

William S. Verplanck (1916-2002)

"Happy Jack"



Photography by Maxine A. Byrne

There was much wariness in experimental psychology when European ethology first began influencing comparative psychology, especially after publication of Niko Tinbergen's *The Study of Instinct* in 1951. One person stood out in that era as a sympathetic, honest, and incisive broker of the clash between the research styles and conceptual apparatus of behaviorism and ethology. For over 50 years, in changing venues, with a twinkling eye accompanying the rhetoric of a curmudgeon, he was committed to clear thinking and fad bashing in many areas of psychology. This singular voice has been stilled with the death of Bill Verplanck.

William S. Verplanck was born in Plainfield, New Jersey on January 16, 1916 to William Samuel Verplanck and Kathryn Tracy Verplanck. He died

on September 30, 2002 in Knoxville, Tennessee. Bill never married and his sole surviving close relative is a nephew, John V. German. However, his intellectual descendents are myriad: hundreds of students, colleagues and friends whose lives were altered, often profoundly, by him. Although terminally ill with lung cancer and emphysema, he kept up his e-mail 'teaching' on listserves, tape recording reflections on numerous subjects, working with a biographer, entertaining streams of visitors, and receiving phone calls until he entered a hospice for his final weeks. Even then his ability to objectively assess his deteriorating situation, often with good humor and insight, was inspiring to those who visited or talked to him.

Bill's higher education career began inauspiciously with his dropping out of St. Stephens College (now Bard) in 1933 to work as a page at the New York Stock Exchange. Perhaps because

A greatly abridged version of this memorial was published in the *American Psychologist*.

the stock market in those days did not seem a growth industry he returned to college and received B.S. and M.S. degrees at the University of Virginia in 1937 and 1938 respectively. There he studied with Frank Geldard and Kenneth Spence. He then went to Brown University and completed his Ph.D. with Clarence Graham in 1941 working on discrimination learning in rats, a species that earned his increasing respect over the rest of his long life. The chair of the department was Walter S. Hunter, whom he greatly admired and whose enduring influence was to prepare Bill to appreciate the heretical views of ethology that behaviorism eventually was to confront. However, at Brown Bill became a committed Hullian, although the upstart B. F. Skinner began to influence him. Graham and his wife were lifelong close friends and after Clarence died his widow visited or called Bill up to his last days.

After completing his dissertation Bill joined the U.S. Naval Medical Research Laboratory in New London, CT and served his country carrying out research for over 4 years on night vision at a submarine base. This was his first experience with research on 'real world problems' and convinced him of the limits of research in restrictive laboratory environments. In 1946 he became a member of the Psychology Department at Indiana University where he joined a series of distinguished colleagues: B. F. Skinner, J. R. Kantor, William Estes, Norman Guttman, George Collier, Irv Wolf, Robert Lundin, Bill Jenkins, Winthrop Kellogg, and several others. Although still a Hullian, he soon fell under the sway of Skinner and Kantor. In 1950 Bill became part of the group that created the seminal publication, *Modern Learning Theory* (1954) in which Bill's role was to present Skinnerian behaviorism, undoubtedly the most insightful treatment up to that time. Also in 1950 Verplanck moved to Harvard where he joined Skinner and another psychologist who was an influential mentor, S. S. Stevens.

Bill began his career in an era where thoughtful experimentation and conceptual reflection was not grant driven, and high publication rates were not necessary to become a respected and well-recognized scientist. From 1942, publication date of his dissertation research, to 1954 Bill published only 15 papers, chapters, and reports. These in-

cluded a series of papers on various aspects of vision, some from his naval research days, that, among other findings, established that successive psychophysical judgments were not independent measures as current theory assumed. Then, in a single year, 1955, he published 8 papers including the classic Psychology Review paper titled 'Since learned behavior is innate, and vice versa, what now?' What happened?

Bill was always an inveterate reader with diverse interests and the work of European ethologist in resuscitating the concept of instinct caught his interest. Encountering scientists actually interested in understanding the normal lives of diverse species of animals and studying how evolution and learning both aided in solving the problems animals faced resonated with him. He was impressed with their offbeat, to a behaviorist, experimental methods and conceptual apparatus. Rather than responding to these new ideas by either ignoring or attacking them, as did most experimental and comparative psychologists, he thought that they were offering to psychology an exciting new direction. This led to his chairing a committee (including Frank A. Beach, Harry F. Harlow, C. F. Pribram, and Carroll M. Williams) that organized a NSF funded workshop on 'Problems of Comparative Behavior' in July 1954 at Harvard. This 10-day meeting brought together ethologists, experimental psychologists, and neurophysiologists for informal presentations and discussions. His report of the meeting in *Science* the following year defined what was to be his salient perspective: differences in approach at the behavioral level were largely semantic and it is critical to look at the phenomena studied and experimental operations employed rather than labels such as operants or fixed action patterns.

His interest in ethology now whetted, he spent his sabbatical in 1956 at Oxford with Niko Tinbergen and traveled throughout Europe where he met or further interacted with leading founding ethologists such as W. H. Thorpe, Robert Hinde, Konrad Lorenz, Erich von Holst, Otto Köhler, Gerhard Baerends, and their many students. He reported on much of what he learned on his visits in an Annual Review of Psychology chapter on comparative psychology (1958). Upon his return he spent the 1957-58 academic

year at Stanford University. Now all his learning, scholarship, wit, insight and erudition went into his 'A glossary of some terms used in the objective analysis of behavior' that appeared in 1957 and was extremely useful in facilitating communication between ethologists and behavior theorists. He would eventually continue working on updating the glossary with an ever-changing cohort of students and colleagues until his death; both the original glossary and a much enlarged interim version, now called a 'Thesarus,' were released on a CD in 2000 by CMS software. The project is still continuing under the auspices of the Archives for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron and the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies.

