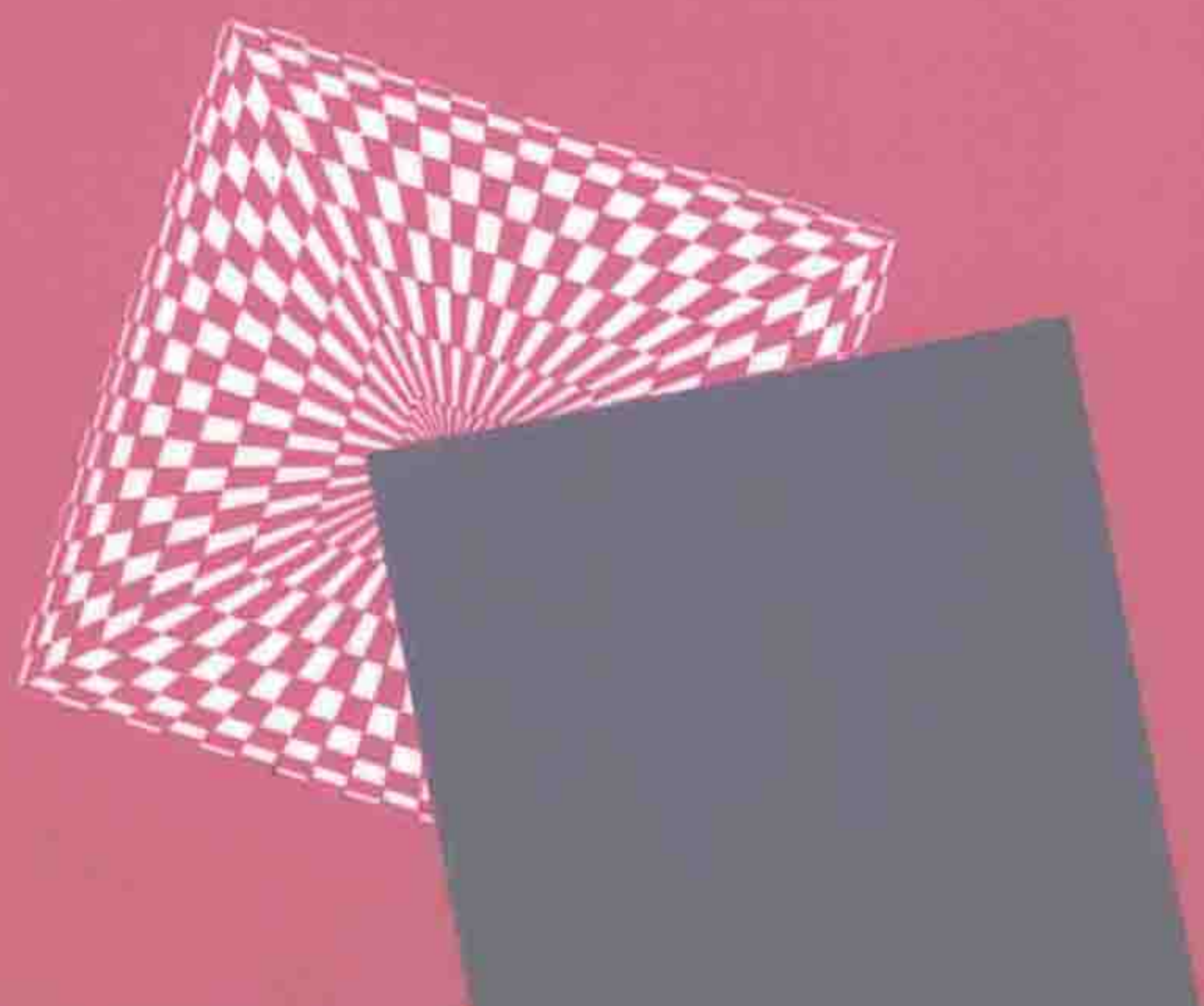


Salvador Minuchin

"As one is swept along in Minuchin's powerful prose and convictions, it almost seems as if he has found the universal solvent in which all family griefs and violence can be dissolved."

— JOURNAL OF CHILD PSYCHIATRY

Family Kaleidoscope



Family Kaleidoscope

Salvador Minuchin

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To my mother and to my aunts Sofia and Esther,
who also mothered me

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Introduction

It is 8 a.m. The TV is tuned to the local public broadcasting station, and the face of a two-week-old baby appears on the screen. A large card with brightly colored concentric circles is held in front of the child. As it moves slowly toward her, her arms move forward and her head arches back. The commentator, a casually dressed psychologist from the university, tells the audience that we have underestimated the human infant's repertory of responses. He makes a loud noise to show the infant's startle response, which is clearly different from her attempt to defend herself from the advancing circles.

