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Towards Understanding Families

Chapter I

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The central importance of the family to the functioning of every society is universally recognised and there is now extensive literature upon which students of social work can draw. Indeed, the problems for the student is to interpret for practical use knowledge from a bewildering variety of sources. Since families do not confine themselves to academic disciplines, to limit discussion to the contributions of one discipline - sociology or psychology, for example, or to a certain theoretical framework - such as psychoanalysis - would not be helpful. I have therefore attempted to find an approach which is multi-disciplinary but which has as its focal point the processes and dynamics of family life. To this end, theory from a wide variety of sources will be used. Such an emphasis is selective and inevitably, therefore, other important aspects of family functioning are not given their true weight. For instance, the social

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2

"Personalities and social systems inter-penetrate. Psycho-analysis holds society and culture constant to look at the processes within the individual. Sociology holds the anonymous person constant to study a variable setting." This book seeks to find the confirmation of which Parsons writes in the hope it will build bridges between the disciplines which contribute to social work practice.

Psycho-analytic theory from the earliest days has emphasised the importance of family relationships but its treatment techniques have tended, until recently, to focus attention on the inner reality of the individuals experience rather than the outer reality of current family interaction. Even when whole families were seen by social work or psychiatric services, there was a tendency to regard them as a set of individuals in relationship, whereas in fact more complex notions are implied in the phrase "family interaction". As Freeman puts it:-

"Too often as we talk about family diagnosis, we immediately move into the detailed consideration of its parts. This is like trying to understand the functions of a molecule entirely by the study of its particles. Although the particles have function and value in themselves and contribute to the molecular structure there is a whole area of dynamic function that belongs to the molecule as a unit"

"The notion of interaction ... involves not simply the idea of collision and rebound but ... the internal modifiability of

the colliding agents".

In Chapters II-V of this book, therefore, which are concerned with the life cycle of the family, the emphasis has throughout been on the "molecule as a unit", that is to say, detailed study of the developmental processes of individuals has been omitted, except to the extent which it is crucial to the understanding of the impact the individual has on other members of his family.

At the present time, ~~therefore~~, although orthodox psycho-analytic theory provides much of the developmental background essential to the understanding of family process, we must draw on other theories to clarify some of the concepts implied in the phrase "family interaction". Particularly helpful is the link with systems theory.

The characteristics of systems have been considered in the natural and social sciences. The idea of a system offers a link between many different kinds of physical and social organization, a family may be

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described as an open social system. This implies that it has a boundary and within that boundary there is greater interaction than outside; yet it is constantly affected by the outer environment. It also implies that there is a tendency to achieve equilibrium amongst its parts and that there must therefore be adaptive mechanisms to cope with change. The same can be said of the human body; of a potted plant; and of the Methodist Church. The notion of the attempt to achieve equilibrium has been explored at length by Adgerman ()

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4

who draws from the natural sciences and describes the phenomenon as homeostasis. The human body attempts by various compensatory mechanisms to adapt to stress, loss, or disease. Similarly, the family makes efforts to cope with the range of experiences, some part and parcel of everyday life, some traumatic, which affect its total functioning. The efforts involve an attempt, as we say, "to get back on an even keel", to find a way of living in which the balance of the system is restored. This movement towards homeostasis is as relevant to the understanding of a family's behaviour when a child goes to school as it is to the impact of premature bereavement. In each case the "particles" which form the "molecule" are disturbed and must reform to find equilibrium. Families can be seen to have attempted this in ways which are healthy - that is, which promote the growth and well being of the individuals - or in ways which are pathological which stunt or distort the development of its members.) The idea of the family as a system is useful because it places family functioning in the context of the study of a wide range of physical and social "organisations" and this sharpens our perception. Yet as Laing () reminds us:- "in the natural scientific system, only behaviour is a question. But the family is a system of interaction and interexperience in which each person's action is experienced by the interexperience in which each person's action is experienced by the self and others". This has led to increased concentration on the analysis of current experience behaviour family members.

5

The contributions of social psychology generally and of small group theory, which has diverse origins and approaches, is also of importance for the study of family interactions and general concepts from these fields are transferrable, for example, the process of "scapegoating" is frequently used in discussion of family dynamics; the idea of authority and leadership have relevance to family interaction as to other groups. It has to be borne in mind, however, that the origins, goals and age structure of the family groups differ so fundamentally from many other kinds of group that many of the concepts need considerable modification before they can be usefully applied. A section of British social workers have been much influenced by the work of Bion (). Although his theories have been more widely applied to the behaviour of groups (large and small) they do have value for the study of the family. Bion postulates the existence of certain mechanisms in all groups; these are the tendency "to pair", to flee or to fight and to(leader). These tendencies he describes as the "basic assumption activities" of a group which are the equivalent of the unconscious forces in individuals and which are in contrast with the rational, conscious forces which are intent on the achievement of the group task. It appears that these forces may work with, or against, the conscious purpose of the group, although the emphasis is usually on the latter. There are many aspects of this theory which need development and clarification in relation to

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the study of groups generally, as well as to family groups in particular. It has seemed of late that the structural simplification which is proper and necessary in the formulation of new theory has been accepted too readily by some social workers.

