

behavioral sciences

From our reporter at the meeting of the American Psychological Association in Honolulu

Schizophrenia and animism

Young children often attribute life to anything that is active, useful or moves of its own accord. Thus clouds, pencils, bicycles or automobiles may be considered to have life. Piaget's theory of animism states that most children outgrow these beliefs in four stages by the age of 11 or 12. Clinical observations, however, suggest that schizophrenics may have difficulty differentiating between animate and inanimate objects. Alice Kramer of St. John's University in New York attempted to discover whether a test of animism, based on Piaget's research, would reveal a persistence of animistic beliefs among schizophrenic children.

Forty schizophrenic children were matched according to age, sex, race and socioeconomic level with 40 normal children. Each was shown 20 familiar objects and asked whether the object was alive or dead. The reason given was used to judge animistic beliefs. Kramer found that schizophrenic children are not more animistic in their beliefs than normal children. She also found the correlation between age and abandonment of animistic beliefs to be less clear-cut than Piaget had predicted. Seventy of 80 subjects between the ages of 11 and 15 still held animistic beliefs. With schizophrenia and age partially rejected as factors related to animistic thinking, Kramer found a strong relationship between lower socioeconomic level and higher rates of animism. She suggests that development of a mature concept of life could be related to the educational level of the parents.

Hypnotic relaxation

Hypnosis in clinical practice is being used in a variety of specialized and innovative settings. Peter B. Field of the Veterans Administration Hospital in Brooklyn, uses a form of hypnosis to prepare patients for surgery. A 20-minute taped explanation matter-of-factly tells the patients what steps the operation will follow and then, in a reassuring voice, lulls the patients into a hypnotic-like drowsiness that enables them to relax.

The preparation, known as hypnotic relaxation, helps prevent emotional disturbances brought on by fear and uncertainty prior to operations. An induced lower stress level, during and after the operation, aids in speedier recovery. Some patients, Field says, feel nothing after hearing the recordings. But those who are interested often find in the recordings the key to mastering the trauma of surgery. The technique is recorded, he explains, in order to make it easy to use in overcrowded and understaffed hospitals.

Learning to sleep

A 25-year-old married male had trouble falling asleep. For four or five years he had been going to bed every night at about midnight and not falling asleep until three or four in the morning. He would worry about money, bills or his job, and finally turn on the television to avoid worrying. The patient was given a simple stimulus control treatment by Richard R. Bootzin of Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.

The patient was told to go to bed and lie down intending to sleep. He was not to watch television, read or

worry in the bedroom. If he did not fall asleep within a short time he was to leave the room and return only when he was ready to try again. This was to be repeated until he fell asleep. At first the patient had to leave the bedroom four or five times per night. Eventually getting up became aversive and sleep became a positive reinforcement. The patient began to associate the bedroom with sleep instead of reading, worrying or television. After two weeks the patient was getting two to four hours more sleep per night. At the end of two months he was leaving the bedroom only one time per week. Bootzin said future studies will be necessary to specify all the factors involved in the treatment, but the dramatic results confirm the value of learning therapy principles.

Modifying teacher behavior

Positive statements and smiles from a teacher are helpful in lowering the rate of disruptive behavior in classrooms for emotionally disturbed children. Teachers have been directly reinforced for such behavior but it is easier to reward children, and some researchers feel teachers will emit more positive social behaviors toward students when the behaviors are paired with primary reinforcements for the students. Robert M. Leve of the Institute of Living in Hartford, Conn., and Lydia Burdick and Patricia Fontain of the University of Hartford tested this theory.

Students were taught that they would be rewarded with candy for the number of times a light flashed in the front of the room. The experimenter controlled the light and flashed it each time the teacher smiled or made a positive statement to an individual or to the group. Neither teacher nor students knew what stimulus produced the light flash. Two teachers were studied and the rate of their positive social behavior more than doubled during the experiment. Thus the teachers were indirectly conditioned to be more reinforcing and the students learned the behavior that would facilitate and maintain the conditioning. The researchers say this might be the most efficient means of behavior modification in situations where direct reinforcement is not possible.

Tape library for psychologists

The American Academy of Psychotherapists is a non-profit corporation organized for educational and scientific purposes. One of their projects is to collect and distribute tape recordings of various types of therapy for use in training and research. Irwin Rothman, a Philadelphia psychiatrist, demonstrated the tapes in the exhibition hall at the APA meeting. More than 70 tapes are available including interviews with therapists and patients. One tape, for example, contains three interviews with a female patient before and after treatment for stuttering. The patient was taught to speak without stuttering by listening to a controllable electronic metronome that is worn like a hearing aid. During therapy the woman learns to speak in time with the metronome and overcome her speech problem. The tapes come with script and theoretical material.