

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN EXPERIMENTAL BACTERIOLOGY

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PREFACE

In the past, the techniques of experimental bacteriology have, perhaps, received less emphasis in textbooks than those used in medical and public health laboratories. Although all branches of bacteriology overlap to some extent, the day-to-day problems encountered in experiments are not of a kind that usually disturb routine tests, and we have therefore tried to provide a documented guide to the basic bacteriological techniques, including some theory as well as working rules. We have also included a number of tables that greatly lessen the computation involved in standard procedures like viable counts by the dilution method. All the techniques described here are relatively simple, but others can be traced from the references which have been chosen largely for their bibliographies and not on grounds of priority. Much of this material is applicable to micro-organisms of all kinds, and, although the main emphasis is on bacteria, many of the examples concern viruses and yeasts.

A book of this sort inevitably relies heavily on methods devised by others, and we would like to express our gratitude to the following authors and manufacturers, and to the publishers and editors of the journals cited below, for giving us permission to reproduce their work:

Dr D. J. Finney and the *Journal of General Microbiology* (Table 1.1); Professor B. D. Davis and the *Journal of Bacteriology* (p. 32); Dr A. D. Hershey and *Virology* (p. 34); Professor Joshua Lederberg and the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (p. 57), the *Journal of Bacteriology* (p. 59) and Year Book Medical Publishers Inc. (p. 36); Messrs Hilger and Watts Ltd (Fig. 1.1); Evans Electroselenium Ltd (Fig. 1.3); Professor E. L. Gaden and *Biotechnology and Bioengineering* (Fig. 3.2); Drayton Castle Ltd (Fig. 4.6); Dr J. C. Kelsey and the *Lancet* (Fig. 4.7); Albert Browne Ltd (Table 4.3); Dr P. A. P. Moran and the *Journal of Hygiene* (Table 6.2); Professor W. G. Cochran and *Biometrics* (Fig. 6.3, Table 6.4); Dr D. J. Finney and the Cambridge University Press (Table 6.6); Dr I. A. DeArmon and the *Journal of Bacteriology* (Table 6.8); Mr J. Taylor and the *Journal of Applied Bacteriology* (Table 6.10); Professor L. L. Kempe and the *Journal of Biotechnical and Microbiological Technology and Engineering* (Table 6.11); Dr A. L. Fernelius and the *Journal of Bacteriology* (Fig. 6.12); Professor H. Orin Halvorson and the *Journal of Bacteriology* (Table 6.12); Dr C. S. Weil and *Biometrics*

PREFACE

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables</i>	page viii
<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>List of Plates</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi

1. MEASUREMENT OF BACTERIAL MASS AND NUMBER

General points: mass and number; heterogeneity in bacterial cultures; viable counts and definitions of viability	1
--	---

Bacterial mass—Dry weight. Chemical estimates: nitrogen estimations; estimation of DNA. Light-scattering: measurement of undeviated, and scattered light; practical applications	3
--	---

Bacterial counts—Total cell counts: counting chambers; counts of stained films; counts of organisms in agar films; precision of a total count. Viable counts: colony counts; the dilution method; precision of viable counts	12
--	----

Quantitative measurement of bacterial growth—Lag; exponential growth; cell yield	24
--	----

2. BACTERIOLOGICAL CULTURE MEDIA

General purpose media—Defined media: basic formulae; supplementation with growth factors. Undefined media based on protein hydrolysates: casein digests; muscle digests; formulae based on commercial products; undefined supplements. Control of pH in culture media. Solidifying agents: agar-agar; gelatin; silica gel.	30
--	----

Inhibitory batches of culture medium: glucose heated in medium; fatty acids; inadequate reduction of medium; peroxide	49
---	----

Special media—pH indicator media: pure cultures; mixed cultures. Other indicator systems	53
--	----

