

Psychology's Johnson

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Macmillan Dictionary of Psychology. By Stuart Sutherland. *Macmillan, London/Crossroad-Continuum, 370 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017: 1989. Pp.491. £29.95, \$49.50.*

Among these unhappy mortals is the writer of dictionaries; whom mankind have considered, not as the pupil, but the slave of Science, the pionier of literature, doomed only to remove rubbish and clear obstacles from the paths of Learning and Genius, who press forward to conquest and glory, without bestowing a smile on the humble drudge that facilitates their progress. Every other author may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach, and even this negative recompense has yet been granted to a very few. [Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755.]

PSYCHOLOGY has attracted its share of dictionary makers, quite a drove of them in the past two decades. But some have wanted industry, others understanding; and none of their compilations has been truly satisfactory. In Stuart Sutherland the discipline has now secured a worthy lexicographer. And there are not a few parallels between Johnson and Sutherland: they enjoy the same robust good sense; they share a somewhat choleric style; and both are men who have placed their private melancholia in the public domain.

Dr Johnson was blunt in deflecting criticism of his dictionary: "Ignorance madam, sheer ignorance" was his response when asked why he had defined *pastern* as the knee of a horse. And Sutherland follows, writing in his preface: "It is customary for dictionary writers to acknowledge that their work is likely to contain mistakes, and to ask readers to write pointing out any they encounter. I apologise for any errors that have crept into mine, but I beg the reader not to draw my attention to them . . .".

I will here respect Professor Sutherland's sensibility, but if the sales of this excellent dictionary prompt an early reprint, then I shall be pleased (for a professional fee) to supply to the publisher a list of more than 20 errors of substance. For the present, I must needs confine myself to Preterition and shall not take our Lexicographer to task for confounding Ideal and Standard observers, for blurring the hard-won distinction between Intervening variables and Hypothetical constructs, for failing to differentiate Short-term memory and Short-term store, or for neglecting the asymmetry of the Stroop effect. I shall even pass over the misleading entry for Forced choice, an entry that fails completely to acknowledge Tanner and Swets'

classical distinction between Yes-No and forced-choice experiments.

In fact, the number of flaws in the dictionary is tiny. Sutherland's especial talent lies in using plain language to give a succinct definition of complex concepts. His economy of words is often marvellous. And when usage is vague or when a term is empty of meaning, he does not hesitate to tell us.

One of the criteria for judging a dictionary has to be the comprehensiveness of its coverage. Sutherland's coverage is very good, though not perfect. He explicitly intended his book to be a dictionary for psychologists, in that he includes many terms from related disciplines. Statistics, neuro-anatomy, linguistics,

classical genetics, psychoanalysis and optometry are notably well covered; and he is fairly comprehensive on the more curious sexual practices. But these extensions may be at the expense of the core of our discipline. Thus Ovarian follicle and many other gynaecological terms are included, but the psychological reader will look in vain for AB error, Additive factors method, Bidwell effect, Cohort model, Liebmann effect, Memory-scanning task, Molyneaux's question, Ranschburg phenomenon, Repetition effect, Transitional probability and Wason task. And even within a category there are unevennesses. Thus Hampton Court maze is in, but Olton maze is not. The antique Holmgren test is in, but the Geller-Seifter test is missing. Tribadism, Frottage and no less than four variants of Cunnilinctio are in, but some old faithfuls, such as Cunniphagia, Ligotage and Irrumation are taboo.

Sutherland enlivens his dictionary with two jokes (although he uses them needlessly often). They are the two jokes used by Johnson, viz:

"*social facilitation*. The facilitation of behaviour by conspecifics . . . does not apply to certain complex tasks, like compiling dictionaries" (Sutherland). Compare: "*dull* . . . Not exhilarating; not delightful; as, *to make dictionaries is dull work*" (Johnson).

"*psychoanalyst*. A person who takes



The dictionary-maker depressed. Perhaps today he would be recognized as suffering from Aerophagia: "Swallowing air, a common neurotic habit that can produce discomfort and belching".

money from another on the pretence that it is for the other's good" (Sutherland). Compare: "*patron* . . . Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery" (Johnson).

Sutherland uses the second of these jokes (*mutatis mutandis*) to convey his jaundiced view of cognitive scientists, social scientists, Gibsonians, Skinnerians and the sillier kinds of psychotherapist. And in general, it is a depressing view of psychological science that emerges from his dictionary. What becomes manifest is the lack of system, the categorical anarchy, with which we today approach the study of the mind. Psychologists have little to call their own except a ragbag of experimental paradigms and a heterogeneous collection of vague explanatory terms such as 'arousal' and 'drive'. For the rest, we depend on borrowings from other disciplines.

There is no better way of commending this book than to quote again from the choleric Doctor: "The words of this dictionary, as opposed to others, are more diligently collected, more accurately spelled, more faithfully explained, and more authentically ascertained" (*A Dictionary of the English Language*, preface to the eighth edition).

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