

An extremely valuable assessment of where psychiatry stands in the second decade of the 21st century. Make it more available!

Psychotherapy emerged at the end of the 19th century, a period in which there was a vast amount of scientific progress being made in the physical sciences. It was the age of Maxwell, Einstein, Darwin and his successors, Durkheim, Boaz and others. It was the time in which Fisher and Spearman were inventing the science of statistics.

Unfortunately, the tools simply did not exist to do a rigorous scientific analysis of the subject at hand, the human animal. Evolutionary psychology, and most especially behavioral genetics were still a century away. Psychology was an empirical practice. Therapists did what they could, observed the results, and attempted to create general theories to explain the connections. It was a hit and miss process. Himself a therapist, Paris credits psychiatry with an overall record of helping its patients. However, he attributes the progress almost entirely to the personal relationship formed between doctor and patient, and the wise guidance that a therapist may give.

Paris concludes that most of the general theories of psychiatry are bunk. Nobody much talks any more of the id, the ego and the superego, or the other constructs created in the early days. The construct that gives Paris the title of this book, "the myth of childhood," is the primacy of childhood experience. This is the theory, dating from classical times, that experiences in early childhood have a lifelong impact. This was the rationale behind Freud and others' practice of delving into childhood experiences looking for explanations of problems that afflicted the adult patient. This was the rationale behind many researchers' segmenting childhood into a sequence of phases, and theorizing that the child had to successfully complete one phase before moving into the next.

The primacy of childhood theory led to a number of spectacular abuses, notably the "recovered memory" phenomenon by which both children and adults found, falsely, that they had been sexually abused in childhood. The theory was that the hurt was so painful, so deep, that it had to be repressed. Repression is another construct that Paris says simply cannot be proven to exist.

The theory went on to hypothesize that the patient could not recover until the past had been brought to light through hypnotherapy or other recovered memory techniques and dealt with. As Paris notes, therapists have the all-too-human tendency towards a confirmation bias. They wanted their hypotheses about individual people to be true. It was quite easy to suggest to patients, especially under hypnosis, that they had been abused. This resulted in some tragically broken homes and long prison terms for child care workers on the basis of stories that had no substance.

Over the past few decades the tools have emerged to support the scientific investigation of theories in the realm of psychology and psychiatry. They have been implemented more in the former. The scientific method would propose the following steps:

- 1) On the basis of observations, form a hypothesis.
- 2) Establish a plausible set of cause-and-effect explanations for why the hypothesis might work.
- 3) Devise an experiment, or series of experiments, to test the hypothesis. Establish and advance the criteria for a successful test. The researcher must be humble. Hypotheses can be disproven experimentally, but they cannot be positively proven.
- 4) Perform the experiments, measure the results.
- 5) Published both the experimental data and the results in such a way that they can be independently verified by any other researcher.

These steps are hard to follow when it comes to human subjects. The human being is simply too complex. Moreover, he is a free living organism and the researcher cannot control the variables. People grow up in different houses, attend different schools, are pummeled by different bullies, subjected to different textbooks... The environment simply cannot be controlled. Therefore,

psychology especially depends on statistical analyses, when possible with large numbers of subjects. This is always been hard to do. Many researchers, Freud among them, didn't want ugly facts to mess up beautiful theories. They did not try very hard.

Laboratory studies on human beings would be immoral. The federal government set specific limits on human subjects research. But there are three naturally occurring conditions which can easily be studied. Paris notes that researchers have taken advantage of the opportunities, and many modern conclusions in the realm of psychology and psychiatry have come from them.

- 1) A regression analysis comparing the similarity of adoptive children to their adoptive parents with the similarity of natural children to the same parents, and to the natural parents of the adoptive children.
- 2) Comparisons of the similarity between fraternal twins and identical twins. The correlations in personality are significantly higher for identical twins. The assumption is that all sets of twins grow up in virtually identical environments.
- 3) The absolute gold study standard, the Minnesota Twins study. Researchers located 56 pairs of identical twins reared apart. They therefore were genetically identical but reared in different environments. Any correlation above random had to be attributable to genetics instead of environment. As far as intelligence went, genetics explain 70% of the similarity in intelligence. The number was somewhat lower for personality, but still incredibly high as correlations go in the social sciences. Similar data sets on twins have been compiled and used in Scandinavia.

Paris refers often to Steven Pinker, "How the Mind Works." Pinker was apparently one of the pioneers in evolutionary psychology. What is interesting is that relatively few of Paris' quotations are from books written in the 21st century. I located this book in my search for work which would validate Judith Rich Harris' theories in "The Nurture Assumption" and "No Two Alike." Paris is quite attracted to Harris's theories, but Harris herself says she is in no position to do the empirical studies herself. I wondered if anybody had done them. Paris seems to wonder the same thing – it appears that the pace of research has not picked up. There is no rush to verify Pinker's, Harris's and other interesting hypotheses.

