Founder of Modern Clinical Psychology

David Shakow, Editorial Advisor Emeritus of the Schizophrenia Bulletin, died on February 26, 1981, two months beyond his 80th birthday. Death came shortly after he had suffered a heart attack while at work in his office at the Clinical Center of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland.

There is no better description of Shakow's professional life than the fact that this final illness struck while he was completing his daily regimen of writing articles, contributing chapters to edited volumes, and working on his memoirs each morning in his office.

Shortly before his death, Shakow had mentioned to a close friend that he needed one more decade to complete his work. Those who know him best are aware that had he been granted those four score and ten years, there would then have been the wish for still another decade of work for the aspirant centenarian.

Shakow once began a biographical statement noting that he was born January 2, 1901, on the lower east side of New York—"a most auspicious place to have one's beginnings, for in the early decades of the century it was a teeming intellectual ghetto bursting with vital people and vital institutions which kept the southeast corner of Manhattan Island in spirited uproar."

Like so many other first generation Americans born to immigrant parents, Shakow remained true to a heritage marked by vital intellectualty and a zeal for learning. In his childhood those attributes were fostered by the horizon-expanding experiences provided by a neighborhood settlement house and the availability of a free public library nearby that served as his intellectual haven.

Later Harvard fostered these qualities in the course of his undergraduate career. As a graduate student in psychology there, he found great profit in the teachings of Boring, Crozier, Hooton, Prince, Wells, Troland, McDougall, Köhler, and others.

Shakow's first major venture into research was a failure—a fortunate event for the future of experimental psychopathology, clinical psychology, and the scientific study of schizophrenia. His first attempt at a doctoral dissertation was a study of subliminal perception, but "equivocal" results led him to abandon that effort.

At that point, married to his beloved Sophie (with whom he was to enjoy 55 wedding anniversaries), and with an awareness that there would soon be a third mouth to be fed, Shakow accepted a position at the Worcester State Hospital, leaving Harvard without having attained his doctorate. Fourteen long years intervened before Shakow finally presented his dissertation to his Harvard faculty. Titled The Nature of Deterioration in Schizophrenia Conditions, his thesis was a collection of research studies that he had generated during the intervening years. In 1946, this work appeared as a Nervous and Mental Disease monograph; it has been reproduced recently in a collection of his writings, Schizophrenia: Selected Papers (Shakow 1977). The monograph is listed as item #45 in a bibliography of 156 citations of Shakow's life work, extending from his first paper with Grace Kent on the Worcester Formboard Series in 1925 to his final one, updating his Stanley Dean Award presentation for a volume now in preparation under...
the editorship of Robert Cancro (Shakow, to be published). The numerical placement of the monograph in his vitae makes evident that its appearance was preceded by other research studies in schizophrenia, several of which could have constituted doctoral dissertations in their own right.

In these early years of Shakow's career, relatively few psychologists were engaged in research in the area that we now term experimental psychopathology. Even fewer psychologists were interested in studying schizophrenic processes.

Shakow's seminal influence changed that picture. As Director of the Laboratory of Psychology of the Worcester State Hospital, he initiated studies that ranged from investigations of simple reflexes of schizophrenic patients to complex studies of reaction time, motor learning, steadiness and tapping tests, play techniques, thought processes, competition-cooperation behavior, intellectual functioning, and level of aspiration.

The appearance of his monograph in 1946 was the beginning of the end of psychology's comparative neglect of research on the nature of schizophrenia. But his work served a far more important purpose. Just as Bleuler's (1950) famed work changed psychiatric conceptions of schizophrenia, so too did Shakow's contribution change irrevocably our views of the psychology of schizophrenia. Both men demonstrated that deterioration in schizophrenic patients was not an inevitable consequence of the disease process. Both provided evidence—one through the clinical method, the other via the laboratory method—that individual variability marked the behavior of schizophrenic persons. Bleuler focused on the schizophrenic as patient, Shakow on the patient as psychological subject. Yet, in the course of their very different orientations, both perceived the normalizing tendencies that were evident in patients and thus the potential for variable prognoses that existed in the disorder.

