

FAMILIES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

by

Ann Hartman, Ph.D.

Presented to the National Symposium on
Doctoral Research and Social Work Practice

College of Social Work
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio
April 14-15, 1986

----- Text continues after this page -----

This publication is made available in the context of the history of social work project.

See www.historyofsocialwork.org

It is our aim to respect authors' and publishers' copyright. Should you feel we violated those, please do get in touch with us.



Deze publicatie wordt beschikbaar gesteld in het kader van de canon sociaal werk.

Zie www.canonsociaalwerk.eu

Het is onze wens de rechten van auteurs en uitgevers te respecten. Mocht je denken dat we daarin iets fout doen, gelieve ons dan te contacteren.

----- Tekst gaat verder na deze pagina -----

I'm really very impressed with this program. I have read it with great interest. As I am a working professor, I have a 9:00 class tomorrow so I am unable to stay and listen to the presentations but I think the range and variety is marvelous. I am really sorry I cannot be here and I wish you all a very good, enlightening and lively time together. I am very grateful for this opportunity to come and talk about family theory and family practice. I think about it all the time and an opportunity like this makes me sort of pull my thoughts together and try to communicate them to you. It always makes me think better when I have to communicate with a group about what I am thinking about.

I think perhaps a more appropriate title for the symposium would be "Thinking About Thinking About Family Research and Family Practice" because that's really what I want to try to do. I want to think about thinking about family research and practice.

I want to talk a little bit about epistemology, God help us, that awful word. I want to look at how we think about people and about families and suggest that the way we think about the way we think about people and about families shape the questions we ask, shape the materials that we respond to, shape how we frame our research questions and how we frame our practice. You know, there is an old idea in social work that we start where a client is. I don't believe that is true, I think we start where the worker is and we, out of our old world views, construct a reality of the situation in which we are practicing and that is what shapes the direction of our practice. I think all you have to do is think about a kid wetting the bed. I was just visiting a friend whose kid wet the bed so I got thinking about wetting the bed. If a mother and father are concerned about a kid wetting the bed, we know, depending on what those parents would do with that child, there would be a totally different conceptualization of the problem and direction of the practice. That is just one little kind of example. A lot of our practice is directed by not where the problem leads us but where our own conceptualizations lead us. So today, we will talk about conceptualizations a little bit.

I want to look at what we mean about a family perspective in practice and research. I want to look at some of the different ways of thinking about families. Finally, I want to share with you a little bit of the way I have been thinking about families lately. I appreciated Dean Boettcher saying that I keep working on learning new stuff and it really is true. Someday I am going to write a two page autobiography about a list of my steps but I do keep changing my thinking and just recently I've been thinking about a new way of thinking about families that had quite an impact on the kinds of research questions I'm thinking about and also very directly on my practice. So in a way, what I want to talk about tonight, in part, is a process. It is a process of discovery and a process of change. I want to demonstrate how part of the interaction between researcher, clinician (the way the clinician thinks and in a small way how the world views or the paradigm shifts) when you think about a new way of thinking about something that leads you to new kinds of knowledge and new kinds of insights. I am going to use, in part, myself as an example of this. So in some ways this will be a little autobiographical.

But, first, I want to define a family, It is absolutely essential to define the unit we are thinking about. It is the first step, I think, in thinking about research, policy or practice. Now it is terribly easy to find the family of origin via the biological: that biological group of parents, grandparents, cousins, etc., that go back through the biological. I think it is important, however, to remember that different cultures define families of origin and biological families in different ways so that when you are describing the family origin be sure you include "fictive" kin. Be sure you find out how the people you are working with define who their kin are because in some families the boundaries are drawn so tight around the den that you cannot even marry in the family. You are always an outsider whereas in other families non-blood relatives (aunts and uncles) are a very important part. But in general, the family of origin is not that difficult to define.

The here and now family, however, presents us with some other challenges. I hesitate to call the nuclear family the family of procreation because that right away defines the family. Certainly today we are seeing varied family forms. The working father, the homemaking mother and the children now represent less than 10 percent of the American families. In my child welfare work, and in the past years in the National Child Welfare Training Center, it was necessary for us to define the family and I had a test for any definition. Any definition of a family had to be able to include a single man and a 14 year old foster child who the single man was fostering over a period of time who was not free for adoption. This is quite a test for a definition.

