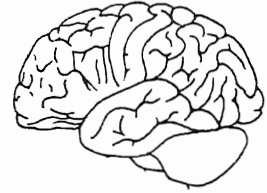




Profile #7
MARGARET BRENNAN-GIBSON, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychology



BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Brennan-Gibson, one of the first to use hypnosis in the treatment of psychological problems, especially war neuroses, discusses her early studies at the Menninger Clinic, and how World War II provided research opportunities for herself and other women. Her recent research has focused on patterns of creativity and a psycho-analytic biography of the playwright Clifford Odets. She explains how she combines work with marriage to playwright William Gibson and with motherhood. She is an outspoken and active worker in the anti-nuclear movement.

VIDEOTAPE SUMMARY

Professionals Portrayed:

Psychologists

Psychiatrists

Playwrights

Medical Concepts Discussed:

Use of Hypnosis in Treatment of War Neuroses

Creativity Compared to Hypnosis

Social Concepts Discussed:

World War II and Professional Acceptance of Women

The Effect of the Women's Movement on Aspirations and Expectations

The Importance of Collaboration in Scientific Research

Role Reversal in Marriage

Parenting

Anti-Nuclear Movement

Margaret Brenman-Gibson, Ph.D.

Transcript

Interviewer: The Joint Committee on the Status of Women has created and produced a series called “Women in Medicine” with senior women professors at Harvard Medical School. Today we’re talking with Dr. Margaret Brenman-Gibson, Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School.

Interviewer: The main area of interest which you have studied has been in the area of creativity and hypnosis. Were you considered somewhat of a maverick among your colleagues for choosing to make this an area of research?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: Oh sure. I was considered a maverick for marrying this improvident artist in the first place. Yes, definitely, by my family as well. But I would say that yes, the choice of, first of all, hypnosis, which involves an altered state of consciousness which is, in my opinion, not qualitatively different from that state we call the creative state. This means a state in which you are, to some degree, letting go of what we might think of as the most conscious, rational, analytical, logical — all the things that have been called either masculine modes of thought or that have been called left brain thinking, all of that stuff. All of which is altered to some degree by the thing we call hypnosis is probably not that different from the state in which you are open enough to yourself to be creative. Indeed, in the book that I wrote with Merton Gil called “**Hypnosis and Related States**,” there is a chapter on hypnosis and the creative process, in which precisely what I was just alluding to is discussed in some detail. It seems to me I knew way back then — we’re talking about 1959 or something like that which is like twenty-four years ago. I think I knew then, not as clearly as I do now, that it takes an altered state of consciousness for us to enable ourselves to be more open to ourselves than we normally are. Most of us, most of the time, are hanging on to some kind of analytical, logical, rational hold on outer reality in a way which is necessary for survival. I mean, that’s why we have those functions but which also, to some extent, put brakes on that more clearly flowing thing which puts together things that normally you would think don’t go together — that integrates things that have been polarized.

Interviewer: Fairly early in your career you had the good fortune to work with people who believed in your talents. Tell us about your relationship with, who then was your mentor, Robert Knight.

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: Well, that was actually in the first year I was at Menninger’s, and I had learned from Wells at Syracuse University the incredible technique of hypnosis, which he had learned from Morton Prince and William James, if you can believe. This goes back quite a way. Now Robert Knight was then Chief of Staff at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas; and when I gave a seminar, really at the invitation of Karl Menninger, at the end of which Karl Menninger had said — I’ll never forget it, it made me so happy — as I was leaving the room, he shouted to Robert Knight, “Don’t let that girl get away.” Robert Knight, who knew I was stationed down at the Children’s Division of the Menninger Clinic, which was the Southard School, named after our Southard here in Boston — Robert Knight then wrote me a note and said, “It’s a pity for you to keep hiding your light under a bushel down in the

Interviewer: What are the rewards of working in an academic setting?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: I would say the essential reward of working in an academic setting, provided that you are at the same time continuing your clinical work, is the breadth of the intellectual bases that are touched in an academic setting and that are made infinitely more accessible to you. I don't think it's possible, really even in the most sophisticated clinical installation, to begin to match the richness and the scope and the range of intellectual nutrition that a really good academic setting, particularly this one, offers. This is unique in the world, as far as I can see.

Interviewer: You're married to playwright William Gibson.

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: I am.

Interviewer: You were very involved in your career at an early age before he became a successful writer. How did this affect your relationship?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: At the time it was all happening, early in my career when I was the breadwinner, and he was, really, the non-earning poet in the family, as far as I knew then, there was no real problem. But as we looked back over it, you know, later, it seemed to both of us that he had been harboring kinds of resentment, kinds of humiliation, at being regarded as my adjunct, my worser half, I suppose you'd have to say, "Mr. Brenman"!

Interviewer: Was there competition in your marriage?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: Again, it's a question of how conscious it was when. I would say the competition in our marriage is infinitely more conscious now than it ever was in the early days because in the last year and a half, I have been very happy with the success of the book that I wrote called "**Clifford Odets: An American Playwright**".

