

**NORMAL FAMILY
PROCESSES**

WALSH

NORMAL FAMILY PROCESSES

EDITED BY

FROMA WALSH

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FW

FOREWORD

Froma Walsh and her collaborators have made a unique contribution to the clinical literature in directing attention to the normal transactional processes in well-functioning family systems. This volume's orientation to normality from a systems perspective represents an important conceptual shift from psychiatry's traditional focus on mental illness and the individual, rooted in the medical model.

In the past three decades, profound changes have taken place in the field of psychiatry, with the development of the mental health movement and conceptualizations of normality and health. It has become increasingly clear that "normal" and "abnormal" are not discrete entities, that both are value systems within our unfixed surround, and that they represent a wide range of functioning and dysfunction. With the application of general systems theory to human systems has come an appreciation of mankind as a biopsychosocial system composed of several smaller systems, all regulated and interrelated.

We are moving toward a unified concept of behavior, recognizing that variables from biological, psychological, and social fields all contribute to human functioning over time. The family system plays a central mediating role in transaction with all other parts of the human system and in their integration through family coping processes. This volume makes a valuable contribution to our knowledge in identifying critical variables and dimensions in the coping processes of normal families.

This is the first volume designed to acquaint mental health professionals with major conceptualizations of and research on normal family processes. It is imperative for clinicians, regardless of their particular discipline or treatment orientation, to become more knowledgeable about the functioning of normal families and to consider ramifications for clinical theory and practice.

The volume is well organized to provide a broad overview of normal family processes. Walsh has clearly delineated important issues for consideration. She has invited distinguished authors who are at the forefront of conceptualization and investigation to address specific aspects of normal family functioning and to present various points of view on the subject. This volume represents the state of the art and does so admirably.

Roy R. Grinker, Sr., MD

PREFACE

This volume is an inquiry into the processes that characterize normal family functioning. Leading theorists and investigators present current conceptualizations of and research on normal family processes. This inquiry is grounded in a family systems orientation, examining the family as an interactional unit that operates in social and temporal contexts.

In addressing normal family processes, the book meets a pressing need in the clinical literature and clinical training programs. The mental health profession, in its concentration on psychopathology, has given insufficient attention to normality. Although important developments in family systems theory and family therapy have taken place, clinical emphasis has been primarily on dysfunctional family patterns. At the same time, assumptions about normal families explicitly and implicitly influence clinical assessment, treatment goals, therapeutic approaches, and research instruments. Where knowledge about normal family processes is limited, inferences tend to be derived from pathology-based models, prevalent social norms, and personal family experience. Moreover, concepts of “normality” and “health” are often confounded, and myths of “the normal family” abound.

The need to develop models for family coping and competence is especially urgent at the present time of social and economic upheaval in our society. Questions about the breakdown of the family are raised as families are undergoing transformations in structure, functions, and resources. The stress and confusion accompanying these attempts at adaptation make it at once more difficult and more imperative to identify crucial processes that distinguish well-functioning families.

Increasing recognition of the importance of this topic for mental health professionals of all disciplines is currently leading to a new thrust in clinical training programs toward formal instruction on normal family processes. This volume is designed to serve as a comprehensive sourcebook that will enable students, practitioners, and researchers to compare and critically assess the most current research on and conceptualizations of normal families and their potential utility for clinical assessment and treatment.

This volume represents the rapidly advancing state of the art of knowledge about normal family processes. Clinically oriented theorists and in-

investigators who are at the forefront of theory building and research were invited to contribute original chapters. Each chapter addresses various critical aspects of normality with attention to clinical implications. The selection of contributors reflects a diversity of orientations and thus offers different perspectives and specific emphases on normal families. The multi-authored format and multidisciplinary scope of the volume are intended to bridge the gap among clinicians, researchers, and theorists.

The format of the book was designed to present an organized conceptual whole including a theoretical overview; major research contributions; and an examination of important temporal, structural, and sociocultural variables in normal family functioning.

