

# What's Wrong with the Poor?

Psychiatry, Race, and the War on Poverty



MICAL RAZ

*What's Wrong with the Poor?*  
PSYCHIATRY, RACE, AND THE  
WAR ON POVERTY

*Mical Raz*

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## *What's Wrong with the Poor?*

STUDIES IN SOCIAL MEDICINE

Allan M. Brandt, Larry R. Churchill, and  
Jonathan Oberlander, *editors*

*To the brave MEN and WOMEN—  
PATIENTS, STAFF, and VOLUNTEERS—  
at Physicians for Human Rights, Israel*

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## INTRODUCTION

AT A WHITE HOUSE AFTERNOON TEA in February 1965, Lady Bird Johnson announced the establishment of Project Head Start, an early childhood educational program that would serve children—many of them African American—from low-income homes. Designed and administered by the Office of Economic Opportunity, this new program drew much media attention. Moved by the educational opportunities these children would be afforded but distressed at their meager backgrounds, the First Lady described how some of these children had never seen a flower, had never sat in a chair; some did not even know their own names.<sup>1</sup>

Today, these clearly erroneous perceptions of children from low-income and minority backgrounds seem misguided, even comical. Why would a well-intentioned public figure such as the First Lady display such a negative perception of children from low-income homes? What did she think their homes were like—isolated dungeons? As a matter of fact, she did, and she expected many of her listeners to think the same way. Images of extreme isolation shaped the prevailing perception of the family life in low-income homes, and throughout the 1960s, politicians and child mental health experts alike viewed the lives of low-income children and their parents through a focus on what was missing. Relying on experimental research and infant-observation studies, liberal policymakers and mental health experts alike were confident in their knowledge that the poor had very little indeed.

Much of the expert knowledge that provided the scientific basis of this view of low-income homes was derived from experiments in sensory deprivation. These experiments, first carried out in the laboratory of eminent psychologist Donald O. Hebb at McGill University in Montreal, were designed to examine the effects of reduced external stimulation on behavior, cognitive ability, and psychological makeup. Differing in protocol and methods, these experiments shared the goal of reducing external stimuli, an objective that

defined them as belonging to an emerging field of scientific inquiry. Donning goggles, earmuffs, and mittens, subjects spent hours and even days in dark, empty rooms. Before and after the experiment, they completed memory and learning tests and psychological evaluations.

Hebb had long been interested in the effects of the environment on the brain. His 1936 doctoral dissertation, advised by psychologist Karl Lashley, examined the learning abilities of rats raised in complete darkness. Upon graduation, Hebb took on different junior research posts that led him away from his original research interests. He cobbled together a position as a research assistant at Harvard and later worked with pioneering neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield at the Montreal Neurological Institute. Hebb evaluated Penfield's postoperative patients to define the cognitive and psychological effects of brain surgery. In 1942, Hebb accepted a research position at the Yerkes Primate Lab in Florida, where he carried out psychological and cognitive assessments of primates.<sup>2</sup> There he worked alongside experimental psychologist Austin Riesen, who examined the development of chimpanzees raised in darkness, and became a leading expert on deprivation experiments in animals.<sup>3</sup> In 1947, Hebb was appointed professor of psychology at McGill University, and he remained there for most of his career. His interest in the interaction between environment and neurological development and his experience in assessing cognitive and psychological abilities culminated in his widely influential 1949 monograph, *The Organization of Behavior*.<sup>4</sup> Proposing an innovative theory of behavior, Hebb's work was unique in its focus on how the environment and past experiences shaped neural connections. In a continuation of this study, as professor of psychology at McGill, Hebb embarked on a series of experiments examining animals raised in enriched or restricted environments. In the early 1950s, Hebb started examining the effects of restricted environments on adult human volunteers, and this research became caught up in government intelligence concerns.<sup>5</sup>

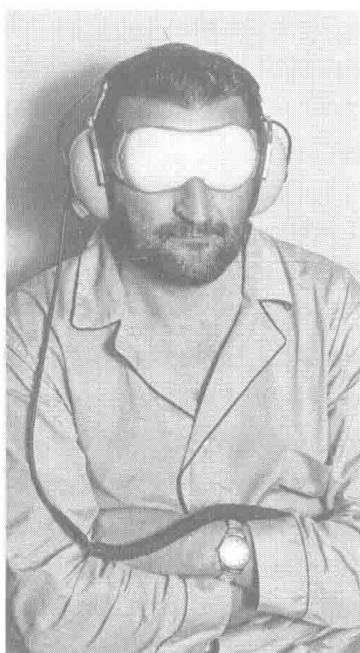
In June 1951, Hebb, as chair of the Human Relations and Research Committee of the Canadian Defence Research Boards, met with senior researcher Cyril Haskins of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency; Ormond Solandt, chair of the Canadian Defence Research Board; and other leading Canadian scientists. At this meeting, Hebb suggested that by sensory deprivation, the "individual could be led into a situation whereby ideas, etc. might be implanted."<sup>6</sup> Hebb later publicly recalled that the work at McGill University began "with the problem of brainwashing." Although "we were not permitted to say so in the first publishing," he explained, the "chief impetus" for

this research “was the dismay at the kind of ‘confessions’ being produced at the Russian Communist trials.”<sup>7</sup> Scientists and intelligence officials saw sensory deprivation research as having the potential to explain extreme cases of changes in attitude, in particular, false confessions and “brainwashing.” From 1951 to 1954, Hebb received funding from the Canadian Defence Research Board for his research on sensory deprivation.<sup>8</sup>

At first, Hebb’s results were kept secret despite his concerns about academic competition, as other researchers began examining similar questions of the effect of environmental restriction. Hebb and his team presented their preliminary, classified results at the Defence Research Board’s 1952 symposium. Their subjects suffered from hallucinations, delusions, disorientation, and out-of-body experiences and scored lower in solving mathematic problems. As part of the research protocol, subjects were asked before the experiment about their attitudes toward controversial topics such as the evolutionary theory or the existence of psychic phenomena. They then underwent sensory deprivation and were subsequently played recordings of arguments against the views they had previously voiced. Testing indicated that they responded more positively than before. Thus, sensory deprivation rendered the subjects more susceptible to attempts to induce attitude change.<sup>9</sup> Hebb and his team had found an extremely powerful tool.