CONTENTS

3. OXYGEN, CARBON DIOXIDE, AND ANAEROBIOSIS

Oxygen—Oxygen demand; increasing the efficiency of oxygenation; measurement of oxygen absorption; overaeration page 61

Carbon dioxide 66

Anaerobiosis and oxidation-reduction potential—Oxidation-reduction potential; anaerobic media 68

4. STERILIZATION

Kinetics of sterilization: survival curves; comparison of disinfectants; concentration and temperature coefficients; other practical applications 78

Methods of sterilization—Heat: heat-resistance of bacteria. Moist heat: the autoclave; steaming and intermittent sterilization; boiling; pasteurization. Dry heat. Controls on the efficiency of sterilization. Chemical disinfectants: non-volatile disinfectants; volatile disinfectants. Filtration: types of filter; side effects of filtration 85

5. EXAMINATION OF BACTERIA BY MICROSCOPY

Microscopy—The compound microscope: optical system; practical details. Dark-field illumination. Phase-contrast microscopy. Plate microscopy. Filters. Micrometry 112

Examination of living bacteria. Preparation of stained films. Positive and negative stains. Stains for the principal cell structures. Staining of organisms on membrane filters. Staining of films containing protein or fat. 134

6. QUANTITATIVE ASPECTS OF MICROBIOLOGICAL EXPERIMENTS

Quantal (all-or-none) responses—Binomial distribution. Poisson distribution: multiplicity of phage infection; terminal dilution method for the isolation of clones; dilution counts; exponential survival curves; total bacterial counts; colony counts; multi-hit survival curves. Normal and log-normal distributions: the probit transformation; applications of the log-normal curve; estimation of the parameters of a log-normal dose-response curve 147

CONTENTS

Quantitative (graded) responses—Measurement of response time in microbial infections; biological interpretations of response time relationships; assays based on measurement of response times.	
Lesion diameter	page 182

General aspects of titrations—Planning of infectivity titrations: choice of response; elimination of systematic differences between dose-groups; choice of doses; number of subjects; duration of titrations. Comparison of dose-response curves	192
Hypotheses of biological action	199

7. MISCELLANEOUS TECHNIQUES

Preservation of cultures—Choice of material; methods of preservation	229
Phage techniques—Temperate phage	232
Ultra-violet irradiation	235
Centrifugation	237
Buffers	239
<i>References</i>	241
<i>Additional Sources</i>	272
<i>Index</i>	275

LIST OF TABLES

1.1	Logarithms to base 2	<i>page</i> 27
3.1	Oxygen absorption rates in laboratory cultures	63
3.2	Relation of percentage oxidation to $(E_h - E'_0)$	72
3.3	Reducing agents suitable for culture media	75
4.1	Times required for sterilization by moist and by dry heat	85
4.2	Times taken by various volumes to reach sterilizing temperatures in the autoclave	94
4.3	Times required for Browne's tubes to change colour	97
4.4	Methods for the sterilization of laboratory materials	109
4.5	Temperature of pure saturated steam at various pressures	111
6.1	Hypothetical dilution count	158
6.2	Values of $E(T)$ and $S.E.(T)$ for Moran's test	159
6.3	Summary of tables giving the most probable number (M.P.N.) of organisms in dilution counts	160
6.4	The standard error and 95 % confidence limits of the M.P.N.	162
6.5	Significance of the difference between two total counts	167
6.6	Transformation of probabilities to probits	176
6.7	Hypothetical infectivity titration	180
6.8	Number of hosts required to estimate the ED ₅₀ with a given precision	196
6.9	Values of e^{-m} and of $me^{-m}/1 - e^{-m}$	203
6.10-6.12	The most probable number of organisms in viable counts by the dilution method	204
6.10	5 tubes inoculated per dilution	204
6.11	8 tubes inoculated per dilution	205
6.12	10 tubes inoculated per dilution	207
6.13	The ED ₅₀ and its standard error in titrations using a quantal response	209
7.1	Buffer mixtures	240

