

## Reading About . . .

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### Family Therapy

by Arnon Bentovim

There has been an exponential growth in family therapy literature in recent years. An outpouring of new books and journals have deluged the market which is bewildering to new readers. Fortunately, there are now some excellent introductory texts which help orientate the newcomer, such as Walrond-Skinner (1976), Skynner (1976) and Glick and Kessler (1980). For those who like encyclopaedic coverage there is also a recently published excellent and critical handbook edited by Gurman and Kniskern (1981). However, to gain a deeper understanding of the way the field has developed, I would like to focus on a number of texts and papers which have helped me in my own understanding over the years.

#### **The move from family relationships to families in therapy**

The first issue to be thought about is how families came to be seen together in groups. Therapists of most persuasions have always been preoccupied with the family relationships of their patients. They have been particularly concerned with relations enacted in therapy through the recreation of pathological parent-child relationships. This has often meant a working-through of such problems against a background of the family which either initiated or maintained problems, continuing the same pulls and pushes. This implied that other family members, parents or siblings, required case-work or therapy in their own right to ensure the changes in the identified patient did not reverse.

It is particularly fascinating that it took so long before the obvious step occurred of bringing family members together. This happened in a number of different centres at the same time, and a variety of explanations have been put forward for the delay, including the notion that Freud misdirected the field. Lowenstein-Freud (1980) in a fascinating review of "Freud and his Father" (Krull, 1979) suggests that Freud did not pursue the observations he was making of the very real seduction and abuse of children, occurring in families generally as well as in his own, out of loyalty to his deceased father. Instead of continuing to reflect on the painful family secrets of

the Freud family, he replaced such actual events by the notion of wishes or fantasies of seductions and damage, instead of realities. This may very well have led to a tradition that such fantasies and transferences needed to be explored and resolved in the confidentiality of the individual analytic and therapy setting, rather than be aired in the forum of the family where it might cause much embarrassment and pain.

It is also intriguing that some of the first experiments in seeing families together were carried out by Bell on a somewhat mistaken assumption that John Bowlby was regularly seeing families together at the Tavistock Clinic. Such meetings were in fact only occasional (Bowlby, 1949). He began to see families together as a routine, and a number of other workers were beginning to do the same. The excitement of these early experiments comes through in some of the early publications in the field, such as Ackerman (1958), Bell (1961), Bowen (1960), Lidz *et al* (1957), Jackson (1959). The early history of family therapy is now beginning to be recorded, e.g. by Guerin (1976) and Broderick and Schrader (1981); and the history of ideas (Hoffman, 1981).

#### **Theoretical developments and their relationship to therapy**

##### *(a) The family system and strategic approaches*

Immediately a new way of working is instituted, particularly when so many of these approaches centred on the schizophrenic and his family, the process has to be conceptualized and described. Although many attempts were made to do so, I feel the most interesting and new way of looking at the work came through the applications of general systems theory, information theories and cybernetic theories. These are all to do with interaction and communication patterns—the very core of the family system. Thus were born notions of the family as an interacting system which maintained a homeostatic sameness rigidly locking individuals into pathological ways of behaving.

Although much controversy still surrounds notions such as the schizophrenogenic family, nowhere are the creative and useful ideas which emerged better ex-

pounded than in *Pragmatics of Human Communication* by Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1969). Pragmatics are to do with the behavioural effects of human communication, with special attention to disorders in behaviour and relationships which result. The authors took on the formidable task of attempting to cast the semantics of human communication into a comprehensive framework. It is perhaps a sign of the general progress in the field that, re-reading this early work recently, I found that it made far more sense to me than it did ten years earlier. Perhaps we have become so much more familiar with the concepts, that such notions as digital and analogical communication, homeostasis, positive and negative feedback, symmetrical and complementary relationships, and the paradoxical qualities of communications which qualify and disqualify in endless spirals, become far more understandable. Illustrations through plays, such as Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and philosophical statements, such as "All Cretans are liars" by Epimenides, The Cretan, begin to fall into place.

These intriguing ideas can also be found in the collected papers of one of the founders of the application of systems ideas to families in Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1973). This contains the classic paper "Towards a Theory of Schizophrenia" which Bateson wrote with Jackson, Haley and Weakland (1956). Although there thus arose the idea of the family as an organization that could create and perpetuate disorder and disease, the family was also seen as capable of rapid change once destructive forces were harnessed in a therapeutic direction. Following up this work, Watzlawick *et al* (1974) focussed on ways of altering family systems which maintain symptomatic behaviour, to allow developments. They described a series of tasks for families to carry out in between the sessions. In one type of task they expected compliance, existing patterns were to be changed by efforts of the family; the second paradoxically invited the family to defy the therapist by suggesting that existing patterns were to continue as necessary to the family, since even though painful they might prevent something far worse.

