

Inadequate interpersonal relationships

- implications for the family and society

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The title of this warrants a few definitions of basic concepts. As we know we cannot fully understand interpersonal relationships without reference to one basic unit of society. "The family" and its roles, and again to understand relationships it would be impossible to even conceptualize what we are trying to understand without reference to the term "interaction".

For these reasons, the key words 'family group' and 'interaction', 'interpersonal relationships' shall be used as focal points of departure.

Interpersonal relationship characteristics

In estimating the quality of interaction and its effects, we would be concerned with several phases of interaction - the closeness of the relationship; the pleasure derived from it; the sense of fulfilment it offers; the harmony or conflict of the relationship; the specific oppositional patterns that emerge.

We would also consider the following questions. Is the relationship a close or distant one emotionally? Is there empathy, communication, and a growing identification of the people concerned? Is there mutual satisfaction and pleasure? In the context of such a relationship what is the individual's image of himself? Is it a pleasing self-image? If so, why?

Parent-child relationships

To understand these we have to find out the motivation for having children:

- Some women have an intense desire for a child,
- Some feel the capacity for boundless love and want to give it to someone
- Some want a child not for the love of it but for some ulterior motive: - viz.
- to neutralize anxiety concerning sterility or frigidity
- to please or punish a husband.

- to keep a marriage off the rocks.
- to win the approval of others eg. grandparents, female peers.
- to fulfil a conventional idealized image of family life.
- to become a parent figure
- to use a pawn in husband-wife conflicts.
- to live vicariously through the child



- to make the child into a masculine, aggressive extension of oneself.
- to give the child what the mother herself never had in her childhood.
- the need to exploit the child as a defence against the woman's feeling of inadequacy.
- to use the child as a defence against the break-up of the family, etc.

The family : a description

The family can be defined in a simple way to refer to a man, his wife and children. It can sometimes represent a complicated household functioning as a unit of all those living under one roof or submitting to the authority of one supreme head, ie a group of persons unified for purposes of effective social regulation.

Family bonds are made up of a fusion of factors; biological, psychological, social and economic. Biologically, the family serves to perpetuate the species. It is the basic unit of society that provides for the union of male and female to produce offspring and to assure their nurture and training.

Psychologically, the members of the family are bound by mutual interdependence for the satisfaction of their respective affectional needs.

Economically, they are bound by mutual interdependency for the provision of their material needs.

The pattern of family organization is in no sense static or sacred. The family is sometimes characterized as an organism. It has the qualities of a living process and functional unity.

This suggests that the family has a natural history of its own - a period of germination, a birth, a growth and development, a capacity to adapt to change and crises, a slow decline, and finally dissolution of the old family into the new.

Throughout the entire process, the psychological unity of the family is continuously moulded by both external and by its internal organization.

In the life of a family there are critical periods when the bond of the family itself may be strengthened or weakened.

Adaptive shifts in family patterns are determined both by its internal organization and its external position in the community. It is commonly recognized that the weave of family relations may be affected in a wide variety of ways by either a friendly, supportive, social environment or a hostile and dangerous one.

A social environment which imposes danger may cause a family to go asunder, the unity of the family may crumble as it is invaded by external force.

A friendly external environment that provides opportunity for self-expression and reward in the wider

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community, may loosen the family bonds and invite increased social mobility for its members. We know that a change in family patterns in response to social change, the bonds of love and loyalty may be fortified or weakened, the sharing of experience, division of labour and apportionment of authority between male and female parent may undergo a marked change.

From within, the family must adjust to a wide range of vicissitudes that affect the inter relations of each family member. Under favourable conditions, the emotions of love and loyalty prevail and family harmony is maintained. Under conditions of excessive tension and conflict, mutual antagonism and hatred are aroused and the integrity of the family is threatened.

The family may be likened to a semi-permeable membrane, a porous covering sac, which allows a selective interchange between the enclosed members and the outside world.

Reality seeps through the pores of the sac selectively to affect the enclosed members in a way predetermined by the quality of the sac.

The influence exerted by the family members on the outside world is also affected by the quality of the sac.

Adverse conditions within the sac or in the surrounding environment may destroy it, in which case, the enclosed members lose their protective envelope.

Menacing external conditions may cause the pores of the sac to shrink, thereby contracting the sac and holding the members more tightly within it.

A family sac thus constricted and isolated from the environment can neither carry out its functions normally nor survive for long. Favourable external conditions expand the sac and promote a more fluid interaction with the external world.

