

Review

A family in therapy

McCallum P. & Lang M. (1989).

Melbourne, Australia: Mcphee Gribble/Penguin. 291 pp. \$14.99

Family therapy is one of the latest fads in therapy and many people are curious about it. Those with a serious inquiry will find a glimpse of what goes on inside family therapy in this book. The book is a record a series of five therapy sessions over a period of three and a half months. A record over a series such as this recommends itself. Often family therapy case studies and verbatim transcripts have covered single sessions only. This case history contains both the beginning and end of therapy for this particular family. This allows the reader to get an overview of the aims and goals of therapy which, for this family, could be said to have been moderately successful.

The therapist was Moshe Lang of the Williams Road Family Therapy Centre in Melbourne. He was the only therapist involved with no mention of collaboration concerning the therapy itself for the duration of therapy. Whereas there was collaboration between the authors on the production of the book. All sessions were videotaped with the permission of the family.

The Black family had been referred by a general practitioner after the attempted overdose by the eldest child, Donna, aged fifteen. There had been an earlier attempted overdose by the mother and wife in the family, Lorraine. The other members of the family were Jack, father and husband, and Ernie, aged twelve. It became apparent that the family had become divided into male and female alliances and that the communication between husband and wife was very poor. A series of marriage counselling sessions which occurred in the middle family sessions was not reported. The family, presumably with the aid of therapy, emerged with Donna making the break toward independence and maturity without cutting the family ties and the marriage partners communicating more directly. Blaming each other for unfulfilled expectations had been a big problem in this family. At the final session they were all better able to accept each other and better able to accept themselves. If the attempted suicide of the two females was interpreted as a cry for help for the family by the end of therapy this cry had been heard. The crisis was over.

The first two thirds of the book (proximately 200 pages) consists of the transcript of the sessions liberally sprinkled with interpretive comments added later by the authors. The final third contains comments and overview by the authors and various members of helping professions and academics who were asked to comment.

The main record of the sessions is presented purposely by the authors with no acknowledged theoretical approach. The authors contend that by presenting the material without reference to a particular theory the material speaks for itself. While this may recommend itself to the general reader, the student and the professional might gain more benefit if the theoretical position were openly acknowledged. The authors claim that the more the material was examined the more the various theoretical differences in interpreting the events became less contentious. Again, for those with professional interest more of this process of arriving at a consensus of opinion could have been included. A discussion of the various differences and actually what was arrived at and what it was that convinced them to come to a particular view would have been interesting. An atheoretical position has the advantage that no one will be able to disagree while perhaps all may benefit. It may have been more desirable to wrestle with some of the underlying but none the less real issues which influence therapy.

The annotations by the authors interspersed within the verbatim text are very useful. The annotations were added later after much discussion between the authors and repeated viewing of the video tapes. It reads so easily that it could be criticised for being misleading, giving the impression that the comments are an obvious fact end part of the session. Still, if it is remembered that the annotations were added afterwards, they are not lengthy and do not overly distract from the text.

The comments in the last third of the book from other professionals provide good reading. The diversity of the expertise of those who contribute illustrates how family therapy fits into the scheme of professional and academic approaches. The comments are amusing at times in the way they reveal the various biases which each person brings with their particular approach. Max Cornwall in his comments discusses some of theoretical issues and claims that Lang's approach leans toward the structuralist and strategic approaches to family therapy. Other comments included emphases on the following: the feminist viewpoint, child development, different communication styles (eg. seeing, hearing feeling) and a broader historical analysis. One advantage those who were asked to comment had over the reader is, is that those who were asked to comment were also provided with video tapes of all the sessions. It is obvious from some of the comments that the authors have access to information which is not available to the reader.

Particularly good use of the book might be made in a teaching situation. The text could be used to analyze the sessions examining issues and questions relevant to therapy. Some examples of issues that could be raised are the degree of and usefulness of directive responses from the therapist, how did the therapist introduce of new information of new connections between 'facts' in the family or the degree to which the therapist did or did not set the priorities or clarify the families own priorities. The availability of a fairly cheap text without too much theoretical emphasis would lend itself to use as a teaching aid of this sort. Rather than having the issues presented as clear cut and defined students would have to work at defining and clarifying the issues.

It would be excellent as a teaching tool if it would be possible to have access to the video tapes of the sessions. This would allow discussions and reflection on the material, including non-verbal communication, and students would have a complete record of the dialogue to refer to at their convenience. Unfortunately, the authors do not mention this possibility. Inquiries would have to be directed to the authors.

In conclusion this book can be recommended as easy reading without technical jargon to lay persons, students and professionals. It could be useful for students interested in counselling psychology, social work, nursing, sociology of the family and interpersonal communication.

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