I always throw this at my students and then they struggle to come up with a definition that will include those two people who are related. In my struggles with this, I have come up with a rather circular definition. In fact, it is a circular definition when we define the family as two or more people who define themselves as a family and who perform functions usually performed in family relationships. So it is absolutely a circular definition and in part a functional definition. Now this is an enormously important issue in practice and policy and research. Let me give you a couple examples to demonstrate in a sense the importance of how you define the family.

Not long ago for instance there was a court case in Detroit, a young man was not allowed to visit his girlfriend and his new born child in the hospital because visiting was limited to husbands and mothers. This went to court and the hospital was upheld that he had no right to visit the mother or child.

In practice, we have to have a flexible open definition of the family to find out who is important, and to find out who is in the family. The agency fact sheet tends to have husband, wife and children listed. In a sense this locks you into a notion that this is what the family is. I think a fact sheet should really say at the top, "Household and Other Significant People," so that the questions you ask won't dictate the answers you might get.

In national policy, the definition of the family is absolutely crucial. As you all may know, the White House Conference On Families almost broke up on the issue of the definition of the family. If the family is defined narrowly then social policy and program tend to disadvantage all of those who do not fit into the narrow definition. In family research the operational definition of the family is extremely important because if you define the family in a particular way you will exclude some people as non-family and that biases your findings about families by your definition of the family.

How do we think about families and how do we think about thinking about families? First, in order to think about families, it is necessary for all of us to change our heads. We come from a tradition in this country of individualistic linear Aristotlean thought. We tend to think about individual entities and the internal characteristics of individual entities. We tend to think of the nature of entities and the intrinsic qualities of entities and this goes into our thinking of families. Some of you may have looked, I hope you have, at the family studies that were done in the fifties and early sixties.

They were early attempts to do family assessments but the intellectual tools were not available to do it. So what they would do is they would assess all the individuals in the family and describe them in length and then they would assess all the role behaviors of all the individuals of the families and then all the didactic interactions of everybody in the family and that was as far as they could get. This would be absolutely endless but it didn't capture the family because adding together individual assessments of all the people and all the separate relationships in a family does not bring you very much closer to understanding the family. It is very difficult to describe and capture complex transactional systems. The development of systems theory helped us begin to think of context and to think about systems of connected entities and it really took us that next conceptual leap to think about systems of entities that were related rather than isolated atomistic individuals. I did a little article about thinking about the unthinkable about systems. By the way, those of you who are doctoral students, I wrote that paper when I was a doctoral student so send your papers off as you write them as you can never tell what will happen.

Systems theory enabled us to raise our thinking to the next level and to look at the characteristics of the family as a system rather than individuals, at relationships among members and at the way the system was organized and at its processes. Everybody began to think about the family as a system and the application of the systems framework for capturing families became the central approach for people who were thinking about families and family research and thinking about practice with families. Interestingly enough, however, even with that shift and with the development of some transactional concepts it was still very hard to capture the family. Some of the interesting transactional concepts that began to develop were for instance notions of complimentary and symmetry, this was interesting but we still struggled with the chicken and egg relationship because we were still talking in a linear language in trying to describe circular processes. This is what we struggle with all the time.

People dealt with this problem in different kinds of ways. I dealt with it by moving to the use of two and three dimensional simulations. To try to get away from words I intended to try to think visually to capture this complex system we were trying to describe. I developed sort of a picture of what I say as family practice. It is a picture I have in my head that I could not even begin to put into words, but it is a picture I have in my head when I think about families and I think about family practice and I will draw it for you. (Ann Hartman is at board drawing a family)

This was my picture of a family unit of attention in social work practice and research. It's the individuals in a family; the family located in the ecological environment and the family also located in historical process of the family origin. Any problem concern that you are faced with in social work can be understood at least to a certain extent as a function of a combination of variables of this whole complex system. This is the picture I had in my head and began to work on. That helped me think about the complexity of the system. Now, as I spelled these things out to try to get a better handle on them, I developed an eco-map which I have been ribbed about, which is a very simple minded picture of the family in the environment. Have any of you seen an eco-map? Quite a few people have used it. It was an attempt to get a picture of the family in the environment and trace the relationships. It has been a little bit like the mousetrap and very simpleminded and yet it was picked up and used in lots of different places. People have been interested in using it in research. Some people have been interested in trying to quantify it and my sense is, good luck, and I am not sure where it ought to go, but it is a way to, at least in practice, get a hold of the complexities of the family. By the way, some clinicians have used it and they have innovated this on their own which I felt was neat. They would do an eco-map at the initial session with families and they would do it in the final session and they would compare the maps to get a sense of to what extent the family network and their quality of life and their connections had changed in course of treatment. I thought this was a very good idea.

