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Relationships

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed writers such as Jordan (1972) urging social workers to direct their efforts towards changing family interaction rather than focusing on the individual. Many authors, including Pincus and Minahan (1973) and Specht and Vickery (1977), have continued this move to a systemic approach to social work.

Walrond-Skinner (1976) and Skynner (1976) provided the first detailed accounts of how systemic concepts and techniques could be used to focus on family relationships. Surveys by Gorrell Barnes in 1980 and Gillman in 1983, and books by Treacher and Carpenter (1984) and Campbell and Draper (1985), indicate that a systems approach to family therapy is applicable across a wide spectrum of social work contexts. This chapter introduces and illustrates some of the terms used regularly by practitioners working from a systemic perspective. These descriptions are intended to be useful in indicating the type of therapeutic interventions introduced in Part II.

The language of relationships: dyads and triads

The way we describe situations reflects our thoughts and influences our actions with respect to those situations. A description of a problem in terms of individuals will lead to our seeking solutions aimed at changing individuals. If we are to take seriously the idea of changing relationships rather than individuals, then we need to be competent in

describing human dilemmas in terms of relationships. It is no longer sufficient to assess a family in terms of its members' individual characteristics. For example, saying that the father is a weak, peripheral person and the mother is domineering and controlling describes two individuals rather than their relationship. An interactional description needs to encapsulate the pattern of their relationship, which in this case would be complementary. The basic unit of analysis, description, and then intervention must become the relationship.

Relationship style and the development of rules

During the formative phase of a relationship the participants negotiate, explicitly and implicitly, a style or definition of the relationship. People then relate as if there were certain rules 'governing' the various aspects of their relationship. These rules apply to such issues as who makes the morning tea and to more subtle aspects such as how affection is displayed in social situations. These initial negotiations and the rules that develop will depend on many factors including:

1. Reasons why people live together, for example: romance, reproduction, necessity, convenience, ethnic custom.
2. Belief systems of the participants. No relationship starts off with a 'blank sheet'. Each of the participants will bring to the relationship values, standards, and expectations of how life should be lived, how people should behave towards each other, and whose job it is to put the rubbish out. In a study that included over a thousand families, Reiss (1981) shows how partners adopt various aspects of one another's functioning and beliefs, so creating a balance. The effects of contrasting belief systems can be seen most strikingly in interethnic marriages.
3. Environmental circumstances such as the financial and material constraints within which the people in the relationship exist; size and availability of accommodation; imminence of war; relative availability of work; threat of redundancy; choice of available mates.
4. Cultural mores. Public opinion and attitudes may influence a couple's choice about a number of factors affecting their relationship, including whether to cohabit or marry, and whether to have children; and if so how many. A couple may be affected by taboos

about a black person living with a white person, or a working-class boy marrying a middle-class girl. According to McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano, ethnicity is a 'major determinant of our family patterns and belief systems' (1982:3).

THE PROCESS AND CONTENT OF NEGOTIATION

Through a process of negotiation, relationships establish what Lederer and Jackson (1968) term the *guid pro quo*. This is an agreement or collection of rules which may be said to constitute the mutual definition of their relationship. In the analysis of relationships it is extremely important to distinguish between the *process* and *content* of negotiation. Process is a term used to describe the patterns of negotiating that develop gradually through trial and error. Content refers to the issue under discussion. An interactional therapist is usually interested in changing the family process rather than the content. Process becomes identifiable as repetitive behavioural sequences based upon a shared belief system. For instance, an observable process in some families may be that whenever the welfare of the children forms the content of discussion, the mother is acknowledged by the other family members as the spokesperson. This rule may be based on the belief that 'mothers know best'.

