

march 17, 1986

Dear Viktor,

I am writing to tell you that good use is being made of your short historical articles on Cajal, Harrison, etc in my Developmental Neuroscience course. Several other of your articles are assigned to supplement the Purves and Lichtman text. The course is "full" (i.e. 15 students). I could have found twice as many interested students but the prospect of grading 4 sets of essay exams and a term paper was unappealing.

In a recent chapter that I wrote, I noted your admonition that "The embryo is the best teacher". In the future I will make this point even more forcefully. So much of developmental neuroscience ignores the embryo. In vitro studies ignore in vivo data (might it be embarrassing?) while others simply redo neurophysiology using an embryonic preparation. Neither approach tells us much about the unique, dynamic properties of the developing nervous system. When I did the cord work, I wanted to discover unique properties of the embryonic system. The early descriptive work would suggest later experimental analyses. Many who now populate our research area are "barbarians" who never studied or thought about embryos. These "barbarians" bring excellent technique. However, their results indicate that embryos are simply "sloppier" than the adult or are different in some subtle, quantitative way. Could they come to any other conclusion? Perhaps we can reform them.

(over)

The above circumstance is encouraging in one way - the most important findings still elude us. My detour into the wing-flapping story may not have cost me much time after all.

This summer I will be returning to embryonic studies almost full time - with a budget that basically covers egg cost only. The human behavioral work on yawning and a few related behaviors will be a side line (an entertaining one), designed to encourage undergraduate participation. I have had better luck with undergrad than grad assistants, while the grad students are bright, they are oriented to the "professional" side of psychology and research is just another job. I am becoming increasingly impatient with that scientific wasteland that is developmental psychology. It's amazing how so many intelligent and energetic workers can produce such a mess. Dev. Psychology is not guided by embryology or even the behavior of children but by the behavior of dev. psychologists!

I would appreciate your comments on the enclosed theoretical comment concerning the sculpting of behavior. In the paper, I suggest that the environment may shape ("sculpt") the nervous system and behavior in a more direct, rapid and efficient manner that is generally recognized. I think that my proposition is original and has exploratory value. What do you think?

Sincerely, Bob.