

## THE REPRODUCTION OF FAMILIES: THE SOCIAL ROLE OF FAMILY THERAPY?

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*Family therapy, while highlighting the significance of family functioning for individual experience and behavior, has in general failed to respond to the critical analyses of the family that have recently been developed, and particularly that offered by the women's movement. Consequently, it cannot investigate the possibility that "dysfunction" in families is actually socially created and maintained. Family therapy's failure to consider the broader contexts of family functioning, a failure that is facilitated by the use of systems theory as its major theoretical underpinning, results in an uncritical acceptance of the contemporary family form.*

We argue in this paper that despite family therapists' understanding of the central significance of family structure and interaction for individual experience and behavior, they have failed to develop a full understanding of the institution with which they work. Because of this, they struggle to alter the internal functioning of families without recognizing the degree to which repetitive dysfunctional structures are required and maintained by the family's social, economic and political context. In addition, the major theoretical base underpinning family therapy, i.e., systems theory, actually blurs the extent to which families in this society operate with necessary structural characteristics which are prone to dysfunction. Moreover, it obscures aspects of contemporary family functioning, such as the role of women, which we believe to be crucial in the development of an adequate account of that functioning.

In other words, despite the family therapist's claim to a broader understanding of individual psychological experiences, s/he in turn collapses the family into an interpersonal event. The price paid for this misunderstanding is misrepresentation to the families with whom s/he works. The therapist communicates to the family its need to accept responsibility for its particular structural inadequacies and for the possibility of change; the "workable" family accedes. In that action, we argue, is revealed a joint complicity with a socio-political system which seeks to deny its formative and deformative power.

We argue that the possibility of fundamental change in family structures consequent upon family therapy is limited; that systems theory provides a reductionistic account of family functioning (one which misleads the practitioner in significant ways); and that a broader analysis is required to account for the fact that dysfunctional family structures are reproduced in successive generations.

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## FAMILY THERAPY AND THE "FAMILY"

Family therapy has a relatively short history. Emerging in the late 1940s and 1950s out of a cross-section of disciplines such as sociology, psychoanalysis and communications theory, it drew on their analyses of small group dynamics and on the attendant understandings of the effect of broader social forces on the individual. Systems theory provided the theoretical substructure for the new work, and the concept of "system" has remained a primary focus for family therapists, even for those of a psychodynamic persuasion.

In this context, the use of systems theory underlines the shift away from the psychiatric preoccupation with individual illness, heralding the introduction of new concepts which explicitly focus on the structure and process of family relationships. From its vantage point, a psychiatric problem or symptom is no longer to be located within the individual; rather it is seen as embedded within particular family transactions or circular sequences that indicate the structural and systemic properties of the family. These entrenched and repetitive transactions account for the difficulties of trying to change symptomatic members in isolation from the family as a whole.

This heightened understanding of the impact that the family system has on its individual members has been of major significance. The theoretical and therapeutic yield has been enormous. Curiously enough, however, there appears to be comparatively little concern with the nature of the institution itself, nor with the social circumstances which impinge on the family's organization. This is curious precisely because the thirty years which have seen the remarkable growth of family therapy literature and practice have also witnessed dramatic changes in the history and conceptualization of the family. Whereas once the family was represented as a fundamental and enduring element of society, providing stability, emotional satisfaction and a "home" for its members, the picture has altered in the last fifteen years. Much has been written that is critical of the family and that registers its disintegration. The catalogue of charges has included its failure to provide personal and emotional satisfaction, its reinforcement of sex role stereotypes, its crippling effect on the psychological and social development of the young, and its inability to meet the demands of rapid social change (Cooper, 1971; Laing & Esterson, 1964; Lasch, 1977).

Certainly family therapists are not unfamiliar with these critiques. They have been noted and lamented by family therapists as much as by anyone else. The rapid rise in the number of practitioners, theories, training programs and demand for services all indicate some fundamental problem in family functioning. Yet family therapists seem never seriously to have confronted themselves with the contemporary family as such, preferring to concentrate on the particular family at hand (Reiger, 1980).

