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'Playmate' Shows Problems In Studying the Emotions

THE VARIETY of people is a fascinating subject of observation and comment. It is also a very hopeful condition.

We may or may not believe "The Territorial Imperative" about the innate savagery of man, what Ashley Montagu calls the "Original Sin Revisited." The human predicament taken in the large, is a gloomy mess. Nevertheless we also know that the human experience includes many admirable lives that inspire hope and emulation. Our sense of doom about "man" depends on which men we use for models.

The study of human variety is becoming fashionable in science as it has long been in literature, but our tools are still very primitive. One large area of research concerns the effects of drugs on emotional states. Some simple psychological experiments reported by Dr. Stuart Valins of the State University of New York at Stony Brook in the Journal of Personality and Social Pyschology illustrate some of the fundamental difficulties in studying the way people respond to emotional stimuli.

THE EMOTIONAL stimuli used by Dr. Valins were fairly innocuous—pictures from Playboy magazine. The pictures were presented under different conditions to college student subjects who were later questioned about which pictures they remembered most vividly and found most appealing.

Some subjects were exposed to a playback of their heartbeat sound, or so they were told. In fact, the playback was quite artificial and was manipulated for slower or faster rates by the experimenter. The outcome was that these subjects showed a consistent preference for the Playboy pictures they had seen while the playback indicated a faster beat, a variation that few of them perceived during the experiment itself. When questioned further, many of the subjects rationalized their choices in great detail, which can be imagined well enough without being repeated here.

For a control, a matching group was shown the same pictures and heard the same heartbeat sounds but was told that these were artificial distractions, not to be confused with their own heart rate. This group's choices were not influenced by the sounds.

THE EFFECT of emotional situations on heartbeat is common knowledge. These new experiments show the reverse effect and suggest that many people assimilate impressions about their internal reactions as part of their emotional evaluation of a given situation. (They ask their heart how they feel.)

In further studies, Dr. Valins showed that this behavior occurred in varying degrees, least of all in those people who scored as unemotional or borderline psychopathic by other psychological tests. This may help to clear up a seeming contradiction, for other work had suggested that such people showed the same range of physical response as others to emotional stress (heart rate, sweating etc.), or perhaps even an exaggerated reaction. Dr. Valins suggests that low emotional tone is related to the ability to ignore internal cues of human response like heart rate.

Advertisers (and demagogues) have, of course, long been aware of the use of coincidental emotion to imprint their products. This is, after all, why they advertise in Playboy, or sponsor TV programs that focus on violence. The conviction about "expanded consciousness" voiced by many drug users has a similar ring.

Drug researchers must be especially wary of these effects in attempts to decide whether drugs like adrenalin have direct effects on the brain. On the other hand, we may now be less fussy about whether a drug that dampens palpitations of the heart is a useful tranquilizer, so long as it restores a sense of calm to the patient's perceptions.