Then also another simulation was the genogram. I saw lots of hands that you were very used to making this very, very essential map of the family in the generational system. That is a basic tool in practice. It is hard for me to imagine practicing with a family or in a family centered approach without, at least, doing a little bit of genogram together since the context of the inner generational family is very important.

Then another thing we worked on were family maps which are ways of mapping the relationships systems. This is the biological system, but through varying symbols using space as a metaphor for a closeness and distance and using lines as metaphors for the kinds of relationship. It's quite possible to do a map of the family emotional system and then be able to look at it again at places of concurrent interactions. They are all going on at one time, but if you tried to describe them verbally, you end up forgetting where you have started.

The other simulation that I was very fond of was family sculpture. Are you familiar with family sculpture?

It is another way of capturing the family system. This is always trying to get beyond words. In family sculpture, it is a non-verbal demonstration where family members assume positions in sort of a living tableau that demonstrates what the family emotional system seems like to them. We got clued into that because families came in and would arrange themselves in a way which seemed to demonstrate the nature of the relationship system. Very early family therapists became aware that the family would sort of arrange themselves to look like their system. Now an early thing was that Ackerman would say "Aha" and would comment on the way the family had seated themselves and I think this is not done so much anymore so early on. But in any event, in family sculpture in which you work with families to help them develop this tableau which feels to them like their family, is a three-dimensional simulation but really demonstrates the family emotional system and even as a four dimensional simulation because you've got the three dimensions and then you also have the people in the sculpture's emotional response to their position which they can then tell you about. This brings in another dimension. By the way Peggy Pape is an absolute master of that. Have any of you seen her film, "Making the Invisible Visible?" It is an absolute beautiful film of family sculpture but she does it and calls it family choreography and does it in movement which is wonderful.

I also started to experiment in practice with words. The use of words in ways to create complex images and that is to paint pictures with words. Again, trying to get away from the linear use of language and to begin to use metaphors. For example, I found myself with families using such metaphors as Hansel and Gretel. I remember a young couple reminded me of Hansel and Gretel in the woods. It was just a feeling, or another family, Peter Pan, Wendy and the boys. You know that kind of family. You know, daddy is one of the boys and mother is Wendy to everybody. Hamlet is a good one. I mean, any of our common shared texts make wonderful metaphors because they communicate a whole complex notion of relationships to people and metaphors. This has become part of my practice.

For example, I have been working with a couple. The man has been angry because his wife kept the house so cold. He talked about the thermostat. It was interesting, because I encouraged him to eventually turn up the thermostat which he then began to do. It was very fascinating that the thermostat has become the metaphor for the temperature of the marital relationship. They began to have fights about turning down the thermostat or turning up the thermostat. The whole marital issue I worked out is getting around that thermostat. The thermostat is also a metaphor for his passive aggressive stance.

I mean, he sat in the cold for ten years. He was cold and angry for ten years. That the thermostat means to him now is not only an evaluation of the situation but a clue to do something to take charge of his thermostat in this own environment. I hope you can see the meaning that such a metaphor has and its communicative power. I am finding that I am listening for metaphors and when I hear families or couples getting into a big mess over some little detail I begin to wonder what this metaphor is about. I begin to wonder what this metaphor is about and then it is very interesting to use what seems like a ridiculous trivial argument as a metaphor for the relationship or a metaphor for the issues they are dealing with around the metaphor.

So these are some of my struggles to begin to try to think about families in a new way. A very interesting thing to look at is that people have started thinking about families as different kinds of systems. In fact, one of the ways you can distinguish the various "schools" of family therapy is to ask what kind of system are they thinking the family is when they think about families. So I began to ask what are the metaphors that the different family theorists are using when they are thinking about families. Just as families think about metaphors, so do family therapists have metaphors that construct their notions of families. So I began to look at family theory metaphors.

One cold group of metaphors were biological metaphors and these were used very early on. These early people saw the family as an organismic system. This led to a big emphasis on homeostatic processes. It was enormously useful, but as a metaphor it tended to emphasize status in families rather than change. This was reinforced by the biological metaphor and also by the fact that these theorists were working primarily with families in which there was a schizophrenic member and they tend to be stuck families.

