PSYCHOANALYSIS AND RESEARCH


Subliminal Explorations of Perception Dreams, and Fantasies details Charles Fisher’s seminal contributions while serving as wonderful reminder of the intellectual ferment of the late 1940s on to the 1970s. Since understanding this era is important in contextualizing Fisher’s contributions, let me spend a moment describing a major figure of that era. Fisher was a fellow traveler to a group of psychoanalysts who were students and colleagues of David Rapaport. The group included Merton Gill, George Klein, Roy Schafer, and Robert Holt, to name but a few. Rapaport’s genius, largely unappreciated today, stimulated research in such diverse areas as states of consciousness and learning research (1967). He attempted to show that a psychoanalytic model of learning could make predictions and explain phenomena that eluded traditional learning theories. Unfortunately, contemporary analysts have somehow misplaced his empirical contributions. His students, however, became strongly involved in subliminal research and the study of states of consciousness, and developed new areas of inquiry, such as research in cognitive styles. Rapaport, of course, is remembered for his pioneering attempts to systematize Freudian theory. His theoretical formulations have been somewhat discounted since critics often confuse his psychoanalytic language (unfortunately replete with allusions to psychic energy) with his elegant conceptualizations. Charles Fisher’s research in subliminal research might have suffered a similar fate, but fortunately Howard Shevrin, the editor of this volume, has brought together Fisher’s contributions in this area. Shevrin’s introduction demonstrates how Fisher presages a good deal of the current research being done by cognitive psychologists.
Fisher, like Rapaport, was an exquisite translator of Freud’s ideas. In all of his work he was able in the most creative ways to test, explicate, and develop Freudian theory. In the present volume one can see Fisher’s fertile mind develop research strategies to test psychoanalytic hypotheses. After the era that this volume documents, Fisher became a sleep researcher. I first met him when sleep research was in its infancy and he was one of the pioneers in the field. It is of note that in the history of sleep research, William Dement did his creative REM deprivation studies at Mount Sinai working with Fisher (Dement 1960). The original REM deprivation studies were in part designed to test REM sleep as a safety valve; the prediction was that if an individual was deprived of REM sleep, psychosis would occur. Dement with Fisher boldly developed an experiment that they thought directly tested this Freudian tenet. The study yielded quite important findings (REM rebound, for example), but Dement’s response to the experiment’s failure to produce overt psychosis sent him in other important directions. Eventually he became established as the father of modern sleep research. Fisher, though, had just begun to think about REM sleep and how its discovery impacted on Freudian theory (Fisher 1965a,b). Rather than leave these ideas, he stimulated a number of researchers (including the team in my laboratory) to further explore these concepts (Steiner and Ellman 1972; Ellman and Antrobus 1991). He also discovered some of the basic descriptive elements of REM sleep; for example, his lab found that there are penile erections during REM sleep (Fisher, Gross, and Zuch 1965). He studied many other aspects of REM and dreaming and was able in ingenious ways to explicate the relationship of Freudian-based psychoanalytic theory and the psychophysiology of REM sleep. He explored issues of dream content and dream formation, as well as writing seminal papers on night terrors. More about this phase of his life later, for what is presented in the present volume is Fisher’s work before he became a REM sleep researcher.

