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Biography of Eric Schopler

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Biography

Eric Schopler was born in 1927 in pre-war Furth, Germany. His Jewish family moved to the United States in 1938, right before the start of the Second World War. He served in the army for several years before attending the University of Chicago, where he earned his undergraduate degree in psychology in 1949, along with his graduate degree in psychiatric social work from the school of social service administration in 1955. Before returning to Chicago to earn his Ph.D., he worked as a family counselor, social worker, and researcher for the Treatment and Research Center for Childhood Schizophrenia. He went on to earn his Ph.D. in clinical child development in 1964 from the University of Chicago. Throughout his years at the University of Chicago, Schopler developed a strong basis for the future autism research he intended to pursue in his post-doctorate career, specifically concerning the way autistic children learn and respond to certain stimuli.

Schopler was pursuing his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago during the same time that Bruno Bettelheim was promoting his “refrigerators mothers” theory. Bettelheim was one of the most well-known autism researchers of his time. Bettelheim took a psychoanalytic view of autism and believed that autism was a result of negative parent interaction, a view that Schopler disagreed with. Schopler later referred to Bettelheim as a ‘negative role model,’ and chose to adopt an empirical approach to understand autism and its treatment.

Schopler completed his dissertation research under Sheldon H. White. His dissertation examined autistic children’s receptor preferences, specifically examining whether children with autism learn information better when information is given visually, as opposed to learning the information in an tactile format. He found that that children with autism showed less preference for visual stimuli compared to non-autistic children. A task that is used to demonstrate this effect is a puzzle task that Schopler used in subsequent studies. (See original image on FUSE of puzzle). The visual way of solving a puzzle would be to look at the colors or the print of each piece and use the picture to solve the puzzle, while a tactile way would be to use the shape of each piece instead. Schopler discovered that children with autism looked at the shapes of the pieces while normal functioning children looked at the print of the pieces on the puzzle. This demonstrated that children did not simply behave differently, but saw the world and processed information differently than non-autistic children.

After completing his studies at the University of Chicago, Schopler accepted a position at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he began collaborating with Dr. Robert Reichler. Schopler and Reichler received a grant in 1966 from the National Institute of Mental Health to research treatment plans for children with autism. Schopler’s earlier work suggested that children with autism learn through visual information. Additional studies discovered that children with autism perform better under structured teaching as compared to unstructured methods. Structured teaching is a way for students to learn and comprehend the world around
them through visual cues rather than auditory or implicit cues. This form of teaching is focused on breaking down a task into individual steps that a child with autism will understand, and prevent them from feeling overwhelmed. Typically this approach involves using a visual schedule (a series of pictures resembling a specific task) to help a student successfully work through their day.

Schopler developed the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-Handicapped Children program (TEACCH) based on the findings from his earlier research. The program began in 1972 and aimed to provide the “clinical services such as diagnostic evaluations, parent training and parent support groups, social play and recreation groups, individual counseling for higher-functioning clients, and supported employment” (http://teacch.com/about-us).

In addition to using structured teaching as a key component of the program, Reichler and Schopler also included parents in the therapy process. This was revolutionary in the field of autism research as parents had previously been excluded from the therapy process. Schopler adamantly believed that behavioral therapy was more effective for autistic children if their parents were involved in the therapy process, and advocated for all parents to act as co-therapists in the TEACCH program (for details on his views see his 1971 publication, Parents as Scapegoats). TEACCH became the first state-supported program of its kind, with seven locations in North Carolina, and TEACCH programming being implemented into school curriculum in North Carolina public schools. Subsequently, TEACCH methods have been implemented in countries around the world in countries like Japan, Egypt, and Kuwait. Schopler served as the director of TEACCH until 2002.

For more information, please refer to the link to the official TEACCH website on the FUSE page for in depth information.

Schopler was also influential in that, along with several colleagues, he created the Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS), a rating scale used to identify children with autism. He also was a co-creator of the Psychoeducational Profile (PEP), a scale that measures the skills and behavioral abilities of children with autism. Both of these scales are used in the assessment of children in the TEACCH program and are used to inform the development of educational and treatment programs which are unique to each child.

Over the course of his career, Schopler published more than 200 books and articles and presented at hundreds of conferences around the world. His contributions to autism research were recognized with numerous awards, including the Autism Society of North Carolina’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005, the American Psychological Foundation’s Gold Medal for Life Achievement in the Application of Psychology in 2006, and the American Psychological Association’s Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Advancement of Knowledge and Service in 1997. Although Schopler passed away on July 7, 2006, near Mebane, North Carolina at the age of 79, his influence in autism research, as well as the TEACCH program, will live on for many generations to come.
References


