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Letters to the Editor

BOOK REVIEWS

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Twins as a Tool of Behavioral Genetics

This book is based on a Dahlem workshop which was held in 1992. The book consists of two sections: the biology of intelligence, personality, psychopathology in childhood, and adult psychopathology. Each section includes a series of background papers written by international experts and a group report from the workshop participants.

This is an excellent book which would be of interest to those involved in behavioural twin research. It would also be useful to those who are searching for ideas for future work. The chapters and discussions are particularly interesting as they focus on potential difficulties with twin studies, current thoughts, and ideas for future research rather than simply reviewing published findings. The main drawback is that although most chapters are well written, the contributions vary markedly in quality. Also some group reports may appear somewhat disjointed if they are not read in conjunction with the accompanying background papers.

In the first section on cognitive abilities, the question of how intelligence should be defined and the importance of a general ability factor is debated. The discussion focuses on the use of twin studies to design measures of intelligence and the incorporation of multivariate analyses to explore the covariation among abilities. The importance of longitudinal studies to investigate developmental mechanisms and the role of twin studies in identifying environmental influences are also highlighted.

The papers on personality cover the issue of how personality can be defined with particular reference to the five factor model. Theoretical psychology of personality is considered and once again the importance of longitudinal studies is highlighted. The participants also emphasise the need for direct assessments of environmental factors and note that there has been insufficient research on the relationship between normal personality and psychopathology.

In the section of childhood psychopathology, the need for genetic research in this age group is highlighted. Most of the issues discussed are, however, relevant for all age groups. The comparability of twin indices and potential sources of bias in twin studies are covered in some detail. The potential uses of twin studies, for example, in defining phenotypes and investigating comorbidity, are discussed and the issue of measurement is also raised.

The papers on adult psychopathology also highlight the difficulties in making valid diagnoses and point out the merits of twin studies in refining phenotypes. The group again highlight the role of discordant MZ twins in studying the contribution of environmental factors and the pathophysiology of disorders and the importance of twin studies is illustrated by findings for alcoholism.

Overall, there are some general issues which emerge from all the groups. The importance of the assumptions of the twin method are repeatedly considered. The value of longitudinal studies and the importance of direct measures of environment are also highlighted.

It is acknowledged that twin studies are particularly useful in defining phenotypes and finally there is a general agreement that the advent of molecular genetics research does not mean that there is no longer a place for twin research. It appears that there is still a need for twin studies which provide a different yet often complementary approach to molecular methods.

ANITA THAPAR


Clinical geneticists are often confronted by clients who are affected by, or have a family history of, an untreatable inherited neurological disorder and these people are well aware of the limitations of currently available therapy. They are often members of lay support associations and through their newsletters take particular interest in new therapeutic strategies targeting the relevant disorder. Indeed they are often aware of such strategies before their medical practitioners and can pose challenging questions at interview/counselling sessions.

Intracellular transplantation of tissues to alleviate the symptoms of neurological degeneration has a long history in experimental neurobiology. The editors of this impressive volume trace the first publication on the subject to 1890. In the 1980s this strategy was applied for the first time to humans: autologous adrenal medulla was transplanted into the caudate or putamen of people with advanced Parkinson's disease (PD). The results varied but the public attention has been caught; neural transplantation was in the public arena. The questions coming from patients were addressed to neurologists and, as the vast majority of cases of PD are not inherited, clinical geneticists escaped. The early studies of adrenal transplantation has already superseded by those using human embryonic mesencephalic tissue and few would now doubt the relative success of this strategy in alleviating the symptoms of advanced PD.

This success has resulted in the proponents of neural transplantation widening the scope of the diseases to be targeted. Huntington's disease is now firmly on the agenda and indeed a transplant strategy has already been carried out and reported in abstract form. The first pan-European programme for recruitment towards transplantation of embryonic striatum into HD patients has been established and the topic is discussed by members of the lay associations for HD. So, where does the practising geneticist turn to


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Inherited disorders and their genes in different European populations

This conference will be held in St Fuliu de Guixols, Spain, on 11–15 November 1995. (Conference organiser: Peter Harper. Co-organisers: Jaume Berrutapetit, Albert de la Chapelle, Angus Clarke.) Applications are invited to participate in this meeting, the second in a series of European Research Conferences on the topic. The aim of the conference is to allow Clinical, Molecular, and Population Geneticists to share data and hypotheses, both with each other and with scientists from other disciplines, such as archaeology and anthropology. The number of participants will be limited to around 100 people. Younger research workers with relevant data to present and discuss will be especially welcome; specific financial support may be available for these and also for participants from Eastern Europe. In view of the wide interest in the subject and the success of the previous meeting in Strasbourg, it is likely that there will be considerably more applicants than can be accepted. Thus early application to the ESF Conference Office is advised; the latest date for applications is 1 July 1995. Applications to Caroline Grimont, Conference Manager, European Science Foundation, European Research Conferences, I Quai Lezay Marnésia, F-67080 Strasbourg Cedex, France. Fax: 33 88 36 69 87.

5th International Congress on Trace Elements in Medicine and Biology

Therapeutic Uses of Trace Elements Satellite Workshop: Molecular Basis of Copper Metabolic Disorders. This congress will be held in Méribel, France, on 4–7 February 1996. Further information from Madame Arlette Alcaraz, Laboratoire de Biochimie CCHRUG - BP 217, F-38043 Grenoble Cedex 9, France. Tel: (33) 76 76 54 84. Fax: (33) 76 76 56 64.