

Book reviews

Contemporary Approaches to Psychological Assessment, by Scott Wetzler and Martin M. Katz, Brunner/Mazel, New York, 1989, 348 pages, US\$ 40.00, ISBN 876305176

This book is the first in a series on Clinical and Experimental Psychology produced by the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. All but two of its contributors come from this centre and there is only minimal reference to any contemporary author from outside the USA. An example of this narrow approach is the chapter on Ego Function Assessment where all the references are by the same writer.

What the authors of this book describe as usual current practice in psychological assessment (reliance on a standard battery of three tests, Rorschach, W.A.I.S. and T.A.T.) would seem, at least in the UK, curiously antiquated. And what is presented as a new and original approach, the method of 'focal assessment', is mostly what has been taught here over the last thirty or forty years, i.e. the choice of an array of specific tests for a specific problem.

Yet the book does capture some of the more recent and exciting changes in psychological assessment. In the sixties and seventies, clinical psychologists too often lost interest in the task of diagnostic assessment. The great advances in biological psychiatry leading to the recognition of more precise aims and limitations of psychopharmacological treatment, and also the need for a brief and specific approach to psychotherapy have again given priority to diagnostic descriptions and categories. The main interest of this book lies in explaining these trends.

This book does not provide the reader with a useful nomenclature of psychological tests (for this the reader should refer, say, to Anastasi's textbook on Psychological Testing) but it does provide some useful insights: its critique of cognitive diagnostic assessment where so 'little progress has been achieved over the past 40 or 50 years', its chapter on cultural and ethnic issues (which could well have been longer), its optimism about the capability of clinical psychologists to integrate research and clinical needs, are refreshing.

All in all, a book which can be read easily and which can sometimes be thought provoking, but not a book that offers the comprehensive survey suggested by its title.

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Computer Applications in Psychiatry and Psychology, by D. Baskin (editor), Brunner/Mazel, New York, 1990, 178 pages, US\$ 23.95, ISBN 876305397

Historians will describe the years 1950-1975 as the First Age of the Computer, the mainframe machines being developed, cosseted and tended in ivory towers by the High Priests of Computing. The last quarter of the 20th century is the Second Age when computers became personal, appeared on every desktop and radically transformed almost every activity that they touched, be it writing, record-keeping, calculation, statistical analysis or playing games. It hardly needs saying that a review like this is typed directly into a laptop computer, at home, on a machine with more power than any mainframe of 20 years ago; and in so doing the process of writing is itself rethought and reborn. In assimilating to the practical needs of the machine our cognitions accommodate, and are liberated in the process.

Psychiatry, like every human activity, will be transformed by the computer, and there is a need for books that will explain what can be done by such general purpose machines. This is not such a book. Born out of a symposium held in New York in about 1987, it has the feel of a book written at the peak of computing's First Age, not its Second. There is no adequate description of what the machines can do that is so radically novel, and instead leaden prose merely likens data-base programs to card-indexes (a similarity as apposite as comparing a word-processor with a quill pen).

There are occasional useful sections, such as the reviews of the very limited literature on history taking by computer, or programs for simulating psychotherapy; but these will not justify purchase of the book by tyro or expert alike. For the beginner the book is rendered less useful by its lack of any adequate listing of software availability, and its total ignoring of the bread-and-butter but nonetheless fundamental utilities of word-processing, spreadsheet, data-base and statistical packages. Chapters on topics such as management information systems simply say nothing profound, interesting or useful. And more seriously the book is completely lacking any mention of the real advances in computing that could well modify psychiatry: artificial intelligence neural networks, parallel distributed processing, virtual reality, graphics, hypertext and computer-intensive statistical methods to name but a few.

The book's last words sum it up too well: 'If the research to date reveals anything it is that computers have not fundamentally altered the type of information used and accumulated. ... Nonetheless, this may change in the future'. Maybe, but not as a result of this book.

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