This particularizing of family problems, we will argue, necessitates a narrowing of explanatory possibilities. It forces an internal view of family dysfunction and thus a foreclosing of alternatives. Questions cannot be asked about the social constraints which bear on family constitution and activity; recurrent patterns of dysfunctional family organization can only be noted rather than considered as a social event; externally generated pressures which produce internal family dysfunction seem not to come within the compass of family therapy. Moreover, such particularization deflects attention away from the broader issue of the viability or desirability of the family as an institution, thus ensuring its immunity from critical analysis or challenge. This apparent indifference on the part of the family therapists in the face of widespread concern about the family-as-an-institution invites further inquiry.

## FAMILY THERAPY AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Consider, for example, family therapy's belated response to the enormous literature on women which has emerged in the last decade and a half (e.g., Chesler, 1972; Firestone, 1970). That literature has heavily criticized society's concept of women's roles, particularly as that is expressed in family life. The most graphic picture of the family emerging from this critique is that of an oppressive, destructive organization which limits the woman's role to that of wife and mother, denying her the opportunity to seek alternative modes of interaction without incurring a variety of labels which suggest her choice is "abnormal" in some greater or lesser degree. Moreover, the critique has not been restricted to the position of women. This literature has also pointed to the dysfunctional consequences for other family members, e.g., the man's orientation to the public world and lack of facility and skill in the emotional sphere; the transmission of sex role stereotypes from one generation to the next; the narrowing for children of relationship possibilities to one or two significant adults and the subsequent intensification of emotional dependence. From this point of view, the family appears as an institution which structures and delimits personality development in an oppressive manner.

Such a critique bears heavily on our current notions of "family" and our assumptions, both implicit and explicit, of desirable family functioning. One might have expected, as a result, that family therapists would perceive the need to critically assess both their theoretical perspectives and their therapeutic intentions in order to engage with the feminist position. Such an expectation does not imply a necessary acceptance of all or even part of the critique; it does suggest that there exists an obligation to respond to it as a serious attempt to explore the current role and status of women.

It is unclear, then, why that response has been slow in forthcoming. Even at a prima facie level, one would anticipate a similarity of concern. From family therapy's point of view, the women's literature would seem to have much to offer, ranging from its general reflections on the position of women in contemporary society to more specific issues of mutual concern such as the psychological effects on women of their role as primary caretakers of children. This more sociological focus not only offers a broadened theoretical perspective on family structure and interaction; it also raises the question of potential alternatives, and thus extends the range of possible intervention strategies. There is a growing body of work on the implications of the women's movement for individual therapy, indicating a re-evaluation of assumptions and theories about women in that area. By contrast, there is very little in the way of explicit attempts to incorporate the women's literature into that of family therapy, and what there is is only very recent (Gluck, Dannefer & Milea, 1980; Gurman & Klein, 1980; Hare-Mustin, 1978).

There are perhaps several reasons for this failure of cross-fertilization. One wonders if the dominance of male leaders in the family therapy field has resulted in the apparent lack of interest in women's issues, or if family therapists in general do not connect those issues with that of the family as a whole. Perhaps it reflects the difficulty of the issues involved or the possibility of awkward implications flowing from the discussion, e.g., having to seriously question the value and suitability of family therapy in contemporary society. What is perhaps more likely is that family therapists consider that their work already embodies much of the import of the women's literature: after all, few family therapists profess a commitment to traditional sex roles, for example, or intentionally reinforce them in their interventions. From this point of view, then, the suggestion that family therapists are indifferent to the position of women in families would be misplaced.