Although Bill published on imprinting, animal motivation, vision, and other topics in the 50's, he also had a continuing interest in the operant control of human behavior, including verbal behavior and conversations. He separated his approach from traditional lab-based operant conditioners by going, like an ethologist, "into the field," though this was typically no more than a walk to a classroom. He reported students inducing altered behavior in teachers through feigned interest or boredom as professors moved in one direction or the other, until they were lecturing almost outside the classroom door! These demonstrations have entered the folklore of experimental psychology and were particularly hilarious when recounted by Bill himself.

In spite of his acceptance of innate influences on behavior, he never could accept the Chomsky style accounts of language and never wavered from a behavioral perspective. His skepticism of the crudities of the then emerging cognitivism came through in a typically insightful chapter 'Unaware of where's awareness: some verbal operants — Notates, Monents, and Notants' (1962). Still, as the years went by Bill became more aware of the limitations of radical behaviorism and Skinner's thought in particular, even as he advocated operational analysis as key to an effective empirical psychology. By 1971 Bill declared himself a 'phenomenological behaviorist' to the delight or chagrin of many.

After his year at Stanford Bill spent two years at Hunter College in New York and then moved

to the University of Maryland in College Park. In 1963 he accepted the Headship of the Department of Psychology at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville and immediately set to work attracting a large group of active faculty in animal behavior, physiological psychology, perception, language, and, somewhat surprisingly, psychodynamic as well as behavioral faculty in the Clinical Psychology Program. By the time I arrived in Tennessee in 1967 Bill had already established strong links with the Zoology department and established a cross-listed psychology - zoology course he jointly taught with an ornithologist in Zoology and that I took over for the next 30 years. He brought over Uli Weidmann and his family as a visiting professor to co-teach the course one year. Uli was a Swiss ethologist who had studied with Niko Tinbergen and was an expert on courtship behavior in ducks. This was a radical move for a psychology department and rare even today, in which nonhuman animal behavior studies are increasingly marginalized.

Just as he ran well-lubricated faculty meetings at his house, so did most of his students study in his always open home surrounded by the gardens he designed and loved. Graduate students were important to Bill and he produced a number of productive psychologists teaching around the United States and as far away as New Zealand. Much of his research with students during this period was devoted to developing his Word Association Test that he hoped would be a more open-ended but still objectively scored assessment tool. For many years after his retirement graduate students met at his house for a weekly unofficial and noncompensated evening seminar in preparation for the department's qualifying 'Generals' exam. Bill was also devoted to undergraduate psychology students, especially the non-conventional, very bright, independent, or iconoclastic ones. He developed what was, in essence, a proprietary honors program that graduated dozens of students that have gone on to successful and creative careers in many areas of life, though not often psychology.

His low opinion of much of fad driven psychology grew during the 1960s and 1970s and he was one of the founders of the Psychonomic Society, which he hoped would move psychol-

ogy back to rigorous and useful scientific analysis. One of his favorite ‘publications’ as head was a full-page ad for a social psychologist in the *American Psychologist*. After the list of qualification, themselves a bit unusual, came a list of specific *disqualifications* that included “A lingering belief in Adam and Eve that leads one to ignore the social behavior of other species” and “A talent for performing perfectionistic imitations of physical experiments.” Perhaps the most telling disqualification was “An impressive publication list exhibiting experimental futility through a long set of researches on the Prisoners’ Dilemma, Decision Theory, Attitude Measurement or Conditioning, Cognitive Dissonance or similar pre-occupation that has retarded social psychologists in contributing to the solution of problems of individual behavior in our society today.” Not unexpectedly, Bill’s critiques and frank style did not always endear him to colleagues. As I look back over the 35 years I knew him, I conclude that Bill valued and expected open and vigorous debate and respected most those colleagues who argued with him forcefully and intelligently rather than be turned off and whine when their views were a target of a critical, usually right on, barb.

Bill kept in close touch with past colleagues and students and other leading psychologists who valued his perspective on all aspects of psychology and its conceptual foundations. He did not write as much as many of his peers due to an

intense self-critical attitude. The years spent on the glossary revisions, which the most demanding publishers could not force him to complete for 40 years, sets the tone for this marvelous life in progress. On the other hand, his clarity of thought and honesty made him an ideal colleague to read manuscript drafts and to discuss the implications of recent findings and the merits of the latest highly touted thinkers and writers.

Bill stepped down from the Headship in 1971 and retired in 1981. He remained in the house he bought when first arriving in Knoxville and lived there until his final weeks. Always interested in cooking and gardening, his retirement allowed for more devotion to these avocations as well as to travel around the world professionally and for pleasure. Always politically active in a conservative town, he loved to participate in local and national political debates on issues he cared about deeply. He collected art from many cultures, especially Asian and African countries. In his last years he became more Kantorian in his views and felt the interbehavioral perspective the most promising synthetic approach. A one-page autobiography on his web site ends by listing the most important influences on his career as “Kantor, Skinner, Tinbergen, and S. S. Stevens, in that order.” The measure of this unique seminal psychologist can be appreciated at his web site (<http://web.utk.edu/~wverplan/>), which will be updated and maintained for the foreseeable future.

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