Book Reviews


This book, edited by Professor Fred Volkmar (third in the series of Monographs in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry), follows the tradition now established for this series of providing an excellent overview of current knowledge with respect to psychopathology, research, and clinical interventions.

This volume (published in 1998) provides a summary of much that is currently known about autism. The majority of chapters are written by authors based in the U.S.A. (one co-author from Canada, one from Australia). There are just two chapters by U.K. authors and one chapter from Germany. The majority of chapters provide excellent reviews of current knowledge and recent research (with references up to and including 1997), but disappointingly relatively little consideration of current controversy and possible future developments.

In the first chapter Volkmar and Lord provide an historical perspective of the classification systems and diagnostic categories. They review some diagnostic instruments and make brief reference to the development of autistic-specific norms for the Vineland Adaptive Behavioural Scales. The authors do not discuss screening instruments, diagnostic algorithms, nor the differing constraints and requirements of clinical diagnoses versus research evaluations. The differential diagnosis of autism and related disorders is briefly considered including the paradox that PDD-NOS, “the disorder with a non-definition”, is much more common than other disorders but much less studied. The diagnostic challenge for future research and practice of individuals with the so-called broader phenotype or lesser variant of autism is, however, not discussed.

The second chapter, Epidemiological Surveys of Autism (Fombonne) is a very helpful and academically rigorous review of epidemiological surveys up to and including 1997. It is generally agreed that there is an increase in awareness of autistic spectrum disorders and many report an apparent increase in clinical referrals. Fombonne concludes, from his data, that for core autism the best estimate is 5.0 per 10,000 population. Not withstanding their expense, he also highlights the dearth of population studies of Asperger’s Syndrome and other autism spectrum disorder variants.

The authors of chapter 3 (Prior and Ozonoff) admit that reviewing psychological factors in autism over the past 50 years is a major challenge. Their review is comprehensive but with relatively little discussion of new and/or innovative ways to advance current knowledge.

Chapters 4 and 5 cover genetic epidemiology and the neurobiology of autism. Again these reviews are impressive but there is a disappointing overlap/redundancy across these two chapters. Chapter 4, however, provides a useful overview of possible genetic models, which for clinicians and researchers not necessarily experienced in the field of psychiatric genetics is instructive. Chapter 5 gives a systematic review of the neurobiology but avoids some of the more contentious aspects such as MMR vaccination, special diet, and/or possible sulphate abnormalities in individuals with autism.

In Chapter 6, Psychopharmacology, McDougal gives a clear systematic overview of current drug treatment and approaches specifically linked with serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine, and neuropeptide function. However, as with the previous chapters, the author avoids many of the more recent contentious claims and does not risk making any controversial suggestions about future new developments.

Chapter 7 (Harris) is an excellent comprehensive review of much current knowledge in relation to behavioural and educational approaches to pervasive developmental disorders. Professor Howlin (Chapter 8), in contrast to many of the chapters, combines both a synthesis of previous studies and reports some new findings including her own research. I was disappointed that the chapter did not include any reference to the topic of regression in autism, especially as this is an area previously considered by The Maudsley Group.

The final chapter outlines a number of theoretical approaches to development of human social behaviour. However, there is only limited consideration as to how these perspectives might link with clinical experience and research findings. Notwithstanding some of my comments, I predict that this book will become an important addition to standard texts about autism and related disorders. It provides an excellent overview of current knowledge in this field—a new benchmark text for the end of the 20th century.

Ann Le Couteur


Since the publication of Birth to maturity (1962) by Kagan and Moss, the former author has published elegant research and thoughtful essays on human development. Arguing now that the social and behavioural sciences have failed to make the dramatic theoretical and methodological advances of other sciences, he suggests that “one of the reasons for their halting progress is a reluctance to question the trio of ragged ideas that is the subject of this book”: the passion for abstraction, the allure of infant determinism, and the pleasure principle.

