Psychotherapy by Reciprocal Inhibition

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Abstract—Reciprocal inhibition is a process of relearning whereby in the presence of a stimulus a non-anxiety-producing response is continually repeated until it extinguishes the old, undesirable response. A variety of the techniques based on reciprocal inhibition, such as systematic desensitization, avoidance conditioning, and the use of assertion, are described in detail. Behavior therapy techniques evaluated on the basis of their clinical efficacy are found to have striking success over traditional psychoanalytic methods. Currently, more comparative studies are required which will validate the merit of behavior therapy in the psychotherapeutic field while experimental research should continue to refine the techniques.

Psychotherapy is at last emerging from the wilderness of speculative thinking and making its way into the cultivated fields of scientific research. Therapies based on speculative theories are beginning to give way to methods rooted in experimentally established principles. It has been demonstrated that neuroses can be produced experimentally in animals, and their production is a matter of learning. The neurotic behavior can be removed by relearning procedures. Similar methods have been shown to be highly effective in overcoming human neuroses in a thorough and lasting way. Reciprocal inhibition techniques are one group of such methods, and I shall tell you about them and their achievements by way of answering four questions:

What are reciprocal inhibition techniques?
What reciprocal inhibition techniques are there?
What are the clinical achievements of reciprocal inhibition techniques?
What are the urgent research questions?

What Are Reciprocal Inhibition Techniques?

Reciprocal inhibition techniques are used to overcome persistent habits of unadaptive responding. A competing response is made to
interfere with the response that one wishes to abolish. The compet-
iting (incompatible) response must therefore be elicited in the
presence of the stimuli that would evoke the undesired response,
and must be "stronger" than the latter. The undesired response is
then inhibited, and the strength of its habit consequently dimin-
ished. Since the source of the inhibition is the competition of a
second response, and since under other circumstances the situation
could be reversed and the second response could be inhibited by
the first, it is appropriate to describe the process of change as
conditioned inhibition based upon reciprocal inhibition.

What Reciprocal Inhibition Techniques Are There?

Reciprocal inhibition techniques have in the main been used to
overcome neurotic anxiety (persistent unadaptive learned anxiety-
response habits). Their efficacy was first demonstrated in connec-
tion with experimental neuroses in cats. Neurotic anxiety-response
habits were induced in the animals by shocking them repeatedly
in a small cage. The animals thereby developed a permanent habit
of anxiety response in the cage and also habits of less intense
anxiety in the experimental laboratory and in rooms that were
physically similar to it. These reactions proved to be indefinitely
persistent without any further shocks. They showed no sign of
weakening no matter how often or for how long an animal was
exposed to the experimental cage or room. However, they could
be weakened and ultimately removed if the animal could be in-
duced to eat repeatedly in the presence of anxiety-evoking stimuli.
Since the animal's eating was completely inhibited in places where
anxiety was strong, the food had first to be offered in a place that
aroused anxiety weakly—for example, in a room slightly resembling
the experimental laboratory. There, eating would occur and inhibit
the anxiety; repeated feedings would diminish it to zero. Then
the animal could be fed in successively "stronger" situations, until
eventually he would eat without anxiety in the cage where the
neurosis had been induced.

As early as 40 years ago, Mary Cover Jones used eating to
counter-condition children's phobias, and recently her method has
again been used for treating children. There are other reciprocal
inhibition techniques that are more readily applicable to adults.

Assertive Responses

Where the patient has neurotic fears in interpersonal inter-
changes, for example, if he is overapologetic or afraid to ask for