

ETHNICITY & FAMILY THERAPY

**Edited by
Monica McGoldrick,
John K. Pearce, and
Joseph Giordano**

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*To our families,
whose traditions we hope to continue,
further enrich,
and leave to those who
will follow us.*

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MONICA MCGOLDRICK
JOHN K. PEARCE
JOSEPH GIORDANO

Introduction

Having seriously changed group relationships in American society, the ethnic identity movements of the 1960s and 1970s should have also had a profound impact on the way professionals practiced in the field of mental health.

To an extent this did happen, but unevenly, haltingly, and controversially. The importance of ethnocultural factors in behavior, although more widely conceded than ever, has remained for many an add-on, to be taken less seriously than knowledge about generic interpersonal relations.

In professional circles ethnic group identity proponents often were treated respectfully but with a hidden wink that ethnic militancy made it politically necessary to mollify special group interests.

When in June 1968, I organized the National Consultation on Ethnic America at Fordham University and launched what later became known as the “new ethnicity” (or, as I prefer it, the “new pluralism”) movement, the advocates for differential ethnic analysis consisted mostly of non-White minority spokesmen.

The Fordham meeting broke the simplistic non-White–White dichotomy and ushered in a remarkable decade of studies on the remaining significance of White ethnicity.

By the middle of the 1970s the theoretical and therapeutic work of John Spiegel, John Papajohn, Monica McGoldrick, and John Pearce had begun to gain greater acceptance. Simultaneously a new group therapy called “ethnotherapy” was being invented and perfected by Price Cobb, Judith Weinstein Klein, and Joseph Giordano who made important breakthroughs in the study of Blacks, Jews, and Italians.

In all of these experiments, one fact stood out. Ethnocultural factors are more powerfully played out in family relations than in any other arena.

Generously funded by the Maurice Falk Medical Fund, the multiethnic work that we had pioneered at the Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity and at our Louis Caplan Center on Group Identity and Mental Health had flowed into many streams of thought, action, and process. A new generation of researchers and therapists had begun to conduct their work with an eye on cultural differences and were beginning to write about their experiences.

So it was with a sense of excitement and anticipation that we lent our aid to the collection and editing of the fine manuscripts represented in this book. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* represents a good beginning in break-

ing through the barriers toward honest dealing with the psychology of America's still vibrant subcultures. The findings and practices described here are sure to be controversial, especially when our emotions are ignited by what we read about our own group.

As a guide to practicing family therapists and to other general readers interested in cultural systems, the material presented here will prove to be endlessly fascinating and eminently useful.

IRVING M. LEVINE

Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity
American Jewish Committee

Foreword

The editors and contributing authors of *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* have brought into sharp focus an issue that is, for the most part, informally discussed in the field of psychotherapy, but one that is subliminally struggled over by therapists and patients in most therapy relationships.

An essential aspect of family therapy, whatever the school of therapy, is the negotiation, directly or indirectly, of the structures of family relationships among family members. The therapist plays an active part in furthering, facilitating, forcing, and directing these negotiations in the family. In the process, the therapist engages in negotiations between himself or herself and the family through his or her personal and professional incursions into the family's relations.

These family structures, which are being negotiated, are not simply personal arrangements among family members. They are manifestations of the values of the cultural group to which the family belongs. The therapies employed also reflect cultural values, which are inherent in their historical development. The personal interpretations and applications of the therapies by clinicians are, moreover, filtered through the personal cultural perspectives of the therapists. Cultural values, which shape the relationships between family and therapist, which influence their respective perceptions of self and others, and which affect their manner of communication, occupy space in the core of therapy.

Ethnicity and Family Therapy represents a leap ahead for the field of psychotherapy in understanding the relationships of ethnic and racial factors to the process of therapy. For the most part the authors are not anthropologists. They are experts in therapy who have made a practical study of ethnicity as a part of therapy. The chapters contain both highly academic and candidly personal interpretations of the place of ethnicity in the relationships of therapists (and their therapy) to the families they treat. Beyond the introductory orienting and theoretical chapters, the expositions are practical efforts at introducing the specific cultural structures of a wide range of ethnic groups into the conceptual and working framework of the family therapist. This in itself is both a professional stance and a political act by the editors who thereby assume the position that ethnic difference is to be considered an active dynamic in the treatment of families, as well as a set of distinctions that are to be recognized and accepted in the societal aspect of the therapy context. The editors do not treat ethnic value structures as archaic postures that are to be erased through assimilation with the domi-

nant social structure. Moreover, theirs is a realistic position that incorporates into the boundaries of therapy a most powerful force in the psychological and social functioning of families that has traditionally belonged to the realm of the anthropologist and the sociologist but not of the psychotherapist.

After reading this book, it will be difficult for any therapist to imagine how he or she can attempt to assess, treat, and communicate with a family without being sensitive to the cultural roots of the family and of himself or herself. One may argue, as I have, with the ethnic stereotypes depicted by some of the authors or with the nonevolving, static picture of ethnic structure presented by some of the authors. But among what experts or non-experts will one find consensus about the values and social structures of any national, ethnic, or racial group? Social values and structures are evolving and intermingling in living cultures as well as within families and individuals from these cultures. The development and change of these structures are signs of life. Debates with and among the authors is a necessary part of that evolution. But this important work thoughtfully and forcefully places the issue of ethnicity squarely in the middle of the therapist's theoretical and practical clinical considerations, where it belongs.

