

MAYO CLINIC
ROCHESTER, MINNESOTA
55902
TELEPHONE 252-7511
AREA CODE 507

HOWARD N. LITIN, M.D.
MAURICE J. BERRY, JR., M.D.
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SECTION OF PSYCHIATRY
SENIOR CONSULTANTS
DAVID A. ROYD, JR., M.D.
HOWARD P. HOWE, M.D.

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY
JOSEPHINE C. EWERT, M.A.
JOHN S. PEARSON, Ph.D.
WENDELL H. BERBERG, Ph.D.
RICHARD S. HOLSTOFT, Ph.D.

September 8, 1964

Mr. Wesley J. Liebeler
c/o President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy
200 Maryland Avenue N. E.
Washington, D. C. 20002

Dear Mr. Liebeler:

I was waiting for the manuscript of Chapter VII before sending you these comments as additions to the speculations I ventured during our discussions on July 9th.

The following is a summary of my ideas on the subject of reading disability. The material which the Commission furnished me, in my judgment amply documents the impression that Lee Harvey Oswald had a specific language disability more commonly referred to as reading disability which (unfortunately as is true of a great many persons) was not recognized by his various teachers nor by the several psychological examinations he was given.

I think that this disability and its consequential effect upon him, while a minor point, in the total array of evidence accumulated by the Commission is relevant since it amplifies the impressions from many sources about the nature of Oswald's estrangement from people, his diffident truculence during school

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years and his unwarranted estimation of his literary capacities.

Such traits as these are not uncommon sequelae of a life-experience which has been marked by repeated thwarting in almost every sphere of endeavor. For a bright person to be handicapped in the use of language is an especially galling experience. It seems to me that in Oswald's instance this frustration gave an added impetus to his need to prove to the world that he was an unrecognized "great man".

As for the evidence of this reading-spelling disability: in a ninth grade record he misspelled Vogel for Voebel. The compensatory effort at phonetic kind of approximate spelling (which is evident throughout his writings) is seen in his writing "Arthor Abear" for "Arthur Herbert" (96 - p. 20, Chapter VII).

The "Historic Diary" is replete with errors typical of this disability. Oct. 21, 1959 (176) "fondes" for "fondest", "offial" for "official", "rist" for "wrist", "plaug" for "plunge".

There are further examples of his typical efforts at a crude approximation of proper spelling: "enorgies" for "energies" (187), "compulsory" for "compulsory", "patrioct" for "patriotic", "opions" for "opinions", "esspecially" for "especially" (202), "disire" for "desire" (203), "unsuraen" for "insurance", "indepence" for "independence", "negleck" for "neglect", "immeanly" for

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"immedately", "abanded" for "abandoned" (209), "nuclus" for "nucleus", "triditional" for "traditional" (212), "imperilistic" for "imperialistic" (213), "altturnative" for "alternative" (217), "triditions" for "traditions" (218), "naccary" for "necessary", "trations" for "traditions" (219), "prefered" for "preferred", "indession" for "indecision", "remotly" for "remotely", "requirers" for "requires", "majustic" for "majestic", "subscriber" for "subscriber" (Watts No. 10), "undiresable" for "undesirable", "douth" for "doubt", "legal" for "legal", "hounourable" for "honorable", "recive" for "receive" (letter dated March 22, 1962), "Nicholylos" for "Nichilayeva" (Commission Exhibit 103), "subscriber" for "subscriber", "confidnence" for "confidence" (A. Johnson Exhibit #1), "honourary" for "honorary" (A. Johnson Exhibit #3), "placare" for "placard" (V. T. Lee Exhibit No. 1), "distrubed" for "disturbed" (V. T. Lee Exhibit No. 5), "magnatic" for "magnetic", "distrubriting" for "distributing" (V. T. Lee Exhibit No. 7), "surpress" for "suppress", "theorys" for "theories", "dying" for "dying", "socializian" for "socialism", "salery" for "salary", "economicsly" for "economically", "renoued" for "renounce" (Comm. No. 295), "apperad" for "appeared", "consuler" for "consular", "surprem" for "supreme" (Comm. Exhibit No. 244), "beausifull" for "beautiful" (Comm. Exhibit No. 306), "untill" for "until" (Comm. No. 308), "wheather" for "whether" (Comm. No. 307), "liberys" for "libraries", "shelves" for "shelves" (No. 45),