The commentator goes on to explain that in the last decade information about infants' capacities has mushroomed. Many psychologists have presented infants with simple stimuli and have recorded their complex sets of responses. Slowly our understanding of an extraordinary organism—the average human being at birth—has increased and evolved, and now movies and related technologies are transforming clinicians' dry language into a heart-melting dialog between the exploring infant on the screen and an entranced audience.

But the average human being at birth does not live in the organized simplicity of a psychology laboratory. The baby is born into a family, and any mental-health technician will agree as to the importance of that fact. There exploration seems to stop.

We know so much about the individual—shouldn't we know more about the family? Well, of course. On the other hand, surely we are all experts. We grew up as part of a family organism, and

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many of us repeat and improve on familiar experience. We have children of our own. Immediately we are in trouble. Our parenting seems to be an exercise of moving by approximation from mistake to mistake. We fumble, hope, improve, compromise, and despair in different ratios according to our different styles. No one else seems to have such difficulty: other parents know how to do it right. *Their* lives are ordered; *their* children's problems are intelligently handled. So what's wrong with us?

I've been a family therapist for over thirty years and can't begin to guess how many families I've met. Never have I met a parent who isn't sure that other parents handle things more smoothly. Everyone knows other families' problems are well handled and logically resolved. My own parents knew it, and so do my children. The well-functioning "typical American family" continues to be a staple of movies, magazines, and television. At some level everyone knows it's a myth, but the myth is destructive because, as our own experience inevitably falls short, our best efforts seem to be failures.

Why is our image of the ideal family so far from the common reality? We are a culture that has enthroned the individual. We have an extraordinarily rich literature of individual psychology, but our insight has focused on the being inside of the self. This is an extraordinary feat of the imagination because "decontexted" individuals do not exist. Life consists of growing, mixing, cooperating, sharing, and competing with others. Surely most of us have had our most significant experiences within some form of the complex social unit we call a family. Why is this social organism invisible to our experts? Why isn't it represented in legislatures? Why doesn't it have legal counsel in the courts?

The answers are embedded in history, politics, and economics. They are worth exploring, for as we study why the family is invisible, we begin to understand why psychology and ethnology understand territoriality and aggression better than sharing and cooperation, though there are innumerable examples of both. Exploring the enthroning of the individual illuminates why economics so often deals with the maximum utilization of resources instead of their interrelation. And why even our "family" courts deal with confrontation rather than mutuality.

We have the capacity for more accurate perceptions of human

reality: after all, when we are shown a mouth and eyes in a gestalt perception test, we recognize a face. The same capacity might enable us to look at an individual and recognize a family. But the paradigms of our culture betray us with a *trompe l'oeil*: the whole is distorted through emphasis on the detail.

This book is an attempt to help you see differently. Not necessarily better, but differently. Most of us are like Molière's "bourgeois gentilhomme," who had been speaking prose all his life and never knew it. We live our lives like chips in a kaleidoscope, always part of patterns that are larger than ourselves and somehow more than the sum of their parts. Our individual epistemology usually blinds us to this kaleidoscopic self, and that is unfortunate because, when we look at human beings from this perspective, whole new possibilities open up for exploring behavior and alleviating pain.

In one way and another, I have been working to define the message of this book throughout my whole professional career. But I think it relevant to point out that this particular statement springs from a specific period in my life. Two years ago my wife and I began a new chapter: we took early retirement. Both of us, though still enjoying the challenge of teaching others, had the frustrating feeling that we ourselves were learning less. After much discussion we decided to take a year off to live in London. Settled there, we followed a lifelong interest in normal families and pursued the study of the processes of divorce and remarriage. Pat began to play the oboe. I toyed with writing plays. It was a period to experiment with being inexpert and to follow whatever intellectual pathway chance threw our way.

For a while it felt strange not to have to respond to the constraints and demands of university and clinic. Separated from the structuring of a daily schedule, I suffered many periods of uncertainty that I had avoided by feeling effective as a teacher and practitioner of family therapy. Then rather suddenly I realized I was seeing things differently. No longer having to concentrate on how to help the Smith family change, I was able to ask myself how Smith families function and how they work within the social context. No longer forced to respond to the immediacies of executive or administrative tasks, I began to ask deeper, more generic, questions. Not how to do therapy, but how do families work? Not

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what are the best training curricula, but have family therapists achieved a paradigmatic change in the organization of institutions that deal with people? Long a member of the councils of family therapy, I began to feel like an Elder in those councils. With this new freedom came new responsibilities—the need to look at the tribe as a whole.