The development of process and pattern takes place via verbal and non-verbal communication. Some rules about pattern may be consciously and explicitly decided through open discussion. Other patterns of coexistence are implicit and are taken for granted. The content of negotiation may at times be issues which the participants regard as crucial such as: in which partner's home town shall the couple live? which child will give up his or her bedroom when Granny comes to live with the family? and who will that child share with? More often content consists of the ordinary, day-to-day practicalities of living such as housework, baby-sitting arrangements, taking the car for its service, making the meals, and visiting relatives. Through negotiations about major and minor issues the style of a relationship will be formed. Haley (1963) called this 'the struggle to define the relationship'.

In traditional ethnic groups the rules governing ways of living may be universally prescribed and accepted by the members of the culture. In such a society little or no negotiation may be felt necessary. In contrast, in a society where old values and rituals are breaking down, people are freer to be innovative in how they organize their relationships. Examples

of this freedom might be: deciding to cohabit rather than marry; deciding not to have children; or choosing to have joint custody of children after a divorce. A consequence of greater freedom is that more negotiation is required to establish each separate relationship. This implies greater potential for the conflict that usually accompanies such bargaining. From an interactional standpoint, people who live together may be said to develop reciprocal patterns of relating which are more or less mutually satisfying. These patterns may be described as conforming to the rules of that relationship.

Relationship patterns

Interactional patterns may be understood in a variety of ways. The search for a satisfactory typology of relationships has always been a major issue in the field of family therapy. Some authorities describe the relationship according to the problem attached to the identified member: hence the alcoholic couple, or the anorectic family. No universally accepted classification has emerged. However, there are some descriptions that are used more frequently than others and which are defined here.

BEHAVIOURAL CONNECTEDNESS

Hoffman (1981) gives the late Don Jackson and his co-authors (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967), Lederer and Jackson (1968) credit for developing Bateson's descriptions of relationships. Three basic modes of interaction are proposed: symmetrical, complementary, and reciprocal, by which he meant a balanced mix of the two. Each type was seen as having the potential for both health and dysfunction.

Complementary relationships

This style of relating follows a sequential exchange based on difference. An example is where one person is cared for and the other is the carer, as with a client and therapist. In another relationship one person may be perceived as being in the teacher or superior position while the other is in the pupil or inferior position; these are referred to as the 'one-up' and 'one-down' positions respectively. Problems occur when a couple become entrenched in the relative positions. A couple in

therapy presented a picture of a relationship in which the man was regarded as intelligent, sensitive, and good with children, while his wife was said to be dull, coarse, and neglectful of the children. This could be defined as a rigidly complementary relationship.

Symmetrical relationships

Two people exchanging the same behaviours may be said to relate in a symmetrical fashion. For example exchanging either compliments or insults would each be regarded as symmetrical. The participants compete to be in the 'one-up' position so each attempts to define the relationship on his or her terms.

A husband said that he and his wife had argued every single day since they got married except Christmas Day 1971. The wife responded by claiming that it was on Christmas Day 1972 that they had not argued. 'No,' the husband insisted, 'it was 1971.' This couple displayed a remarkable talent for maintaining a symmetrical relationship.

Reciprocal relationships

A reciprocal relationship contains aspects of symmetry and complementarity. Furthermore, the participants are able, and allowed, to adopt either of the complementary positions. Each partner will have areas in which he or she will be regarded as the expert. Disagreements are permitted and can be contained without irreparable damage to the relationship. The complementary positions can be reversed if the situation demands it. The less ability a relationship has to be reciprocal the more inflexible it becomes and therefore the less able it is to adapt to changing circumstances.

An example of reciprocity failing to operate as required is seen in a couple whose style of interaction has become characterized by rigid complementarity. The man usually makes the decisions and the woman carries them out. If he became ill and could not organize the family affairs, then she would need to be able to take over from him. It may be that the 'rule' of complementarity is so strong that neither is able to accept this reversal of the usual pattern of relating. She may handle things so incompetently that even though he is ill, he still appears in the one-up position. An assessment of this relationship may conclude that it has become 'rule-bound': it has lost the ability to change the rules

Problems in relationships

All relationships have phases which are characterized by one way of relating more than another. The question is whether the family has sufficient flexibility in its rules. This would enable its structure to adapt to changing circumstances by adopting a different and more workable organization. Family systems that present with relationship problems may be viewed as operating in an outmoded style which prevents them from dealing with certain tasks in the next stage of development.