Paris writes that "finally, additional evidence for the underlying biological nature of personality comes from transcultural research. The same broad dimensions of personality traits have been found to be measurable and cultures all over the world." I will add that personality tends to be more uniform within cultures. See Geert Hofstede's "Cultures and Organizations" for an account of how IBM dealt with this phenomenon in its global operations. Canadian evolutionary psychologist Philippe Rushton devoted many years to this study, producing the landmark book "Race, Evolution and Behavior."

Paris notes that political conservatives tend to believe more in genetics, whereas liberals are committed to a 100% environmental explanation. It traces back to Locke and Rousseau. The environmental explanation is attractive because it theorizes that there are solutions to the problems at hand. A genetic explanation relegates it to the sadness of the human tragedy, something which generally cannot be remedied through political action. Psychiatrists want to believe they can change things, and they tend to be politically liberal.

One of the appealing features of the book is Paris' confessions of the way he believed in traditional psychotherapy – the Freudians and their successors – and often cited them in his earlier works. When evidence-based approaches came into use, he avidly read the journal papers and changed his opinions. Many others – perhaps a majority in the psychiatric profession – did not. And that is the value of the book.

Paris notes that psychiatry has lost its luster over the past few decades, its prestige, but its theories still retain a vast amount of influence. Nothing has replaced them. He writes about how literature, and especially films, is devoted to the theory of the primacy of childhood. They blame the problems of the adult on traumatic experiences in childhood. Paris does not go into the justice system, which blames childhood abuse for the bad behavior of the adult. It exculpates whole swaths of society, especially minorities, from adherence to the rules of civilization. It is now being done with third-world immigrants entering Europe.

Every other page of the book seems to contain a very quotable paragraph. I have taken some of those that appealed most to me and included them as comments to this review. The reader should appreciate the quality of writing throughout the book.

If I had one recommendation to make to Joel Paris, it would be to price this book to sell to a broader audience. It should be priced comparably to Harris' two books, or popular anthropology titles by Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, or evolutionary psychology titles by Pinker, Wade and others. These ideas need wider circulation.

That concludes a five-star review. I greatly enjoyed the book, and recommend it to anybody with an interest in psychiatry or, more broadly, in what is going on today in mental health.

Here are some of the most valuable passages from Joel Paris' *Myths of Childhood*

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The thrust of this volume concerns the large gap between what researchers have found and what clinicians believe.

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Explanations and Attributions

False beliefs in psychology do not readily die out. Many survive and continue to influence each new generation. Why do new facts not lead to the correction of old errors? Why does illogic so often defeat logic?

Social psychologists have long been interested in understanding why people come to idiosyncratic conclusions about the world. This area of research is termed attribution theory (Sutherland, 1994; Weiner, 1999) and consists of formal studies about how people explain sequences of events in their lives.

First and foremost, people prefer any explanation to no explanation. We are all more likely to prove something true than untrue. When confronted with a complex sequence of events, most of us are uncomfortable with not having at least some adequate theory. For this reason, we have trouble withholding judgment about cause and effect. This leads to an availability bias, the tendency to explain events on the basis of what lies closest at hand (Dawes, 1994). These explanations provide an illusion that we can control our environment. What is most readily available often derives from beliefs that are commonly held in one's culture. The primacy of childhood experience is a good example.

Attributions based on an availability bias also color clinical observations, leading to misleading associations between risk factors and outcomes. In an instructive example quoted by J. Holmes (1998), physicians once believed that Down's syndrome was caused by birth trauma, largely because mothers of these children, no doubt searching for some explanation of their tragedy, frequently reported such events. When the real cause (an extra chromosome) was discovered, it became clear that the "available" mechanism was entirely wrong.

Second, people overvalue previous harm when experiencing present adversity. This tendency to rewrite one's personal history in the light of present suffering is an example of recall bias (Weiner, 1999). Moreover, people may not prefer to explain present failure in terms of personal inadequacy. Blaming one's childhood experience and one's parents provides a readily available explanation that maintains some degree of self-esteem (Deutsch, 1960).

Third, the way patients think affects the way therapists hear their stories. The fundamental attribution error describes the fact that individuals typically characterize their own behavior as a reaction to a situation, but attribute the behavior of other people to internal dispositions such as personality. In other words, when patients tell their stories, they tend to present themselves as victims of circumstance, rather than as the authors of their own distress. Of course, it is the task of therapy to correct these perceptions. But too often, out of a need to be empathic and "on the patient's side," clinicians are inclined to accept and validate these attributions.

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Moreover, if rearing practices during infancy and early childhood were as important as is often claimed, we should see dramatic differences in the frequency of psychological problems that accord with cultural variations. Yet the prevalence of serious mental disorders is about the same around the world.

