
FAMILY WORLDS

*A Psychosocial Approach
to Family Life*

Robert D. Hess and
Gerald Handel

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PREFACE, 1974

The publication of a paperback edition of *Family Worlds* provides the authors an opportunity to take another look at their work. A new edition suggests that the book has a new timeliness and new implications for the future. Fifteen years have gone by since initial publication, and we have now both the opportunity and the obligation to comment on the study in the light of subsequent trends and developments. Time has brought about many changes in society, in the life of families, and in the social sciences which seek to understand both continuity and change. What then is to be said about a fifteen-year-old study which endeavored to conceptualize families as groups and to portray them as they function? To us there seem to be four main contexts in which this book can usefully be discussed at this time.

Family change and family groups. The past fifteen years have seen a surge of interest in the family that, if not actually unprecedented, is certainly unlike anything that was taking place when this study was in progress. Although a new reflectiveness on the nature of sexuality and its relationship to society, occasioned by the eye-opening Kinsey reports, was beginning to emerge, it had not yet evolved into a full-scale reexamination of sex roles and their wider import. Then in the 1960s came a variety of discontents and new hopes—the women's liberation movement; the seemingly unceasing rise in numbers of people on public assistance—a trend that prompted the Moynihan report on the Negro family, which in turn prompted a still-reverberating

controversy; the civil rights movement; the black power movement; the undeclared war in Vietnam; the student protests and uprisings; the war on poverty; and community action. From the roiling waters of these many currents and cross-currents, a variety of slogans, beliefs, and practices relating to the family came into public view. "Make love, not war!"; legalized abortion; communes; "alternative life styles"; sexism and repression of women; home-made marriage ceremonies to replace the traditional ones authorized by establishments. A variety of alternatives seemed to be sweeping aside the traditional family, as the mass communication media eagerly spread the news that traditional families were on their way out.

Yet one fundamental fact tended to be overlooked. There was much more change in the norms of association (the terms on which family members associate) than in the norms of composition (who is included in the family).¹ More couples might live together before marrying and they might do it more openly than in the past. After marriage, more couples than in the past might sanction extramarital relations. Couples might more readily accept abortion. They might accept divorce more easily. More couples than before might decide not to have children at all. More marriages would include two partners pursuing independent careers. But when all these changed norms are recognized, the perduring fact emerges that whether people marry in blue jeans and bare feet or gowned and ascoted, this society continues to see the formation of many new groups consisting of an adult man and an adult woman, legally married, who procreate and live together with their children as a group, maybe for a shorter term than before, but nonetheless as a group inhabiting a common household over an extended period of time. So far as is now apparent, groups of this kind will continue to be the mode (both stylishly and statistically) in this and other western societies, for the combining of love, procreation, childrearing, and household for-

¹ See Gerald Handel, "Views of a Changing Interior," in G. Handel (ed.), *The Psychosocial Interior of the Family*, 2d ed. (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1972).

mation. If this be so, then the study of families as groups will continue to have a compelling claim on our attention.

Family groups and mental illness. The importance of family groups for society was perhaps stated most forcefully for American social scientists by Charles Horton Cooley, for whom the family was a prototypical primary group in which human nature was formed. Later generations of social scientists created a whole field of study which came to be known as "small groups"; yet very few of those who identified themselves with this field gave any attention to families as small groups. A few social scientists outside this movement addressed themselves to the task of depicting and analyzing family groups; Oscar Lewis's first major family study was published contemporaneously with our own,² and Jules Henry's studies were getting underway about the same time.³ Nevertheless, it is fair to say that social scientists still do not do much study of families as groups. Sociologists mostly ignore the family as a group, and psychologists generally fail to conceptualize the family as a group.

But psychiatrists have, in the past fifteen years, turned their attention to families as groups. Increasingly, psychiatric theories of mental illness (or "madness," a term which is being used with growing frequency) focus on the family not only as the primary generating cause but as itself the primary locus of disturbance. A new psychiatric specialty—family therapy—has arisen, with many variations in techniques of treating "sick families." But this psychiatric enterprise proceeds in the absence of concurrent efforts to study "normal" or "ordinary" families. To the present authors, it is hard to see how it is possible to build an adequate body of knowledge concerning what goes wrong in some families without also building up a body of knowledge concerning ordinary families.

