Book Reviews

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Hypnosis: A Scientific Approach
By Theodore X. Barber
Reviewed by Fred H. Frankel, p 93

Episodic Behavioral Disorders: A Psychodynamic and Neuropsychiologic Analysis
By Russell R. Monroe
Reviewed by Chester A. Pearlman, Jr., p 95

Basic Psychoanalytic Concepts on the Libido Theory. Vol I
Basic Psychoanalytic Concepts on the Theory of Dreams. Vol II
Basic Psychoanalytic Concepts on the Theory of Instincts. Vol III
Basic Psychoanalytic Concepts on Metapsychology, Conflicts, Anxiety and Other Subjects
Edited by Humberto Nagera, et al
Reviewed by Paul L. Russell, p 95

Hypnosis: A Scientific Approach
Theodore X. Barber
New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold Co, 1969, 282 pp, 15 tbls, $2.95

Barber, in this treatise, is highly critical of the idea of the hypnotic or trance state, and progresses systematically from one chapter to the next in his attempt to prove his point. He describes the concept of the hypnotic state as entangled in circular reasoning, pointing out that the hypnotic state is presumed to exist when subjects respond to suggestion, and their response to suggestion is then assumed to be the result of the hypnotic state. Barber's text pursues the point that those who favor the theory of a hypnotic state have not been able to prove that state as the factor essential to the production of the criteria generally considered indicative of the hypnotic state—namely, response to test-suggestions, a hypnotized appearance, reports of unusual experiences, and testimony of having been hypnotized. He contends that it has not been demonstrated that a unique state of consciousness differing from waking and also from sleep can account for the factors in so-called hypnotic behaviors.

Barber consistently recommends that a theory explaining the dependent or consequent variables (considered to be the hypnotic phenomena) should develop from the accumulation and reexamination of empirical observations. There is little place for inductive reasoning in his scheme. He proposes a series of eight antecedent variables in the attitudes of the subjects and the behavior of the experimenter, that might be functionally related to the consequent variables. He asserts that when some or all of these antecedent variables are present and appropriate, hypnotic phenomena are reproducible in many subjects without the induction procedure and independent of the hypnotic state.

The publication contains an impressive list of experiments performed in the laboratory of the author, and almost 400 references. The author exhorts his readers to pursue the truth according to the plan he proposes. His urgent recommendations for greater clarity and precision in the use of terms and in the reexamination of data cannot be faulted.
BOOK REVIEWS

There is, however, a quality to the text and its overwhelming display of logic that create uneasiness. The results of the experiments of others, when repeated in the laboratory of the author, are so consistently contradicted, and the notion of a spontaneous trance state occurring in very susceptible subjects is so hastily swept aside, that this reviewer was left wondering about the impatience for change and the broad sweep of intolerance that prompts it.

This reviewer was also surprised, in the section dealing with the validity of age regression, at the short shrift given to the significance of the extensor plantar response in infancy. References by the score cannot diminish the relevance and proven value of the Babinski sign in clinical neurology, nor can they deny the fact that pediatric neurology recognizes the normal existence of an extensor plantar response for about the first half year of life. Where Barber quotes references to Wolff (1) and McGraw (2), he appears to miss or misunderstand their reports of dorsal extension of the big toe (with or without dorsiflexion and fanning of all the other toes) as the most frequent response in the early months of life. In his very systematic search for the classic Babinski sign, he seems to lose sight of and disparage the significance of its acceptable variations.

Burr (3) is reported by Barber to conclude that no specific movements of the toes can be considered as characteristic of the infant plantar response to plantar stimulation. Burr does state, in addition to his report on variable movements, that “most frequently there was extension.” This is not noted by Barber. These selective quotations are unfortunate in what appears otherwise to be a very scholarly work, and prove at least how air-tight logic can limit perspective and threaten an institution as dependable as the upgoing toe!

Historic precedent is not lacking. The Royal Commission and the Commission of the Academy of Sciences in France, toward the end of the eighteenth century, were equally intolerant in the name of science, and missed entirely the psychologic and subjective quintessence of the phenomenon of animal magnetism. In their haste to condemn it, they could not allow the faintest remnant of the notion to survive. Had they been prepared to acknowledge and to live with some degree of ambiguity, we might not have had to wait for a century to pass before the discovery of the unconscious. Barber’s intolerance of the fact that theories which pivot around the hypnotic state can be neither proved nor disproved, seems to lead him to the same guillotining procedure. While there is no reason to dissuade him from pursuing the truth in his own very logical style, and while all investigators should be encouraged to define their terms as precisely as possible, it will be a sad day when all investigators in the field of psychology and psychiatry become equally impatient with constructs like that of the hypnotic state. This is no more difficult to substantiate in scientific language than the concepts of the unconscious and the emotions, and probably no less relevant to a fuller appreciation of human behavior.

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REFERENCES
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Episodic Behavioral Disorders: A Psychodynamic and Neurophysiologic Analysis
Russell R. Monroe
Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1970, 517 pp, $11.00

Temporal-lobe epilepsy is one of the potentially most fruitful areas for study of psychosomatic phenomena. Dr. Monroe thoroughly reviews