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Such a position, it would appear, rests on the theoretical basis which family therapists invoke; presumably it is this which yields intervention strategies that avow neutrality with regard to the position of women in families. As mentioned earlier, that basis has developed and changed over the past thirty years from one concerned with the interactional approach, incorporative of psychodynamic, communicative, behavioral theories, towards the systemic-organizational theories of Haley (1974) and Selvini (Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata, 1978). In terms of accepted nomenclature, the shift has been away from linear theories of causality towards the recognition of circular causality as espoused in systems theory. The latter is not fundamentally concerned with functional dynamics (i.e., affective, cognitive, behavioral states) of or between individuals, and is concerned with such dynamics only to the extent that they indicate the organizational nature of the system rather than intrapsychic or interpersonal aspects of individuals. The information that is sought from assessment of the family's content, process and developmental stage concerns the nature of the coalitions, the functioning of the subsystems, the clarity of boundaries, hierarchies, and the way in which all of these contribute to symptom maintenance in family dysfunction in a particular case.

The implications for a consideration of the position of women in the family become clearer: it is not within the parameters of systems theory to identify the position of women (nor any other member of the family, for that matter) as of particular concern. Systems theory is interested in women only as participants in an organizational interactional, as opposed to a social, structure. Herein presumably lies the basis for its claim to neutrality. There is no prescriptive comment regarding women's position in the family, no sex role stereotyping, no focus on their particular experience as such. Women are one among several participating members of a family, and are thus understood from a "neutral" point of view.

From this perspective, family therapists' failure to actively address the issue of the position of women in families stems less from an indifference to women's issues than from the particular framework according to which the "family," and patterns of relations within it, are understood. That is, the use of systems theory as a theoretical lynchpin of family therapy means that the family becomes a special case of a system, and is understood according to that model. In this way a theory of the family, and of women's participation in it, is collapsed into a theory of structural organization. The implications are of some significance, both theoretically and therapeutically.

We will argue that, despite its value in elucidating particular patterns of family interaction, systems theory can by no means provide an adequate account of family functioning, and further, that its inability in this regard amounts finally to a misrepresentation of that functioning. Moreover, to the extent that family therapists rely on systems theory as the primary theoretical basis for their activity, they will carry this misrepresentation into their work with families. In that move, family therapists adopt, wittingly or otherwise, a particular social and political position.

#### TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF SYSTEMS THEORY

To make the family a special case of a system, subject to certain defined rules of operation, is to conceive of it in the abstract, to uproot it from its historical, social and economic contexts. The family, from a systems point of view, appears as a given, as an objective formation. This is not to suggest that systems theory cannot allow some discussion of external forces impinging on the family, but rather to argue that its primary focus becomes the internal functioning of an already-constituted system. The attempt to understand the family's operation is an internal one. Specifically, there is no interest in the historical forces which have shaped the family's current form and

patterns of behavior; nor is there much concern with contemporary social forces and their influence on family constitution, interactions, behavior and self-understandings.

This internal understanding is particularly evident, and naturally so, in the approach adopted by "systemic" family therapists: a particular family's dysfunction is located within its own structures. In fact, concern with the genesis of the difficulty is frequently eschewed; its actuality is the primary feature. The "presenting problem," and the manner of its maintenance within the family is the overriding focus; an encopretic or school-refusing child, an acting-out adolescent, all bespeak overt or covert difficulties within the particular family, all defined as intra-familial problems, all responded to at a psychological, albeit interactional, level.

It might be said, in fact, that family therapists replicate the very mistake they accuse individual therapists of making: they approach the problem as if the nuclear family system is "child" to the wider society "parent," and insist on seeing the child out of the family context. As Russell Jacoby (1975) puts it, "the family does not exist in a no-man's-land. It is snarled in an historical dynamic; it has changed in the past, and it is changing now. It is as much victim as victimizer" (p. 139).

In other words, despite family therapy's claim to a broader perspective, it is a perspective which is itself limited by its failure to take account of powerful and pervasive social forces. A case in point concerns something previously noted: while family therapists can readily identify certain recurring patterns of family interaction, these tend to be understood only as internal, intra-familial events. Consider, for example, the very familiar pattern of a mother who is over-involved with her children and frequently accompanied by a disengaged partner. When confronted with such a situation, most family therapists utilize intervention strategies developed from a systems framework such that the disengaged father is retrieved from the periphery of the family, and the wife extricated from her intense involvement with her children and realigned with her husband.