Qualitative research methods. *Family Worlds* is a product of qualitative research. At the time it was published, there was a growing belief that qualitative methods were on their way to

erations, interviewed quality - with words

² Oscar Lewis, *Five Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

³ Jules Henry, *Culture against Man* (New York: Random House, 1964).

becoming obsolete and that only quantification would in the future be acceptable as a style of work in social science. The intervening years have brought a more balanced judgment. While quantitative methods have become increasingly sophisticated, there has been increased recognition that qualitative methods remain indispensable. The logic of qualitative inquiry has been further clarified and codified.⁴ The extent to which social science depends upon qualitative modes of inquiry is suggested in a recent work on the philosophy of science.⁵ The increasingly sophisticated inquiries into the nature of scientific inquiry suggest that qualitative research will continue to be indispensable, not only in the study of families as groups but in many other substantive areas as well.

Family and "life chances." That the family is significant for the life chances or fate of its members is underscored by various researches. Thus, studies indicate that the family in which a child grows up has a very significant effect on his cognitive skills, the extent to which he is likely to benefit from schooling, and indeed the occupational level he will eventually attain.⁶ These investigations are able to show with increasing precision that families are highly consequential to the fates of their members. But when it comes to explaining just how and why this is so, the precise findings are surrounded with many uncertainties. These works often explain what is "probably" or "undoubtedly" occurring in the families to bring about the reported findings, but the basis for such judgments is skimpy indeed. These works only make clearer than before the necessity of studying families as groups of

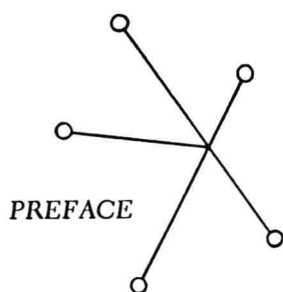
⁴ See, for example, Robert S. Weiss, "Alternative Approaches in the Study of Complex Situations," *Human Organization* (Autumn, 1966); Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1967).

⁵ Paul Diesing, *Patterns of Discovery in the Social Sciences* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1971).

⁶ See, variously, Christopher Jencks et al., *Inequality* (New York: Basic Books, 1972); James S. Coleman et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966); Peter M. Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967).

members who are engaged in multiple concomitant interactions and relations with each other.

In sum, families continue to be important in America. More and more detailed understanding of how they are important continues to emerge from research. But families exist as groups, and we shall not adequately understand how families produce the consequences that they do until we increase our study of them as groups. The whole field of small group research that burgeoned during and after World War II virtually ignored families as small groups; the important goals of group study then seemed to be to understand what makes more effective bomber, tank, and submarine crews or more productive producing units in factories and offices. Now that the value of such goals is increasingly questioned in this society, and wider efforts are made to revive humanist concerns, including more comfortable and rewarding forms of association in families, perhaps the study of family groups can find a place of honor among the tasks social scientists set themselves. We are pleased that *Family Worlds* is now available in an edition that will make it more widely accessible, and we hope that others will be stimulated to improve upon our efforts.



This volume attempts, by interpretive analysis of family psychological and psychosocial materials, to examine the complexities of family emotional organization and to indicate concepts that we believe may be useful for research on the internal processes of non-pathological family interaction and emotional structure.

In the belief that knowledge grows by instance and example as well as by generalization, we have chosen to illustrate our approach to family dynamics by describing five families selected from a research group. The detailed examination of cases suggests lines of thought, urges re-examination of contemporary theory, reveals areas of behavior in which our knowledge is sparse, and stimulates hypotheses that may be tested in other research formats. Case analysis serves another function, perhaps more important: it translates abstractions into the concrete components of actual lives. The social scientist loses touch with his subject matter if he confines his work to disembodied responses and acts grouped into categories. Learning in social science must have a sensory base; tables of data must have some connection with people who can be seen or heard in action. If tabulation of data advances our science, case study and analysis serve to remind us that our subject is human action and feeling.

Case studies have, perhaps, a particular usefulness when they deal with problems at the forward edge of an area of investigation. They make it possible to illustrate in detail the referents

of new concepts and to think about their ramifications. Concepts that have gained currency sometimes become so far detached from the phenomena they are intended to represent that they take on, unsuitably, a life of their own. Formal definition of concepts seldom suffices to locate them appropriately; indeed, such definitions often are possible, not to say fruitful, only after prolonged acquaintance with the phenomena from which they issue. A group of cases serves to keep concepts closely related to the events we wish to understand.