The complexities of interaction within the family are, of course, partly quantitative. Thus:-

Family of	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Number of 1-1 relationships	1	3	6	10	15	21	28

When all permutations including dyads and triads are taken into account, the picture becomes even more complicated. For example, in a family with three children, there are 65 possible permutations. The demands on intellect and feeling which these networks of relationships make are considerable, and it is worth remembering that many of the large families with which social workers have to deal are the least able to cope with such demands. It would be interesting to know whether the increase of emotional strain and confusion in relationship as the family grows sometimes plays its part in family disintegration, in addition to the obvious practical and emotional problems which it brings in its wake. This quantitative complexity may account for the fact that much useful study about family process has focussed on sub-systems of the family: the work of Bowlby () and his

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associates on mother-child interaction and of the Institute of Marital Studies* on marital interaction are obvious examples. In putting the spotlight on these sub-systems, the rest of the family is thrown into darkness; there is no doubt that the intensity of the light is of great value to our understanding but it is left to the social worker to integrate the study of the sub-systems into the whole. / Unfortunately, this is not always achieved and the impact of such literature causes social workers to concentrate their attention on one or other aspects of family functioning, as the fashion goes.

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* Formerly the Family Discussion Bureau.

8

Crucial to all discussion of family interaction is the issue of the independence of the individual with strengths and weaknesses of his own and the extent to which these are created in him by the behaviour of others. Theories from different quarters (notably from the Institute of Marital Studies) have of late tended to emphasise the unconscious needs which lead people to choose each other in marriage and subsequently to provoke, and to gain gratification from, the expression in the other of feelings which they cannot express themselves. The group processes of role allocation, placing family members in the role of the weak and the wicked, for example, have also been stressed. Students may be forgiven for wondering at times if there is any possibility of an individual being "mad" or "bad" in his own right, as a result of his constitutional make up or his earlier childhood environment and not as a result of current subtle processes of projection by the other family members. This issue is of considerable practical importance since it will affect crucial decisions about families in trouble, as for example, a plan to remove a child from a family or to keep him at home. If it is believed that a particular child has serious emotional difficulties which - whatever their origins - are now an integral part of his psychic structure, one might consider that his removal was a necessary step to relieve strain on the family. If one

sees his disturbance as created or fostered by current family interaction, then his removal may do little to promote harmony in the family. It is often said that where the individual has been made the "scapegoat", and is removed, the family will find a new scapegoat amongst its members. There are instances where this is demonstrable. It would be interesting, however, to research into the effect on family interaction of the removal of a child and to see in how many instances this was the result; in how many instances the absent child remained "the enemy" - now outside - ; and in how many instances the family, relieved of the daily stress imposed by that member, were able to function better and to modify their attitudes towards him once he was absent.

In seeking to understand current family functioning, a combination of both approaches will usually be called for. The student will need to take in account the past history and personality traits of the individuals which affect their current interaction, yet to bear in mind that the current interaction has, as it were, a life of its own which does not simply mirror the past. Nevertheless, there is a danger that in adopting this balanced and eclectic stance, an important theoretical issue will not be grasped. We do not say when a man develops a brain tumour that his wife "needed" this, or that a mother "needed" a mentally subnormal child. (Although we

know that once it has happened, family members may experience gratification as well as sadness and anger, (from their adaptation).

On the other hand, however, there are some family situations where it is strikingly clear that the mother or father has, to all ^{intent} ~~interests~~ and purposes, "created" a problem in a child or where one partner in a marriage has played upon the temperament and problems of the other to intensify, if not to create, certain patterns of behaviour. The finding of a judicious balance between these two ways of looking at family functioning would seem therefore to be of vital importance. They lead, of course, to the question of the relevance of genetic and hereditary factors in the emotional disturbance of individuals - a matter on which there is little certain knowledge as yet. It is worth noting that writers such as Winnicott or Laing, who focus on interaction, have acknowledged the probability of constitutional factors in certain emotional disturbances, although they hold these factors constant whilst focussing on the environment of the individual - other people. Laing and his associates, however, influenced by existential philosophy, appear to have laid increasing stress on the impact of current experience on the behaviour of mentally ill individuals.