LIST OF FIGURES

1.1	Light-scattering by a bacterial suspension	page 7
1.2	The Spekker absorptiometer	8
1.3	The Eel nephelometer	10
1.4	Measurement of lag	25
3.1	Air line for aeration of laboratory cultures	62
3.2	Aeration in shaken conical flasks	64
3.3	Relation between bicarbonate, CO_2 , and pH at 37°	67
3.4	Relation between degree of reduction and oxidation-reduction potential	70
3.5	Values of E_0 between pH 5 and 9 for some oxidation-reduction indicators	71
4.1	Hypothetical survival curves derived from a deterministic hypothesis for disinfection	80
4.2	Phase diagram of water	87
4.3	Effect of superheating on sterilization	88
4.4	Temperatures of mixtures of air and saturated steam at various pressures	89
4.5	Diagrammatic longitudinal section of a downward-displacement autoclave	91
4.6	Longitudinal section of a balanced pressure steam trap	92
4.7	'Thermal death times' of spores exposed to moist heat at various temperatures	99
4.8	Filter and vacuum line arranged for filtration under negative pressure	104
4.9	Two devices for the distribution of filtrates	105
5.1	The compound microscope	113
5.2	Numerical aperture	114
5.3	Image structure	117
5.4	Critical illumination	118
5.5	Köhler illumination	119
5.6	Dark-field illumination	124
5.7	Appearances seen in a film of indian ink while centring a dark-field condenser	125
5.8	Characteristics of diffracted and unretarded rays	127
5.9	Differing paths of diffracted and undeviated rays	128

FIGURES

5.10	Relation of diffracted and undeviated rays	<i>page</i> 129
5.11	Positive phase-contrast	130
5.12	Negative phase-contrast	131
5.13	Equalization of amplitudes by the diffraction plate	131
5.14	Plate microscopy, using oblique transmitted light	133
6.1	Isolation of clones by the terminal dilution method	153
6.2	Dose-response curve in a dilution count	155
6.3	Effect of the dilution factor on the standard error of the M.P.N. in a hypothetical dilution count	157
6.4	Survival curves for exponentially declining populations	164
6.5	Precision of a total bacterial count	166
6.6	Relation between count and size of inoculum in bacterial colony counts	169
6.7	Multi-hit survival curves	172
6.8	The normal distribution	174
6.9	Cumulative (integrated) log-normal distribution	175
6.10	Relation of probability to probit	176
6.11	Cumulative log-normal distribution, plotted in probits	177
6.12	Five survival curves plotted in different ways	178
6.13	Relation between mean response time and logarithm of dose in microbial infections	184
6.14	Hypothetical growth curves in infected hosts	186
6.15	Hypothetical growth curves in infected hosts and the distribution of response times	187
6.16	Calculation of the cumulative proportion of responses within a dose-group	188
6.17	Distribution of death times for mice given pneumococci	189
6.18	Comparison of two hypothetical dose-response curves	198
6.19	Dose-response curves predicted by the hypothesis of the Individual Effective Dose	201

LIST OF PLATES

5.1	Image of a luminous point: Airy disc (by courtesy of Mr M. R. Young, National Institute of Medical Research) <i>facing page</i>	116
5.2	Ray paths in dark-field microscopy (by courtesy of Carl Zeiss)	117

MEASUREMENT OF BACTERIAL MASS AND NUMBER

Many experimental techniques depend on some measure of bacterial growth. This may be the total mass of bacterial protoplasm/ml. culture, estimated either directly, as dry weight, or indirectly from the concentration of bacterial nitrogen or the light-scattering power of the culture. In other experiments, it is more important to know the number of individual organisms/ml. than their total mass, and so either the total number of cells or the number of living cells is then measured by a total or by a viable count respectively.