Such a situation, while frequently producing some change in observable behavior, begs a prior and fundamental question: the reason for the recurrent nature of this pattern of family interaction. Systems theory cannot approach this. It can only focus the practitioner's attention on the circularity of interactions in the "here and now" process: that is, systems theory is a theory about the maintenance of problems—it is not a theory of causation. To many family therapists this is no cause for concern, the priority being that something be done to change the family's current mode of operation. The cause of "dysfunction" is deemed irrelevant.

Apart from the theoretical difficulties inherent in a position that would radically separate genesis and maintenance of "dysfunction," consider the following quotation from Mark Poster's (1974) book, The Critical Theory of the Family: "Is there anything in the social function, role and experience of the mother in nuclear families that would produce a tendency to over-intrusiveness?" (p. 134).

The implications of such a question are of some significance for family therapists. If we incline to an affirmative answer, then we are moving towards a proposition that contemporary society creates, perhaps even requires, a family form that actually produces the pattern of behavior that we judge "dysfunctional." And if this is the case, then even those family therapists professing concern only with the maintenance of certain problematic behaviors produce a sadly inadequate account if they seek it within the confines of a particular family. Moreover, intervention in pursuit of changed behavior within a particular family, while altering things at a superficial level, cannot hope to affect the dysfunctional structure at a deeper level.

It is imperative, then, to take up Poster's question. His own, rather attenuated, answer is that since the nuclear family constrains the woman to spend so much time and energy in the care and rearing of children, it is not surprising that "over-

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involvement" is the result. Despite its brevity, his answer nevertheless points the way. What we wish to argue is that women's mothering, as mediated by contemporary social forces, is of pivotal significance in the reproduction of what is so commonly identified as "dysfunctional" over-involvement of wives/mothers and under-involvement of husbands/fathers in family life. Furthermore, we would argue that full appreciation of the crucial role played by women's mothering in the production and reproduction of a particular set of family interactional patterns requires that the family itself be situated theoretically within its socio-historical context. We believe that until these links are made, family therapists will continue to function "unself-consciously" that is, without full understanding of the nature of the "dysfunction" they discern, and thus of the real possibility of change.

This problematic situation cannot be elucidated from the vantage point of systems theory. A supplementary analysis is necessary, one that draws on psychodynamic and socio-political perspectives. In this way, we can bring into focus a range of structural forces which fundamentally affect the family and which so far, seem to have been neglected in the family therapy literature.

### WOMEN'S MOTHERING

The reciprocity between the nuclear family and its socio-historical context, and its significance for understanding patterns of family relationships, has been the subject of several recent books (Donzelot, 1979; Lasch, 1977; Poster, 1974). One of the most compelling is Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) and the importance of her work from our point of view resides in its systematic attempt to assert the inextricability of the psychological and social aspects of family functioning. Concentrating her attention on the relationship between the nuclear family and Western capitalist economies, Chodorow argues that continued economic growth has necessitated a particular family form, one which guarantees the reproduction of both workers and consumers through the provision of basic care (food, shelter, etc.) and through the inculcation of certain personality characteristics, sex role behaviors, relationship patterns, and so on. In other words, economic dictates produce a family marked by a sexual division of labor that locates women primarily in the home, and men primarily outside it.

This location of the family within a particular social and economic situation brings into new perspective the structural form of the nuclear family that is so familiar to family therapists, i.e., a form characterized by the centrality of women as mothers and the absence of men as fathers. It is a structure which entails the devaluation of women and seriously limits their work, activities and participation in the public sphere. This structure is maintained, Chodorow argues, as long as women remain the primary caretakers of children: girl babies become mothers and boy babies become men in the world of production, thus perpetuating a cycle of over-involved mothers and under-involved or absent fathers. Concerning one aspect of this process, Chodorow (1978) writes:

Women's mothering in the isolated nuclear family of contemporary capitalist society creates specific personality characteristics in men that reproduce both an ideology and psychodynamic of male superiority and submission to the requirements of production. It prepares men for participation in male-dominant family and society, for their lesser emotional participation in family life, and for their participation in the capitalist world of work. (p. 180)

In this way, Chodorow begins to explore the social formation of psychological processes. She takes this seemingly "natural" activity, mothering, and reveals its thoroughly social content, arguing that this recognition is fundamental to an under-

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standing of the process by which the family is reproduced. This, in turn, is fundamental to an understanding of the reproduction of the social and economic world in which families function. In other words, the social world is not simply an external world, separate to the individual; rather, it dwells in the individual, and it is this unconscious transformation of ideology and culture into the individual psyche that makes possible the entire reproductive process. It is here, in her attempt to elucidate this nexus of women's mothering, patterns of family relationships and reproduction of the current socio-economic formation, that Chodorow (1978) draws on psychoanalytic theory to make her case.

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The psychoanalytic account shows not only how men come to grow away from their families and to participate in the public sphere. It shows also how men and women come to create the kinds of interpersonal relationships which make it likely that women will remain in the domestic sphere—in the sphere of reproduction—and will in turn mother the next generation. (p. 38)

The essence of Chodorow's argument is that, in the context of the contemporary nuclear family, women's mothering creates a relational capacity in women which is absent in men. She maintains that a mother's relationship to her female child is significantly different from her relationship to her male child. This qualitative difference is reflected in unconsciously determined interactions evident in the mother-child relationship. With girl babies, the mother is less able to separate herself from her child: similarities are enhanced and an emotional fusion is promoted. Female children are less able to individuate and therefore maintain a primary emotional involvement with their mothers throughout successive developmental stages. They are consequently preoccupied with issues of individuation and dependence. Although they usually develop a strong attachment to their father, their most intense involvement is with their mother; their relationship to father is motivated by an attempt to separate themselves from her.

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By contrast, male children, because they are the opposite sex to the primary parent, although in an equally intense relationship, are more easily able to separate from her. They are assisted in this process by their mothers, who experience them as different. A male child thus becomes almost an objective other for his mother. He is further pushed into a psychologically differentiated position that orients him to be separate, a move away from emotional entanglement. In contrast, the female child becomes the mother's subjective self.

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In this way, the stage is set for boys and girls gradually to take on the adult roles assigned to them—women as closely involved mothers, and men as participants in the world of work—thus assuring the reproduction of a nuclear family characterized by entrenched and recurring sets of interactional patterns.

Thus Chodorow demonstrates the complex interrelationships between individual psychological experience, family relationships and the broader socio-economic formation. Her use of psychoanalytic material highlights the significance of the internalization of social constructs, and illuminates the process by which various social and psychological pressures culminate in the creation of the contemporary nuclear family. Such a complex account underscores the tenacity of individual needs to reproduce particular kinds of family relationships, and would seem to dwarf any account which suggests that significant structural change can be therapeutically procured within the context of a particular family.

#### THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THE FAMILY THERAPIST

Thus, the "natural," taken-for-granted family form suddenly reveals itself as his-

torically and socially constrained. The nuclear family stands at the intersection of the social and psychological structures required for the continued functioning of capitalist economies. The pattern of family behavior so frequently encountered by family therapists, that of the "over-involved" wife/mother and disengaged and absent husband/father, suddenly appears in a new light: as a necessary family form. That necessity derives from its ability to reproduce the personality characteristics, relationship patterns and behavioral orientations that are functional for the continued operation of the contemporary social formation.

+ —————> It is at this point that the need for a broadened perspective on a particular family's psychological distress becomes clear: that distress frequently has its source in structural pressures that are socially induced. The argument for a broader perspective is not meant to imply that family therapy is at fault when it does not deal directly with the socio-political situation in which families operate. This would constitute a spurious attack, given that family therapy sets out to respond specifically to the particular family requiring therapeutic assistance. As Jacoby (1975) puts it in the context of a discussion of individual therapy, "the therapy accepts for the sake of the individual victim the disjunction between the individual form of the illness and its social origins" (p. 134). From this point of view, family therapy can only be "a choice in how to treat the (family) that leaves untouched the social roots" (p. 139).

