FAMILIES AT RISK

Treating the Multiproblem Family

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Ludwig L. Geismar, Ph.D.

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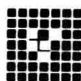

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To Alice Overton (1907–1987), who gave hope
to the families whom society passed by.

Dedication

Serving as director of the St. Paul Family Centered Project between 1954 and 1959, Alice Overton translated the concept of family-centeredness and the mechanism of reaching-out into an exciting community endeavor that served as a model for countless projects and services throughout North America and other Western societies. Although she was not the only professional to use these concepts to pull back seriously problematic families from the outer fringes of social existence, she was unique in moving from the concept to the deed. It is to her teachings and example that this work is greatly indebted.

The authors came to an appreciation of her contributions from very different perspectives. The senior author learned about the work of Overton and her associates from a close reading of the literature on services to the dysfunctional family over the last 100 years. The junior author was privileged to serve on the Overton team as director of research. Thus, he knew her much more directly, not only as Alice the thinker and doer, but also as a charismatic social work leader and delightful human being. From both viewpoints Alice Overton's work can be seen as a great pioneering wellspring for those who seek to intervene in the plight of seriously malfunctioning families.

Writing this book in the late 1980s, we attempt to put the Overton model, especially as it is spelled out in the 1957 *Casework Notebook* by Overton, Tinker, and associates, into a broader theoretical and historical perspective. Despite a mushrooming

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literature with a growing theoretical sophistication, the Overton work can serve as a baseline against which to compare these later, related developments. The concepts are clear and the language of the prescriptive model is direct. The researcher takes delight in the potential for operationalization. The work of the Family Centered Project has given rise to a fair amount of practice research, and although it is not nearly enough to establish a firm empirical basis for practice theory, it is still much more than has been produced by most other programs of professional intervention.

Of late, there has been a resurgence of interest in and service to multiproblem families. Although the movement to launch the Great Society of the Johnson administration has run its course, we find the dysfunctional family is still with us, perhaps in greater numbers than ever before. Furthermore, the conservative ethos that gave rise to the Reagan administration stands in the way of structural reform that might conceivably improve the lot of many socially handicapped families.

Casting about for ideas and models to help deal with the problem, social work practitioners and educators are likely to come across a few published articles by Alice Overton—although historical scholarship has never been one of the strengths of social work—and perhaps the aforementioned Overton–Tinker *Casework Notebook*. Many thousands of copies of the book were sold, and it is still available at the noninflationary price of $4.50. The inexpensive, softcover, looseleaf format was deliberately chosen by Alice so that it could be placed into the hands of a maximum number of practitioners and thus be put into immediate use serving the multiproblem population.

The volume of sales indicates that the plan worked exceedingly well. The problem posed by the book design is of a different nature. Libraries are reluctant to place books of a nonstandard format on their shelves. There is yet another reason for the limited visibility of the Overton contribution. The writings of Overton were a model of simplicity, designed to speak to the beginning and often untrained practitioner. That style is not in tune with the language of the family therapy movement presently sweeping the country. (We comment on this in more detail in Chapter 6.) For these reasons and perhaps also

because of social work's lack of historical perspective, Overton's work has remained relatively obscure.

Alice Overton's Family Centered Project anticipated some of the key developments that were seen in social work in subsequent years. Her keen perception—derived from her work with juvenile delinquents at the New York Youth House for Girls—of the interconnectedness of individual behavior and family functioning became a central organizing theme for the St. Paul Family Centered Project. Social work direct practice was only beginning to loosen its psychiatric bonds and explore the contextual aspects of human behavior. The Family Centered Project was a highly visible demonstration of this development. As is often the case, the more articulate theoretical formulations followed rather than accompanied this event. Alice Overton's work occupies a central place in these developments and should continue to influence the direction of professional practice.

