
New Paths in Family Studies

The family is the basic bio-social group in society. There was early evidence in the post-war period that it was seriously disturbed. The degree of disturbance has since become greatly magnified. Changes in the wider society negative to its well-being continue to take place. In engaging with this meta-problem the Institute has opened up a number of new paths which are reported under this Theme.

The Reduction of Group Tensions in the Family. The child guidance movement took the child out of the context of the family, to make him or her “the patient.” The cardinal problem, therefore, was to get engaged with the family as a system rather than simply with an individual extruded from it. While the Clinic and Institute were still a joint organization, John Bowlby took a major step and had the fathers as well as the mothers of his child patients attend joint sessions. He has been acclaimed as the originator of family therapy.

His original paper reproduced here bespeaks the influence of the work on groups in the Tavistock at that time. The paper, presented at the World Congress of Mental Health in 1948, was the first to describe the therapeutic technique of seeing all members of a family together. In an account of the development of what became known as family therapy, Waldron-Skinner (1981) writes in the Introduction to her volume of historical papers:

As is now well-known, this paper holds some claim to have initiated the whole family therapy movement, since it was on reading Bowlby’s paper (and misunderstanding the extent to which Bowlby was engaging in conjoint therapeutic work) that John Elderkin Bell embarked on his own formative contributions in America (Bell, 1961).

She also notes “the enormously influential scene-setting work of R.D. Laing,” also of the Tavistock, during the late 1950s and 1960s and selects his 1969 paper “Intervention in Social Situations” as representative:

These two contributions by Bowlby and Laing are of particular interest. . . . They display both the simplicity and profundity of the change of approach required of all who embark on the treatment of the family group, whatever (their) original training.

Non-Medical Marital Therapy. Very little professional work with the family was going on in Britain in the decade after World War II. A large number of people were averse to coming to any treatment center under psychiatric auspices such as the marital unit in the Tavistock Clinic. The bulk of the work was carried out by such organizations as the Marriage Guidance Council which was entirely lay. The staff were without professional training and approached problems from a moral and religious rather than a psychological viewpoint.

The Institute secured the opportunity to enter the marital field through a crisis that developed in the London Family Welfare Association, as described in the Series Introduction. A comprehensive overview of the developments that have subsequently taken place is presented in the paper by Douglas Woodhouse. These have become so widespread that not all of them could be described within the limits of a single paper. They have led to the appearance of a new profession of psychologically trained non-medical marriage therapists. Major innovations in training methods were introduced to make this possible, such as the interpretation of caseworkers' counter-transferences in group case conferences conducted by a psychoanalyst (Balint, 1957). It was found, however, that case workers did not themselves necessarily have to undertake psychoanalytic training. Such a necessity would have prohibited any wide multiplier effect which was a principal aim of the program. This aim has been achieved. New theory has emerged concerning mutual projections between marriage partners.

Conjugal Roles and Social Networks. Little was known about how ordinary families functioned. Accordingly, research was undertaken to open up this area. It was found that conjugal roles varied in relation to the density of the kinship network of the families. Factors of social mobility and urbanization made the connections increasingly sparse. The conjugal relationship had to take a far higher level of stress. This is described in the contribution of Elizabeth Bott Spillius whose book, *Family and Social Network* (1957), rapidly attained the status of a classic and opened up the concept of an open network as distinct from a bounded group. A whole literature has been generated from this beginning.

Dual-Career Families: The Evolution of a Concept. A new field of study pioneered by the Institute is the work/family interface. This was opened up by Robert and Rhona Rapoport in their study of dual career families, a new phenomenon in the 1960s. They have since set up their own Institute and undertaken projects which have extended the scope of studies concerning the work/family interface. A number of new concepts have been introduced. Their contribution provides an overview of the field, emphasizing what needs to be done in the future.

These new paths all arose from what is recognizable as the distinctively Tavistock approach of domain-based research into field-determined generic problems. They show the interpretation of the clinical and non-clinical areas. The pathways they created are still being followed.

References

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