+ —————> What is being implied is that family therapy is at fault when it does not simply "leave untouched" the social roots of family dysfunction, but rather denies their existence altogether. To maintain the position that the family can be conceived of in a vacuum is to maintain a fiction. To the extent that family therapists either deny or minimize the social content of family distress, and at the same time attribute to that family, via their interventions, full responsibility for its "dysfunction," they participate in the reproduction of this fiction. That is, that the current family form is unproblematic and appropriate, that problems arising in its functioning have an internal source, are internally maintained and can be internally rectified. Inasmuch as family therapists see family dysfunction purely as an internal event, radically separated from its social origins, they take on an explicit social role, that of apologist for the contemporary family form, and facilitator of its reproduction.

+ —————> Systems theory takes its place as the appropriate theoretical underpinning for this concept of the family. While apparently neutral and "contentless" in its lack of prescription either for the role of women or the functioning of families in general, it is a theory which, in fact, smuggles in a content with significant implications. That content resides, paradoxically, in its claim to lack a content. It is this which supports the possibility of the fiction that the family, and women's participation in it, can be seen in isolation from social, economic and political contexts. Moreover, its reductionistic account of conflict as occurring between various elements within the system forecloses any discussion of the possibility that such conflict inheres within the system, that it is socially created and maintained. This internal rendering prompts the conviction that problems and conflicts can be resolved with a bit of internal tinkering, the desired change effected by some structural realignment of the elements.

+ —————> It cannot be argued that this is but a convenient fiction, designed to facilitate therapeutic intervention and change, for it is a fiction which entails actual misrepresentation of families, their social and psychological functioning, and the position of women and men within them. Nor can it be argued that the difficulty here reflects a misapplication of systems theory, to be corrected by a more encompassing account of interacting sub-systems (e.g. individuals, families, societies). Certainly more interest in the broader system of which a family is one part will provide a richer account of that family's situation; but it is systems theory itself that is of concern here. The argument is that, while it can provide a useful view of the interrelationships between elements of a

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system, it can make no comment on the nature of the system itself. In the context of this discussion, systems theory must accept existing social structures. It can describe their interactions; it cannot comment on, or question, the validity and desirability of the structures themselves. In this way, moral, social and political issues are collapsed into technical issues requiring technological intervention (Kelk, 1982).

In the context of family therapy, it is not that systems theory sets aside a series of questions for the sake of therapeutic intervention. Rather it makes it impossible to pose them: why the contemporary family takes the form it does; how that form is transmitted from one generation to the next; what function it serves for the particular socio-historical context; the extent to which apparent family "dysfunction" actually reflects the outcome of its necessary functioning; is there a more desirable family form?

Systems theory's inability, as distinct from its failure, to frame these questions is its own indictment. Its analysis of the family must preclude any social or political critique, and thus it functions to preserve the family as an isolated phenomenon. In this way, it deflects attention away from a social system which, if its oppressive nature were allowed to become more clear, might prompt challenge and even resistance. Despite its value for elucidating much of the internal functioning of the family, systems theory finally distorts the real nature of the family. Its widespread use by family therapists as the dominant theoretical underpinning for therapeutic intervention betrays an uncritical acceptance of the contemporary family form, and family therapy can be seen as one of the forces acting in pursuit of its preservation.