Interviewer: What Clifford Odets?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: Well, I think that's really answered — in a way I think I may even answer it in the book itself — which is that when I was growing up the 'thirties, the culture hero for all of us, including for my husband, was Clifford Odets. He was the playwright who really gave voice to what all of us were feeling then — the necessity historically at that time, which was to say, we must make a world where this creative human potential will have its best chance to flower and grow and enrich all of human life, not just the person who's making the art, but people who are enjoying it. And it's a whole view of life which . . . is essentially very humanist and has values which are exactly at the opposite ends, for instance, of the present values that I am running around the country opposing, namely, that we must destructively win over the other guy rather than creatively allow everyone in the world not only to eat but to live the most — to realize their own potential, you know? Clifford understood that.

Interviewer: You said you met your husband at the age of 17 or 18, and you have been married since, I imagine, your early 'twenties. During the early years of marriage, you and your husband made a conscious decision not to have children, because you were pursuing your training. When did that decision change and why?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: Oh, I think that's probably pretty simple, and it has to do with the life cycle. It didn't become acute, I would say, until the next large figure was being approached, which was 35. Along about that time, I began to get really unsure, very conflicted, about this. I

Children's Division. Soon you will be brought up here to the really important main building, and you will be appointed a research fellow." This was after I had given my very first seminar on hypnosis which they were interested in at that time because this was already during the War, and what was being sought during the War was some way of dealing with the traumatic war neuroses in servicemen who were coming back in droves from the front. People who had been in some hideous kind of combat and who were then having nightmares or other kinds of bad disturbances, who could be helped with hypnosis, as it turned out. So that was a little bit later after the seminar, but I think probably the reason, aside from the fact that Karl Menninger was an intrepid explorer in this field — he was one of the first psychoanalysts in this country — and aside from his own acts of courage in this regard, I think the necessities of the time, which was the War, encouraged them to allow me to really do research in this field. Also to allow one of their talented residents in psychiatry, who was Merton Gil, to work with me, even though at that time, unlike now, hypnosis sounded to most people like something very peculiar and a little quirky and weird and, you know, kind of suspect. At the same time, and I must say that I admire to this day Karl Menninger's wild, intrepid capacity to look into anything that held promise — so it was that which started that whole thing. We got an NIH grant which went on for many years.

Interviewer: Were you the only woman in that setting?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: Yes.

Interviewer: Was there a reluctance to take you under Knight's wing, or did Menninger at all hold back because you were a woman?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: That was not obvious to me at the time. I'm sure that that was there, but you know, I almost hesitate to say this because it's terrible: The fact is, I do believe that one of the reasons I moved as fast at the Menninger Clinic as I did was precisely because it was during the War years when many of the young, gifted men who would have been psychiatric residents or whatever — research people — at the Menninger Clinic, were in the War. Many of them. It's, in a way, a foolish thing to say because it was, after all, staffed by men (the Menninger Clinic) and there was nobody else, man or woman, besides me who was doing this kind of research in hypnosis, certainly not on a theoretical basis to explore creativity or to help the war neuroses. I'm not saying that I had no talent; I'm sure I had some talent at that point, but I think that my acceptance was made easier by the fact that so many of the gifted men were simply in the service. I think women have an infinitely more difficult task in life. I really do, you know.

Interviewer: Given the constraints of the professional market?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: Absolutely. Given the constraints of what we have been "allowed to do" or not do over centuries and centuries. When I talk about maintaining one's feminine identity, I by no means am saying let us give up the hard won territory that we have gained. Oh, not at all. I think it's outrageous, for example, that at this really wonderful University, Harvard University, one of the finest in the world, maybe **the** finest in the world, that among the professors at the Harvard Medical School (actually 300), there are only ten of us who are women!

was still conflicted, I would say, as I guess I might have mentioned to you earlier, was conflicted enough that I asked Margaret Mead what she thought about this. Could women have a career and children at the same time? She said, "No problem." That's really when we started to plan having a family. I have two sons. I would not, for a moment, feel that I would have done better had I not married and not had children. Indeed, as I was telling you earlier, I feel that my own life is infinitely richer for reasons of having gotten married and having children. I don't say it has been easy; it has **not** been easy; it's been very difficult, particularly in the first ten years of their lives.

Interviewer: You are very involved right now in nuclear disarmament, lecturing, going around the country talking about this issue. Why did you choose to take this on?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: After a great deal of soul-searching and really serious thoughts, it became very clear to me that unless those of us who really see the situation clearly, namely, as something that's going to end the planet unless we do something about it, I felt I had to make this one of my highest priorities. I feel this is really beyond anything one could call narrowly political, and I feel that it's essentially a question of education and that unless I, among others of course, help to really educate people to know that the situation, as it stands now, is on a course, that if we don't change that course, we're going to end up where we're heading, which is in a mutual, assured destruction between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Interviewer: You are a full professor at Harvard Medical School. Did you ever consider how your outspoken nature and political involvement would affect your reputation among your colleagues?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: Yes. I have considered it very seriously, and I'm sure that in some quarters it has, as they say, not done me any good. On the other hand, when you consider that all of life involves weighing one set of risks against another, I feel that the risks involved in taking a chance on my reputation, on my standing, or my possible further advancement or whatever, that those risks become nothing, zero, unimportant, compared with the risks that are involved in ignoring the danger this planet is now in. It has become for me such a high priority that I must confess to you that two weeks ago, after really a very long period of soul-searching and deep thought about it and of very sleepless nights, I elected to do my very first civil disobedience action in New York City in front of the Sperry Corporation, which makes most of the component parts for the Euro-missiles, and 21 of us were arrested. I feel very proud of that, you know? I rather like the idea of a professor at the Harvard Medical School engaging in something that really says very clearly, "you are going to have to arrest American citizens of all kinds, not just young, rebellious people who don't like war and who are known to be idealists, but you're going to have to arrest **respectable people.**"