HARRY APONTE

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Preface

The United States is the most ethnically diverse nation in history, but this fact has not increased our ability to tolerate differences. We have regarded our society as a melting pot and have blinded ourselves to its inherent diversity. Our wish to forget cultural variations and to encourage common norms, though understandable, has been an idealistic and fallacious goal.

There are still many psychotherapists in the United States who are being trained with hardly a reference made to ethnicity. There are clinics set up to serve particular ethnic groups that have no staff who speak the group's native language. Foreign psychiatric residents are trained to do therapy on the most subtle aspects of adjustment in our society without any consideration of the major cultural gaps between themselves and their patients. In fact, most of us have gone through our entire professional educations with hardly a word mentioned about ethnicity. It is, therefore, not surprising that therapists have not appreciated the role of ethnicity in developing therapeutic models and interventions. For many reasons, some of which we have outlined in Chapter 1, the subject of ethnicity has, until recently, been almost taboo.

Problems (whether physical or mental) can be neither diagnosed nor treated without some understanding of the frame of reference of the person seeking help. We have asked the authors writing about various American groups to answer the following questions, relating them specifically to a family therapy context:

1. What do they define as a problem?
2. What do they see as a solution to their problems?
3. To whom do they usually turn for help?
4. How have they responded to immigration?
5. What are the typical family patterns of the group?
6. How do they handle life cycle transitions?
7. What may be the difficulties for a therapist of the same background or for a therapist of a different background?

The chapters highlight ethnic differences in family patterns and typical attitudes toward therapy, emphasizing positive and practical clinical suggestions. The authors have described ethnic patterns using simplified pictures of the cultures, "snapshots" frozen in time, in which the continuities with the past are emphasized. There are disadvantages in this approach, the most obvious of which is stereotyping. We are keenly aware of the per-

niciousness of negative stereotyping and in no way wish to contribute to that tendency in our culture, although it cannot be denied that our snapshots can be misused in that way.

There are those who argue that, therefore, ethnic generalizations do more harm than good. In our view, developing a relatively simple paradigm is the only realistic way to begin to expand our knowledge. But it is only a start. The danger of training anyone in the details of a particular ethnic group is that it will ultimately squeeze people into unreal categories and reify their culture, as we have rigidified diagnoses. We think the solution to the problem lies in maintaining openness to new experience, once we have a framework, rather than in avoiding a framework because it is not altogether accurate or complete. We hope readers will move past the stereotypes, using them as starting points from which to learn more.

We have not dealt fully with the enormous complexity of present-day ethnic families. Any single group would take many volumes to consider in depth, and most of the groups presented here are themselves combinations of a multitude of cultural groups with a widely varied heritage.

Many factors will determine the extent to which particular families will fit into the traditional paradigms presented here: migration experience, whether they lived in an ethnic neighborhood in the United States, their upward mobility, socioeconomic status, educational achievement, rate of intermarriage, the strength of their political and religious ties to their group.

Obviously no therapist can become an expert on all ethnic groups. What we consider essential is to develop an openness to cultural variability and to the relativity of our own values. We come to understand patterns only by observing differences, and thus we have presented many groups together in the same volume, rather than focusing on fewer groups in greater depth.

It is not easy to raise questions about the validity of assumptions that we have grown up with and have always experienced as part of ourselves. Writing the chapters for this book has been a far more difficult task than other clinical or academic writing (as the authors will surely testify). Our authors have had to write about their own cultures, from inside the culture. They have had to gain enough distance to describe a phenomenon when still a part of it. Many of us have gained some perspective on our own ethnicity by marrying spouses with different backgrounds (about half of the authors). Close experience of differentness increases both one's ability and one's need to understand.

Chapters 3 through 21 describe specific American ethnic groups. In addition, we have included a theoretical overview by Monica McGoldrick, and an ecological perspective by John Spiegel, who has been the guiding force on ethnicity and therapy for many years. We have also included several chapters on special issues. The case of a Vietnamese single-parent family is an excellent example of culturally sensitive intervention that transcends detailed knowledge of the group's values and customs. A chapter on the Latin Lover illustrates the

importance of understanding reciprocal stereotyping in intercultural interaction. "The Myth of the Shiksa" raises some important reservations about the ways an emphasis on ethnicity may be used to obscure family emotional process. Chapter 25 offers a model of ecosystemic assessment and demonstrates its application with Chinese families. Finally, Chapter 26 describes a model of therapy for families in cultural transition, in which the therapist works through a member of the family who is pivotal in the transition process.

This book proposes cultural profiles and specific therapeutic suggestions intended to broaden the repertoire of therapists. We urge readers to take what is presented here not as the truth, but rather as a map, which, while it covers only limited aspects of the terrain, may nevertheless be a useful guide to explorers seeking a path.

MONICA MCGOLDRICK
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