

From our reporter at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in New Orleans

Positive treatment for sex offenders

Erotic slide shows have become standard equipment in behavioral therapies designed to change sexual preference. If a male homosexual, for instance, wants to become a heterosexual, alternating slides of males and females are shown. Every time a slide of a male is shown, the patient gets a slightly painful electric shock or hears a loud buzz in his ear. No stimulus is associated with the female slide. These treatments have had some success, but aversive therapy is viewed with suspicion by many patients and therapists—especially when it is used in an involuntary setting. D. R. Laws of Atascadero State Hospital in California described a non-aversive behavioral therapy for hospitalized pedophiles or child molesters.

Slides of children and adults are superimposed over each other in such a way that each can fade in or out. The fading process, which makes one slide invisible while the other becomes clear, is controlled by the patient's reaction to the picture. A penile transducer measures the patient's erection and controls the fading process. In one set of trials, for example, an erection (positive reinforcement) would make the slide of the child fade out and the adult become clear. Gradually, the patient learns to respond sexually to adults. The subjects in the study reported increased confidence in themselves and in their ability to socially interact with adults. Laws concludes "that positive rather than the typical aversive conditioning procedures can be used for the alteration of maladaptive sexual behavior." Says one patient who was successfully treated: "I think your machine has done something to my head."

What is intelligence?

"Intelligence is what intelligence tests measure," is the typical glib response to a question that has never been adequately answered. Because IQ tests are often culturally or otherwise biased, no one test has been designed that is a totally valid measure of intelligence. Intelligence has therefore become whatever a particular test happens to measure. One psychologist who does not agree with this conclusion is David Wechsler, developer of the much-used Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS).

Intelligence is not a quality of the mind, says Wechsler, it is an aspect of behavior that has to do primarily with the appropriateness, effectiveness and worthiness of what human beings do or want to do. (The difficulty in measuring intelligence, however, has to do with the fact that all of these aspects vary from place to place and from time to time.) While Wechsler does not specifically define intelligence, he does stick up for intelligence testing. "I believe that intelligence tests are valid and useful," he says, "and if administered by a competent examiner, can do much better in appraising intelligence than one can do without them."

Inflation psychology

When people expect prices to go up, they go out and spend in order to avoid paying still higher prices later on. But increased spending without increased production upsets the balance of supply and demand and leads to even higher prices. This vicious circle is called inflation and economists don't seem to be able to decide what to do about it. Because consumer attitudes have such a great influence on the economy and because economists rarely agree, George Katona

of the University of Michigan suggests that it may be safer to listen to consumers than to economists.

Katona is founder of the Survey of Consumer Attitudes that samples public opinion each quarter and serves as an early indicator of economic trends. Recent surveys, says Katona, suggest some remedies for inflation. Inflation psychology, which did not develop during the recent sharp increases in food and energy prices is beginning to develop now. Many people are still optimistic and expect to be financially better off in the future but, says Katona, if the administration continues its policy of raising interest rates and creating a recession there may be unfavorable psychological reactions which will lead to increased inflation. Higher interest rates are supposed to tighten up money supplies and slow down the economy, but surveys indicate that the opposite may happen. High interest rates seem to destroy confidence and encourage people to borrow before the rates go even higher. "Fighting inflation," concludes Katona, "calls for creating conditions in which optimism and confident attitudes arise rather than the expectations of rapidly rising prices."

Racial bias in identification

"I don't know, they all look the same to me." It has become a standing joke for a member of one race to claim not to be able to recognize members of another race. But joke or not, this generalization has been at least partially substantiated. Roy S. Malpass of the State University of New York in Plattsburgh reports that "black faces are recognized more poorly by white than by black observers."

Twenty-eight black and thirty-six white students took part in two face-recognition experiments. Under both conditions, black faces were better recognized by black than by white observers. On the other hand, white faces were recognized equally well by both kinds of observers but less well than black faces, even by white observers. And in one experiment white faces were recognized better by black observers than by white. These findings have implications for eyewitness identification. Concludes Malpass: "Identification by white observers of black males, in a given case, have a higher probability of being made in error than if the observer were black." The same can't be said of white faces because the data are not consistent.

The occult image

Would you like to attend witch coven meetings and magical rituals or go to spiritualist classes and seances? That is what some researchers have been doing in an attempt to explain some of the characteristics of the occultist personality. Frederick J. Scheidt of Vassar College compared participants in the occult to participants in more traditional religions.

The study was conducted with 37 members of four belief classes—9 Methodist, 10 Pentecostals, 7 spiritualists and 11 self-proclaimed witches. Researchers spent up to six months observing and participating in activities of the occultists. Interviews were then conducted. Among other things, the occultists were found to have been labeled "deviant," "crazy," "weird" or "sick" even before they became involved in their present belief system. Scheidt suggests that some occultists may have reacted to deviant labeling by changing their self-concepts and activities to conform to the deviant image others already had of them.