The classic metaphor when you move to the organismic model was body temperature. Body temperature has a very narrow range of movement, 98.6 is optimal and is optimal all over the world and throughout life, give or take, and to use that metaphor for families got people thinking there should be emphasis on the maintenance of a homeostatic balance around a particular point.

It did lead to some very interesting notions about families, however. One was the notion that homeostatic processes are so important that one of the ways to look at the family is to consider that everything going on in the family is essential to the maintenance of that family. This is a very structural, functional view and I am sure you run into this and this leads to interesting research and practice questions.

I find myself using these questions. I always ask myself "Is it possible that this problem is helping this family maintain itself?". When I started using this question, I began to see families in a very different way. I decided to at least test out the possibility that the symptom the family is presenting is a solution to a problem and not the problem. If this is the solution then you ask the next questions, "What is the problem?" Sometimes when you take that leap you find yourself getting a new view of what is happening in the family. Other people used other biological metaphors. Bowen's work was quite biological in conception. He saw the inner-generational family system as sort of an organismic hole and talked very much in biological terms about fusion and differentiatonal and about inner-generational transmission. He wasn't talking about heredity. He was talking about the transmission of characteristics in the emotional system.

Others turned to mathematics and physics for metaphors. This led to the tracking of the communication loops and led to language such as deviation amplifying feedback loop and entropy. Peggy Pape wrote a nice article and she said "That she worried about the future of the mathematical model." She stated that we might start getting assessments such as "The presenting problem in this family is that their patterns are low in consequential morphostatcious leading to a dialectic calibration in which the negative and positive feedback loops have ended in negatropy." I can see why the language of science is sometimes burdensome when it is turned on families. Mathematical metaphors have been very useful in looking at communication. But mathematical concepts are without content in the sense that they are primarily related to process, tend to be antihistorical and are the purest of abstraction. I think most mathematical metaphors may be useful but are not probably useful enough.

Other family therapists turn most sensibly to sociology and to social systems theory and use the notion of the family's social system as a metaphor for understanding the family. They look primarily at role and at structure. Structural family therapy has been very useful but there are problems in the use of the social system as a metaphor. Primarily issues of norms begin to be troublesome. The metaphor of structure tends to imply a normative structure. It tends to imply that a family should be a certain way. When you talk about restructuring a family you are using a tremendously active verb. In restructuring you have a picture over here that you want to move the family to and I think all of us have to ask what is that picture of the normative structure of the family.

Early family therapist who utilize the metaphor of the social structure tend to draw upon the Parsonian view of the family. The view of the well ordered family is the instrumental male, the expressive female, considerable differentiation between the sexes and between the generations. Anyone who has watched Manuchin and some of the other structuralist therapists can see these themes clearly spelled out.

For example, if the mother is in charge of the family's emotional system and things go wrong in it, it is her fault. Usually, what she has done wrong is to be overclose and protective of her children keeping father who is really a big loving teddybear out of the family and undermining his authority. Those of you who have seen some of the structuralist therapists can see this theme played out over and over again. Gender issues, obviously emerged in the structuralist work, and most of the concerns about sexism is throughout the family therapy field but they have taken the blunt of it primarily because of their reliance on the Parsonian model. In practice, all of us must examine with great care the pictures that we have of the functional or the healthy family and this is also true in research. We carry these norms with us. When we restructure a family and set up norms of what is a functional family in our work and in our research we want to be very careful about where we got this picture. Often we get the picture from our own families.

I just discovered a very interesting one about myself and I have been going around checking this out with folks. I was raised in a female-headed single parent home. This is supposed to be a kind of bad family. It has been considered as less than a perfect family. I recently noticed something about my family. As I look back one of the normative feelings I have is that the family should be democratic in their organization. I mean that is my picture, or my norm. I have been checking with other people that were raised in female-headed single families and discovered that this is quite common for the organization of the family without a male. This is very interesting as the impact this has on kids growing up with that model of how to run a show as opposed to a hierarchy authoritarian model. Very, very interesting. But it's an example of how I walk around with that picture as the template in my head of a well functioning family. My picture is consensual and democratically based and that's coming out of my own background and the fact that I was in a female-headed single family, I have this feeling and I have begun to check it out.