Only in 1954, after descriptions of these studies were leaked to the popular press, was Hebb granted permission to report his results to the scientific community.<sup>10</sup> Early results published in the *Canadian Journal of Psychology* were prefaced by a cover story that explained that these experiments were designed to shed light on “the lapses of attention that may occur when a man must give close and prolonged attention to some aspect of an environment in which nothing is happening.” Examples included “watching a radar screen hour after hour” or “inexplicable” highway accidents; no mention was made of attempts to induce a change of attitude.<sup>11</sup>

This article was the first of a series of publications on experiments involving what would become known as sensory deprivation, which were carried out with human subjects. These pioneering experiments were further developed by researchers in laboratories across North America, including notable researchers such as psychoanalyst and expert in dolphin studies John Lilly at the National Institutes of Health, psychiatrist Philip Solomon at Harvard, and John Zubek at the University of Manitoba. Hebb’s students—for example, Maitlin Baldwin at the National Institute of Mental Health and Canadian psychologist Ronald Melzack, who later credited his interest in the study of



University of Manitoba researcher John Zubek outside his sensory deprivation chamber, ca. 1966. Photo by David Portigal. Conserved in the John Zubek Collection, University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections, Winnipeg.

pain to observations he had made during Hebb's early sensory deprivation experiments with dogs—went on to assume leading positions in sensory deprivation research.<sup>12</sup> Within seven years of Hebb's team's first publication, more than 230 articles on sensory deprivation appeared in leading scientific journals, and most of the authors cited Hebb's work. In 1958, Harvard University held a symposium on sensory deprivation funded indirectly by the intelligence community.<sup>13</sup> It attracted leading researchers who approached the topic from diverse backgrounds: psychiatrists, research psychologists, physiologists, and the director of research at the U.S. Air Force's Aerospace Medical Laboratory. Their papers encompassed a wide range of interests, from the use of sensory deprivation to facilitate psychotherapeutic intervention to changes in EEG patterns that could be documented during isolation.<sup>14</sup> Whereas the late 1940s had seen only a handful of researchers working on the effects of a restricted environment on animals, the interest in sensory deprivation sparked by the McGill studies also led to a surge in animal research in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Researchers across North America experimented with rats, cats, dogs, and primates in restricted and enriched environments, assessing the effects of sensory deprivation.<sup>15</sup> Thus, while both animal studies and the military interests of the United States and Canada influenced the trajectory of sensory deprivation research into the study of human volunteers, this trajectory in turn led to further research on experimental animals.



At the height of its popularity, sensory deprivation was invoked as explanation for a wide range of phenomena from various fields. Psychologists and psychiatrists published articles in professional journals speculating on the role of sensory deprivation in accounts of shipwrecked sailors and Arctic explorers as well as in more mundane situations, such as accidents involving long-distance truck drivers.<sup>16</sup> Well-documented clinical phenomena were also subject to this reinterpretation. Patients often suffered from hallucinations following ophthalmologic surgery; the eye patch was faulted for causing visual deprivation, a form of sensory deprivation. This belief led to a questioning of the necessity of prolonged patching and a change in postoperative care on ophthalmologic services.<sup>17</sup> Psychotic episodes following surgery and immobilization were reinterpreted as caused by sensory deprivation.<sup>18</sup>

Even the success of the psychoanalytic setting was credited to sensory deprivation. Psychoanalyst Karl Menninger used the framework of sensory deprivation experiments to describe how psychoanalysis induced regression. One psychoanalyst ventured that the “technical conditions of psychoanalysis—the couch, the injunction against ‘acting out,’ the psychoanalyst as a blank screen, etc—involve stimulus deprivation.” Similarly, another analyst suggested that the “quiet of the analyst’s office, the patient’s supine position, his inability to see the analyst and the absence of everyday verbal response” created a form of sensory deprivation.<sup>19</sup>

Sensory deprivation experiments provided the impetus for a reevaluation of popular mental health theories, leading researchers to rethink their work through an emphasis on what was missing. The field enjoyed both significant scientific prestige and wide cultural currency, as a number of popular articles in the mid-1950s described the psychological perils of monotony, boredom, and isolation.<sup>20</sup> By the early 1960s, this emphasis on deprivation became the leading theoretical approach in the American mental health profession.

As this book demonstrates, mental health experts privileged interpretations that focused on what was missing in contexts as diverse as children in orphanages to the race riots of the 1960s. *What’s Wrong with the Poor?* examines how this deprivation discourse of mental health and child development experts shaped social policy in the 1960s. Sensory deprivation serves as the starting point for this analysis, which follows how theories of deprivation developed by psychiatrists and psychologists became the leading framework by which to evaluate the lives, needs, and abilities of low-income children and adults of color. Various external stimuli were seen to be crucial for the development of normal intelligence and a healthy psyche. While sensory deprivation