If participants in a relationship hold tenaciously to their relative positions when change is required, then escalation or 'more of the same' occurs. Neither person seems able to shift from his or her stance. If one of them tries to change the other responds in such a way that the previous definition of the relationship is restored. Haley (1963) calls this phenomenon the first law of relationships. For example, in a symmetrical escalation of insulting behaviour, in which each participant continually disqualifies the other, one of them may attempt to change the pattern by accepting defeat and saying 'Yes, you are probably right, I am a lousy lover', that is taking a complementary (one-down) position. The other may respond, 'That's the least of your faults, it's your cooking that I can't stand'. This is likely to provoke another round of symmetry.

Such chronic escalations may go on for years with only temporary respite to allow the participants to 'get their breath back'; they are often described as the 'game without end'. An excellent example of this is given in an analysis of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in *The Pragmatics of Human Communication* (Watzlawick, Jackson, and Beavin 1967: Chapter 5). Complementarity can also become rigidified, as when one person is always seen as the overadequate partner and the other as the underadequate one.

Levels of relationships: overt and covert

Professionals often assess relationships in families that at the overt level appear to be one type but at the covert level are another. We may discover that silence does not represent compliance but is a son's way of fighting his father. Therefore it could be said that the relationship while being overtly complementary is covertly symmetrical. This idea

of a two-level relationship is extremely useful in therapy as symptoms can be viewed as one way of taking a fight underground. It often emerges in therapy that manifesting problems is a person's way of fighting back in a relationship struggle, albeit covertly.

Conflict that is not overt is more difficult to resolve. An aim of therapy in such a case may therefore be to bring the conflict into the open so that participants need no longer produce symptoms in their attempts to deal with it. For example, an anorexic woman's not eating might be a covert tactic in the fight over independence in an enmeshed family. One aim of therapy might be to enable negotiations about independence to be more open so that such self-destruction is not required.

The descriptions above are essentially bi-polar terms useful when analysing dyadic relationships: individual to individual, family to agency, nation to nation, and so on. They are useful but not sufficient in work with families. The next stage is to look at relationships in terms of triads, and the problems produced in three-party interactions.

Triads

The use of a 'peacemaker' to mediate between two adversaries can be seen throughout history and at many levels of social interaction. ('Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be the children of God'). However, the peacemaker's role or reward is not always as attractive as it first appears.

Prudent use of the influence of an outsider to assist a relationship can be beneficial. However, the over-involvement of a third person in a dyadic relationship can be problematic. *Triangulation* is the process whereby the conflict between two people is detoured through a third party; this diffuses but does not resolve the original problem. Examples of this are: a child becoming 'caught up' in parental conflict, a mother acting as the 'bridge' between her husband and her children, or a father stepping in between warring children. The 'go between' may perform his or her task in many ways: sometimes openly, e.g. 'I wish you would both stop this constant fighting and be friends'; or this role can be performed in a covert way through symptomatic behaviour.

The following example illustrates this process. Two parents begin to argue (symmetry). As their voices rise and their faces look angrier one

of their children may develop a headache or start to cry. Alternatively, two of their children may begin to fight. At this 'signal' from the children, the parents may cease their argument to attend to the child(ren). This is an example of triangulation; it happens in most families. Taken to the extreme, however, e.g. where a child is repeatedly required to use symptomatic behaviour to regulate the distance between the parents, it becomes problematic. The above example might continue thus: after the parents have comforted the child they may begin to blame each other for upsetting it. The conflict thus begins again and so the child has a headache and so the parents stop to comfort the child and so on (more of the same). The term triangulation can be applied to any situation where a third party gets *repeatedly* caught up in the disagreements between two others, e.g. a parent between two fighting children, a therapist between two sides of a family in conflict, a worker between a school and family in a disagreement over who is to blame for a child's lack of progress. When such a family seeks help, it is often the 'peacemaker' who is manifesting the problem.