This book has been prepared at a time when the social work profession is in something of a ferment about its approach to the study and treatment of family problems. There is growing concern

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that insufficient attention has been paid to the effect of social and material deprivation on a certain section of society. There is a new determination that for this underprivileged group, as well as for others, whose way of life has been radically affected by the geographical, industrial and social mobility, social workers must be active in encouraging programmes of social action to ensure that people are enabled to use services which are available and to demand services which they should have.

It may be, therefore, that the emphasis of this book will offend some, who will see in it a reiteration of a reactionary position, a concentration on internal dynamics with insufficient regard to the effect of the environment outside the family on its functioning. To this I can only say that it is possible to write a book about London, England or Europe. London (the individual) is a part of England (the family) which is a part of Europe (the wider society). I have chosen to write about England, knowing full well that London and Europe each merit a volume and that in selecting, there is an inevitable process of distortion.

For social workers, for whom problems and deviancy are the focus of concern, it is valuable to outline briefly some of the positive contributions to emotional well being which normal family life, without self consciousness, makes possible.

First, for adults and children alike, family life offers an opportunity for the intimate experience in relationship which is a basic human desire. Within this experience, conflicting feelings of love and hate can be contained and an assurance of the predominance of loving feelings is made possible. Secondly, family life is an important medium through which the individual gains and reinforces his sense of identity, his selfhood. Personal identity has three aspects, psychic, social and biological. Normally, these are so intertwined in family life that they are inseparable, yet the example of a family with an adopted child helps us to see that there are separate, though related, elements. In such a family, the adopted child may be secure in his psychic identity - the ^{love} ~~care~~ of himself that is formed through his earliest experiences of good mothering; he may be secure in his social identity in so far that he perceives himself accurately in terms of his capabilities, effect on others and so on. Yet knowledge of his adoption may lead to insecurity about his social status as an illegitimate child with "alternative" parents and; in adolescence, it may enhance the normal uncertainties concerning identification. He may also, throughout childhood, be aware of his physical differences from his adoptive parents. One adopted child said: "why am I the only one in this family with brown eyes?" The ordinary family offers to its members a process of identity confirmation in all its aspects. It offers

the exact opposite to the concentration camp or the bad institution -
the certainty of uniqueness in association with others. I am me,
yet I belong.

The third contribution of family life is to meet the human need for approval. This is of equal importance to the adult as to the child. Benign family interaction offers to its members continuing experience of approval, whether through childhood achievement (such as a good school report), parental activity (such as good cooking) or marital interaction (such as sexual fulfillment). Conversely; family disapproval, if expressed in a basic atmosphere of love and trust, provides the individual with a constant mirror against which to appraise his activity and to adjust his perception of himself and his achievements, against a loving reality.

Fourthly, the experience of shared loving, in which marital adjustments must constantly be made, strengthens the adaptive capacity of individuals through the fluctuations of frustration and gratification which form part of everyday life.

The part played by the family in the emotional development and socialisation of the child has been frequently and exhaustively described. Readers are referred to the bibliography since to attempt to summarise the literature would be absurd: its implications for interaction of family members will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Less frequently described, however, and of great importance, is the contribution which the family makes to the adult members through the maturing effects of power and responsibility, especially in relation to the infant's helplessness. Furthermore, the children bring into the home the influences of a younger generation, with the challenge of new ideas and attitudes, which encourage flexibility of outlook. There is above all an opportunity for the adults to improve, in their second experience of family life, elements in the first which were unsatisfying. Social workers often see situations where history appears to have repeated itself. Yet for many adults, marriage and parenthood heal the wounds of the past.

Ackerman (1966) has described the functions and purposes of family life as follows: "union and individuation; the care of the young; the cultivation of a bond of affection and identity; reciprocal need satisfaction; training for the tasks of social participation, including the sex role; and the development and creative fulfilment of its members". ~~She~~^{He} points out that "the growth and effective adaptation of the family unit are reflected in its capacity to integrate, harmonise and balance these multiple functions."

15

Consideration of the positive contribution which the family makes to the development of individuals offers a frame of reference for consideration of the opposite and for the definition of family pathology. The notion of family pathology is as complex and elusive as notions of physical sickness and health in medicine. The view of what constitutes physical health is affected by the values and standards of a society at a given time. (Some primitive people, for example, would accept chronic diarrhoea as normal and it would not be regarded as sickness.) In the complex field of family relationships, it is quite impossible to set up rigid criteria of healthy and unhealthy family functioning. Indeed, as with physical health, it seems that expectations of the emotional satisfactions from family life have risen, as the grosser forms of social and material deprivation have been eased.