GENERAL POINTS

Mass and number. It is the rule for mass and number to vary independently during bacterial growth. Clearly, an individual cell must enlarge before it divides. A bacterial culture often increases in mass without changing in number during the lag phase; while the opposite occurs at the end of exponential growth, when the cells become smaller (Hershey & Bronfenbrenner, 1938). Similar changes occur on altering the culture medium of an exponentially growing culture (see Maaløe, 1960). The ratio, mass:number, increases even more in damaged cells, which sometimes enlarge without dividing to produce long filaments, as on exposure to u.v.-irradiation or to metabolic analogues which block DNA but not protein synthesis.

Mass and number have therefore to be treated separately in measuring bacterial growth.

Heterogeneity in bacterial cultures. The usual methods for estimating bacterial mass and number tend to obscure the fact that all bacterial cultures are grossly heterogeneous. The estimates are necessarily averages, derived from individuals which, although they may well be genetically identical, nevertheless differ in many characteristics like length and breadth (Henrici, 1923), antibiotic resistance (Hughes, 1956), cell wall composition (Pennington, 1950; Cole & Hahn, 1962), and doubling time and age (Powell, 1955, 1956*a*). The extent of these differences which almost certainly arise from non-genetic causes can sometimes be determined

MEASUREMENT OF MASS AND NUMBER

directly, as in measuring the size of bacteria by light microscopy (p. 134) or the mass of individual yeast cells by interference microscopy (Mitchison, Passano & Smith, 1956). Other differences can only be determined retrospectively. One example is antibiotic resistance. Another is the varying number of phage particles released by individual infected bacteria which differ in a way that cannot be determined before lysis, for example from the distribution of cell volumes in the culture (Delbrück, 1945). Some differences, as in size, are eliminated if cell division is synchronized, but others, like differences in composition, may follow from the nature of bacterial growth.

Viable counts. Definitions of viability. A viable count ostensibly measures the concentration of living organisms, but its significance necessarily depends on what is meant by 'living'. No satisfactory definition has ever been provided, with the result that a multitude of working definitions has been proposed in the past (see Wilson, 1922; Postgate, Crumpton & Hunter, 1961). Some depend on a characteristic, like the ability to form a colony visible to the naked eye, which would be universally accepted as a criterion of viability. Other definitions depend on less obvious characteristics, such as motility or fermentative ability (see Wilson, 1922), resistance to staining (see Knaysi, 1935), appearance by electron microscopy (McFadzean & Valentine, 1959), ability to reduce tetrazolium salts (see, however, Stille, 1953; Parker, 1955), or the formation of elongated cells during incubation on nutrient agar containing urea (Valentine & Bradfield, 1954). None of these alternatives has been widely accepted, presumably because they rest on functions which, at present, are generally felt to be only distantly connected with our intuitive preconceptions of 'viability'. The usual working definition, accepted here, equates 'viability' with the power to form a macroscopic colony on nutrient agar or to produce visible turbidity in broth in a dilution count (p. 21).

The limitations of this definition should be appreciated. The qualification, 'macroscopic', is important, as instances of limited multiplication are known where cells divide a few times to produce a microcolony and then stop, as with irradiated yeast (p. 237) or bacteria treated with ferrous ions (Catlin, 1956). Furthermore, organisms which are dead according to this definition may still possess functions characteristic of viable cells, including the ability to support the growth of virulent phage (Benzer, 1952) and to form β -galactosidase upon exposure to an inducer (Spiegelman, Baron & Quastler, 1951). It is also the rule in bacteriology to find that the viable count is higher on some media than on others, especially when the organ-

GENERAL POINTS

isms have been exposed to a bactericidal agent—whether it be radiation (Norman, 1953), heat (Olsen & Scott, 1946), or a chemical (see Harris, 1963). Higher counts are usually obtained on 'rich' media, like digest agar, than on simple defined media, like glucose-salts medium, although the reverse was true of a u.v.-resistant mutant of *Escherichia coli* exposed to ultra-violet irradiation (Alper & Gillies, 1960). It follows that no viable count has any absolute significance, for its value often depends as much on the experimental conditions as on the state of the organisms.