For example a 15-year-old girl presented as seeing ghosts. During the first interview it came to light that the parents, who were separated, never met directly but carried on all their financial and emotional negotiations via this particular daughter. After she began to have these problems she was unable to act as the parents' 'go between' and consequently they began to meet regularly. Bynng-Hall has referred to this process in his paper 'The Symptom Bearer as Marital Distance Regulator' (1980). A different example of this phenomenon was seen in a family where three people were always involved in arguments. No matter which dyad began to argue a third party would inevitably intervene. An aim of therapy in such cases is to detriangulate the third party, enabling the dyad to resolve their difficulty and allow the 'go between' to give up their symptom.

PROCESSES IN TRIADS

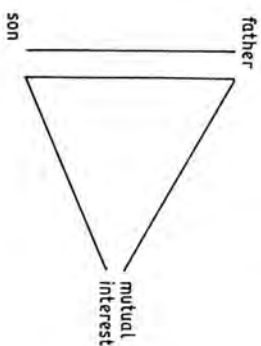
The following terms are used to describe three-party interactions.

Alliance

This indicates a situation where two parties have made an agreement to share a common interest or project, for example, when two family

members join together to share an interest in fishing, cooking, or planning a surprise for another person.

Figure 1 Alliance



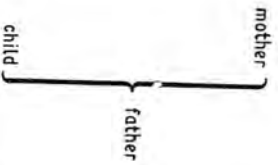
Coalition

This indicates a joining of forces against another. Such coalitions are often arranged covertly. For example, where a mother and child plot together in order to deceive another family member. A mother may know that a child has been in trouble at school and agree not to tell the father if the child does not tell about something that she has done. This example would be noted as crossing hierarchical or generational boundaries.

Hierarchy

This refers to the organization of a family around the notion of executive power in decision-making processes. The power to decide may be related to age, status, knowledge, strength, gender, etc. For example, parents are generally seen as having the power to make decisions for their children and would thus be seen in a hierarchically superior position. An adolescent may be given hierarchical power over younger siblings when parents are absent. Women in a family may traditionally assume a more powerful position than men over issues concerning the emotional welfare of the children.

Some therapeutic schools (Minuchin and Fishman 1974, 1981; Haley 1980) attribute most of the problems that occur in families to the fact that hierarchical boundaries are either too diffuse or too rigid. Hence their therapeutic endeavours are devoted to the restoration and



maintenance of an appropriate hierarchy with the parents united and in charge. In the case of the mother-child coalition described above, the therapists might direct their energies towards inducing the parents to make an open alliance for the sake of their child's success, thus breaking the cross-generational coalition. An incestuous relationship between father and daughter would be viewed in hierarchical terms as breaking the appropriate sexual boundary. Work would be directed towards clarifying the intergenerational boundaries and possibly physically separating the father from the family as a first stage in emotional disengagement.

Boundaries

This is a way of circumscribing the spatial, temporal, and emotional territory of relationships. For example, a decision by two adolescents to go on holiday without their parents can be seen as the creation of a boundary. If the rest of the family accept this 'statement' or even help them financially, then the boundary is validated. This concept can be applied to any activity carried out by an individual or group of individuals. The making and breaking of boundaries is a central feature of many therapists' interventions. Enmeshed families are seen as having diffuse boundaries, represented thus:....., while disengaged families tend to have rigid boundaries, represented so: -----. Health lies in having clear yet permeable boundaries: - - - - - . This allows for distance to be established without losing contact, and for contact to be maintained without losing individuality.

Belief systems

The first part of this chapter deals with the behavioural and emotional styles of relationships. These patterns exist within a conceptual framework known as a family's belief system. A belief system is a family's way of knowing and understanding its world. It can be likened to a 'filter' or lens through which events are passed and interpreted. The work of Reiss (1981) shows that families operate within a conceptual and behavioural framework which regulates and maintains family balance. This framework is an amalgam of traditions, myths, legends, shared assumptions, expectations, and prejudices.

