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Cover: During the Middle Ages, outbreaks of "tarantism" — or dancing mania — were reported in towns throughout Europe. Behavioral scientists now view those outbreaks as episodes of mass hysteria, the expression of collective emotional tension in epidemic form. Although tarantism seems to be a thing of the past, epidemics of hysteria still occur, and scientists are beginning to understand their dynamics. (Illustration by Donna Ward)



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Letters

Unethical research?

Regarding your article "Malnutrition of childhood emotions" (SN: 8/14/82, p. 101) I am aghast that the experimental study was allowed to be done. Feeding one group of undernourished Guatemalan children a low-calorie supplement and another a high-calorie supplement is, to me, like treating the poor Indian people of Guatemalan villages like laboratory animals. Would undernourished children in the United States ever be purposely split into two groups, with one group receiving a less nutritious supplement, in order to test them three years later on the degree to which their emotional and mental health differed? I doubt it very much. This is clearly an example of exploitation of Third World people by the scientists of our so-called "developed" nation.

If these scientists would turn their energies away from such unethical research and begin to educate themselves about the great inequality in wealth and land that causes hunger, malnutrition and death in Guatemala in the first place, I think they would be able to serve the scientific

community and the world in general in a much better way.

After all, if hunger is a man-made problem, certainly scientists have a place in finding solutions to it, but it is not by allowing hungry children to grow hungrier.

P. Kalee Powell
Portland, Ore.

Self-fulfilling anecdotes

Thank you for your report on the evolution of kin support... and grandparenting (SN: 8/21/82, p. 123). Unfortunately, these studies which were touted as supporting sociobiological theories are nothing more than self-fulfilling anecdotes. The "considerable controversy" generated by sociobiology revolves around the question of how much of complex human behaviors such as altruism, aggression, intelligence or giving to charity are determined by heredity (the genes people carry) versus the different environments to which people are exposed.

In both of these studies heredity and environment are hopelessly confounded. Thus, these studies do not qualify as science (either social or biological). The statistical anecdotes reported have simple, persuasive interpreta-

tions quite unrelated to evolutionary theory. I'm more likely to loan money to my brother rather than to a complete stranger not because he and I share 50 percent of our genes but because we've shared a lot of good and bad times over a lot of years. And as for grandfathers spending more time with granddaughters, I'll wager that little girls are still brought up to be more polite, appreciative and attentive than little boys. The only reason I take exception to this kind of sociobiological cant is that I'm concerned that the sociobiologists soon will be telling us that "giving someone the finger" is biologically determined.

Indeed, whether the authors intend so or not, the naive reader already draws the clear, if implicit, conclusion that to give the non-relative the finger is also evolutionarily determined behavior and, since nature made it, it must be right. The real danger of sociobiology is that it pretends to give scientific support to what is simply claptrap.

Gordon Edlin
Davis, Calif.

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