The following sections describe the various methods for determining bacterial mass, total and viable counts, their precision, and the effect of technical errors. Sampling errors arising, for example, from the random distribution of organisms in suspension, are discussed more fully in chapter 6.

BACTERIAL MASS

The relation between dry weight, chemical composition, and light-scattering power of a culture necessarily depends considerably on the species of organism and the conditions in which it is grown. However, as a guide, 10^9 cells of a Gram-negative organism like *Escherichia coli* or *Pseudomonas pyocyanea* have a dry weight of *ca.* 0.32 mg.; contain *ca.* 56 μ g. nitrogen and 8 μ g. DNA; and have an extinction of *ca.* 0.4 with a 1 cm. path at 450 m μ (Schaechter, Maaløe & Kjeldgaard, 1958; Gaby, Logan & Whitaker, 1962; Cohn & Horibata, 1959).

Dry weight

A sample of the culture is treated with formalin at a final concentration of 1 %, v/v, and centrifuged in a weighed tube to deposit the cells which are then washed once with 0.85 %, w/v, saline + 1 % formalin, and once with 0.05 % saline or with distilled water. The deposit is dried to constant weight in an oven at 105°. Before each weighing, the tube is placed in a desiccator over P₂O₅ until it has cooled to room temperature.

Chemical estimates

Estimates of bacterial nitrogen or protein are often used as indices of bacterial mass. Although this is satisfactory for many experiments, other estimates are sometimes more useful on occasions when a sizeable fraction of the cell nitrogen is a structure whose formation varies independently of cytoplasmic growth, like the polyglutamic acid capsule of *Bacillus* species. Two alternatives are to measure bacterial phosphorus (Bennett & Williams,

MEASUREMENT OF MASS AND NUMBER

1957) or bacterial DNA, which also estimates the number of genetically independent individuals and may be especially useful for organisms growing in clumps or chains.

Nitrogen estimations. The Kjeldahl method is widely used. The nitrogen in organic material is converted to ammonium sulphate by digestion with H_2SO_4 in the presence of a catalyst (see Kirk, 1947; Steyermark, 1961). The ammonia can then be estimated:

(a) by volumetric titration following distillation, for example in the Markham still which measures $20\mu\text{g. N} \pm 1\%$ (Markham, 1942), or in a Conway micro-diffusion unit which measures $0.5\mu\text{g. N}$ (Parker, 1961); or

(b) colorimetrically, after addition of Nessler's reagent, which measures $1\mu\text{g. N} \pm 4-5\%$.

The second method is quicker and simpler, and is given here. It is obvious that the more sensitive the test, the more important it becomes to avoid contamination by extraneous nitrogen contributed by glassware, reagents, and the atmosphere, including tobacco smoke.

The colorimetric method requires the following reagents (Macfarlane & Gray, personal communication):

(1) Nessler's reagent.

(2) Digestion mixture. Equal volumes of:

(i) 1 ml. conc. H_2SO_4 (analytical or N-free grades) + 5 ml. glass-distilled water;

(ii) 10 ml. 72 % perchloric acid (analytical grade) + 5.5 ml. glass-distilled water.

(3) Standard nitrogen solution, e.g. NH_4Cl .

(4) Gum ghatti solution (to prevent turbidity of Nessler's reagent). Cover 1 g. gum ghatti + 1 g. benzoic acid with 500 ml. glass-distilled water for 3-4 days at room temperature. Then dilute to 1 l. with glass-distilled water saturated with benzoic acid, and filter through cotton wool to remove undissolved solids.

Reagents 1, 3, and 4 are available from commercial sources.