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About 15 years ago, I was invited to lecture to a class of medical students about some of the basic concepts in psychiatry. In accordance with my views at that time, I took a strong psychodynamic position, presenting an essentially Freudian model of how psychological symptoms develop. (The coordinator of the course, a neurobiologist, did not invite me back the next year.) When challenged by the students about my theoretical position, I replied that while there were many problems in analytic theory, I could not find a better one.

Like most people, I like to think of myself as a free and independent spirit, who comes to his own conclusions. Of course, this is no more true of me than of anyone else. In retrospect, I can see very clearly how my ideas have followed the prevailing zeitgeist. Since then, times have changed and my mind, like many others, has also changed. There are now better alternatives to psychoanalysis than existed in those days. The findings of behavioral genetics have shaken many who believed that parents are all-important for development. Cognitive science provides a viable alternative for the study of mental processes. The entire field of developmental psychopathology has come of age, and can now be thought of as a basic science for clinicians.

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We do not have a theory that can explain all the things that psychoanalysis has claimed to explain. It will take many decades before we can understand all the interactions between constitution and experience that shape the development of children. At the end of this book, I will make recommendations for how we might begin to carry out this task.

My hope is that psychoanalysis will eventually join the scientific community and accept the standards of empiricism. For this to happen, it must cease to be a separate movement and ideology and develop stronger links with academia. Psychoanalysts could actively support research to test their theories and submit their therapeutic methods to clinical trials. We would then be in a position to find out which parts of this complex theory stand up to the test of data, and which parts do not. Moreover, in this scenario, psychoanalysis would cease to be a separate discipline, and accept incorporation into the science of psychology.

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Yet many psychotherapists remain resistant to genetic explanations of their patients' behavior. This knee-jerk reaction is rooted in the world-view that many clinicians share.

First, therapists receive a training that biases them in favor of nurture over nature. As documented in earlier chapters, many influential theoretical models fail to take biological factors in development into account. Both the psychodynamic and behavioral traditions have seen the organism as a blank slate, with only a grudging and minimal recognition of the role of constitution.

Second, mental health professionals are socially aware. They are wary of genetic explanations that could be used to support the status quo or shift attention away from real social problems.

Third, therapists believe in change. They are reluctant to consider human problems as insoluble or inevitable. They oppose genetic explanations that can make therapists or patients feel hopeless.

Finally, many therapists perceive behavioral genetics in the light of its early history. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the eugenic movement had a wide intellectual influence, espousing plausible but poorly grounded genetic explanations of behavior. These ideas led to several unpleasant consequences, most particularly the exclusion of specific immigrant groups for their supposed low intellectual capacity (Gould, 1981), and the warehousing of hereditarily tainted psychiatric patients in mental hospitals (Shorter, 1997).

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Quote on Harris

1. No specific child-rearing practice consistently predicts personality in children. In cases where associations have been reported, they have not been very large. Moreover, since these studies did not control for heritability, genes could easily account for whatever similarities exist between parents and children in personality.
2. Differential parental treatment of children in the same family does not account for personality differences. Even when parents treat children in the same way, their personalities turn out quite differently. Siblings are also rarely similar, most probably due to differences in temperament.
3. The correlation between the personality traits of adopted children and the parents who rear them is zero. There is also no correlation between traits of adopted children and nonadopted children in the same family.
4. Children behave differently in different settings. The way they are raised influences behavior in the home, but not necessarily outside the home. The basic assumption of attachment theory, that the quality of family life determines interpersonal behavior with other people, has not been supported by research.

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Psychotherapy works – but no particular approach is better than any other. Need to focus on current problems. Going into the past is not productive. Therapy restores hope and morale.

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To translate this saying back to its French original: *Le meilleur est l'ennemi du bon*. Those who insist on perfection in life risk becoming paralyzed and unproductive. Parents who try to have a perfect family and to raise children perfectly are almost surely bound to be disappointed.

Marriage provides a good example of this principle. Amato and Booth (1997) report that marital satisfaction is much lower than it was in previous generations. Why should this be so, in a time when people choose their own partners and marry for love?

The explanation is that people expect too much from marriage. In the past, husbands and wives worked together to raise children. Their bond was as much a union of families as of individuals. Today, people expect to find profound happiness with their partners and are intolerant of the inevitable disillusionment when intimate relationships prove less than perfect.

Amato and Booth (1997) found that the majority of dissolved marriages are not a necessary escape from severe discord and abuse, but result from reactions to feelings of dissatisfaction. Thus, in married life, the best is very much the enemy of the good. Moreover, changing partners is hardly the road to bliss. Research shows that remarriages following divorce

are even more unstable than first marriages (Riley, 1991). In a famous phrase, Samuel Johnson described a second marriage as the triumph of hope over experience.