

PSYCHIATRY

Mother-Child Psychosis

► ONE INDIVIDUAL can unconsciously force another to act psychotic, Dr. Kenneth H. Gordon Jr., director of the Child Guidance Clinic at Lankenau Hospital, Philadelphia, told the meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association in Chicago.

This happens, especially, he said, when a mother tries to prolong the extreme closeness of her baby that is natural during the first year of infancy. The mother wants to keep her child a baby instead of letting him live his own life.

As a result, both mother and baby are forced into a double psychosis—what the psychiatrist calls a “folie à deux.” As far as society is concerned, when they act psychotic, they are psychotic and usually end up in institutions.

When the child's psychosis is caused by the need of the mother for a psychotic child, the illness is called “false childhood psychosis,” Dr. Gordon said. A true childhood psychosis is caused by the need of a child for prolonged infancy that interferes with growing independence during the second year of life.

Much can be done in preventive psychiatry, Dr. Gordon said, by diagnosing the situation early in life and treating the distorted parent-child relationship rather than either mother or baby individually or waiting until they must go to mental hospitals.

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New Name for Hitler

► TODAY, 16 years after he supposedly committed suicide, and while one of his lieutenants is on trial in Israel for the mass murder of millions of Jews, Adolf Hitler figuratively took his place on a psychoanalyst's couch.

A name, “psychotic character,” was coined by Dr. Norbert Bromberg of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York, to describe the peculiar mental state of Hitler as reported to the American Psychoanalytic Association meeting in Chicago.

Hitler was not totally and irreversibly psychotic. Neither could he be considered to be always and in every way relatively normal. Hitler showed such accurate perception and skillful manipulations of political situations that he was called a political genius. But his blind rages, his violent, irrational hates and paranoid ideas would cause a psychiatrist to diagnose him as a psychotic.

Such contradictions in Hitler's psychology caused Dr. Bromberg to call him a borderline case and to give his condition the new name “psychotic character.”

The “psychotic character” differs from the true psychotic in ability to establish relations with other people. Hitler, like other psychotic characters, had a relatively poor capacity to get along with others unless he felt he could get something out of them.

The true psychotic may become so in love with himself, so engrossed in his own needs

that they are more important to him than anything or anyone else in the whole world. The psychotic character sometimes temporarily sinks to this level.

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Child's Promise Is Magic

► WHEN A PARENT insists that his small child “promise to be good,” the exacted promise is, to the child, an act of magic, as crying is to the baby, Dr. Herbert J. Schlesinger of the Menninger Foundation, Topeka, Kans., told the American Psychoanalytic Association meeting in Chicago.

Crying, he explained, is originally an expression of the infant's discomfort. Later the baby observes that crying “magically” brings back the parent to his crib. Similarly, the “promise” wins back as if by magic the love or approval of the parents.

The young child is incapable, Dr. Schlesinger said, of truly pledging “to be

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Child Suicide Attempts

► WHEN A CHILD tells his mother spitefully, “You'll be sorry when I'm dead,” he is displaying an attitude that may lead him to an actual suicide attempt. Child suicide is not so rare as generally believed.

A study of all patients under 17 entering New York's Bellevue Hospital was reported in Chicago to the American Psychiatric Association by Dr. James M. Toolan, psychiatrist in charge of adolescent services of Bellevue.

Four other major reasons for childhood suicide, besides spite, are:

1. Anger, especially at the parents, is turned inward against self, leading to self-destruction.

2. The suicide attempt is a signal of real distress to call attention to the child's problems in the hope of producing effective help.

3. The suicide attempt is a reaction to a feeling of inner disintegration or is in obedience to the command of an imaginary voice.

4. The suicide attempt is due to a desire to join a dead relative.

The majority of the suicidal children were found to be depressed or maladjusted or to have behavior and character disorders. There has been a tendency to underestimate the importance of depression in young children, Dr. Toolan pointed out, because children have a different manner of showing their depression.

Instead of in “the blues,” it often shows in behavior problems in school and at home, in difficulty in concentration, withdrawal, restlessness and boredom. The adolescent, especially, tends to deny that he is depressed and to mask his true feelings with delinquent activity.

good” in a future which he cannot foresee and over which he has little control.

When parents extort a promise to “be good from now on” as the price of avoiding a spanking they build up the childish belief that a promise is “magic.”

As the child grows up, Dr. Schlesinger pointed out, the meaning of promising as an act of magic, complete in itself, should give way to an appreciation of promising as a prelude to a later act of keeping the promise.

Maturity in thinking is not, however, always fully achieved and remnants of the childhood magical thinking are to be found in many adults. Among some cultures, as a matter of courtesy, an individual will promise all sorts of things which he has no intention or even capacity to carry out.

When a psychiatrist observed such a pattern of meaningless promising in the history of a mental patient and saw the relationship of the pattern to the behavior of a child not sure of his mother's love, he understood and treated the behavior. Thus the patient matured to become a “man of his word.”

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Children under ten do not understand the meaning of death as the adult does. They often believe that one can recover from death, it was found.

Of 900 consecutive admissions, Dr. Toolan found, 106 were sent to Bellevue because they had attempted suicide. The youngest was only eight years old. Girls outnumbered boys 85 to 21 in the suicidally disposed group, Dr. Toolan found, but of the 21 children who were under 12 years old, 13 were boys. Among adolescents, 77 were girls and only eight were boys.

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Mental Patient's Spouse

► AS A MARRIED mental patient recovers, the marital partner often shows signs of mental illness, Dr. Richard N. Kohl of Cornell University Medical College, reported to the meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in Chicago.

During a period of ten years, Dr. Kohl observed 46 such cases of mental illness brought on by the recovery of husband or wife. In all cases, he said, it was necessary to treat the marital partner before the recovery or improvement of the patient could be maintained.

Although both husband and wife deny that marital conflict has anything to do with their mental illness, as the patient gets better, the other partner starts to drink excessively, shows great hostility toward the psychiatrist, threatens divorce or breaks off the patient's treatment.

The success or failure of the treatment often depends on the psychiatrist's ability to deal with the hostility of the marital partner.

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