The first flawed belief is that most processes generalise broadly. Many feel that it is not terribly important to specify the agent studied, be it rat, monkey, or human, nor the context, whether laboratory, natural habitat, workplace, or home, because general conclusions can be drawn regardless of agent or context. Kagan examines four popular but controversial concepts illustrative of ambitious over-generalisation: fear and anxiety; consciousness; intelligence; and temperament. The use of such broad terms means that we can only achieve partial insight into these phenomena. This emphasis on context is reminiscent of Mischel’s situationism, an inconsistency of behaviour across different situations. Indifference to local influences “leads some scientists to write about psychological processes as if they were like fingers and toes that each person carries from one situation to the next”.

The second area of discussion, the allure of infant determinism, is of special appeal to the present reviewers who have independently ploughed the same furrow, reaching the same conclusions as Kagan. The notion of critical periods, identified in the psychobiology of animals, caught the imagination of developmentalists who transposed it to humans. This idea was, however, overturned by the discovery that damaged children, the victims of adversity, often reverted to normality after rescue and placement in much better conditions. But a belief in the potency of early experiences has been revived in studies of early
attachment, thought to provide an inner representation, a working model, for later relationships. Here Kagan treads on what, for some, is sacred ground by attacking Ainsworth’s Strange Situation, a method for establishing security/insecurity of attachment in early childhood. For example, between 15 and 20% of children are genetically programmed to fear novelty; they will appear insecurely attached even though most will have sensitive, loving, predictable mothers. So, too, with children used to day-care and therefore familiar with their mothers’ disappearance and reappearance. In the Strange Situation they will be unperturbed by the mothers’ absence and will ignore her upon return. Kagan is equally critical of the Adult Attachment Interview, which seeks to explore adults’ feelings about the quality of their own childhood attachments. He believes that questions about the role of early experience lie at the heart of many debates in the field of development.

In the pleasure principle, the author distinguishes two very different psychological states. The first originates in changes in one or more sensory modalities, either increasing or decreasing excitement. The second, qualitatively different, state originates in thought rather than sensation; this seeks a consonance between a personal standard and a chosen action, a sort of ‘feel good’ factor. The affirmation of one’s virtue takes precedence over the search for sensory pleasure; humans are the one species that applies a symbolic evaluation of good or bad to thoughts, feelings, and personal characteristics, trying to choose acts that make it easier to regard the self as good. The evolution of Homo sapiens was marked by the emergence between the second and third year of symbolic categories ‘good’ or ‘bad’, which then develop over the next decade. Kagan also takes a tilt at the ‘continuist premise’, arguing that the pervasive influence of evolutionary theory is one reason for the relative lack of work on moral motives and emotion. Although many human qualities are ultimately derivative of tendencies observable in monkeys, many are not. We look from our primate ancestry a keen sensitivity to the voice, face, and actions of others, but there have been added five unique abilities: a capacity for (1) inferring the thoughts and feelings of others; (2) self-awareness; (3) applying categories of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ to events or to self; (4) reflecting on past actions; and (5) knowing that a particular act could have been suppressed. Some have been too accepting of the view that humans bear the indelible stamp of their lowly origins. Human moral sense, like the spider’s web, is a unique product of evolution, maintained because of its survival value. Kagan argues that the number of universal moral rules—thieves, theft, abuse, rape, and murder that occurred yesterday is infinitesimal when compared with the total number of opportunities each adult has to display these forms of behaviour.

This book has considerable underpinnings in philosophy, but is packed with research findings, the interpretation of which some will find controversial. It is iconoclastic in its approach, beautifully written, and represents a lifetime of thinking about human development. It should be read by those prepared to examine their fondest assumptions, as well as by those normally reluctant to do so!

Ann and Alan Clarke


There is much debate about who should provide appropriate treatment for disorders of overactivity and inattention. In the United States, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) has been seen predominantly as a biological disorder and therefore legitimating the realm of paediatricians and child and adolescent psychiatrists. In the United Kingdom, child and adolescent psychiatrists have, up until recently, the clinicians primarily involved in assessments and treatment. This book is mainly aimed at the American paediatrician market but may be of some limited interest to clinicians in the United Kingdom given the extent of the information it reviews.