By the way, this would be a very nice research topic. It would be interesting to look at female-headed single parent families not as deficit organizations but to see what are they really like. For example, what is their decision making? In my family, we used to vote and there were two of us against our mother. If we wanted to go to the movies, we'd vote yes, she would vote no, then we would go to the movies. It was great.

Finally, the final model I just want to mention very briefly in thinking about families is the political model. The political metaphor is that the family is a mini state with metaphors around power and hierarchy and with the use of game theory. So as you can see even these kinds of practitioners and researchers share a systems notion about a family and try to focus on the relationships and transactions and on systems characteristics.

Now, I was always a little unhappy about the eco-map. Don't tell anybody. I never know what to do about culture. I never knew what to do with values. I sort of wrote culture in a circle and began to think it is like in the air. I mean, you were treating an ecological system as a thing and you see it as a concrete thing. And I got to worrying about "where was culture," "where were values," "where were aesthetics," "where were a lot of things that didn't appear in the eco-map." Several things happened at once to sort of move me to a different place in thinking about family systems. One, I was quite attracted to the work of Gregory Bateson who of course is now the major guru of family work. His notion is that mind is part of ecology and if you look at an ecological system you've got to think about the mental part of ecological systems; values and construction of reality.

The second thing was the research of David Reese. Do you know David Reese's work? He is one of the most talented and contributing researchers on the family in the country. He's the head of the Family Research Institute in Washington. He has been doing laboratory research on families. What he had attempted to make was an experimental situation which was absolutely identical for all families. Serendipitously, what he discovered was that although the situation was identical for every family, each family interpreted the situation differently.

The other thing he discovered was that individuals within the families interpreted the situation in the same way. Everybody in the family would have the shared construction of the experience. It was absolutely fascinating that Reese discovered these families had a shared construction of reality.

He proceeded to go on and research this a good deal and has published an absolutely fascinating book, called The Families Construction of Reality. In it he presents his research and shows that this shared family view seems to be inner generationally transmitted over the world that family members share.

The other thing that happened with my thinking about the family is that my colleague and co-author, Joan Lear, began to study anthropology about six years ago and we began to devise or think about a metaphor new to us for the family and that is to think about the family as a small society. The minute we began to think about the family as a small society we then needed to turn to anthropology for some ideas about how to think about families and how to study families for knowledge about families as small societies. We began to have a lot of fun. I really want to tell you a little about the process that began to happen when we shifted our metaphor from the biological social, to the family as a small society.

Now the small society has a structure. It has rules, roles and hierarchy, power and blood connections and a shared history like the family does and like the other metaphors that were discussed. But a small society also is a meaning system. It has a culture, shared beliefs, values and language. It shares a world view or a construction of reality. So we turned to anthropology for categories of knowledge to help us to move toward a better understanding of the family. Not to replace the others, but this was another way to look at the family system.

The first and most obvious category that we utilized to begin to look at families was the ritual. That is one of the anthropologists favorite things to look at in understanding a small society. We began to look at rituals. Anthropologists feel that rituals are the basic social fact and speculate that they preceded language as a means of communication and as a means of developing coherent synchrony among creatures. I must say that I am convinced that this may be the case as I trained my dog with the use of rituals. I think living creatures love rituals. I guess we are among those who love rituals. I have trained my dog to take her heartworm pill only by developing a ritual that is repeated everyday.

As we began to study rituals in families we wondered if they performed the same function in families as they did in small societies. I think it is probably very likely that they do. Rituals have many functions; they bring order into a system and they mark and enact transitions. We all know that we organize rituals to enact important changes in our lives; graduations,

weddings, funerals and birth rituals. Rituals seem to consolidate family identity. People get together and enact rituals in which people play very particular important roles and sort of enact both their role in the family and the identity of the family as a whole. We began to explore rituals with families and it became quite apparent that there are both underritualized and overritualized families. I know that sounds normative, but I think one of the ways to think about what we call disorganized families is to think of them as underritualized. Such families often have no regular place or regular time for the basic functions of life like eating and sleeping.

In underritualized families, when the kids are hungry they will go to the icebox and will get something. There is no place to eat or time to eat. Daily rituals are very important. Religious rituals and holiday rituals are also important. We began in treatment with families to make very conscious use of rituals and to help underorganized families to begin to develop a ritual life. The way we did this was to try to hook into rituals that were reported to the parents as kids in their own families while growing up. We begin to bring some of those up into the present and to begin to develop more coherence and continuity in their lives. I began to make a conscious use of rituals in getting people to enact rituals that had been bypassed.

