Psychopathology Without Benefit of Freud

Washington University. Committee on Publications

Theory and Treatment of the Psychoses: Some Newer Aspects.

Reviewed by Joseph Zubin

Dr. Zubin is Professor of Psychology at Columbia University and Principal Research Scientist in Biometrics in the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene. He has spent the major portion of the last quarter-century in developing and applying quantitative techniques in psychopathology. He is a past-president of the American Psychopathological Association, and finds himself involved in many ways with psychology, psychopathology, nervous and mental diseases, mental deficiency, statistics, biometrics, and psychometrics.

The general scope and format of the present symposium are reminiscent of a similar symposium entitled, Psychiatric Research, held in 1947 at the occasion of the dedication of the laboratory for biochemical research at McLean Hospital. The contents of the two monographs, however, are quite different. The present symposium is far less physiologically, much more behaviorally oriented. Where the earlier book had chapters dealing with the blood-brain barrier by Jordi Folieh and with neurophysiology by Gasser, the current volume presents Skinner on What Is Psychotic Behavior? and Redlich on Some Sociological Aspects of the Psychoses. The only common link between the two publications is Stanley Cobb who tackles the task of integrating the various disciplines concerned with mental disease, just as he did in his earlier chapter. Streeker finds a replacement in Whitehorn, and Penfield's chapter has no parallel in the present book.

Alan Gregg's review of psychiatry in the general hospital holds up the example set by the Belgian town of Gheel whose citizens, since the thirteenth century, have made it a practice to billet mental patients in their homes. His description of Gheel's attitude toward psychiatric disease culminates with the observation: "The impression I received on a visit there drew additional flavor when I learned that scarcely any native of that town but had been tended as a child by one or another of the insane in Gheel." This well illustrates the point that present-day psychiatry is more sensitive to atmosphere, sympathy, tolerance, and quiet tenacity and faith than any other branch of health and healing. Rather puzzling is Gregg's repeated reference to the alleged therapeutic value inherent in "the blessed chance of being found to be a sufferer from some predominantly bodily disorder whose mental or emotional accompanying sign or symptom was wrongly assumed to be primarily or exclusively psychiatric." This gratuitous distinction between the mind and the body seems somewhat out of place in an otherwise very interesting and informative article.

The concept of milieu therapy is ably presented by one of its chief proponents, A. H. Stanton. Providing a suitable atmosphere in the hospital and removing unnecessary administrative stereotypy so as to alleviate confusion and suffering in the patient, are, of course, highly desirable. Just how much of the variance in therapeutic outcome these factors will account for remains to be seen. At the present time, the interest in milieu therapy seems more likely to throw light on the mechanisms of interpersonal relations than on psychopathology.

In a very practical chapter dealing with strategy and tactics in psychiatric therapy, Whitehorn points out the need for uncovering the assets of the patient.
as well as his liabilities. He argues against the conclusion that when mentally ill people respond to psychotherapy, their disease was of psychogenic origin. I would add that a drug’s efficacy against an illness is also no proof that the illness was basically organic. That drugs as well as words may alleviate anxiety or other forms of mental deviation is evidence for an underlying mechanism common to both. What this mechanism may be, of course, still unknown, but it seems probable that it involves some neurohumoral balance within the organism that can be influenced either by words or by drugs.

Redlich underlines the difficulties of epidemiological studies of health and disease in the general population. At the present time most studies are limited to the incidence of hospitalized mental disease. Studies which go beyond this criterion seem to bog down in the morass of definitions telling what is meant by mental illness. As a result, we have varying estimates of the incidence of mental illness, ranging from 10 to 87 per cent of the general population. One solution to the impasse is to turn the problem around and ask the question, “How much psychopathology is the normal population entitled to?” A Kinsey ‘survey’ of everyday psychopathology—i.e., anxiety and mental illness, ranging from 10 to 87 per cent of the general population—may help. Such an approach to the problem might serve to delimit more closely the borderline between what might be called the ‘frank neuroses and psychoses’ and the acceptable deviations of everyday behavior.

Redlich concludes that the psychoses are relatively less culture-determined than the neuroses. One wonders whether neuroses, too, are less dependent on culture than a first glance suggests. Perhaps the effect of culture is to elicit latent neurotic tendencies. If a culture makes no great demands, the absence of a particular capacity or ability in an individual or their presence in low degree may not become apparent. The contention derived from the Yale study, that both prevalence and incidence of mental disorder are higher in the lower socioeconomic groups, seems to this reviewer to be extremely doubtful. For one thing, incidence is confused with prevalence in the discussion. Then, too, it seems quite likely that schizophrenia as a group socioeconomic levels are incompletely represented, since the bulk of such individuals do not come to the attention of state hospital authorities and are even outside the experience of the usual private practitioner. The tendency to apply psychotherapy to the upper classes and to give organic therapy to the lower classes is, of course, well known and should hardly be regarded with any great surprise, since it reflects the ability of these groups to pay for the therapy extended them.

Skinner in his chapter, What is Psychotic Behavior?, stresses the lawfulness of psychopathic behavior and insists that if we confine attention to the observable activity of the organism (moving about, standing still, seizing objects, pushing and pulling, making sounds, gesturing, etc.), we can develop suitable instruments with which to amplify small details of the subject-matter. Skinner’s ‘empty organism’ approach is too well known to warrant any further discussion. It is interesting, however, to note that this preoccupation with the empty organism has begun to throw light on things which apparently must go on under the skin of the organism, but which cannot be detected in any other way. For example, the cumulative curves of key-pecking by pigeons (to which Skinner is noted) have been found to yield evidence of the presence of quantities of drugs too minor for the chemist to find by his own techniques.

It is surprising, however, that although Skinner considers heredity variables in his general conceptual design, he leaves no room in his system for the possibility that some of the diseases are genetically determined. One of the variables with which Skinner, of course, refuses to deal is the affect which accompanies the behavior of the patient. Despite his disinterest in such factors, the reviewer and his associates have been able to adapt his own verbal conditioning techniques to determine the presence of affect through a focused interview. By reinforcing the affective utterances of a patient, the number of such utterances increases beyond the level reached during an operant period. Thus the man who objected most strongly to penetrating beneath the skin of the organism has provided techniques by which we can explore the internal milieu to better advantage.

In the last chapter, George Saslow reviews the major themes of this symposium and points out that nearly all of the contributors have either explicitly or implicitly addressed themselves to the question of the control of behavior, through the use of drugs or of other devices. The ethical problem of the desirability of instituting control of human behavior raises philosophical questions which can not be entered into here; but, as long as there are rebels to kick over the traces, there is little danger that human behavior will be indefinitely controlled by anyone.

The Pride of Minorities

Joseph B. Gittler (Ed.)

Reviewed by JOHN HARDING

Dr. Harding, who is now Associate Professor of Child Development and Family Relationships at Cornell University, was for five years a research associate and later assistant director at the Commission on Community Intercalations of the American Jewish Congress, an organization that has always been concerned with the internal forces that hold a group together as well as the external pressures that shape it.

This little volume contains the papers presented in a symposium on American minority groups at the University of Rochester in the fall of 1955. Like most books in this area, it appears to have three major objectives: (1) to promote