Haley, one of the original Palo Alto group, also explored similar themes in a series of papers and books which have had a considerable impact on my own thinking. His first book, *Strategies of Psychotherapy* (1963), introduced the notions of the highly original hypnotherapist, Milton Erikson, whose therapeutic manoeuvres have formed the basis of the so-called 'strategic approach' to family therapy. Haley explored Erikson's work in much more detail (1973) and his own approach is described in two subsequent books, *Problem Solving Therapy* (1977) which dealt with

general behavioural problems, and *Leaving Home* (1980) which dealt with adolescent disturbance. Together with Madanes (1981) the notion of 'pretending' to reproduce the dysfunctional family system was introduced, again as a way of helping the family to feel that instead of a sense of spontaneity and freedom in their dysfunction they are directly in control and have to find other solutions.

#### (b) *Developmental and structural theories*

One of the problems of the so-called strategic approach described here is that it is not so much concerned with the family as a developing entity, but more as a system surrounding a pathological problem. It reminds us again that much of the initial work was concerned with families where the patient was an adult schizophrenic rather than a child. For those concerned with the child as identified patient, the approach described by Minuchin (1974) from his work at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic has been of particular interest. He sees the family as a developing multi-faceted organism, which has a characteristic structure, with a hierarchy of spousal, parental and sibling subsystems separated by semi-permeable boundaries which alter though the family's life cycle. Dysfunction is thus based on failures of boundary maintenance and with this approach many valuable clinical insights can be obtained into delinquency (Minuchin *et al*, 1967) and anorexia nervosa (Minuchin *et al*, 1978). The approach called 'structural family therapy' is one of the best developed technically, and the steps have recently been described by Minuchin and Fishman (1981).

#### (c) *Dynamic and experiential approaches*

A more traditional path of understanding family dysfunction is illustrated by the pioneering work of Dicks (1967) in the marital field, with the idea that 'internal objects'—significant relationships created from infancy and beyond—shape attitudes to others in adulthood, affect the choice of marital partner, and form a template to predict the interlocking patterns of marital and family disturbance. There is an excellent early collection of papers edited by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Framo (1965). Zinner and Shapiro (1974) working in a more orthodox psycho-analytic frame have described the family as a psychic entity, distributing the individual functions of impulse and control between individuals rather than within them. Others, e.g. Lieberman (1980) have described forms of therapy which attempt to re-edit history and family myths (Byng-Hall, 1979). Exploration of family trees—'genograms'—returning back to original members of the extended family, interviewing the parents of adult patients (Framo, 1976) are all techniques which

can also help explode myths, false beliefs and pathological meanings of events. (See also Byng-Hall, 1973; Ferreira, 1963; Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark, 1973; Stierlin, 1977; and Pincus and Dare, 1978).

The use of video playback for the family to experience itself as others see them, family sculpting, family role-playing, art sessions, are described in two useful collections of papers edited by Bloch (1973) and by Guerin (1976).

Haley and Hoffman's *Techniques of Family Therapy* (1967) transcribes a number of sessions of leading family therapists, such as Jackson and Satir, and questions the therapists on their strategies at particular stages.

Further examples of therapist style can be gathered from Papp's *Collection of Full Length Case Studies* (1970), and the original approach of Whitaker (Napier and Whitaker, 1978). There are now a number of excellent reviews of research on family therapy outcome and process studies, e.g. Gurman and Kniskern (1979 and 1981), and an annual bibliography edited by Olsen (1981).

#### Recent developments

Another group has certainly created much interest in recent years with its innovative approach, namely the Milan group, Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin and Prata (1978). They have devised a so-called neutral form of interviewing (Palazzoli *et al*, 1980) to help both understand and begin to unlock the dysfunctional family system, and understand it both in its here-and-now functioning and in the context of its history. The approach has been called a 'systemic' one and interventions require a team to formulate how to get to the fulcrum and centre of the family system and its pathology and to apply remedies to match (Palazzoli *et al*, 1977).

#### Journals and videotapes

The premier journal in the field is the long-established *Family Process* which acted as a unifying force in the early days of family therapy. I always turn to its pages with a sense of excitement and expectation. They also publish reviews of videotapes. The newly-established *Journal of Family Therapy*, published for the Association for Family Therapy, is showing that family therapy as a technique and method of work can be successfully implanted and grow in the United Kingdom and is not nurtured in American soil alone. The Institute of Family Therapy (London) is developing a series of teaching video-tapes. As a sign of the times the long-established *Journal of Marital Counselling* has now been retitled *The Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy*.

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#### Video-tapes

- Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic, 34th and Civic Center Boulevard, Philadelphia, Penn. 19104, USA.
- Boston Family Institute, Publishing Division Dept C, 1170 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Mass. 02134, USA.
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