My introductory chapter presents an overview of conceptualizations of normal family functioning, with particular attention to family-systems-based models and contributions from the social sciences. In Section II, five major research projects are presented: Investigators describe their research priorities, strategies, and findings to date. Multiple aspects of family functioning, such as problem-solving styles and communication patterns, are addressed in the various studies. Different methodological approaches are utilized, including laboratory-experimental and naturalistic observation models; microscopic and macroscopic analyses; and longitudinal and cross-sectional perspectives. Thus, readers are given the opportunity to compare the various study approaches, to assess what is currently known and how it was learned, and to consider new research directions and clinical applications. Additionally, practitioners will find several family assessment tools of potential utility in clinical evaluation.

Sections III, IV, and V examine temporal, structural, and sociocultural dimensions of the family that must be taken into account in understanding normal family functioning and dysfunction. Whereas most normal family research (largely due to methodological constraints) has concentrated on intact nuclear families, at only one point in the life cycle, and in the dominant, middle-class culture, considerable diversity exists among normal families in different temporal and social contexts. Chapters in Section III examine the temporal dimension: how normal families pattern themselves and vary over time, and how normal transitions can pose both problems in adaptation and opportunities for therapeutic intervention and growth. Chapter 7 highlights the salient issues and potential complications typical of each developmental stage from a multigenerational perspective. Other chapters consider more specific issues of autonomy and interdependence; death, bereavement, and sexual functioning; and a microscopic view of sequential communication patterns.

Section IV addresses common structural variations from the traditional intact nuclear family model. Chapters discuss the normal processes and typical adjustment complications in disrupted families; in divorced family

systems and the coparenting relationship; in remarried stepparent families; and in families with nontraditional sex roles.

Finally, Section V considers normal family processes in sociocultural context. Chapter 15 places questions of normality and dysfunction within a cross-cultural perspective. Chapter 16 describes ethnic variations among normal families and their responses to therapy. The importance of social networks to family functioning is then considered in Chapter 17. In conclusion, normal family patterns are examined in Chapter 18 from a broad sociohistorical perspective, with implications for future trends.

Like many other contributors to this volume, my professional interest in nonclinical families emerged from the study of a so-called “normal control group” for purposes of comparison to families of schizophrenics. In attempting to determine selection criteria for the normal sample, I struggled with the question of how to define a normal family. A review of the literature and consultation with other investigators revealed this to be a common dilemma. With so little direct investigation of normal family processes at that time, it was unwise to impose criteria of normality that lacked empirical validation. Therefore, I chose, as most other investigators had, to limit selection criteria to a negative, or conservative, definition of normality: absence of severe psychiatric symptoms of any nuclear family member. In my contact with the normal control group families, I became increasingly aware of the diversity of patterns in nonsymptomatic families, such that any singular concept of a homogeneous normal control group had to be called into question. Moreover, my observations raised questions about the validity of many commonly held clinical assumptions regarding distinctions between well-functioning and symptomatic families.

Because the purpose of the investigation was to test hypotheses related to schizophrenia, results for the normal control group were limited to *negative* findings—that is, as a group they displayed a significantly lesser degree of particular dysfunctional patterns under study. At this point I directed my attention toward the development of a *positive* conceptualization of normal families. I became interested in delineating the typical processes, positive strengths, and diversity that characterize normal families. Several investigations of normal family processes were under way at that time. So that investigators might have the opportunity to share preliminary findings, I organized a panel on normal family processes for the 1978 Annual Meeting on the American Orthopsychiatric Association. The enthusiastic response led to an invitation to hold a second panel on normal family research the following year. The interest generated by these discussions led directly to the development of this volume. We have been unusually fortunate in having many of the leaders in the field contribute to this project.

In sum, this volume is unique in assembling leading research on and conceptualizations of normal family processes with relevance to a broad

range of mental health professionals. The field has now matured to a point that a thorough scrutiny of concepts and premises is timely. While it is not intended, at this early stage of knowledge building, to provide a definitive analysis or synthesis of normal family processes, this text introduces clinicians to important advances and identifies major dimensions and variables that must be taken into account. I have chosen not to comment in editorial notes, but rather to encourage readers to consider each point of view in relation to the ideas and findings of other authors in this volume.

Finally, the normal family perspective offers a valuable framework to clinicians for assessment, intervention, and outcome. It provides clinicians with an appreciation of patterns that characterize normal families, their orientations and modes of response to treatment, and their constructions of the meaning of health and illness. Furthermore, it offers important implications for preventive work with families confronting normal adaptational challenges.

FW

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OVERVIEW