The method is as follows:

(1) Measure the sample (≤ 1 ml.) into a narrow Pyrex boiling tube or into a 10 ml. ground glass stoppered tube graduated at 5 ml. (ext. diameter 16 mm., length 100 mm.). Also put up 3 samples of the standard solution containing 5, 10, and $20\mu\text{g. N}$ respectively, and set aside 2 tubes for blanks. The tubes must be long enough for acid to condense in their upper part during heating in stage 3.

(2) Add 0.2 ml. digestion mixture to each tube.

BACTERIAL MASS

(3) Heat the tubes at 200° on a digestion rack or in a heated block for 1 hr. in a fume cupboard.

(4) Remove the tubes from the heater and stand on the bench to cool to room temperature. As soon as possible, add *ca.* 1 ml. glass-distilled water and again cool to room temperature.

(5) Add 1.0 ml. gum ghatti solution and mix well.

(6) Add 1.5 ml. Nessler's reagent: if the stock solution is turbid, centrifuge and use the supernatant. Add sufficient glass-distilled water to bring the total volume to 5 ml.

(7) Measure the extinction at 425 $m\mu$, using a 1 cm. path. The intensity of colour due to N = extinction of the sample minus the mean extinction of the blanks.

The extinction is proportional to N concentration over the range, 5–40 $\mu\text{g. N}$.

Estimation of DNA. The method given here depends on measurement of the blue colour formed by deoxysugars, like deoxyribose, with diphenylamine.

The following reagents are needed:

(1) Perchloric acid (HClO_4).

(2) Diphenylamine reagent (Burton, 1956). Dissolve 1.5 g. steam-distilled diphenylamine in 100 ml. analytical grade acetic acid and add 1.5 ml. conc. H_2SO_4 . Store in the dark. If a blue colour develops during storage, redistilled acetic acid should be used. Add 0.1 ml. of 1.6 %, w/v, aqueous acetaldehyde to every 20 ml. stock solution on the day it is to be used.

Add to the sample 2.5–12N- HClO_4 to a final concentration of 0.25N, chill for 30 min., and then centrifuge. Discard the supernatant. Stir the deposit with 0.5 ml. of 0.5N- HClO_4 . After adding another 3.5 ml. 0.5N- HClO_4 , heat at 70° for 15 min., with occasional stirring. Centrifuge a second time. Tip the supernatant into a 10 ml. graduated tube. The precipitate is extracted again with 3 ml. 0.5N- HClO_4 , the mixture centrifuged, and both supernatants pooled and their total volume measured (Burton, 1956, using *Escherichia coli*).

Alternatively, freeze the sample of culture quickly in a bath of ethanol and solid CO_2 , thaw, and centrifuge in the cold for 30 min. to deposit the cells. Take up the deposit in 2.5 ml. chilled 0.85 %, w/v, saline and transfer 2 ml. to 0.1 ml., 70 %, w/v, HClO_4 . Heat at 70° for 30 min., centrifuge, discard the deposit and retain the supernatant for assay (Schaecter *et al.* 1958, using *Salmonella typhi-murium*).

MEASUREMENT OF MASS AND NUMBER

Mix 1–2 ml. supernatant with 2 ml. diphenylamine reagent. Incubate at 30° for 16–20 hr. Measure the extinction of the colour that develops at 600 m μ .

Also include blanks containing HClO₄ but no DNA, and standard DNA or deoxyribose preparations.

Light-scattering

The amount of light scattered by a bacterial suspension may be proportional to its concentration expressed as mass or number, or to mean cell length, depending on the way in which the measurements are taken. The relationships observed in practice are best discussed after the optical theory which, though difficult in detail (see West, 1960; Oster, 1960; Koch, 1961; Powell, 1963), is fairly simple in principle.