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Foreword

In this work, Wood and Geismar seek what has often been wished but seldom accomplished, namely a marriage between theory and practice in social casework. The focus is on work with multiproblem families, the work imaginatively initiated by Alice Overton in the St. Paul Family Centered Project between 1954 and 1959. Much time has passed since that period and much development has occurred in social work, particularly in social casework. The concept of the multiproblem family has undergone change over time, but the essential concern with families who "have been bypassed by society" has endured.

The authors' endeavor is not primarily to bring the reader up to date on the current status of the multiproblem family in American society or, for that matter, in American social work, but rather to utilize the practice innovations of the St. Paul Project as a springboard for developing theory and practice concepts that are useful for working with today's disadvantaged families. Writing as they do some 30 years after the St. Paul Family Centered Project has ended, the authors review developments in social casework that are pertinent to working with the family (Chapter 4). The reader is treated to a history of the family therapy movement and a critical examination of casework's efforts and struggles to move from predominant consideration of the individual as the client, to a consideration of the interactions of the members of the family with each other and

the family's interaction with its material and social environment (Chapters 5 and 6).

As we witness social casework's slow and at times painful rediscovery of the "social" in social work, we observe the inevitable reemergence of the family as a focus of concern. The stage for this discussion is set in Chapters 1 to 3, which provide an analysis of the sociological literature pertinent to understanding the problem family. Dr. Geismar, the junior author of the book, identifies two categories of family functioning—task functioning and role functioning—which are "essentially two sides of the same coin" (Chapter 2). Tasks and roles together constitute the interplay of the individual and the group, the exterior and interior of the family—the total array of the relationships of the family with society and of the family members with each other.

This analysis is the fruit of Geismar's work as Director of Research of the St. Paul Family Centered Project, but goes beyond it and incorporates his more recent work in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. The advantage of Geismar's perspective for the development of a theory-based practice is that he clarifies not only the "what" but also the "how" and the "when" of task performance and role functioning. The "how" can be measured through the use of the health-welfare criteria for the tasks, whereas criteria of competence, satisfaction, and nondeviance apply to the roles. The "when" calls for placing family functioning within a time span, namely the family's life cycle. Geismar also critically examines various ideologies that have been invoked over time to explain family malfunctioning—namely poverty, deviant behavior, and psychopathology. His examination of the literature dealing with these assumed causes of family dysfunctioning identifies the scholarly limitations inherent in these approaches (Chapter 3).

This analysis of the sociological literature is followed by Dr. Wood's historical survey of 100 years of concern by social work with the problem family (Chapter 4). The review reflects the ebb and flow of identification of societal deficiencies versus the attribution of family dysfunctioning to shortcomings of individual members of the family. It depicts the ongoing struggle to assim-

ilate Freudian and other psychological explanations of family dysfunctioning, the shift away from the family to an emphasis on the individual, and the often limited attempts to bring the family back into focus without abandoning concern with internal individual processes. The reader who is interested in the development of social casework will be particularly pleased to find an assessment of the powerful role played by Mary Richmond and her bias in favor of the individual approach and, on the other side, the somewhat submerged but nevertheless substantive emphasis on the total "situation" of the family and its context in the work of Ada Eliot Sheffield.

Dr. Wood provides the student of recent social casework history with an opportunity to relive some of his or her own participation in the struggle between the "people-changing" approaches and the "situation-changing" approaches. She singles out the writings of Gomberg and other members of the staff of the Jewish Family Service in New York City during the late 1940s and the middle 1950s that reflected their pioneering family emphasis, deviating from the mainstream individualistic thinking of the time that was characteristic not only of social casework but also of psychiatry and other helping professions.

Two chapters dealing with descriptive theory (Chapter 5) and prescriptive theory (Chapter 6) for family social work set forth and clarify the requirements of theory development for the purpose of its use in practice. Alice Overton's formulations, because they were couched in operative terms, permitted ready utilization in practice. These formulations led to the creation by Wood and Geismar of a framework of practice principles (Chapter 7), consisting of a series of theoretical premises on the level of practice theory that were operable and capable of being tested through research. This framework is a tribute to the genius of Alice Overton, to whom this book is dedicated. The Overton–Tinker *Casework Notebook*, which is still available to the practitioner, serves as the jumping-off point for the authors' theoretical work.