To set the scene we are taken through historical developments, charting some of the changes in terminology and knowledge. The style used overall is a question and answer approach which, although refreshing, can at times be quite confusing. The chapters run through a standard format of causes, symptoms and signs, diagnosis, comorbidities, and management. An interesting although not always balanced view of current research findings in these areas is provided. The major problem with this book is that it veers from endorsing pure biological approaches at one extreme to unquestioning acceptance of alternative therapies at the other. There is very little, for example, about the value of assessment of family problems and parenting styles that may be contributing to presentations of ADHD.

Overall this is a book that is really aimed predominantly at paediatricians. Although very useful in the way it covers issues, it is biased in its approach and details a number of questionable clinical practices. Its value is in providing a good introduction to the subject for those who find more standard texts boring, but its limitations should be kept in mind.

Mary Cameron


This is a fascinating book, and a mine of information concerning theories and data on perception, from the work of Berkeley in the 18th century up to the present day. The authors are mainly concerned with bringing together theories and evidence concerning the information in the world, which is utilised in human perception, with the representations and processes that constitute perceptual content. They explicitly do not deal with the biological mechanisms involved in perception. Inevitably the nativist-constructivist debate is a theme running through the book, the authors taking the view that ‘... human mental life begins…(with)...a coherent, meaningful, reality furnished by perceptual mechanisms’ (p. 307). The relationship between ontology and evolution is another theme running through the book. The meat, however, consists of an extended review of visual perception, divided into chapters on the perception of space, patterns, objects, and—most interestingly, because most unusually—of motion and events. There are more perfunctory but nevertheless interesting chapters on auditory perception, including speech perception, and on intermodal perception. There follow three chapters covering the relations between perception and action, and the perceptual foundations of social and cognitive development. These three chapters are potentially extremely interesting, and are good as far as they go. However, they are not written with the same depth of knowledge as the chapters on visual perception. This is a book for academics or research-minded professionals, rather than for practitioners. However, for anyone working with children with sensory or perceptual impairments it is worth looking at, if only to learn how far research into the development of perception has moved in recent years.

Jill Boucher


Richard Brunsetter is an academic child psychiatrist, but this book is written from his clinical experiences as the director of two inpatient services. He aimed to illustrate “what happened behind the unit door” for the benefit of trainees and professionals from all the disciplines involved in this highly specialised field. It is divided into five sections, which progress from a brief history of adolescent inpatient units through discussions of how psychodynamic approaches may be useful in
understanding adolescents and their difficulties. It describes how psychodynamic concepts may be integrated with other approaches and how they can be modified for use in the system of short admissions generated by the managed care approach.

The strength of this book is its easily digestible style and its many clinical examples. It provides a good idea of the dynamics and processes involved in working with severely disturbed adolescents. The chapters on milieu, classification, and formulation are thought-provoking and would be helpful for trainees approaching a placement on an adolescent inpatient unit.

However, perhaps in an effort to appeal to all disciplines, there is material that will be redundant or irrelevant to each professional group, and at times it lacks academic depth. The historical perspective and the section on managed care is most relevant to those working in the United States of America, but has some relevance with issues in Britain.

In summary, this book would be interesting and thought-provoking for those working in an adolescent unit or interested in psychodynamics to dip in and out of, but it should not be considered as an academic text.

Tamsin Ford


This is a great book! In 130 pages it succeeds in imparting the latest research information about the causes of conduct disorder, and at the same time is bang up-to-date about the most effective interventions. The first half covers phenomenology, progression, and causes. Here the latest epidemiological findings are lucidly set out. The recent distinctions between early-onset lifetime persistent and adolescence-limited subtypes are made clear, and the relation to antisocial personality traits is explained. Frick proposes his own addition to subtyping, by distinguishing between callous–unemotional conduct disorder and impulsive conduct disorder. This is interesting, but so far has not been widely adopted or replicated.