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"dissoble" for "dissolve", "legle" for "legal", "belifas" for "beliefs" (No. 46), "Proportty" for "property", "gaurenteed" for "guaranteed", "knowlega" for "knowledge", "remunete" for "remunerate", "distrubation" for "distribution", "manufator" for "manufacture", "investers" for "investors", "enterprize" for "enterprise", "Atheian" for "Athenian", "democray" for "democracy", "fasiam" for "fascism", "discrimenation" for "discrimination", "desimination" for "dissemination" (No. 41), "capitist" for "capitalist", "fasist" for "fascist", "patroticism" for "patriotism", "themseifa" for "themselves", "socially" for "socially", "resugent" for "resurgent", "vielel" for "veiled", "intrests" for "interests", "sponseres" for "sponsors", "abserd" for "absurd", "representative" for "representatives", "imature" for "immature", "tenation" for "tension", "cristan" for "Christian", "conserative" for "conservative", "falicites" for "facilities", "mechnicization" for "mechanization", "regementation" for "regimentation", "imperialist" for "imperialist", "colinies" for "colonies", "coliations" for "coalitions", "experament" for "experiment", "monumentle" for "monumental", "delagated" for "delegated", "depent" for "dependent", "centrilized" for "centralized", "military" for "militarily", "altturnitives" for "alternatives", "whene" for "when", "realize" for "realize" (No. 37).

These are just a sample of the kinds of spelling errors which are repeated throughout the written documents I have had an

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opportunity to examine. They confirm the impression of a distortion in the perceptual sphere. In my judgment, a defect of this degree would be a serious handicap in the facile reading of printed material of any degree of complexity. A person of his reputed intelligence would be acutely conscious of this limitation and consequently chronically frustrated in his efforts to circumvent the disability. It would impose an absolute ceiling on his ability to be accurately informed if reading were the primary route of learning.

The phenomenon of a specific language disability is a somewhat imprecise description of a congenital, neurological deficiency - word-blindness. It is a specific disorder of function and not merely the chance result of a series of external factors. It was established early that difficulties in reading are always accompanied by difficulties in writing and spelling. The latter since they depend on visual recall are often more pronounced and persistent than difficulties with reading, which as a rule can be circumvented by an approximation of meaning by an intelligent person with a moderate disability so that the word-blind person with a moderate defect may achieve a normal or nearly normal proficiency in reading simple material. In the more severe cases there is also difficulty with the reading and writing of numbers and hence with calculation. Occasionally this extends to difficulty in reading

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music so that the phenomenon of congenital specific language disability may not involve only difficulty in reading and writing but may be a more widespread disturbance of function related to symbols in general and is in such instances therefore more accurately termed a general dysymbolia.

Upon inquiry into the process by which printed and written symbols are perceived, stored and recalled to be used in literate communication, it is evident that the defect which impairs the accuracy of the transmission:transformation process is basically one in the domain of spatial relationships: the capacity to keep the message, the picture, as it were, in a fixed and stable geometric pattern throughout the various neuro-psychological steps in the complex task of perception, cognition, and recall.

The defect, therefore, is in one's capacity for acquiring at the normal time in growth, development and education, a proficiency in reading and writing which corresponds to average performance. The deficiency is dependent upon constitutional factors (heredity). It exists in the absence of intellectual defect or of defects of the sense organs (such as physical blindness and deafness) which might retard the normal accomplishment of these skills; and it occurs in the absence of past or present appreciable inhibitory influences in the internal and external environments.

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There are a number of synonyms for specific language disability - congenital word-blindness, strephosymbolia, constitutional dyslexia, (in cases of acquired disturbance of language function) aphasia; alexia refers to the partial or complete loss of ability to read due to disease. Agraphia is applied to the impairment of the ability to write both words as well as letters. Dysgraphia is a constitutionally determined difficulty in writing.

There are a number of diagnostically significant aspects of the cluster of phenomena which comprise specific language disability. The impaired development of the symbol functions which involve principally reading and writing, occur as primitive characteristics which are also to be found in the young as a manifestation of normal variation. Therefore, not all poor readers and spellers are to be construed as being word-blind in this sense of the term. Then too, the phenomenon does not occur in an all-or-none fashion. There are varying grades of disability; in turn these are not static entities but are subject to the fluctuation which may be seen in all persons when they are subjected to, what for them is stress. In other words under the pressure of stress, fatigue and urgency, performance tends to deteriorate. The types of error are not essentially different from those found in normal subjects; the point is that they persist and therefore the reading and writing of the word-blind individual has a certain qualitative character which makes it readily recognized.

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This is to say that the errors of the dyslexic person are traceable to a definite fundamental perceptual disorder, of which the errors are symptoms. In normal persons distraction, fatigue and other temporary curtailments may lead to the same type of error. Then too, errors in reading and spelling must be viewed against a wider background which takes into consideration such factors as age and education and performance over a period of time. In addition all literate skills are influenced by many other factors such as intellectual endowment, interests, age, general health, education and social milieu.

