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Computer Applications in Psychiatry and Psychology. Clinical and Experimental Psychiatry Monograph No. 2. David Baskin (Editor). New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1990, 178 pages + xiii, \$23.95 (hard).

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Computers have many potential practical uses for mental health professionals, yet their acceptance and use has lagged behind that found in business and the natural sciences. Perhaps this is because the average professional is not aware of how computers can be of value to his or her practice. Based on a tristate symposium sponsored by the Department of Psychiatry at Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University, the present work is an excellent survey of the many real and potential applications computers can have in the mental health professions.

Following brief introductory chapters, Chapter 3 presents a survey (Schwartz, 1990) of subscribers to "Computers in Psychiatry/Psychology" completed in 1986 which found that word processing, database programs for billing and insurance purposes, and psychological testing were the most common uses of computer systems. Word processing was used largely for report and article writing, while relatively few clinicians used word processing to record progress notes. The second most common use was database programs to store and retrieve general information about patients, and for billing and insurance forms.

Computers have also been used to process biofeedback signals and for enhanced video games for assisting cognitive rehabilitation. Fantasy role playing games have been used to help teach adolescents impulse control and long-term planning, and may even foster cooperation in peer relationships. Programs have been developed to simulate memory systems and even patients.

Psychological testing programs were used by about one-third of respondents to the survey and, in fact, are the most widespread use of computers in mental health. Most psychological tests are now available in computer form. Unfortunately, many practitioners are using these tests without adequate training and without understanding their construction and interpretation. Scott Wetzler nicely explains the advantages and pitfalls of these programs (Chapter 5).

John Griest reviews the use of computers in psychiatric diagnosis (Chapter 4) and Plutchik and Karasu discuss computerized interviews (Chapter 6). Harold Erdman has created an accurate DSM-III program, and Griest's own research found no difference between Diagnostic Interview Schedules (a subset of DSM-III criteria) collected by computer versus those collected by trained interviewers. One study found com-

puters to be more accurate than clinicians at predicting suicide attempts. While human interviewers can recognize nonverbal cues, several studies have shown that clients reveal more personal information and more socially undesirable information to the computer. For example, alcoholics admit to a computer greater alcohol consumption. And computers have no reluctance to ask sensitive questions; nor do they forget to ask a question.

Computers as psychotherapists is the most controversial application. Programs exist which can interview patients about phobic avoidance and then construct a graded hierarchy for systematic desensitization. Depression has been successfully treated with computerized cognitive behavioral programs. Griest points out that the continuing medical education of computers is easier than that of clinicians and notes that "computer therapies can be programmed not to seduce and sleep with patients" (p. 37).

Chapters 7 through 12 discuss the use of Management Information Database Systems in Community Mental Health Centers. Database systems are like computerized card files which allow rapid access to any information on any or all clients. Their primary uses include appointment scheduling, record keeping, generating reports, and billing. One advantage is that billing will always agree with clinical reports since the source of the information is the same. These programs may also be used for quality assurance, program evaluation, planning and research. However, a nationwide survey (Baskin and Seiffer, 1990) [Chapter 12] found that computerization did not reduce costs but did increase an organization's efficiency. It also revealed that the computer had not changed the type of information collected but made that information more accessible and useful.

This book should be useful to those considering whether a computer will enhance their practice or help their agency. It does not discuss particular hardware or make specific purchasing recommendations, but readers will be better equipped to make their own decisions after reading this book.

References

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