Drs. Wood and Geismar do not neglect to develop the administrative and research contexts in which family practice and casework need to be placed (Chapter 8). They identify issues and problems, and provide suggestions for appropriate admin-

istrative structures to facilitate research in conjunction with practice.

This book should go a long distance to give comfort to the student of social casework, because it succeeds in establishing historic continuity in an area that has been much neglected. Further, because it was written by two teachers and researchers in social work, it underlines the convictions and provides the evidence that research need not and should not be separated from practice. Finally, and this gives particular joy to this writer, the book makes plausible the notion that the teacher of social work, concerned with the development of practice skills by students, needs to provide in his teaching and afford students in their learning the opportunity to engage in practice by doing research and engage in research by doing practice.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The volume before us examines the role of professional services in helping the problem-ridden family to endure as a viable institution. Throughout recorded history, the family has been a core element in human groupings ranging in complexity from tribal organizations to postindustrial societies. The family has ensured the survival of these segments of mankind by carrying out procreating, socializing, nurturing, material, maintenance, and various social-control functions.

By and large, the relationship between family and the larger societal institutions has been a symbiotic one. Each has been clear about the roles of the other and, by relying on the performance of these roles, has achieved continuity and stability. The recorded history and the archivers of anthropological investigations show an enormous variety of patterns marking the relationship between the family and larger human groupings. These patterns, though beset occasionally by friction and conflict, are nonetheless impressive in their capacity to endure.

Durability, most observers tend to agree, is inversely related to societal complexity. Although our methods for observing historic or primitive societies lack the sophistication of techniques of investigation we apply to modern societies—another way of saying that we may be unaware of some problems in other times

We are indebted to Professor Max Siporin for a critical reading of the manuscript and for helpful suggestions to strengthen it. Its shortcomings, however, are the responsibility of the authors alone.

and places—the evidence is still overwhelming that comple societal forms confront the family with special challenges to i existence.

The relationship between family and society is thus mark by ongoing reciprocity. Each relies on the other for legitimatio and support, particularly in times of crises such as natural disasters, wars, social and economic upheavals, and other threats to stability. Society expects from the family loyalty, ideological conformity, reliable and stable functioning—particularly with regard to socializing the young—and provision of resources in the form of taxes and services for maintaining the societal structure. The family in turn is dependent on society for legitimation, physical and social security, order and continuity. When society is in trouble, it can call on the family to bail it out (though this may not be the most efficacious way of dealing with the trouble) by way of increased material and social support or more appropriate functioning, or both. When the family encounters problems, it may as one of its options look to society for help in coping. Such help can take a variety of forms, depending on the type of society and its particular orientation toward helping.

The more developed the society, the greater the number of options—partly because of the variety and complexity of its institutions and partly because of the diversity of views that come into play and that have a bearing on the choice of options, at least in a democratic society. Modern American society furnishes a good illustration of how the well-being of the family can become a societal agenda item, and of some of the ways in which options dealing with the problems of the family are played out on a nationwide scale.

Families can be rendered assistance and services from two vantage points: the macro and the micro. The macro perspective comprises all measures that are beyond the micro or direct person-to-person contacts with family members, such as legislation, the programmatic provision of resources and services, and all other measures under the general heading of policy. The macro aspects of activities on behalf of families have received considerable attention in this country in the professional literature, and even at the level of government during the 1960s and 1970s. A number of European nations, including Sweden,

France, and Norway, had been addressing the issue in a more sustained and productive manner at least two decades earlier.

The micro perspective, the subject of the present volume, deals, as already indicated, with the services extended directly to the family by individuals and organizations authorized to render such services. Although most services in any society, primitive as well as modern, are furnished informally through the family (nuclear and extended) itself, and through friendship and neighborhood groups and the like, specialized services tend to come into play to complement or supersede informal ones whenever the family experiences a serious crisis or encounters situations where one or more members find it difficult to cope.

