

## Books Reconsidered

### *One Flesh: Separate Persons: Robin Skynner*

There are probably few practitioners of marital and family psychotherapy who are not aware of the work of Dr Robin Skynner. In his own unique style, he has been part of the vanguard of the development of thinking and practice in these fields. Together with colleagues, he was instrumental in setting up the Group Analytic Practice, the Institute of Group Analysis and the Institute of Family Therapy. He is a teacher, and a prolific writer, and many of his papers, articles and lectures have recently been collected and published in two books (Skynner, 1987, 1989).

Dr Skynner is also widely known to a lay audience, largely through his excellent book co-written with actor and author John Cleese (Skynner & Cleese, 1983). In this book in particular, Skynner demonstrates his capacity to translate complex theoretical and clinical concepts into ideas accessible to a general reader. The sequel to this book, currently being co-written, is keenly awaited.

Much of what Skynner is known for, and what underlies much of his work, was set down in *One Flesh: Separate Persons* in 1976. As the sub-title indicates, this book outlines his "Principles of Family and Marital Psychotherapy". In the opening sentences of the book, Skynner puts marital and family psychotherapy into context. He writes:

"The institution of the family stands in a peculiarly central, crucial position. It faces inward to the individual, outward toward society, preparing each member to take his place in the wider social group. . . . Our needs for physical, emotional and intellectual exchange, and for nurturance, control, communication and genital sexuality, can all exist side by side and find satisfaction in harmonious relationship to one another. . . . It [the family] has enormous creative potential . . . and it is not surprising that, when it becomes disordered, it possesses an equal potential for terrible destruction."

It is exactly because marital and family life is so central to public and personal mental health, either in promoting it, stunting it, or, at worst, damaging it, that it is rightly the concern of the mental health profession. Marital psychotherapy and family psychotherapy should therefore stand alongside individual and group therapies as potential treatments of choice.

In his introduction to the book, Skynner writes of this text being an attempt to provide a review of the various theories of marital and family psychotherapy, with practical guidance and clinical illustrations which may enable professionals to apply the ideas to their own practice. At the time of writing, no such introductory general text was available. What did exist tended to concern itself with either family psychotherapy or marital and sexual therapy, and took either a psychoanalytic orientation or a systemic one.

What is of particular interest and value in this book is the attempt Skynner makes to relate and integrate family, marital and sex therapy viewed from a range of theoretical and conceptual positions. He refers to this himself when, in his chapter on "Developmental Sequences" (Chapter 2), he writes:

"A generally useful classification (of the sequences of events in childhood development) is based on a combination of Freudian and Kleinian developmental concepts, modified in the light of elaborations by other individual-centred therapists such as H. S. Sullivan and E. Erikson, and also by researchers in group dynamics and development, including, Bion, Bennis, Schutz and Durkin."

He goes on to acknowledge that followers of any one of these schools may justifiably feel that some violence has been done to their conceptual schemes. He specifies, for example, that there may well be real differences between Klein's 'positions' of emotional development and Freud's 'stages'. However, he justifies his integrative approach by saying that he is attempting to find the common patterns which must underpin all these various theories.

This lack of theoretical purity, this eclecticism, is one aspect of the book which some readers may find difficult, particularly when many of the clinical illustrations which pepper the book tend towards the anecdotal and personal and so do not readily avail themselves of critical theoretical and clinical examination. However, this criticism, although probably valid, misses Skynner's purpose in writing the book, and also the value that the book still has today. Skynner wanted to introduce the relative beginner, be he/she a psychiatrist, social worker, counsellor or

psychologist, to an overview of the variety of approaches to thinking about and working clinically with couples and families. He was clear in the book that an integrated, eclectic approach is the one he finds most useful for his clinical work. The value of the book goes beyond that: it allows the practitioner to discover, from his own experiences, which of the conceptual and technical models he finds most therapeutically valuable. It is this that I personally found most satisfying when I first read the book on its publication, and still do now on re-reading it. It has always remained a textbook to dip into.

The book is written in two parts, theory and practice. Or, as Skynner writes, concepts and applications.

In the first part, he systematically goes through general systems theory, a developmental scheme (eclectic, as outlined above, but heavily influenced by ego psychology), psychoanalytical theories, modelling and social learning theories. Throughout, there is a constant attempt to show the overlap and similarities between these different models. Three of the nine chapters in this first part concentrate on the marital relationship. This, I believe, is appropriate as the couple are at the heart of the family. Children internalise not just models of their parents in isolation but also, probably more importantly, of their parents in relation to each other and in relation to them. These internalised images then become part of the blueprint which, largely unconsciously, is taken not only into their own marriages and families, but into all their social interactions and relationships.

Skynner gives a very clear and concise outline of the psychoanalytic object-relations model of marital interaction, and specifies the developmental and defensive aspects of unconscious partner choice. He also discusses with conviction the view that in the case of most children and adolescents who are referred for psychotherapeutic help, the level of the child's developmental arrest, or the nature of the symptom being presented, relates very closely to pathology in the parental relationship. Whether understood in systemic terms or in terms of psychoanalytic notions of projection and projective identification, the child may be said to become the victim of the emotional conflicts of the parental couple.

In the final chapter in this first part, Skynner addresses 'The Ethics of Change'. He asks such questions as what right we (as practitioners) have to attempt to change others; what the motivations of referrers may be; whether change is possible; and, if so, whether it is desirable. It is a thought-provoking chapter and addresses issues which are often taken for granted or overlooked.