For instance, I saw one woman who had been moderately depressed when I saw her and what quickly came out is that twelve years earlier she had a two year old die. They had not had a funeral. They were new to the community, didn't know enough people and had spent about a year off and on in the hospital with the kid with a genital heart situation and when she finally died they were so spent they did not have a funeral. That was an undone issue for her. She was still mourning that child. Well, we began to plan a ritual. Her husband got involved, at first he thought she was off the wall, and then he began to think it was a good idea. This couple was quite alienated from their families of origin. In about a four month period they had planned the ritual and had a memorial service; wrote letters to all their standard family members and invited them to come. They all came and went through the memorial and music service to commemorate the life and death of this child. It was absolutely a powerful kind of intervention.

I have been teaching my students to give families assignments in a very ritualized way. I mean, if you just toss out, "Gee, the two of you might just go to the movies this week," they will not do it. But if you, in a very ritualized way, develop going to the movies into a ritual that they share together and you plan it out, you increase your chance of them doing the assignment by one hundredfold.

We are also helping people identify some of our new transitions in society that are without rituals.

For instance, divorce is without a ritual in our society and yet it is now a very common transition that has no way of getting dealt with. I am hearing about people developing divorce parties, announcements, and other ways of marking this major change. When my mother got divorced in the old days the only place you could get a divorce was Reno, Nevada and it was a very elaborate ritual. You went for six weeks and then everybody would go together down to the court and get the divorce and then after the divorce you threw your wedding ring into the fountain outside the courthouse in Reno. You see, people will devise rituals if they have any support and opportunity to do it.

I think another point where rituals are needed is around leaving home. Now, in the old days marriage was a leaving home ritual. That is why people gave their daughter away. I mean, you left your parent's home and went into your new home. Well, now kids are leaving home before they are getting married. They are in a sort of liminal phase, are they home or not home, are they out or in. Liminal unmarked situations like that are at risk and one of the things we've encouraged people to do is to develop rituals around leaving home to clarify that liminal state so that people are clear about re-entry in the family and what stage are they out of the home and how to they get back in. We have been gathering information about rituals. There has been some fascinating research.

One very brief bit of research I want to report was done by Peter Steinglass on alcoholic families. Steinglass discovered that in families where the family rituals were disrupted by the alcohol abuse in the next generation there were alcoholics and in families where the family rituals continued to be maintained despite the alcoholism of one of the parents, there was no alcoholism in the next generation. This is absolutely fascinating. I wonder if it is just that the alcohol disrupts the family rituals or does ritual behavior around the alcohol begin to organize the family? I think the whole business of ritual and alcohol is fascinating. If you look at AA, which is enormously ritualized, you note that AA members do the same things around sobriety that they used to do around drinking. So I have looked at AA families in terms of what extent are their family rituals both laced with alcohol and disrupted with alcohol. It is a very fascinating thing. I recently saw just last week a genogram of a young woman whose grandfather was an alcoholic. This is an Irish family, and all of the grandfather's brothers were alcoholic. That is 100%. Nobody in the next generation was an alcoholic and there were seven kids.

There were 27 cousins and none of them were alcoholic. That was a family that was absolutely fascinating to study because it is a very atypical pattern. I asked the client about the family rituals and she said that family life went on despite the grandfathers and fathers drinking. Very interesting.

Another research question that I have is whether families who survive long term illness and the death of a child are the families which maintain their rituals throughout illness and death, are the families that fail to survive the families that lose their rituals? It is an interesting question and one which possibly could be studied.

The second anthropological category that we began to think about was stories and story-telling. This is the thing we have had the most fun with. Small societies have oral traditions and they transmit culture through oral stories at least in part and we began to wonder whether this is the way families pass it on. So we began to look for family stories. One thing we began to clearly realize was that most families have very few stories. But there are stories that are told over and over again. So one of our questions was, when you think about how many characters you have in your family, and when you think of how many stories there could be in your family then you are surprised to realize out of that mass of data that a handful stories are kept and passed on and told over and over again. It's just led us to wonder why "these" stories. We began to wonder if stories "were for families" as dreams "were for individuals." They are highly packed with meaning, highly selective, often metaphored and symbolic. But we were faced with a research problem. We got intrigued with family stories but how do you begin to expand your knowledge and understanding. What I usually do when I am trying to learn something new about something is that I turn the questions on myself. So I ask myself what were the stories in my own family. So I'll tell you my family stories. I have six family stories. They are very short. Some stories are long but my family tended to tell short stories. These are all stories that were told over and over again. I mean, I had eighteen blood great-aunts and uncles. My mother had 54 first cousins. I mean, there was a lot of material there, but I only have six stories.

