

## PSYCHOANALYSIS AND RESEARCH

SUBLIMINAL EXPLORATIONS OF PERCEPTION, DREAMS, AND FANTASIES: THE PIONEERING CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHARLES FISHER. Edited by *Howard Shevrin*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 2003, 197 pp., \$49.95.

*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.

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