### CONCLUSION

In this paper we have argued the following:

1. Family therapists lack a full understanding of the institution with which they deal, i.e., they fail to appreciate the extent to which it is socially constituted and maintained.
2. Systems theory, so fundamental to the development of family therapy, facilitates an understanding of the family as an institution separated from its social conditions. It offers a framework which allows "dysfunction" to be seen as internally produced, thus obscuring the possibility of its social construction.
3. A full understanding of the determinants of family structure requires a broader analysis, one incorporating psychodynamic and socio-political perspectives. We have attempted to demonstrate that such an analysis sheds new light on a pattern of family interaction familiar to family therapists, i.e., one involving mother/child dyads and distant or disengaged fathers. Rather than constituting an aberration in family functioning, this pattern can now be seen as a necessary family form.
4. To the extent that family therapists do not recognize the social content of a family's distress or disorganization, they may unwittingly reinforce the dysfunctional structure they seek to eliminate.

By pointing to the possible social role taken by family therapists, that of apologist for the contemporary family form, we are not arguing that family therapy of necessity acts as a conservative force. We are arguing that it must develop what Jacoby calls "lucidity as to its scope" (1975, p. 134), i.e., a clear sense of the limitations of its intervention. Such a self-consciousness amounts to an awareness of contradiction: the attempt to pursue change in a context which seriously limits its possibility. We have not attempted here to speculate in detail on how such a perspective might alter therapeutic intervention with a particular family. While mindful of Jacoby's formulation that therapy can only be "a choice in how to treat the (family) that leaves untouched the social roots" (p. 139), we would certainly support recent moves to develop intervention techniques which respond to a greater awareness of the social pressures and constraints that operate on and in families. In fact, it seems likely that there is greater potential for

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families than for individuals to reflect on the social nature of these pressures in addition to the interpersonal. Such a focus can do much to alleviate feelings of guilt and personal failure, and is the first step in developing strategies to mitigate the stressful influence of externally generated pressures. Certainly family therapy has a lot to learn from those working along similar lines with women (Hare-Mustin & Brodsky, 1980).

We have argued throughout this paper that it is family therapy's penchant for the particular rather than the general that tends it in the direction of a basic confirmation of the contemporary family form. Here we discern an undeveloped potential, for therapeutic concerns are only one side of the coin. As observers of internal family dynamics, family therapists are in a unique position to perceive the social pressures on families and to trace the psychological and interpersonal forms that those pressures take. From this point of view, family therapists have much to offer (and we would argue that they have a responsibility to do so) those theoreticians who are developing more critical analyses of the contemporary family. This more integrated approach would provide a greatly strengthened basis from which to argue for political, economic and social changes aimed at reducing the various constraints on families which issue in psychological distress. To take a simple example, the lack of available child care is not an insignificant impediment to the eventual restructuring of family relationships. Family therapists are in a position to provide firm evidence of the interpersonal and psychological consequences for families of failure to make such services more generally available. It is this sort of activity, we believe, which opens the possibility of a social role for family therapy that is more adequate to its therapeutic intentions.

In summary, then, our analysis has implications at a number of levels:

1. At the level of therapeutic intervention, family therapists need to be more cognizant of the social content of the psychological distress they confront, and explore ways to incorporate such awareness into their therapeutic work with families.
2. At the level of theory development, efforts should be made to generate theoretical frameworks that are more wide-ranging, in order to obviate reductionistic perceptions of family functioning and misplaced intervention strategies.
3. At the level of training, programs should seek to engender in their trainees a more critical perspective on both theoretical models and therapeutic interventions, with particular focus on their social and political implications.
4. At the level of research, there needs to be a continuing re-evaluation of theoretical assumptions with a view to detecting the uncritical incorporation of normative expectations regarding sex roles and family functioning (Gurman & Klein, 1980).
5. Finally, at a socio-political level, it seems important that family therapists accept the fact of their social role, in addition to their therapeutic, and be more active in determining what form that will take. We have suggested above that there is significant contribution to be made in the area of developing more critical analyses of the family as it is currently constituted.

As was stated earlier, we do not believe that family therapy of necessity entails a conservative commitment to the contemporary nuclear family. Nevertheless, if it fails to develop the broader perspective for which we have pressed here, and continues, albeit by default, in its uncritical embracing of that family form, then its potential to achieve anything other than the reproduction of that which currently exists is foreclosed. This is its conservative undertow.

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