The first story was one my mother used to tell to me and my sister. When she was a girl she was the only girl in the neighborhood who could climb into the boys treehouse, therefore, she was the only girl who was a member of the boy's club. Isn't that a neat story to tell your daughters. There was a second story; when she was seven, she fell out of the tree and broke her arm. Now, I thought a lot about those stories and those are clearly socialization to sex roles stories.

You could do anything but you are going to pay a price. That was the message told over and over again. We had another story in the next generation about me that I think is the same story.

When I was three and my sister was five she went to kindergarten. She was two years older than I. She and I were a team and I was devastated that she was gone. So I ran away to school. I got there by walking two miles. I walked there, found the school, walked in with my pants full. My sister was absolutely mortified. Well, again, it is a story, risk, you can do it and you will pay a price. Margaret Mean, by the way, tells a story about herself like that of putting her hand into a hornet's nest.

Another story in my family is a cautionary tale. One of my mother's cousins down on the farm went out into the garden to pick potatoes and she left the baby in the kitchen in her high chair and she turned around and the kitchen was on fire and the baby burned and she went down into the basement and hung herself. Now we have been studying stories and I call this one the "burned baby story." These stories are very common and they are cautionary tales about how to take care of children. About bad things that happen to kids if you don't watch them. I've got one about a kid who fell down a well and in that one the mother went down and rescued the child; got the child out, and it died of pneumonia. You see, they are tragic cautionary tales about the death of children.

Then another story is about my grandfather. He was the youngest of ten children and had lived all of his life on the farm which he hated. At the age of sixteen his father died and all of his older siblings had left so he took his mother and \$25.00 and went to Ann Arbor. He graduated from college because he hated the farm and was so glad to get off the farm. He spent the rest of his life every Saturday and Sunday working in the backyard raising vegetables. I think of the that saying, you can take the boy out of the country but you can't take the country out of the boy. But the thing that is interesting is that everybody in my family for three generations spends every Saturday and Sunday out in the backyard garden raising vegetables. The story communicates a very strong family value of connection with the soil and never forgetting your roots and there are all kinds of messages in this.

I think probably the major story for my family is the "kiss of death" story. My great-uncle had TB and he traveled around the world in the 90's spreading it. He came back home to this little farm in southern Illinois where my family lived and my great-aunt, Carrie, and her baby met him at the train and he

kissed them both and within a year they were both dead. That story was told over and over again. That story was an explanatory tale, I think. One of the things that story explains is the physical distance that my family maintains. I don't come from a huggy kissy family. I will tell you and I think that story is an explanatory tale that explains why our family is not a huggy kissy family.

But even beyond that, when I began to think about the story I realize that my mother had TB when I was four. We were not allowed to go into her bedroom and we would stand out in the hall and talk to her. I since thought this was her explanatory tale although she never made the connection of the kind of physical distance that she had to maintain from us. The interesting thing is that right in the middle of studying these stories my sister and her kids and grandchildren came for Christmas and a friend of mine was visiting. We had been working on this story stuff together and she said later that is was the darndest thing, you and your sister absolutely adore those grandchildren but you never get anywhere near them. You read and sit near them but you never hug or kiss them or hold them on your lap. The thing which was absolutely fascinating to see was that communication about how to deal with babies was very loud and clear in our family. If you were a relative, you keep a distance. One of the things that is fascinating about change is that the next time I saw those grandchildren after I had worked on this story and begun to understand the impact of this notion on my life, I had no problem being affectionate to those kids, because I didn't have TB. You see, those of you who have read Bowen's work, this is sort of an enrichment of the Bowen approach. After we had done our own stories, we began to gather stories from our colleagues at the Ann Arbor Center for Family. Now we are busy getting together stories both as a research methodology and in treatment with families.

It's very interesting what people say about those stories that cannot be true. For instance, a great one is a one-liner I got from a colleague. I'll tell it in her voice. "My father came along from Europe at the age of twenty and assimilated in one day." That's a neat story.