Interviewer: Do you think you would have been as likely to have made the same decision had you been at a different point in your career, say a young, aspiring assistant professor?

Dr. Brenman-Gibson: That's a very good question, and I ask myself that as well, wondering, am I being so "courageous" precisely because I have come, I suppose, as far as you can come, you know, in terms of professional advancement? It's reasonably secure, I suppose. I don't imagine getting arrested for nonviolent civil disobedience with a religious interfaith task force would quite be regarded by an ethics committee as a 'bad' thing. How could they think that? Yet, I think about it, sure. I'm not sure I would have made the same decision if I'd been 32 or something like that. **I would like to think I would have.**

Dr. Margaret Brenman-Gibson
Vocabulary

consciousness: (1) the state of awareness; (2) the totality of experience at any given moment as opposed to mind which is the sum of past consciousnesses; (3) awareness of acts, activities, and reactions; (4) the subjective aspect of neurological activities; (5) self-knowledge, self-awareness (Chaplin).

creative. Pertaining to productive mental application or functioning — usually with the implication of employment of information derived not from direct experience or learning but from conceptual extension of such sources — in the solution or the development of artistic or mechanical forms (Chaplin).

creativity. The ability to produce new forms in art or mechanics or to solve problems by novel methods (Chaplin).

hypnosis. Hypnotic state; an artificially induced trance-like state resembling somnambulism in which the subject is highly susceptible to suggestion, oblivious to all else, and responds readily to the commands of the hypnotist.

neurosis. A psychological or behavioral disorder in which anxiety is the primary characteristic. Defense mechanisms or any of the phobias are the adjustive techniques which an individual learns in order to cope with this underlying anxiety.

psychoanalysis. A system of psychology directed toward the understanding, cure, and prevention of mental disorders.

Dr. Margaret Brenman-Gibson
General Questions

1. What is Dr. Brenman-Gibson's lifelong interest?
2. Who were her mentors and how did they aid her career?
3. What are the rewards of working in an academic setting?
4. How does Dr. Brenman-Gibson describe her marriage to writer William Gibson, and particularly what does she say about a marriage in which her career success came earlier than his?
5. What is a psychoanalytical biography? Why did she write such a biography of playwright Clifford Odets?
6. What stage does she note in discussing her life? For example, what became an acute issue at 35? How did she resolve this issue?
7. How does Dr. Brenman-Gibson evaluate her combining a career with being married and having two sons?
8. What are the possible short range and long range effects of Dr. Brenman-Gibson's political activism on her career?

Dr. Margaret Brenman-Gibson
Science Questions

1. What is hypnosis? How does it create an altered sense of consciousness? In addition to hypnosis, how can consciousness be altered? For example, how can psychopharmaceuticals be used?
2. How can science be used in studying something so seemingly elusive as creativity?
3. Dr. Karl Menninger, one of Dr. Brenman-Gibson's mentors, received his medical degree at Harvard Medical School. Later, he became clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Kansas Medical School and chair of the board of the Menninger Foundation. Dr. Menninger is especially famous for his work on suicide. What are the advantages of a medical degree in the study of behavior? Might there be any disadvantages?
4. When studying human behavior, what problems, practical and ethical, arise in applying the scientific method?
5. What questions may arise in the use of psychopharmaceuticals?
6. What social issues arise from personal use of legal drugs like alcohol and of other illegal drugs, or from the abuse of controlled substances, in order to alter consciousness? Why are such drugs so popular?
7. Why conduct scientific inquiry into the nature of creativity?

Dr. Margaret Brenman-Gibson
Social Studies Questions

1. Do doctors and scientists have a special social or moral obligation to society? Dr. Brenman-Gibson's activism illustrates the nuclear issue. What other issues might be of concern?
2. What lessons in career development might be drawn from her life? Illustrate.
3. What challenges are presented to traditional sex roles during this interview? Explain. How do these challenges relate to you and your future?
4. Are a personal life and a family life compatible with an active and successful career in medicine? Explain.
5. What historical and social factors aided Dr. Brenman-Gibson's career development.
6. What does Dr. Brenman-Gibson mean when she says that "women have an infinitely more difficult role in life given the constraints on what they have been allowed to do over the centuries"?
7. Why has she made political activism on the nuclear arms issue one of her highest priorities? How does she reconcile an act of civil disobedience with her career? Do age and position influence this action?