In the second part of the book, the author turns to clinical practice. He outlines different therapeutic models and distinguishes between them. He then describes his own clinical practice, across the range of his clinical work including that of couples groups which he often co-ran with his wife. Throughout, there are many clinical examples and vignettes to illustrate what is being discussed.

I was particularly interested to read his views on transference. He writes that he does not encourage the transference by drawing it onto himself, and only interprets it if it is getting in the way. He also says that the wide spacing of the interviews, and his more natural, active, and spontaneous behaviour diminish the development of transference phenomena. Finally, he says that as the therapist he offers himself explicitly as an expert and this, too, limits the development of the transference.

How much these factors actually do limit the development of the transference is open to debate, and Skynner seems to imply this when he goes on to say that, despite all his best efforts, marked transferences to the therapist do develop. He sees this as usually being concerned with defensive needs, either in the family or in the therapist. This view is in sharp contrast to a purer psychoanalytic understanding which would view transference as inevitable and unavoidable, and would value the transference feelings and enactments evoked by the psychotherapeutic encounter as being a rich source of information about the family members and their images and expectations of relationships. This view is not one simply held by individual psychoanalytic psychotherapists, but one that family and marital psychotherapists would hold (e.g. Box *et al.*, 1981; Scharff, 1982). However, this may be an unfair observation since the application and adaptation of psychoanalytic theory and practice to marital and family work has gone on since the publication of Skynner's book. I suspect, however, that he would still hold to his original view.

The next five chapters discuss a variety of technical issues such as indications and contra-indications for marital and family work; the use of multi-family and couples groups; and training and teamwork. This second section finishes with a chapter outlining the family therapy with a particular family carried out over 16 sessions at three or four weekly intervals by Dr Skynner and a female co-therapist.

Without doubt, exactly as intended, this book remains an excellent introduction to marital and family psychotherapy. In its 400-plus pages it is informative, provocative, practical and always lucid and accessible. Although an introductory text, it is ambitious in its aims and raises many issues for

debate and discussion. Like a good therapist or teacher, Skynner makes the reader pause and think for himself, and come to his own conclusions.

I would like to raise two further thoughts. The first is a criticism, the second is a point of interest.

To take the criticism: there are points in the book when Skynner could be accused of sexism and chauvinism. Sometimes his descriptions of the wives and mothers in the families he is writing about are rather clumsy. It seems particularly unfortunate to use expressions such as "shrewishly" (p. 75) and "bitchiness" (p. 77). There is a danger that such clumsiness may distract some readers from utilising the book to the degree it deserves.

This may be compounded by Skynner's clearly stated view that for some families it is optimal for the father to accept ultimate responsibility and authority for all important matters. What he is referring to is something which most marital and family psychotherapists are familiar with, particularly in relation to working with the more severely disturbed relationships and chaotic families: that is, the lack of structure, boundaries and authority which such families display. The therapeutic solution is of course the development of benevolent boundaries and authority, but there is no reason why this should necessarily be in the domain of the male. Most appropriately, this should be carried jointly by the parental couple in the case of a family, and by both spouses in the case of a marriage. Without denying appropriate differentiation, clinical experience demonstrates quite clearly that it is the capacity to share power and authority that produces healthy marriages and families.

The final thought is simply one of interest. There has recently been a lot of interest, at least among those more inclined towards a psychoanalytic framework, in Bion's concept of container-contained (Bion, 1962, 1967), developed out of Klein's concept of projective identification (Klein, 1946). Bion's model of containment suggests how personal relationships can be so beneficial and therapeutic. The other's capacity to be sensitive to, process and make some sense of tensions and anxieties evoked by the self, all usually unconsciously, allows the tensions and anxieties to be experienced less persecutorily. It also allows for the self to internalise the notion that such containment is possible and so begin to better manage inevitable feelings of conflict and fear.

This framework is very useful for thinking about the nature of marital and family interaction; about

what the marriage and the family naturally fulfil for the individual members. It also offers a model for psychotherapeutic intervention. It may be that when a couple or a family seek psychotherapeutic help, it is because their natural containment capacity has broken down; the psychotherapist is sought to offer a temporary containment in the psychotherapeutic relationship, which allows the now unmanageable tensions and conflicts to be reflected upon.

Inherent in Dr Skynner's book is the attempt to think about what is happening between the couple in a marriage or between family members. His personal openness, and his willingness to use whatever concepts and theories prove of value, suggests that he would find Bion's framework at least familiar.

When I started to think about writing this review, I wrote to Dr Skynner to tell him of my project. He wrote back a very generous letter of some length. I am sure that he will not mind if I quote his final paragraph:

"... I never intended to write a book at all! At the time I began, it was impossible to get American text books on family therapy in Britain, and I decided to write a long paper or pamphlet of about 50 pages for the seminars I was doing then. However, 50 became 100, 100 became 200, 200, 400 and even then I realised it was all just an outline summary of what I had to say".

I, for one, am very pleased and grateful that Dr Skynner wrote this "outline summary". It proved substantial food for thought and reflection when published in 1976, and still does today. It remains an introduction of some substance and I for one continue to use it, not uncritically, and to recommend it. The publishers are quite right to keep it in their lists and to republish it.

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Stan Ruzsyczynski, *Deputy Chairman and Senior Marital Psychotherapist, Tavistock Institute of Marital Studies, Tavistock Centre, London*