This volume gives us a look into Fisher’s theorizing mind before he could more rigorously test his wonderfully crafted theoretical-clinical-experimental conceptualizations. I ask the reader’s forgiveness for this clumsy phrase, but I can think of no other way to convey how Fisher’s ideas were able to traverse these different areas. I have not fully mentioned Fisher’s erudition: think about how many people have carefully read Pötzl or how many have taken in the importance of Freud’s footnote citing the Pötzl effect. My guess is that there are many readers
who may not even know of Pötzl. If so, then it will not be clear how Pötzl’s findings influenced both Fisher and generations of subliminal perception researchers. Fisher (pp. 37–38) relates that in 1919 Freud added a long “footnote to the section on day residues in The Interpretation of Dreams.” Freud stated that Pötzl had presented subjects a picture at a speed too fast for them to consciously perceive the whole picture: “It was shown unmistakably that those details of the exposed picture which had not been noted by the subject provided material for the construction of the dream, whereas those details which had been consciously perceived and recorded in the drawing made after the exposure did not recur in the manifest content of the dream” (p. 37). Freud’s statement that the study provided a “wealth of implications” in furthering the theory of dream formation fascinated Fisher, who derived four interrelated conclusions in considering Freud’s statements and Pötzl’s findings: (1) He noted that Pötzl’s findings had never been fully integrated by Freud (or anyone else) into psychoanalytic theory. (2) If one were to attempt this integration, Pötzl’s findings would necessitate a “very great expansion of the role of day residues in the process of dream formation . . . especially of the visual percepts associated with day residue experiences” (p. 38). (3) “These findings indicate that a form of preconscious visual perception plays a significant role in dream formation.” Fisher then draws a parallel between this form of perception and perception found in states “such as visual agnosias and hallucinations” (p. 38). (4) “Pötzl’s findings suggest the need for an amplification of certain parts of Freud’s psychology of the dream process, as set forth in chapter 7 of The Interpretation of Dreams, especially the processes going on in that part of Freud’s hypothetical psychic apparatus which he called the P (perception) system” (p. 39).

These conclusions led Fisher to ingeniously deconstruct and then reconstruct Freud’s ideas on the day residue. Between 1954 and 1959 he performed a number of experiments in which he replicated, refined, and extended Pötzl’s findings. The results that Fisher and his collaborators report are both interesting and provocative; the aspect of these papers that is most compelling, however, is the opportunity to see Fisher’s mind grapple with the data that emerged from these studies. Although he presents statistical data (the statistical, methodological aspects improve greatly over the course of these experiments), his use of clinical inference is in my opinion more convincing and certainly more interesting. His agile mind demonstrates how a clinical analyst
can conceptualize data in a manner that richly augments statistical inference. Gradually Fisher puts forth a model of dream formation that preserves the depth of Freud’s ideas while allowing the experimenter to conduct empirical studies. If I attempted to summarize Fisher’s model, I would either do it an injustice or rapidly run out of space. (It is obviously my view, however, that it can be tested and further developed to the benefit of contemporary researchers.)

Let us instead follow one aspect of Fisher’s reasoning and observe how he theorized his subliminal findings. Fisher quotes George Klein, a psychoanalytic researcher and theoretician who stated that when we view peripheral stimuli as having the “property of fluidity and that of the interchangeability of medial forms, then we can see the possibility that peripheral forms have a unique value in the discharge of latent wishes” (p. 182). Klein maintained that the reason subliminal stimuli have an effect is that they are fluid in the sense of not having a strong personal meaning (not strongly cathected) and can easily be translated into preexisting unconscious structures. Fisher joins Klein in this theoretical statement, adding that “visual factors alone have a unique value for the discharge of latent unconscious wishes in dreams and (conscious) images” (pp. 182–183). His findings tend to support his hypotheses, but his studies would today be considered dated in terms of methodology. Nevertheless, one can see in this volume how Fisher attempted to follow up these ideas experimentally, while at the same time constructing a theory of dream formation that remains cogent today. Though relatively untested experimentally, it is pregnant with empirical implications.

One can say about this volume that Fisher’s reasoning demands to be revisited and can provide the basis for an exciting contemporary theory of dream formation. I must admit that although I knew of this subliminal research and read it as a graduate student, I never appreciated the theoretical sophistication that distinguishes this aspect of Fisher’s writings. This is the strength of the present volume; it takes us back to an era of great intellectual ferment. It is therefore somewhat unfortunate that Howard Shevrin, editor of the volume, overstates the empirical value of Fisher’s early research; indeed, even the later studies with Paul and Luborsky were somewhat deficient by today’s methodological standards. This does not detract from the volume, however, since the reader has a chance to meet an extraordinary psychoanalytic thinker. It is easy to be anachronistic in one’s view of earlier research,
and Shevrin does remind us that it was published in some of the better empirical journals. Still, the reader should look at this volume for the wealth of ideas contained in it, not for methodological purity.