Consider a culture placed in a beam of parallel monochromatic light. The proportion of incident light failing to traverse the culture unchanged represents the sum of light absorbed and of light scattered by the organisms. Absorption of visible light is usually negligible, since most species are unpigmented and almost transparent (p. 126). Changes in transmission are therefore determined by scattering, due to reflection at the surface of the organisms and to diffraction within them. Consequently, there is no scattering if the refractive index of the organisms and their suspending medium is the same. The intensity of the light deviated at any particular angle to the incident rays may be plotted against the corresponding angle to show how scattering occurs. Such graphs reveal that, as this angle increases, the intensity does not fall smoothly but shows peaks and depressions caused by interference between rays arising from different points in the suspension (Fig. 5.3). With large transparent particles, like bacteria illuminated by white light, the greatest intensity is immediately to each side of the emergent undeviated light at an angle of less than 90° to the axis (Fig. 1.1; Mestre, 1935; Koga & Fujita, 1962; Powell, 1963).

The total amount of light scattered increases directly with the ratio, particle size:wavelength of incident light (cp. Taysum, 1956; Koch, 1961). It follows that scattering will be greater (*a*) at a given wavelength, the larger the organisms, and (*b*) the shorter the wavelength used with a given organism. The shortest wavelength commonly used is 450 m μ as measurements in the ultra-violet introduce technical complications. 650 m μ is preferable for broth cultures as the extinction of broth is then minimal.

In estimating bacterial concentration, either scattered light or undeviated light can be measured. The former is the more sensitive method at

BACTERIAL MASS

low cell concentrations. The receiver, whether it is the observer's eye or a photocell, will then be detecting the difference above zero intensity; whereas the amount of undeviated light differs from the blank reading by only a small amount that may be more difficult to measure. The reverse is true at high cell concentrations where measurements of undeviated light should be more sensitive. In practice, measurements of undeviated light necessarily include some scattered light as all receivers accept light over an angle, a factor which necessarily leads to a decrease in sensitivity (see Powell, 1963, Table 1).

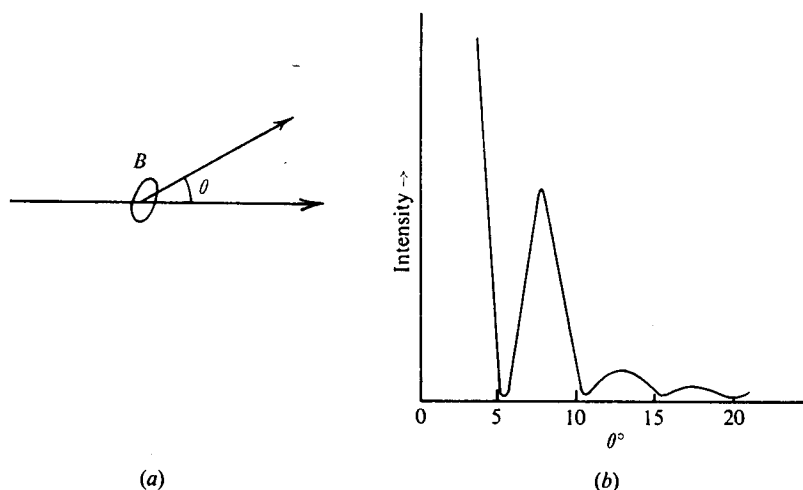


Fig. 1.1. Light-scattering by a bacterial suspension. (a) A ray encountering the bacterium, *B*, is deflected from its original path through the angle θ . (b) Angular distribution of scattered light. Ordinate: intensity at a given angle θ . Abscissa: values of the angle θ . (After Koga & Fujita, 1962.)

The numerous methods and types of apparatus are described by Snell & Snell (1948), West (1960), and Oster (1960), and only a few of the most common are mentioned in the following sections.

Measurement of undeviated light. The incident light, I_0 , and the transmitted light, I (that is, the light *not* scattered) are often related at low bacterial concentrations by the Lambert-Beer law:

$$I = I_0 10^{-\epsilon lc},$$

where ϵ is the extinction coefficient, l the depth of the suspension, and c the bacterial concentration.

$$\log (I/I_0) = -\epsilon lc \quad \text{or} \quad \log (I_0/I) = \epsilon lc.$$