Introduction

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This symposium was presented at the meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association in April, 1974. The topic is the 'active organism', as distinguished from the 'reactive or passive organism' and as conceptualized in three different paradigms: structuralism or cognitive psychology, empirical behaviorism or operant psychology, and theoretical behaviorism or the learning-theory approach. Each of the four participants in the symposium – Drs. Willis F. Overton, Donald M. Baer, Sheldon H. White, and Hayne W. Reese – is a child psychologist, but the issues discussed are not limited to child or developmental psychology. The issues are sharply focused in developmental psychology, however, and therefore have been of special concern to us. In addition, the overlap of our interests brings the issues into sharper focus than would be possible if we represented completely nonoverlapping interest areas.

Our approaches to child psychology – and to the 'active organism' – are different. Dr. Overton is an authority in structuralism, especially the Werner and Piaget varieties. In his paper, he covers the concept of the active organism as it is defined in structuralist positions, and emphasizes its metaphorical nature. In structuralism, the organism is spontaneously active and the activities are organized into a structural whole.

Dr. Baer is an authority in the experimental analysis of developmental phenomena. He covers the concept of the active organism in empirical behaviorism, in which it is the behaviors that are active, not the organism. Behaviors may be organized, in the sense of being interdependent, or may be independent.

Dr. White is an authority in the learning-theory approach to developmental psychology. He covers the concept of the active organism in theoretical behav-

1 The symposium was organized by Hayne W. Reese and was chaired at the meeting by Harry Beilin, whose participation is gratefully acknowledged.

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iorism, in which mental activities are given operational definitions and organization is handled by assumed interdependencies among intervening variables.

Dr. Reese, the discussant for the symposium, has written elsewhere about contrasts between behavioristic and nonbehavioristic approaches to developmental psychology.

Each participant has apparently found it necessary or desirable to refer to positions other than his own in explicating his own position. For Overton, this approach is taken in order to clarify the nature of models in general, leading to clarification of the nature of the active-organism model.

For Baer, the approach is taken in order to show one way in which the experimental analysis of behavior can expand, specifically into the topic of abstract

ion as a possible behavior responsive to the principles of operant conditioning. For White

the approach is taken to show how the alternative positions can cross-communicate for their own purposes especially for sharpening of their own concepts. As discussant Reese of course considers the alternative positions and the uses which each can make of the other. His theme is that there are limits to the effectiveness of cross-communication but that some cross-communication is possible and all is desirable. In this connection an encouraging fact that emerges in the series of papers is that the participants take seriously the alternative views eschewing the invidious comparisons that many others have offered as support for their own view. The participants have thus accomplished the major aims of the symposium which were to further the understanding of alternative positions and to promote the realization that other positions can contribute to the understanding and expansion of one's own position.