Finally, I would mention that the volume could have benefited from the inclusion of some of Fisher’s REM sleep papers. In some of these publications (e.g., Fisher 1965a,b) we can see more clearly the evolution of Fisher’s ideas. Since the book touches on issues of dream formation, one or two of these articles would have been relevant and useful. Shevrin’s introduction tries to show the reader the relationship of Fisher’s subliminal research to contemporary research efforts in this area. Although clearly contemporary subliminal research is germane to Fisher’s work, an intellectual history of the era would have been of particular interest and might usefully have highlighted Fisher’s theoretical efforts. An historical review would have made the volume more accessible to a contemporary audience, particularly candidates, graduate students, and recent graduates of psychoanalytic institutes. But these concerns are obviously minor. No one reading this volume can fail to be excited by the depth and clarity of Charles Fisher’s elegant theoretical conceptualizations.

REFERENCES


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Just as physical pain is the most common somatic symptom propelling people to seek medical care, so are depressive symptoms or depressive character dispositions (allied often enough with anxiety and dissatisfaction with work performance and relationship patterns) the most common complaint of those coming into the mental health care system: reason enough to welcome this magisterial study by Sidney Blatt and his gifted colleagues into the psychopathology and psychotherapy of the depressive experience. Blatt, a psychoanalyst and empirical psychological researcher, is properly praised, in Peter Fonagy’s foreword to the book, as “one of the giants in our field.” This volume is the culmination of an extremely productive life’s work, one joining clinical study to empirical research into the nature of the depressive experience. This should not be read, of course, as noting the end of this life’s work; I trust it will long continue, on the same widendly generative path.

What is the essence of Blatt’s impressive exposition here? It is simply this: that clinical depression and/or the depressive character formation are not unitary clinical entities; rather, Blatt, based on his clinical psychoanalytic experience and thirty years of empirical research, has distinguished two fundamentally different depressive diatheses, designated anaclitic and introjective, differing in symptomatology and character attributes, and differing as well in the formative childhood experiences that create a predisposition to the one or the other, and in implications for prognosis and psychotherapeutic outcome.

Anaclitic (or dependent) depression is marked by interpersonal issues of care, connectedness, and relatedness. A central fear is of abandonment, loss, and helplessness, to use the Engel-Schmale idiom (Engel and Reichsman 1956; Schmale 1972). Here we see a desperate need to maintain supporting and nurturant links, and to ward off feelings of being unwanted and unloved. At its life-threatening extremes in infancy and toddlerhood, it can be manifest as hospitalism and marasmus, as chronicled by Spitz (1965; Spitz and Wolf 1946) and the Robertsons (Robertson and Robertson 1971). It occurs more frequently in females, who according to Blatt are more oriented to issues of relatedness than are males.

Blatt locates the infantile prototypes of this disorder in the deformative experiences of the oral developmental stage at the beginning of
life. Here I find him to be more fixed to a defined psychosexual developmental ladder than is much of contemporary analytic discourse, which tends more to blur the psychosexual stages delineated by Freud and Abraham, in favor of a perspective that views oral issues (or any others) as potentially arising from the entire range of developmental phases, somewhat differently colored, of course, depending on the time and locus of origin.

By contrast, introjective (or self-critical) depression is marked by issues of self-definition, separateness, and autonomy, with often a coercive characterological perfectionism. Central concerns are with self-criticism, self-worth, and self-doubt. There is a profound fear of failure to measure up to one’s exalted standards (internally felt or externally imposed), with consequent guilt and either self-blame or blame aggressively projected onto one’s most important objects. In the Engel-Schmale formulation, this engenders a feeling of hopelessness. This species of depression occurs more frequently in males, who are presented as more oriented to issues of self-definition, achievement, and ambition. And it is located by Blatt at a higher developmental level, built around the deviant experiences of Mahler’s separation-individuation phase (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman 1975) and the superego issues of guilt and blame. Here again my caveat can be entered concerning putatively direct linkages between adult phenomena and specific originary experiences in childhood.