The famed Worcester Research Program in Schizophrenia (Hoskins 1946; Shakow 1972) saw Shakow assume his role as a senior participant in what was probably the most distinguished assemblage of interdisciplinary scientific talent that we have witnessed in the history of psychopathology research. A decade ago, in an earlier tribute to Shakow, I described this extraordinary period of research collaboration:

The Worcester Program produced such a harvest of persons and papers as to be unequalled in the history of American psychiatry. Four hundred and thirty-nine references spanning 40 years (1929–1969), to which are attached names that are a veritable Who's Who of psychiatry and psychology: Hoskins, Jellinek, Shakow, Huston, Freeman, Rubin, Angyal, Rosenstein, Gottlieb, Hanfmann, Rodnick, Haagland, Hunt, Cameron, Kant, Malamud, Rotter, Roe, Pincus, and Elmadjian among others. . . . It is unlikely that there will ever be another research program in schizophrenia to match this one for the clinical-experimental sophistication and sensitivity of its investigators, the careful delineation of the characteristics of its subject samples, the attentiveness to environmental (ward and laboratory) attributes, the concern for diagnostic precision, the control of therapeutic effects, the unique interdisciplinary flavor, the matchless rigor of its data-gathering, and the staying power of its empirical findings. [Garmezy 1971, p. 317]

Ten years later I see no basis for changing that appraisal, other than to raise the citation count, for during 1979–1981 Shakow added a volume on his theory of segmental set (1979) and papers describing association norms (1980), cooperation behavior (1981) and prodmet learning (Shakow and Huston, in press) derived from the Worcester data.

Shakow was our final contributing link to that historically important Worcester program. He had filed away the original data that Jellinek had so meticulously collected and analyzed. The Schizophrenia Research Program of the Scottish Rite (Northern Masonic Jurisdiction) assisted him, following his retirement, in analyzing these data, enabling him to place the results before contemporary researchers in schizophrenia. This labor of love was a product of Shakow's awareness of the importance of professional, scientific, and historical continuity.

Shakow's theory of segmental set as the basis for psychological deficits in schizophrenia spans four decades. Its first exposition appeared in 1934 and was enhanced in 1940 with the publication of the classic study on reaction time conducted with his colleague, Eliot Rodnick (Rodnick and Shakow 1940). In 1979 Shakow's definitive statement on a theory of segmental set was presented in his volume, Adaptation in Schizophrenia. As always, his statement of his contribution carried a modest, cautionary note. "Although this theory," he wrote in the Author's Preface, "is developed more thoroughly here than ever before, it is still in hypothetical form, having many unexplored
areas needing refinement, elaboration, and analysis."

There is another segment of Shakow's professional contributions that requires mention. He was not only a researcher but he was a founder. Shakow rightfully deserves recognition as the father of modern clinical psychology (Kendell and Butcher, in press). It was he who provided the leadership in espousing the view that the role of the clinical psychologist was to be both scientist and practitioner in the mental health field. He respected both enterprises, but he gave primacy to the role of clinical psychologists to the roles of researcher and scientist. And he had a credo to accompany that role. Always researchers had to have:

knowledge of the subtleties of the person they are working with; who, recognizing the many variables involved, are modest about the knowledge they achieve; who are as accurate as possible about the observations they make; who check out these observations repeatedly for dependability; who have some appreciation of the meaning, as well as the factualities, of their observations; but who are still willing to stick their necks out. A tall order for all of us. [Shakow 1969, p. 619]

It can be said of David Shakow that he was one of the most influential figures in American psychology. He parented a mental health discipline and demonstrated, as teacher, researcher, and administrator, how that discipline could contribute to heightening our understanding of one of society's most malignant diseases. He provided a revision of how clinician and researcher would jointly contribute to such understanding. And he did all this with a dedication, a truthfulness, a vigor, and a humanity that honors all who follow in his path.

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References


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