The section on clinical assessment stresses the benefits that can arise from using formal questionnaires and interviews, while having the feel of real clinical practice. Frick is refreshing in recognising that often the clinical picture does not fit the diagnostic template, and insists that the clinician tries to develop explanations for discrepant information. He then goes on to argue for a thorough formulation of the problem which includes strengths as well as weaknesses. This must surely be a sound basis for good clinical practice.

The last two chapters give lively examples of the most effective treatment modalities, especially parent management training and interpersonal skills training. He also draws attention to the need for medication where there is co-existent hyperactivity, a factor often overlooked by some writers on conduct disorders. The book ends with a good overview of multi-modal approaches to intervention and picks the best programmes as examples. This book shows all the benefits of a single-author work, where judgements have been made about what to leave out and stress put on the important points.

I heartily recommend this book, along with the second edition of Alan Kazdin’s Conduct disorders in childhood and adolescence, which was published in 1995. It has much to offer the experienced practitioner as well as the beginner.

Stephen Scott


This book is a worthy contribution to a respected Clinical Psychology series. It includes substantial contributions from the Institute of Psychiatry, London and is none the worse for that:

indeed, apart from one contribution from Iran, the book is entirely U.K.-based. However, the reference list is suitable international, reflecting various contributions to the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies and those in response to local, national, and international disasters, which have led to the recognition of the need for, and development of, this distinguished organisation. Thus, the book will be useful to academics who wish to develop concepts of post-traumatic stress disorder and to be informed about the current debate on classification and differential diagnosis, to researchers who wish to devise well-thought-out prospective treatment studies, and to clinicians and administrators who have the obligation, from limited resources, to plan, cost, and evaluate an effective service for those suffering the psychosocial effects of disaster, whatever the scale or scope of that disaster, and bearing in mind that interventions must be effective across ages and cultures.

Post-trauma reactions vary between individuals and this reader recommends a paradoxical approach to this book, with the first reading being directed towards the final chapter, which states the hypotheses on which the book is based and discusses an integrative psychosocial model for the formulation and evaluation of post-traumatic stress reactions. The first two chapters then provide a useful overview of the aetiology of stress disorders in adults, children, and adolescents, followed by contributions on social support and the variation of post-traumatic stress reactions according to personality, development, cultural issues, and psychobiology. Chapters on therapeutic procedures are well edited and effective.

The editor, Bill Yule, Professor of Psychology at the Institute of Psychiatry, is to be congratulated on this thoroughly useful contribution to an expanding field of knowledge.

Jean Harris Hendriks


“A whole book on tearing your hair out. Just the thing for the busy clinician-manager.” It is hard to avoid making such quips when presented with a book on hairpulling, but the editors do a good job in emphasising the seriousness of the condition of trichotillomania. This book is, however, by no means dull. It is full of literary, anthropological, and ethnological facts to propel the average reader through the drier sections.

This is a collection of papers by U.S. authors. The editors have done well in minimising repetition and evening out stylistic differences between authors. The book covers phenomenology, neurobiology, veterinary models, pharmacotherapy, psychoanalytic perspectives, and behavioural psychiatric treatments. There are also separate sections on hairpulling in children and adolescents, and the relationship between trichotillomania and obsessive-compulsive disorder. The penultimate chapter is a cognitive behaviour therapy manual detailing the most effective behavioural treatment found so far. The last chapter is, perhaps oddly, on assessment. However, it leads well onto the collection of assessment instruments in the appendices.

Any disappointment with the book is confined to the content. Conclusions are largely tentative because of the small numbers involved so far in research studies. It is to be hoped that the articles in this book will stimulate research with more “power” to determine the best treatment approaches.

Most clinicians I have spoken to about this subject related more than one patient with trichotillomania for whom the choice of treatment was a problem. This book will go some way to helping them. It is to be recommended for libraries (and there is already a waiting list to borrow it at ours) but the price may deter individual clinicians. The publishers are to be congratulated, however, on such an intriguing jacket illustration (of a woman with many arms all poised to pick). Designed to make the browser pick up the book, it should succeed!

Paul Laking