Without conscious awareness, I began to reexamine the problems that led me to family therapy thirty years ago—the workings of families with delinquent children. In that other country (and in so many ways, another era), I returned to family court to resume the exploration of families of the slums. But now, after so many years of accepting the way institutions label families and taking families on the institutions' terms, I wanted to explore what institutions do to families.

So this book is, in a sense, an interim report, growing out of a pause in the life of an intervener. Maybe what it really is is a travelog: I've been traveling through family country; I'd like to show you some sights. Or perhaps there is only one area, which displays its varying textures as we circle around it. It seems to me that all I want to do is show how the reality of human nature goes beyond the individual as a complete system. When I talk about divorce, remarriage, family therapy, the judiciary, the medical system, and violence in families, I am always telling the same story.

The itinerary I have set is a trifle arbitrary, very personal. The book is divided into sections containing a potpourri of cases, dialogs, discussions, fables, and plays. I have mixed fact and fiction with no real attempt to sort them out in the usual scholarly fashion. Each claims to portray reality—just as in life.

Part One

*Patterns in
Transition*

Kaleidoscope

Fragments

Looking into the interior of a family, one can suddenly be caught by scenarios. These may be whimsical, challenging, absurd, or dramatic, but they are all disturbing because they carry the tantalizing feeling that they are complete. It is as if one glanced into a store window, and flashed the universe.

But the truth is that the family therapist is always in the presence of shifting images. Often he focuses on one well-defined piece—the family's presentation of their identified patient. But there are hundreds of other pieces with clear or uneven edges that have to be fitted together in order to see the pattern, and perhaps change the position of the pieces.

What follows are two puzzles, pieced together to show you how the game is played.

The Magdalene

I met the Flauberts in Europe. They had requested therapy and accepted the offer of an initial session with me and the psychiatrist who would then continue treating them.

As I first saw them in the office of the family therapist, the father, an official of a foreign embassy, seemed an escapee from the pages of John le Carré: dark glasses, a beret that he kept on, gray flannel trousers and a blue blazer, a high-necked blue shirt, and a paperback book on structuralism in his hand. The mother, also in her forties, was a study in dignified femininity with an aura of Chanel No. 5 and English knitwear. Their daughter Cecily was

clearly claiming that she belonged to another family, in a world of the uninhibited whose uniforms are colorful, wrinkled, and frayed.

Sophisticated makeup hid her fourteen-year-old innocence—though she would probably scorn the word; for the last six months she had been taking a different man to bed almost every night. She always managed to leave clues for her parents to find. They had suspected and at first denied the facts. Then, unable to lie any longer to themselves or each other, they had confronted her. Her answer was that genuine challenge of the young: “So what?” The lines had been drawn—on one side the parents, filled with impotent rage and hidden guilt, on the other the girl, with all the power of the helpless. She had come at her mother’s insistence, resolved not to say anything: her parents might drag her to the psychiatrist, but they could not make her drink.

At the beginning of the session, as usual, there were a lot of irrelevant movements, as if bodies had to find the right spot on the chairs or the most protected corner. Then there was an exchange of looks, from father to mother, mother to daughter and therapist, the girl to her hands. All were fast enough to avoid detection—nobody wanted to be the family informer.

I began some irrelevant comments on the weather, traffic conditions, the TV camera in the corner. This is the social gambit: white pawn/king nine. The father responded in kind, black pawn/king three. Casually I asked, “Who would like to tell me why you’re here today?” A fast exchange of messages between the parents resulted in the mother’s taking the voice for the family. I acknowledged the expected move; it usually is the mother. The question of who will begin is part of an informal guessing game I enjoy: Will the man ask the woman to talk, or will she start straight away?

MOTHER: Well, we came because Cecily is acting strangely. No, not strangely, but certainly it’s not characteristic. She’s always been a very good student. She’s very bright, and she was very hard-working, but this semester she’s failing almost all her subjects.

CECILY: I am not!

MOTHER: You told me you’re failing math and history. Isn’t that true?

CECILY: Forget it!

MOTHER: If I'm misquoting you, just tell me.

Silence fell—back to square one. The father rearranged his dark glasses. I had a strange impulse to pull them away to see if there was a man there. I acknowledged the feeling, suppressed the impulse, and looked expectantly at the mother.

MOTHER: You know we love you, Cecily, and we came here to help you. But if you don't talk, we're helpless.

CECILY: I said forget it!