I'll tell another story from another colleague which is exactly the same story. I'll tell it in her voice. "My mother was raised in China and she had a sister that was ten years younger than her. When my mother was fifteen and my aunt was five the family came back from China where they had been missionaries. My little aunt, age five, could not speak a word of English and spoke only Chinese. They steamed into the New York harbor and they were on the deck of the boat and my aunt

looked and saw the Statue of Liberty and said in perfect English, 'Oh look, there is the Statue of Liberty' and never spoke another word of Chinese again." Now people will say that couldn't be true. One of the things that you do in stories is you begin to define truth in a new way. It's not whether it happened but that it is the truth in the family and the truth is passed on over time. It says something about the family paradigm and family's view of reality and the family as a meaning system. My mother used to say don't ever spoil a good story for the sake of the truth. I think she was right. Peggy Pape has said that a ritual story keeps us from being blinded by the truth. In your research you can begin to search and listen in a sense for a different kind of truth. What is the truth for a family you see or one studying in research?

Would you like to hear a couple of stories from my practice because I am now beginning to use them in practice as well as research. This is a nice one. This is a client of mine who is totally cut off from her father. She hadn't seen him in sixteen years. She also had lousy relationships with men as you might guess. She'd had a bad marriage and now is in a relationship that isn't working out. She is a woman in her forties. One day she was talking about how she couldn't understand why she felt such a shame and self-consciousness around men. I said "What do you think?" And she said, "I don't know why, but this story come to mind when I was a kid." Well, you know when anyone says "story" I fold up into my chair. This was the story. She was born during the first part of WW II and her father was drafted and off he went. This happened to a lot of people. She and her mother moved back to her mother's parents' home and when they got there, her grandfather said, "You can call me daddy" to the little girl and she called grandfather daddy. A year later mother and child go down to the train station to meet dad and he arrives at the station and the child runs across the station saying, "Daddy, daddy, I have two daddies now." Everyone laughed and looked embarrassed and, of course, what everyone thought was that the mother had a boyfriend. This story was told over and over again and the important thing is not that it happened but that this story was selected and told over and over again amid gales of laughter over the years. My client was always mortified and her father was always angry and everybody else laughed. Well, what the story was about, and we worked and worked to understand the story, was the fact that when the father came back he never really won his way back into the family. He was really "replaced" with his daughter. He became a very alienated figure in the household and that was really what this story was about. In fact, my client has somehow connected that she had somehow done it. She felt it was somehow her fault. Another story.

I have just been working with the use of a story in a very negative way to maintain a particular balance in a system. It's an old story. This is a story about a man telling about his mother. When his mother was a little girl, her father immigrated to the United States from Russia just before WW I leaving his grandmother and his mother and two younger children. The grandmother went to another town and left the mother in charge of the siblings (8 or 9) and the mother gave all the food to her siblings and starved and it ruined her health for life. That's the story. Well, when we got into the story, we found that the story was the absolute truth in the family. Every time he or his brother attempted to grow up, to differentiate, to express an opinion, to get even slightly annoyed at their mother, his father would tell the story about what the mother did for her siblings. She had starved herself and ruined her health. This martyr story was trotted out and retold and it made it absolutely impossible for the client and his brother ever to handle a negative in any way with their mother. I mean, the story was used to keep the two brothers bonded most of their lives. In fact, it continued all the way up until very recently. The mother is dead now, but it is interesting that the old tale is still there that she ruined her health. It is interesting too that he would not eat from his mother. He would not eat anything as a child until his father came home. This is another thing recently we have found out.

Well, it's about time to wind up. I wanted to tell you about my adventures in trying to think about different ways of thinking about families and where it leads me in terms of both treatment and research. I hope that this will stimulate you to do some thinking about how you get to where you are going when you think about treatment and research.

----- end of text -----

This publication is made available in the context of the history of social work project.

See www.historyofsocialwork.org

It is our aim to respect authors' and publishers' copyright. Should you feel we violated those, please do get in touch with us.



Deze publicatie wordt beschikbaar gesteld in het kader van de canon sociaal werk.

Zie www.canonsociaalwerk.eu

Het is onze wens de rechten van auteurs en uitgevers te respecten. Mocht je denken dat we daarin iets fout doen, gelieve ons dan te contacteren.

----- einde van de tekst -----