In the United States and most other Western nations, such services tend to be of a professional nature. In most general terms, *professional* means (1) being rendered by persons who have received specialized training (more often than not) in institutions of higher learning; (2) being given official societal recognition, by way of licensing or related means, to be the only agents to render such services; and (3) receiving monetary compensation for the services.

The problems of the problematic family have in recent decades been the province of professional agents and agencies. This is particularly true in the United States. In this country, also, the social work profession has been assigned major responsibility for attending to the needs of the seriously troubled family. The beginnings of social work as a specialized, skilled service during the last third of the 19th century showed a concern of the emerging profession with the poor, the foreign-born, the mentally retarded, the delinquent, and children in need of care. Service to families was a legitimate and normal activity of the social work practitioner. By the third decade of the 20th century, these concerns had given way—at least in the minds and writings of the professional leadership—to a preoccupation with the intrapersonal and interpersonal problems of the individual. This movement was strongly influenced by Freudian and neo-Freudian psychiatry, which, although transferred from continental Europe, found in this country a most receptive climate.

By the 1950s, however, the pendulum had already begun to swing in the other direction. Social work was being accused of disengaging from the poor. Some professional voices were heard asking what happened to the "social" in social work. Social science subjects were introduced in the curricula of many schools of social work. But the new impetus to give services to families rather than to individuals came from within the social work profession. The writings of such authors as Scherz (1953), Overton (1953), Regensburg (1954), and Fantl (1958) indicated a new direction (new from the vantage point of where social work stood in the 1940s) in the treatment of troubled people who are members of a family. Overton's work in particular was rooted in her professional experiences as director of family treatment programs at the New York Youth House for Girls and the St. Paul Family Centered Project. Psychiatry followed the social work lead, having Nathan Ackerman (1958) as one of its earliest and most visible spokesmen during the 1950s and 1960s. Most of the initiative for serving the seriously malfunctioning and resistive family, however, came from social work.

During the 1960s, the concern with service to the family became temporarily subordinated to the War on Poverty and other efforts to bring about social change. The prevailing ethos of this period tended to shift the blame for human malfunctioning away from the individual and the family to society as a whole.

In the 1970s, partly as a result of disillusionment with efforts at social reform and as a reaction to a meaningless war in Vietnam, there was a turning inward toward microstructures, including the family. Work with families gained momentum under the label "family therapy." The Carter government put the stamp of the White House on efforts to strengthen the family. At the start of the last tercile of the 1980s, the family therapy movement was still going strong, but work with seriously problematic families was given only minor attention. There was a proliferation of treatment schools, most of them claiming to incorporate a systems orientation and competing for adherents to methods with as-yet minimal empirical validation. Psychiatry is strongly represented among the family therapist leadership, but clinical psychology, social work, marriage counseling, child guidance,

and related disciplines contribute at all levels of the family therapy enterprise.

The alternating periods of concern and unconcern in social work for the collective welfare of the family are more easily delineated than explained. They reflect in part, of course, the ethos of the larger society in which liberalism and conservatism in government alternate with some regularity. But the development of a profession, particularly one that is still evolving, follows its own dynamic in which theory and practice are greatly influenced by concerns with identity, image, and social rewards.

The succeeding chapters examine some of these issues, beginning with a review of theoretical perspectives (Chapter 2) and problem foci (Chapter 3) in meeting the needs of the severely dysfunctional family. Subsequently, social work's treatment role is scrutinized in a historical perspective (Chapter 4). This is followed by a critique of some of the major descriptive and prescriptive intervention theories (Chapters 5 and 6), juxtaposing the claims of their authors with principles of scientific theorizing, including the use of empirical data to support such theories. In addition, the authors have attempted to identify a set of professional practice principles (Chapter 7) designed to guide future efforts to serve families in peril. Finally (Chapter 8), they examine the implications for research and administration in strengthening services to the multiproblem family.

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