It is thought by some that the nature of the basic defect responsible for the specific language disability is an impairment of the capacity to accurately generalize spatial relations - to see, retain and recall the picture of printed words. This means in a larger sense the ability to orient oneself in relation to objects and symbols. In persons with this type of defect the most outstanding associated uncertainty is left-right orientation. Since this is a sine qua non for accurate literate performance, the deficit (e.g.: reading and spelling errors) is manifested in the mal-coordination of those functions which are required in reading and writing.

Reading disability, as one part of a specific language disability, is a defect akin to color blindness or tone deafness and is not a sign of stupidity, or willful inattention or necessarily

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indicative of a lack of education - although it is frequently taken to be equated with these devalued social behaviors. On the other hand, handicapped by an inability to read and spell at a level of efficiency which would otherwise be attended by rewards, a person with this handicap is at a great premium to maintain sustained attention and interest in activity where he is a consistent poor performer.

The high social value placed upon adequate literate performance by our culture invokes sanctions of considerable significance upon these persons. Inasmuch as they tend to lose status in the eyes of their peers as well as superiors (teachers, parents and adults), they are prone to develop a range of alternative ways of coping with their disadvantaged state: apparent indifference, truculent resistance, and other displacement activities by which they hope to cover up their deficiency and appear in a more commendable light. Frequently they feign illness or preoccupation which alleges visual or auditory impairment. Restitutive and compensatory mechanisms of the usual psychological sort soon cloud the picture with complications so that frequently there is a misattribution of responsibility to various real and fancied psychological and social circumstances which are then made to appear to be causal.

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The nature of the errors which are of a great many varied types, consist of rotations and reversals of letters and syllables, omissions and elisions which are indicative of the perceptual difficulty in maintaining a fixed, true picture of the word throughout the complicated process of perception, cognition and recall. The person with this kind of word-blindness does not see and retain the picture of the word as an entity. It is as if he grasps certain features and tries to guess at the rest by filling in the blanks, as it were. If he attempts to circumvent this difficulty by an untutored phonetic approach as the more intelligent do, he encounters a further obstacle in the form of the irregularities, inconsistencies and ambiguities which are characteristic of printed and written English.

English is a language which is typified by considerable variation between its morphemic (form) and phonemic (sound) characteristics. The effect of this leads to confusion in the syntactical or organizational arrangements between "i's" and "e's" and "ae's" and "ae's"; the syllabification of multisyllable words, and the duplication of consonants. Then too, there is a frequent confusion of letters attributable to the tendency to rotate their axes. Thus, b-d-p-q are frequently mistaken for each other. Similar confusion is prone to occur between U-N and M-W and N and Z inasmuch as N laid on its side becomes a Z. Also one may see "dig" and misread

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it "pig"; also, "was" is often mistaken for "saw". Inasmuch as letters are usually combined with other symbols to form a word, one finds that buried in this context, the recognition of the shape of individual letters becomes more difficult and the result is a confusion between e-c-o, m-n-r, l-l, f-t-j, h-b. Misreading in this fashion endlessly, can lead to sheer absurdity and consequently leads to an inability to grasp the meaning of the sentence. Of course, this is greatest with long and unusual words although not invariably so.

In contrast to a first hand examination which is indispensable for a psychiatric evaluation, one can establish a diagnosis of a specific language disability from written productions. Consequently, I feel I can say with a greater degree of confidence that the written material attributed to Lee Harvey Oswald that I have had the opportunity to review is consistent with the clinical picture one sees in individuals with this disability.

As for my other impressions. Here one has had to rely on inference and supposition and consequently it is not possible to do more than hazard a guess at what might actually have been the significant train of events and experiences in his life which shaped his responses and motivated his reactions. In the light of this insoluble doubt, the Commission has been forced to piece together

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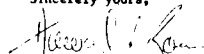
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the most likely data. The probability of such conjectures being accurate ones is based on analogy. It is my impression that the carefully documented reconstruction of his life, buttressed by the evidence gathered from many first hand witnesses fits the pattern of behavior which the Commission's Chapter VII summarizes. I feel that the inferences which have been drawn are justified. The conservative manner which characterizes their presentation does not in any way strain my credulity. I do not find any construction which warrants modification. In short, I feel that this is a most thorough and at the same time a restrained analysis of a very tragic event.

I hope the foregoing is responsive to your inquiry. If an elaboration of any point would be helpful to the Commission, I would be pleased to make what further contribution I can.

Sincerely yours,



Howard P. Rome, M. D.

HPR:jm

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