The belief system of a family is formed by, and in turn sustains, its patterns of behaviour. For instance, take a family that throughout the generations has maintained its balance during a crisis by calling upon a social work agency to temporarily remove one of its members. This family may well be seen as conforming to a belief that the expulsion of a member is the only solution to a crisis. The more the family believes that expulsion is the only solution, the more it will use expulsion as a solution, the more the family uses expulsion, the more it will believe that expulsion is the only solution, and so on throughout the generations. In such a family the person who is expelled can be regarded as the content and expulsion as the process of crisis resolution.

Some families proclaim their belief system in the form of an official family motto. Beliefs are manifest in catch-phrases. For example, 'Once children reach thirteen they're nothing but trouble', 'Father is always right', 'A house without children is an empty shell'. The catchphrase of a family whose members constantly argued amongst themselves, and with people at work, school, and in the neighbourhood, was 'If you are a worthwhile person, then you will be right every single time'. Gaining access to these beliefs can help the therapist to understand and change patterns of behaviour. Byng-Hall (1984), building on the transactional analysis concept of an individual's life script, has coined the term 'family script' to describe how the members of a family repeat sequences of behaviour just as actors follow the script of a play.

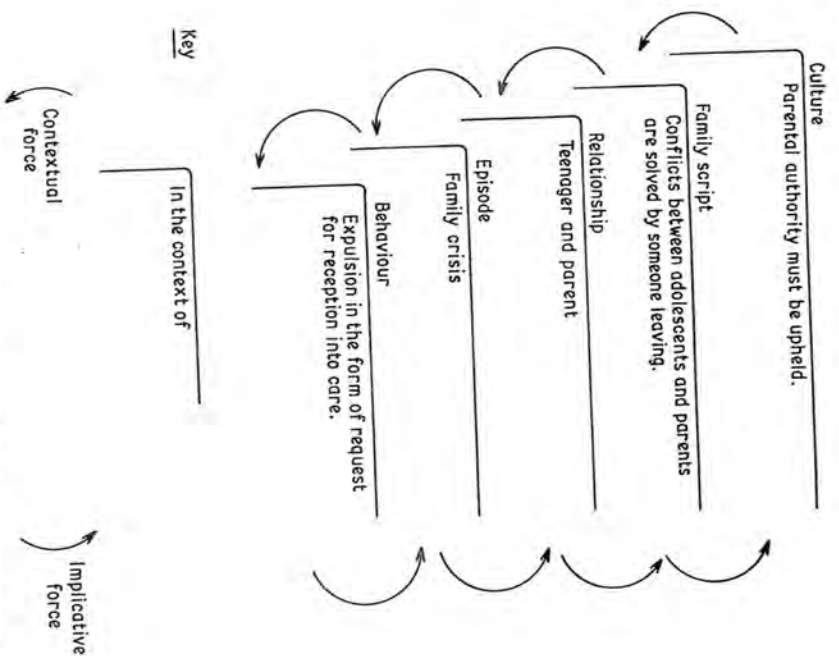
Family scripts are established and handed down through the generations via family customs. They may be altered according to current circumstances. In an era of great social change it is likely that these scripts will need to be changed or even abandoned in favour of a new

version. Work with the family might include re-editing the script so that people can play different parts. This is similar to Whitaker's idea (1984) of helping a family to have a rotating scapegoat instead of one person playing the part all the time. Palazzoli *et al.* (1978) intervened in a particularly rigid family system and likened their interaction to the production of Agatha Christie's *Mousetrap* (a play that had been running for many years) where the actors always played the same part. The way in which behavioural change can be achieved by affecting a system of beliefs will be illustrated in Part II. Earlier models of family therapy tended to concentrate on either the current behavioural patterns of the family or the historical legacies manifested in the form of the family's belief system. Knowledge of the way in which they are intertwined is now thought to offer more options for successful intervention.