Considerable illustrative material from the original raw data has been included in our case analyses. Presented in the context of interpretation, this material gives the reader an opportunity to see how we have reasoned from the data. At the same time, he also has a basis for working out interpretations of his own, whether in disagreement or along lines that we have not considered. It is our hope that case studies such as these will not only stimulate further research but will also prove particularly useful in the teaching of graduate courses on the family.

We believe that some new ways of looking at families are necessary. What these are we attempt to delineate in chapter i and to illustrate in the succeeding chapters. At this point we set down some assumptions we have taken for granted; they constitute the base line from which we have proceeded.

Certain features of family life and circumstance may be regarded as universal givens, or derivatives of the biological nature of the species. Overlying the biologically determined universals of family life are the cultural givens—the characteristics that emerge as a direct result of the family's membership in a social and cultural system of human beings. At this level, the features of the family are more complex and more diverse, varying not only from one culture to another but between subgroups within cultures. Cultural and social patterns impose expectations and limits of different kinds upon the sexual activity by which the species reproduces itself, regulating such behavior within the family as well as between family members and other individuals in the society. These patterns also are prescriptions for formal

marital and parental ties as expressed in law and for informal definition of family obligation as expressed in custom.

Cultural expectations also regulate the basic elements of the socialization process and the features of roles that each family member must assume. Within rather broad limits the behavior of parent toward child is indicated by group norms; the child learns through experience those behaviors that are appropriate to the biosocial status of a child and gains a conception of the roles of adult family members.

The components of family roles common to members of a particular culture provide useful constructs for the study of the family as an institution and for cross-cultural comparisons of the family as a focal element of the social structure. However, the dynamics of family interaction are affected by powerful situational and idiosyncratic components, so that analysis of an individual family must push beyond the data provided by fitting the biological and cultural givens over family behavior. It is our purpose here to examine some of the variations in living that individual families have evolved, with a view to understanding their emotional and social consequences. This volume thus continues work which we have previously reported.¹

Frames of reference and theories for comprehending family life are not lacking. Stimulated by diverse interests and concerns, social scientists have been led to consider what families are and what they should be. Within the social sciences, broadly considered, there are numerous approaches, elaborated in a great volume of writing. In proposing yet another perspective, we shall attempt to set forth what we conceive to be an area scantily attended. This task is perhaps most readily approached by considering briefly several of the professional approaches to the family.

The clinical practitioner—psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, psychiatric social worker—is concerned with assisting people in

¹ Robert D. Hess and Gerald Handel, "Patterns of Aggression in Parents and Their Children," *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, LXXXIX (1956), 199-212; Gerald Handel and Robert D. Hess, "The Family as an Emotional Organization," *Marriage and Family Living*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2 (May, 1956).

difficulty. An individual comes to him or is committed to his care for treatment so as to be able to resume adequate functioning. In most prevailing systems of psychotherapy the individual who needs the therapist's services is necessarily the focus of the therapist's interest. He explores his patient's family involvements to the extent necessary for achieving a therapeutic aim. This aim takes the form of one or another kind of personality alteration. Research on the family carried out by clinical investigators—stimulated by or incidental to their work with patients—has traditionally been directed to understanding the personality of the patient. The personality is disordered; the circumstances of the disorder must be understood; and this entails knowing how the patient's relationships with others contributed to his difficulty.

In the treatment of emotionally disturbed children, the concept of disturbance has often been relocated or extended so that—most often—the mother-child *relationship* rather than the *personality* of either one is regarded as the locus of disturbance. Treatment is seen to require a revision of the commitments they have to one another, the ways in which they take account of each other. Increasingly—though not yet extensively—this same conception has been extended to adult relationships. Work guided by this view finds expression in a recent collection of clinical papers.²

Also quite recently, some clinical workers have endeavored to move beyond the two-person relationship and to arrive at a diagnosis of the entire family unit—comprising parents and children—guided by the belief that a personality disturbance is essentially imbedded in, if not produced by, the entire matrix of intra-familial relationships. The work of Dr. Nathan W. Ackerman is particularly noteworthy in this area, since he has called attention to the complexity of interpersonal involvements within the small family. Though he has pointed to the phenomena of the unit, his concepts remain those of the two-person or triangu-

² Victor W. Eisenstein (ed.), *Neurotic Interaction in Marriage* (New York: Basic Books, 1956).

lar relationship, so that, in effect, he studies the family by considering in turn each such relationship. As yet he has not developed any concepts for dealing with the entire group.