Blatt caps this fundamental dichotomy (anaclitic/introjective) by noting that depressive manifestations, over the entire life cycle, can range from a subtle and transient dysphoric experience in an individual of depressive predisposition, especially in the presence of a proximal trauma resonating with that predisposition (say, the loss or rupture of a valued relationship for anaclitics, or failure or disappointment in some valued life goal for introjectives), through an enduring characterological disorder, a profoundly pessimistic outlook on life, ever prone to feelings of loss (helplessness) or failure (hopelessness), all the way through to a disabling state of severe clinical depression. In that extreme case there is so often a serious risk of suicide. As to that, Blatt regards the suicide attempts of anaclitic depressives to be more often dramatic cries for help, while those of introjective depressives are seen as more seriously death-seeking in intent. Unfortunately, either kind can be successful.

From his tale—see the opening sentence of the volume—Blatt’s views on the nature of depression originated in his disparate experiences
with two patients he analyzed as a psychoanalytic candidate—one of each kind of depressive diathesis. The bulk of the volume, however, presents the mountains of empirical data from studies he and his many collaborators have conducted to define, characterize, and measure (through the creation of suitable instruments) the phenomena marking these two varieties of depressive experience.

And, here, by the way, Blatt also presents an impressive argument for the value of empirical research to psychoanalysis, both as a science of mental life and as a therapy for mental disorders. As someone whose own career has, over the span of half a century, been centrally dedicated to psychoanalytic therapy research, I have been painfully aware of the long-standing arguments within analytic ranks concerning the relevance of empirical research to our field. Despite Freud’s deep commitment to his conception of the psychoanalysis that he had almost single-handedly created as a natural science embedded in an evolutionary biological framework, he was himself indifferent, even antipathetic, to the systematic research by which a science grows incrementally and accrues a deepening knowledge base. Basically, he felt that the many thousands of hours that he and his adherents spent with their analysands provided proof enough of his theories, as he stated in a well-known letter of 1934 to an American psychologist, Saul Rosenzweig (cited in Shakow and Rapaport 1964, p. 129).

Despite the recent bourgeoning of psychoanalytic empirical research, this anti-research posture, based on the proposition that psychoanalysis is a discipline sui generis, without connection to other avenues of intelligence of human mental life, and that the consulting room is therefore the only source of insights relevant to psychoanalysis, is still alive and well within our ranks. It is this posture that Sidney Blatt has spent his career challenging, and this volume is a most impressive marshaling of the vast array of empirical studies by Blatt and his group, and by the many others he cites (within attachment theory, developmental psychology, and even cognitive science), who in ensemble have demonstrated the salience and heuristic values of the distinctiveness, as well as the interrelationships, of the two (always dialectically interacting) perspectives on character organization, the anaclitic (relational) and the introjective (self-defining), as well as on the different organizations of the depressive experience to which they are prone.

All this thickly documented research activity does not make for an easy read, but it requires no statistical sophistication beyond a basic
understanding of factor analysis as a way of extracting organizing themes from arrays of empirical data. Here Blatt elaborates the instruments he and his group have created for the experimental study of the psychopathology of the depressive experience. The Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (DEQ) was initially built around three factors—Dependency, Self-Criticism, and Efficacy—but eventually came to include four factors, when two basic Dependency dispositions were identified, Neediness and Relatedness, these latter two reflecting the more ill and the more well directions in which basic Dependency dispositions can be expressed. Over the many years of its development and application, the DEQ has become an ever more precise and definitive marker of personality configuration.

Alongside the DEQ, Blatt and his group have developed an equally elaborated Object Relations Inventory (ORI), a set of scales representing the internalized representations of the major object relationships (parents, perceived self and ideal self, and, in therapeutic contexts, the therapist), becoming thus an avenue of access to the internalized object relations that have evolved and been transformed over a person’s lifetime, going back to the earliest formative experiences. These interconnections between past and present are systematically presented in the book via numerous attachment theory studies, studies of the children of depressed mothers, and retrospective accounts by adults of their childhood experiences. These interconnections between past and present are systematically presented via numerous attachment theory studies, studies of the children of depressed mothers, and retrospective accounts by adults of their perceived child-rearing experiences.