MULTIPLE LEVELS OF CONTEXT

The way in which the above ideas can be seen as a series of layers connected through a reflexive, circular process is discussed by Cronen, Johnson and Lannaman (1982) and Cronen and Pearce (1985). The concept of reflexivity emphasizes the mutual and simultaneous effect of the different levels of relationships on one another. *Figure 3* (a simplified and adapted version of Pearce and Cronen's work) shows how the 'expelling' family can be represented diagrammatically. *Figure 3* provides a framework according to which behaviour, to be understood in an interactional sense, must be seen in the context of the episode in which it occurs; the episode must be viewed in the context of the relationship between those involved; the relationship must be understood in the context of the prevailing family script that governs that relationship; and so on in ascending degrees of influence. Each level is influenced by those above. Although Pearce and Cronen consider this influence from higher to lower which they call contextual force to be the strongest, the process is not one-way. They also note the implicative or upward influence from the lower to the higher levels. Behaviour at a lower level can have far-reaching consequences on relationships over time. For example, if a family is helped to resolve a crisis episode without using expulsion as the only viable solution then that episode may in time influence future episodes, relationships, family scripts, and a culture. That is, behaviour at time A can become the context for behaviour at time B.

Figure 3 Multiple levels of context



The parents of an 8-year-old boy were asked why he was not allowed out to play unless one of them was with him. They answered that since he had been in a fight with an older boy two years ago, they had not thought it safe to let him out on his own. Not surprisingly this family's script was 'better safe than sorry'. The episode of the attack influenced other levels over time, producing an enmeshed relationship between parents and child, and the child's disengagement from peers. This two-way (though not equal) interchange of influence is known as reflexivity or recursiveness. This conceptual framework can be extremely useful in examining therapeutic failure as will be shown in Chapter 10.

This chapter inevitably gives a somewhat static picture of relationships. Account has to be taken of fluctuations and variation over time and the family's ability to evolve through developmental stages.

The patterns of relating in a family are established over a period of time, through negotiations that are both explicit and implicit. The formation of these patterns will be influenced by the cultural mores of the time and by the particular family's unique process of trial and error. The definition of the relationship will have been reached through the process of bargaining over many content issues. Agreements are reached for a combination of reasons including obligation, necessity, pleasure, and usefulness at any particular time in the family's development. Families tend towards particular behavioural and emotional styles which are based on the definition of the relationships. The repertoire of behaviours will reflect and support a conceptual framework within which the family operates. These many facets of a family's life can be usefully organized schematically as multiple levels of context.

At some future date these patterns will need to be renegotiated either incrementally or transformationally when they are no longer sufficiently functional or emotionally satisfying. Such times of renegotiation are known as transitional stages and are of particular interest and utility to an interactional therapist. The next chapter goes on to look at relationships over time using the ideas of transitional stages and the family tree.

2

Transitions

Information about a family can be organized to reveal relationship patterns and, more importantly, changes in those patterns. By plotting the family relationships on a chart known as a family tree, the effect of the presenting complaint can be analysed by means of the concept of transitional stages.

The family tree (genogram)

Use of a family tree as a relationship chart is a distinctive feature of family therapy. Carter and McGoldrick (1980) give Murray Bowen the credit for developing it in a clinically useful way to gather, organize, and store information. Relationship patterns discussed in the previous chapter can be represented diagrammatically. The therapist can use the genogram as a planning tool, a therapeutic technique in a family session, and as a way of examining an individual's family of origin in a support group. It can be restricted to the family members or can be extended to include other perhaps more significant people, such as friends, neighbours, or professional helpers. The uses are many and varied, and facilitate the shift to an approach that views symptoms in the context of the evolution of family relationships. A major advantage of the genogram is that it shows available information and indicates what else the worker needs to know. Used well, it can highlight patterns and themes which have been occurring in families for generations and may be influencing present interactions. Events that significantly alter the shape of relationships within the