All of these clinical approaches derive from an interest in personality disturbances.

The study of the family as a group has traditionally been the province of the sociologist and anthropologist. The central concerns of their investigations have varied in different periods, though an underlying thread of continuity is woven through these disparate queries—the nature of the forces that link family members to one another and how these forces are related to the form of the larger society. The various conceptualizations of the problem of family cohesion have not typically included the idea that the particular personalities of the individuals who comprise a family are an essential element of its structure. Concerned as they are with understanding social aggregates, classifications, and groupings, the assessment of individual persons has not been part either of the method or of the thinking of sociologists and anthropologists. In a sense, then, it may be said that clinician and academician have each been working on the same problem from two essentially different perspectives. By reason of training, habits of thought, and professional responsibility, the clinician begins with the individual and moves toward extending the scope of his considerations step by step. For precisely the same reasons, the sociologist and anthropologist begin with the group.

Yet in certain respects the development of sociological interest in the family parallels and verges on the clinical. The similarity is most obvious in early origins: sociologists were also concerned with urgent problems—divorce, illegitimacy, delinquency. Some early American sociologists, at least, were clinicians in the formulation of their interests. But the more significant impetus toward convergence was provided by the interest in *social change*. Ogburn's memorable statement that the family was losing its functions necessitated reflection on what the family was doing, if it was no longer doing what it had been. The

conclusion reached by some, such as Sorokin and Zimmerman, was that it wasn't doing much of anything except deteriorating. A larger phalanx concluded with near agreement that the family functions to develop personality. In their chapter on the American family, Parsons and Bales write: ". . . the functions of the family in a highly differentiated society are not to be interpreted as functions directly on behalf of the society, but on behalf of personality."³

The import of much of Burgess' work, as of the recent volume by Foote and Cottrell, is in this same direction. The same basic implication is pursued in different ways by Allison Davis, Waller, Hill, and many other notable investigators. While a detailed discussion of previous research and theory is not within our purpose in the present volume, we have rapidly sketched in this background to provide a context relating our work to what has already been accomplished.

Each of the five families presented in this volume was chosen because it represented in its interactional aspects a cluster of families of the total group. We passed over families whose personal circumstances and psychodynamics were more dramatic or unusual or deviant. These five families show no extremes of conflict or psychological crisis; their problems are typical. In each case we chose among two or three families that were highly similar in their interactional problems, style of life, and general sociological characteristics. Each of the families of our total research group has its problems. Our aim is not to dramatize a series of problem families but to describe families with typical stresses and internal relationships and to examine the ways families deal with the day-by-day tasks of family living.

To some extent we have found it necessary in the interests of furthering our understanding of family interaction to draw back the curtain of privacy that protects any family from the eyes of its neighbors. Out of consideration for the rights of the families

³ Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955), p. 16.

we have described, we necessarily disguised the five families of the book. We cannot, of course, indicate the kinds of disguise we have employed to conceal the identity of the families involved, other than to say that the names of the families and of their members are fictitious. We owe a tremendous and profound debt to these families who consented to participate in our study. We recognize the courage that they displayed in cooperating in an effort of this sort. Their only compensation is the gratification they may receive from the possibility that they have contributed to the understanding of family life and thus perhaps assisted other families whose troubles are greater than their own. They have our deepest thanks.

We have profited from the work of many people. Our greatest immediate debts are to Professors Allison Davis, Robert J. Havighurst, William E. Henry, and W. Lloyd Warner. Their thinking has been particularly influential, and the atmosphere they have created in the Committee on Human Development has been a most congenial one.

In writing this book, we have received helpful suggestions and criticisms from Drs. Henry Maas, Bernice Neugarten, and Sidney J. Levy. We wish especially to record our indebtedness to the late R. Richard Wohl, with whom we had many discussions concerning the problems of this volume. His comments were richly suggestive, and his enthusiasm greatly encouraging. His death, at the time this manuscript was nearing completion, deprived social science of a stimulating mind. We lost an esteemed colleague.

We express our thanks to Mrs. Fayette Loria, Mrs. Noreen Haygood, and Mrs. Florence Hamlish Levinsohn, who carried out all the interviewing and testing of family members. Their efforts were persevering and skilful.

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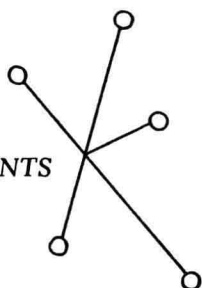
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