Some of the more intriguing forays in Blatt’s book, demonstrating the robustness of his concepts and instruments, involve his reworking—in terms of the anaclitic/introjective distinction—data made available to his team by the Menninger Foundation’s Psychotherapy Research Project (PRP) and the NIMH Treatment of Depression Collaborative Research Program (TDCRP). When he divided the PRP patients into his two main types (with a very few of them classed as mixed), using primarily their Rorschach protocols gathered before treatment, after treatment, and at a follow-up point several years later, he came up with a significant finding, one complementary to the overall findings of the Menninger group, but not discerned as such in our own exhaustive study (Wallerstein 1986). He found that the introjectively organized patients did better in standard psychoanalyses, while the more anaclitically
organized did better in various of the expressive-supportive psychotherapies, and he offered his own theoretically based speculations as to how and why this should be. None of that had appeared in my 1986 book of overall clinical accounting from that project, *Forty-two Lives in Treatment*.

Similarly with the TDCRP study. Comparing patients in long-term, intensive residential treatment at the Austen Riggs Center with TDCRP outpatients in weekly treatment for sixteen weeks, Blatt found more significant therapeutic improvement among introjective patients in the long-term therapy, as compared with their significant difficulties and very limited response in brief therapies. This difference did not occur with the anaclitic patients—and again Blatt adduces his theory-configured reasoning that renders this clinically meaningful.

Blatt summarizes pithily in a number of places the overall thrust of his work. Midway in the book, for example, he writes the following: “Thus, individuals with dysphoric experiences around abandonment or [around] failure and guilt differ in their expression of depression, in their early experiences in caring relationships, in their sensitivity and vulnerability to different types of stressful life events, and in how they engage their environment” (p. 151).

All of which brings us to a central question for the psychoanalytic practitioner. What implications does all this have for treatment, especially of course for the treatment of the depressed? Here Blatt does not explicitly state (but Fonagy in his foreword does, on Blatt’s behalf) that in a significant sense this whole body of work can be read as a counter to many of our common operating assumptions as psychoanalytic clinicians. Though clearly every psychoanalysis is different, and unfolds differently in each instance, unique to each analytic dyad, yet we have a method, the psychoanalytic method, that we deploy with more or less common understandings to create the psychoanalytic situation within which the psychoanalytic process expectedly unfolds. And though we bring our distinctive subjectivities, as well as our formally learned theoretical perspectives, and also our more idiosyncratic personal theories, as general frames to our involvement in the therapeutic process, a very great number of us go so far as to try to take to heart Bion’s famous dictum, that we approach each new therapeutic session without memory or desire. Fonagy’s foreword pinpoints this as luxuriating “in an intellectually satisfying but practically undemanding ‘one size fits all’ model of psychological therapy” (p. xii). We can decide
for ourselves how accurately this assessment reflects (or how much it misrepresents) our particular therapeutic stance, and our sense of how our discipline as a whole operates.

Blatt’s book squarely challenges such a view. His final chapter, “Therapeutic Implications,” clearly propounds his therapeutic tack. Anacritic and introjective individuals differ sharply in their characteristic transferences and in the countertransferences they typically evoke. They have had seriously different developmental processes. In analytic depressives, issues of interpersonal relatedness are most salient; their central concerns are around trust and dependability, loving and being loved, and their central fears are of loss and abandonment. In introjective depressives, issues of self-definition predominate; their central concerns are around autonomy, ambition, and achievement, and their central fears are of failure, criticism, guilt, and consequent loss of self-esteem and self-worth. At their most perfection-driven, the superegos of this group can be most punitive, and the projected criticism harsh indeed.

All this points for Blatt to different salient therapeutic foci, different themes to be sought out and explored—in other words, to a more consciously focused and guided therapeutic process, more in keeping with an opposed dictum that has appeared more than once in the psychotherapy research literature, the idea that the purpose of psychotherapy research is to learn more about what therapeutic approach works best with what kind of patient. Again, we each of us can decide how much such a perspective does or can or should square with the more usual prescribed stance sketched out above.

For me this is one of the central questions raised by the book. As such, I feel it should be read by everyone concerned with our discipline as a therapeutic enterprise, not just by those committed to the growth of formal and systematic psychoanalytic research.

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