Kleptomania

One of the impulse control disorders, characterized by an overwhelming impulse to steal.

Persons with this disorder, popularly referred to as kleptomaniacs, experience a recurring urge to steal that they are unable to resist. They do not steal for the value of the item, for its use, or because they cannot afford the purchase. The individual knows that it is wrong to steal. Stolen items are often thrown or given away, secretly returned to the store from which they were taken, or hidden.

Persons with this disorder describe a feeling of tension prior to committing the theft, and a feeling of relief or pleasure while stealing the item.

Kleptomania is a rare disorder. It can begin at any age, and is reported to be more common among females. Kleptomania is different from deliberate theft or shoplifting, which is much more common; it is estimated that less than 5 percent of individuals who shoplift exhibit symptoms of kleptomania. Shoplifting often involves two or more individuals working together; among adolescents, peers sometimes challenge or dare each other to commit an act of shoplifting. Individuals with kleptomania are not influenced by peers, nor are they motivated by a need for the item stolen. This disorder may persist despite arrests for shoplifting; the individual is apparently not deterred by the consequences of stealing, but may feel guilty afterwards.

Further Reading
Working with Max Wertheimer and Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Koffka helped establish the theories of Gestalt psychology. It was Koffka who promoted this new psychology in Europe and introduced it to the United States. He was responsible for systematizing Gestalt psychology into a coherent body of theories. He extended Gestalt theories to developmental psychology, and his ideas about perception, interpretation, and learning influenced American educational theories and policies.

The son of Emil Koffka, a lawyer and royal counselor of law, and Luise Levi (or Levy), Koffka was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1886. His early education was in the hands of an English-speaking governess, and his mother’s brother, a biologist, fostered his early interests in philosophy and science. After attending the Wilhelms Gymnasium and passing his exams, Koffka studied at the University of Berlin with the philosopher Alois Riehl. In 1904-1905, Koffka studied at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, improving his English and becoming acquainted with British scientists and scholars. Upon returning to Berlin, he changed his studies from philosophy to psychology.

Koffka’s first published research, an examination of his own color blindness, was carried out in the physiology laboratory of Wilibald Nagel. Koffka completed his doctoral research at Berlin, on the perception of musical and visual rhythms, under Carl Stumpf, one of the major experimental psychologists of the time.

Cofounds Gestalt psychology

Koffka moved to the University of Freiburg in 1909, as assistant to the physiologist Johannes von Kries, a professor on the medical faculty. Shortly thereafter, he became an assistant to Oswald Külpe and Karl Marbe at the University of Würzburg, a major center of experimental psychology. That same year, Koffka married Mira Klein, who had been an experimental subject for his doctoral research. It was Koffka’s next move, in 1910, that was to prove the most fateful for his career. Koffka and Köhler both went to work as assistants to Friedrich Schumann at the Psychological Institute in Frankfurt am Main. They shared a laboratory with Wertheimer, who was studying the perception of motion. Soon, Wertheimer, Koffka, and Köhler were establishing the theoretical and experimental basis of Gestalt psychology. Their new approach rejected the mechanistic psychology of the nineteenth century, which had attempted to reduce experience and perception into smaller components or sensations. Instead, they favored a holistic approach to perception. Wertheimer had studied with the phenomenologist Christian von Ehrenfels, and the three scientists tried to combine this philosophy with experimental methods. Koffka left to take a position as lecturer at the University of Giessen in 1911, where he continued his experimental research on visual perception and began new studies on memory and thinking. However, he maintained his close association with Wertheimer and Köhler.

In 1914, Koffka began studying hearing impairments in brain-damaged patients, with Robert Sommer, the director of the Psychiatric Clinic at Giessen. During the First World War, he also worked for the military on localization of sound. Koffka was promoted to a professorship in experimental psychology in 1918, a position that increased his teaching responsibilities but not his salary. In 1921, when he became director of the Psychology Institute at Giessen, he was forced to raise his own funds to set up his new laboratory. Nevertheless, Koffka and his students published numerous experimental studies over the next few years, including 18 publications in the Gestalt journal founded and edited by Wertheimer, Köhler, and Koffka.

Applies Gestalt principles to child development

Koffka’s major work extending Gestalt theory to developmental psychology was published in 1921. He maintained that infants first perceive and respond holisti-