• Social workers have sometimes been accused of imposing their own norms and values of what constitutes a healthy family life on clients; such criticisms are usually made in the context of social class - the attempt to influence working class clients by middle class social workers. Certainly, unrecognised assumptions about good and bad in family life are dangerous. It is a professional responsibility to be aware of the assumptions and to examine the basis for their existence. That they should exist, however, and be acted upon, by social workers seems inevitable. It is sheer

66

hypocrisy, and arrogant, to speak as if they could be avoided, for the social worker is a child of his time and his society, like everyone else.

Ackerman's () description of the multiple family tasks is helpful in that it avoids placing particular weight on one rather than another and is not limited by any elements ^{distinctive} restrictive to a particular time or culture. It must be added, however, that the idea of a family providing opportunities for "the creative fulfillment of its members" is one which will probably only be associated with a relatively sophisticated society. Ackerman argues that the performance of a family at a given time "can be assessed in relationship to the fulfillment of its aims and values, the regulation of its essential functions and the resulting balance of health and illness"

"It is maladaptive if it suffers a loss of any of its vital functions, if it safeguards some at the cost of others, if it over asserts some while underestimating others, if it distorts or sacrifices functions indispensable to its own continuity".

It is helpful to think concretely about the implications of such statements for a social worker's appraisal of family functioning. Accepting, as we must, that there is no hard and fast line between health and pathology, we can nevertheless see how family dysfunctioning with which social workers are concerned fit into Ackerman's () scheme. It is obvious that a family whose "child-

17

caring function" has been lost or impaired will be a source of major anxiety, as will a family which offers poor training to children in the "task of social participations", in the terms which a particular society determines at a point in time. Of equal interest, the less obvious, are the problems which arise when the preservation of one aspect of family functioning is achieved through the sacrifice of others. Thus, there are families where the needs of the marital relationship so dominate family functioning as to exclude the children; or where family members need for "union" overwhelms the need for individuation.

The essence of family process may therefore be seen in terms of "complementarity and conflict" of need of individuals and the balance which is found between them. Ackerman () points out that conflict can be "catalytic or paralytic"; that is to say it can promote or inhibit growth. Social workers also meet situations in which the conflict can not be contained and is so extreme that it may be described as "disintegrative". The notion of the family as an open system, discussed earlier in this chapter, helps us further in ~~defining~~ ^{defining} its health; for, as with all open systems, there is "an ~~optional~~ ^{optimal} balance between continuity of old and open-ness to new experience". It is probable that social workers in the field of child care have more frequently been asked to help families whose pathology is marked by insufficient stability in their role relations with

each other and society. (This will be discussed further in Chapter .) They are in a sense "too open".. By contrast, workers in Child Guidance Clinics have, until recently, had more experience with families whose problems centred upon rigidity of roles, who are "too closed". Although Ackerman () acknowledges the existence of both, the American literature generally throws more light on the latter than the former.

Goldberg () has drawn attention to the notion of "family fit". "Normality consists in a tolerable fit between what members of a family seek from each other and given in return and also perhaps is a fit between their values and way of living and those of the social group or network to which they belong." There are obvious objections to the second leg of this argument. Are we to say that it is "normal", i.e. healthy, to adapt to the dictates of the wider society at any price? Yet such a suggestion reminds us of an important fact which is sometimes overlooked in a wave of concern about imposition of values and standards on clients - that most people desire to conform to the mores of their society and experience acute discomfort if they are estranged. It also helps us, as does Ackerman (), to avoid the falsity of an artefact of healthy family functioning, which time and culture constantly changes. In such a matter as the respective roles of the sexes in relation to each other, for example, Goldberg () has shown that the fit

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between the partners may be satisfactory although their sexual identifications may be very different from those associated with most men and women in our culture. Three examples of "non-fit", in the sense in which Goldberg has used the term, may help to clarify the argument. First, in the case of psychosomatic illness, one may often see that tensions and unmet needs within the family have been expressed by an individual in these ways. (This will be discussed further in Chapter) Secondly, the problem of pregnancy, out of wedlock, may reflect family "non-fit" and may be the result of difficulties in relationship between a girl and her parents or it may ~~be~~ conform to a family pattern but be unacceptable to the wider society. Thirdly, one might instance differences in child-rearing practices between immigrants and the host society where the "non-fit" was essentially between the family and society: in this last example, however, it is interesting to note how this can become internal *family* conflict, as between adolescents and their parents.

This Chapter, in introducing the focus of the book, which is on the process of family interaction, has suggested that social workers need to integrate various branches of psychology and sociology in developing such understanding: that there are important theoretical questions, with practical implications, arising from the significance which is given to the individual as a separate entity to the family as a system: that there are guide lines available for the social worker in distinguishing between family health and family sickness, although these are, and must remain, imprecise if they are to be of any general validity.