MINUCHIN: Would you mind, Cecily, if your mother or father tells me why you are all here? You can correct them if they're not accurate.

CECILY: I don't mind.

M: Would you prefer your father or your mother?

CECILY: I don't care.

I was treading softly, trying to keep the door open. The mother had said over the phone that they were concerned about Cecily's promiscuity and that they suspected she had been "selling her body." Her opening, talking about school, was one of the meandering ways by which frightened parents approach problems.

M: Mr. Flaubert, would you like to tell me how you see the problem?

FATHER (*puts his book on a nearby table, takes his glasses and beret off with the same movement, and puts them down—a man after all, and a worried one*): Let's cut it out, Lydia. We all know why we're here. Cecily hasn't slept in her bed for weeks. She leaves home before I get back from the embassy, and returns at three or four in the morning. She sleeps all day, and she's been cutting school for the last month. (*He doesn't look at either Cecily or me while he talks. His wife is the target, and he spits his words out with contained anger. He shifts in the chair, pulls up his pants before crossing his legs, then looks directly at me.*) I learned all this three days ago—from the school principal. She called me at the embassy.

MOTHER: I didn't want to tell you because I was afraid of what you'd do to her.

FATHER: What could I do? Shoot her?

MOTHER: I was afraid.

M: Excuse me. How long has this been going on?

MOTHER: For quite a while, but it's been increasing this last month.

M: And you learned all of this only three days ago, Mr. Flaubert? I don't understand that.

FATHER: Lydia has been protecting her. I leave home at six in the morning and I come back late. Cecily's been angry at me for the last month and she's been avoiding me. I thought her need for distance was a necessary part of growing up, and I accepted it. (*In an incongruous gesture, he puts his dark glasses on again. I wonder if he's signaling his disappearance.*)

M: Is your father a very violent man, Cecily? Or is your mother protecting you because she doesn't think you're grown up?

CECILY: She thinks I'm ten years old! She talks about me as if I'm six. We can't get together at all; we just talk *at* each other. And my father doesn't talk at all. He just hides behind his important books and his dark glasses.

It would be difficult for any adolescent to resist an invitation to explore parental failures. Cecily's answer reveals a bright and bitter girl, skillful in using words. I guess she is caught in some struggle between her parents, and bent on self-destruction.

At certain points in a session I let family members talk, encouraging their interaction, and I float. That way I can get some perspective on the whole family organism. For the Flauberts, I sense the father's fear of being discovered, the mother's dignified aloofness, and Cecily's despair, commingling in a dance of tenuous contact. In the computer of my brain, with its billions of connections, images come and go—checked, connected, replaced, retrieved. I think, without thinking, about the mother's possible lovers, the father's machismo or homosexuality, Cecily's feelings of betrayal: chips of eidetic information form the uneasy background against which I explore further.

M: I'm quite impressed, Mr. Flaubert, that important events can occur in your house without your knowledge. I see, by the way, you're reading Foucault. He's remarkable. I think he takes the

truth and turns it on its head. Well . . . how is it possible, Mr. Flaubert, that you didn't know?

FATHER: My wife left us three days ago.

I don't make a move. My eyes unfocus in my best imitation of the invisible man. This is a time to wait.

MOTHER: It's true. But I waited around long enough—a doormat for you to wipe your intellectual feet on! I was a nothing, thinking I had to sacrifice myself for Cecily's sake, all my life, just waiting! I'm forty-five. I need to be myself. Now!

All the forces contained in twenty years of marriage collide here at accelerating speeds. Their story is not so special, as they tell it. They were always mismatched: Maurice the only son of an academic couple, shy and intellectual, pursuing a career; Lydia a child of the bourgeoisie, marrying above her station and organizing her life to advance her husband's career. She wanted many children; they had only one. Cecily became her mother's project, then her friend, and finally her confidante. Everything was routine until a couple of years ago, when Lydia, with her child growing up, decided to study for a degree. Maurice supported her decision, and Cecily felt it was fun to have a mother at the university.

FATHER: I really want you to come back. Of course you have the right to decide—but we need you.

MOTHER: I don't think you need me, Maurice. I don't think you even noticed when I left . . . well, maybe that's unfair. But I really think you'll manage.

CECILY: What about me? I suppose I'm supposed to manage too?

MOTHER: I want you to come live with me. I told you that.

FATHER: No! I don't want that. Cecily already has a home. It's your home too, but apparently you've decided to leave it. We'll manage. (*He looks at Cecily.*) I'll have to get to know you better.

Triangulation is a dirty game, but family members play it frequently. Children have to find their own way, and Cecily, at