in the assessment and treatment of psychiatric patients. The aim is to provide students with the technical skills necessary for clinical work in the second year. During the second year students spend half their time, over four three-monthly periods, in supervised practice in the following health service units and institutions; a mental hospital, a mental deficiency service, a neurological and neurosurgical department of a general hospital, and a child psychiatric and school psychological service. The other half of their time is spent on research or experimental work connected with their dissertation.

Research in the Psychology Unit covers a rather wide variety of problem areas which reflect the interest of staff members and students rather than a departmental focus. White emphasizes the fact that there is no adherence to any given theoretical doctrine within the Unit; however, the visitor certainly is struck with the general organic or biological orientation which permeates both the teaching and research programs. As in many British universities, the behavior therapy fad has caught on at Belfast. These points notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to say that analytic or more

dynamic personality theory is ignored in the Department.

A study on intellectual performance, activity level, and physical health in old age recently has been completed; and a paper reporting the work has been submitted to the Journal of Gerontology. Likewise, work recently has been completed on an investigation of memory disorders in older psychiatric patients.

Considerable effort is being devoted to the application of behavior therapy to phobic anxiety and the psychophysiological concomitants both of the disorder and the therapeutic process. Mr. H. McAllister and Miss M. Olley, the other two full-time staff members in the Department, will be the principal investigators in a project which has been submitted to the British Medical Research Council for support.

The objectives of this study are threefold: to obtain a better understanding as to the nature of psychophysiological response to anxiety-provoking stimuli in subjects displaying evidence of phobic anxiety; investigate the interrelationships of various psychophysiological responses to both anxiety-provoking and neutral material; and, to evaluate change in response during the course of behavior therapy.

Two groups of patients, with established diagnosis of phobic-anxiety state, will serve as subjects. One group will receive behavior therapy and the second will act as controls. Pre- and post-treatment psychophysiological measures, obtained on both groups of subjects, will include heart rate, electro-myograph, galvanic skin response, respiratory rate, plethysmograph, systolic and diastolic blood pressure. In addition, the psychophysiological battery will be run on the experimental subjects during the course of selected therapy sessions.

A hierarchy of verbal stimuli which arouse progressively increasing subjective anxiety will be constructed for each subject. A number of neutral items also will be ascertained for each individual and randomly interspersed in the hierarchy of anxiety-provoking material, with three neutral items at the beginning and one at the end of the series. Procedures for development of the stimuli material, as well as for its administration, already have been worked out in the pilot study. McAllister and Olley would seem to be well aware of the complexity and pitfalls of developing stimulus material in this fashion and have approached the task with considerable experimental rigor. Obviously, the problem has been somewhat simplified by using intra- rather than inter-subject change as the criterion.

The above material is intended to give no more than a rough idea of the range of research interests and activity in this group. The staff of White's unit are keenly aware of current literature in their areas of interest and show a statistical sophistication which exceeds that found at many universities in the UK. Their dedication and drive is contagiously stimulating; however, along with the staff of the University Psychology Department, they tend to turn out many relatively limited studies in a variety of problem areas rather than adopting a programmatic approach for intensively working in any given area. While one receives the impression that this approach to research may continue in the Psychology Department, it well may change in the Clinical Psychology Unit of the Medical School. In fact, one receives the impression that the Clinical Psychology Unit will mature into a rather sophisticated and productive organization with the passing of time.

The timeworn phrase that the only thing we need to really get off the ground is people, money, and space, is heard throughout the world. It is doubtful if many groups feel this need as deeply and strongly as the psychologists of Northern Ireland. However, even these assets, which are so often glibly considered to be the panacea of all difficulties in the scientific and academic world, will not solve the problems at Belfast. The 30-mile stretch of water from the end of the road in Stranraer, Scotland, to the beginning of the road in Larne, Northern Ireland, creates an obstacle far greater than one might imagine.

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