

E. Fuller Torrey's Fantasy Trial Regarding Schizophrenia Researchers

Schizophrenia is fraught with advocates of different theories. E. Fuller Torrey, however, is the most public and vocal in his *condemnation* of theories that are not biological. His book, *Surviving Schizophrenia: A Family Manual (Revised ed.)*, ©1988, New York: Harper & Row, has sold over a million copies. He might be recognized as the foremost critic of psychodynamic theories and he is a popular proponent on talk-shows. Torrey not only criticizes, but condemns developmental theories. He reproduced a mock trial, that he wrote for another publication, in his book. The entire provocative passage is quoted as it originally appeared in 1977 as “A Fantasy Trial About a Real Issue.”

No trial since Nuremberg has stirred so much public interest. And when the names of the accused were finally made public—more than 100 psychoanalyst, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and others—the crowds became so large that the proceedings had to be switched to JFK Stadium.

The main charge was a serious one—iatrogenic (“induced by medical treatment”) anguish. As intoned by the federal prosecutor: “Over a period of more than two decades, the accused did willfully and with forethought but no scientific evidence blame the parents of patients with schizophrenia and autism for their children's condition, thereby causing great anguish, guilt, pain, and suffering by these parents. As healers you broke the cardinal rule; you *caused* suffering when you should have been relieving suffering.” It was a class-action suit for the parents of over 1.2 million schizophrenic and autistic patients, and it seemed as if all the parents wanted to attend the trial.

According to the charges, the defendants had blamed the parents for being over protective, hostile, rejecting, cold, unfit, domineering, irrational, indifferent, schizophrenogenic—in short, malevolent, inhuman mothers and fathers. Charges against Bruno Bettelheim took several hours to read. He was accused of blaming the mothers for being inept, and thereby causing autism in some children. The ineptness, Bettelheim said, may begin with the mother's first attempts to feed her child.

R. D. Laing had been extradited from England and was additionally charged with willful obfuscation. As evidence the prosecutor read into the court passages such as the following:

In those families of schizophrenics that have been studied in detail, a consistent finding appears to be that there is minimal genuine confirmation of the parents by each other and of the child by each parent, separately or together, but there may not be obvious disconfirmation. One finds, rather, interactions marked by pseudo confirmations, by acts which masquerade as confirming actions but are counterfeit. The defense maintains that Laing was a poet, and that his writings should be taken the way we read Lewis Carroll's “Jabberwocky.”

The views of Theodore Lidz evoked cries of outrage from the assembled crowd, especially his contentions that parents of schizophrenic children are “narcissistic” and “egocentric.”

And so it went, day after day, defendant after defendant. Harry Stack Sullivan, Melanie Klein, Fromm-Reichmann, Jackson, Bateson, Haley, Wynne, Bowen, Searles, Stierlin, Burnham, on and on. Those who died were tried in absentia. It was rumored that several hundred more, who had told parents they were responsible though they had not published papers on it, were going to be brought to trial at a later date.

The prosecutor made a devastating case. “Why did you extrapolate your theories from so few case histories? Why didn't you use controls? Didn't you know your sample was biased? Why didn't you do prospective studies? Why didn't you take into consideration genetic, biochemical, and neurophysiological research? Weren't you reading your professional journals? Isn't it true that you personally gained prestige and an associate professorship from the promulgation of your theories? Wasn't this all at the expense of the parents?”

The defense based its whole case on ignorance, but ignorance is no defense even for the well-educated.

The jury's verdict was swift and certain: guilty on all counts as charged. In the days before sentencing there was much speculation of what would be appropriate punishment. Some advocated life imprisonment. Others thought that the defendants themselves should have to raise autistic or schizophrenic children. Finally, the sentence was read: “The convicted, for a period of 10 years, shall be forced to read and reread continuously their own writings.” Everyone was stunned. Relatives wept openly. Nobody had expected that harsh a sentence (Torrey, 1988, pp. 166-168).

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