Excess tension within the sac arising from a state of imbalance among the enclosed members may warp the sac. Unless the balance is restored, the accumulated internal pressure will eventually burst it.

Basically the family does two things - It ensures physical survival of the individual and builds the essential humanness of men by satisfaction of basic biological needs essential to

survival, and sharing the family experience of togetherness.

This togetherness is epitomized in the union of mother and child, and is further reflected in the bond of identity of individual and family and wider community.

Concretely, the social purposes served by the modern family are:-

- Provision of food, shelter, and other material necessities to sustain life and provide protection from external danger, a function best fulfilled under conditions of social unity and cooperation of family members.
- Provision of social togetherness which is the matrix for the affectional bond of family interpersonal relationships.
- The opportunity to evolve a personal identity tied to family identity - this bond of identity provides the psychic integrity and strength to meet new experiences.
- The patterning of sexual roles, which prepares the way for sexual maturation and fulfilment.
- The training toward integration into social roles and acceptance of social responsibility.
- The cultivation of learning and the support for individual creativity and initiative.

The currents of feeling that move between family members are myriad in kind and of all degrees of intensity.

It is the changing manifold of emotional currents and cross-currents that define the unique interpersonal atmosphere of the family.

The family group as an example of interpersonal relationship

The basic unit of society is a group called the family, which may be provisionally defined as two or more persons who interact with each other over an appreciable period of time.

The terms social interaction refers to the process in which persons participate in reciprocal actions. That is, one person acts in response to the real or anticipated action of the other:

Interaction is the very stuff of social behaviour, for without interaction there would be no society. Therefore, social interaction is the way in which social relationships take place.

Social interaction may be analyzed

in terms of the following social processes-communication, which is the process of transmitting and receiving symbolic stimuli by conversation gestures, and other signs; conflict; competition; accommodation; assimilation.

There are several reasons for the formation of the group in terms of relationships. These are personal attraction; group prestige; task performance. For example, men and women marry because they are romantically in love (personal attraction), because of the prestige of marriage because they want to start a home and rear a family (task performance).



Both marital partners bring into the union their individual resources such as trust, identity, intimacy, generativity, self acceptance.

The father is the instrumental leader of the family, i.e. he provides the drive to get things done for the family and establishes its status in society.

The mother is the expressive leader. She not only sets the tone, but keeps the proper atmosphere and enables the family group to work together harmoniously. She also acts as a skilful mediator of the child-father relationship and thereby assures both the perpetuation of family solidarity and the emotional security of the child.

Fathering and mothering are both special functions in life, in which man and woman act not only for themselves, but also for the species, the family and the entire community.

Both parental roles are profoundly influenced by surrounding social patterns. By nature, the functions of mothering and fathering are interdependent. The reciprocity of the two sets of parental functions is so

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basic that any change in the carrying out of the functions of the one parent must immediately be echoed in a corresponding change in the functions of the other parent.

Furthermore, the complementary relations of man and woman are so fundamental that the interaction of male and female as a parental couple is inevitably influenced in the most sensitive manner by the interaction in other roles: such as marital, sexual, occupation, social, etc. The roles of father and mother in isolation, rather than each of these parental functions must be continuously related to the other.

We all know that the length and breadth of the child's personal environment embraces much more than the mother; it includes the entire family group - father, siblings, and other significant relatives.

The family as a group develops a major pattern; individual members may echo this pattern, inject opposing ones or act out minor patterns. All this is done as a way of entrenching the position of the family in the wider community.

Families may be either predominantly "sick" or predominantly

"healthy". It is possible to distinguish in a given family some components of family functioning that are mainly "healthy" and other that are mainly "disabled".

Whatever their social and economic level, it is clearly recognized that family life acts as a kind of conveyor belt for pathogenic conflict and anxiety. In other words, the family becomes a source of sick emotional contagion.

In such socially and economically maimed families, the human situation is critical, and demands emergency measures - that is an all-out effort to save the life of the failing family functions, eg by way of support and reinforcement of family functions, food, housing, opportunities for work, restoration of the central relationship, particularly the bond between man and wife, parent and child etc.

In every relationship, we observe, on the one hand, processes of emotional union and identification, and on the other, processes of individual differentiation.

Where the link of individual and family identity is weak and deformed,

and the foundation of self-esteem is required, there is a fertile ground for a severe form of prejudice. In this context, prejudice may be regarded as a variably sick emotional attempt to repair damage to self-esteem.

Irrational prejudice is a destructive force in human society. It exalts power for its own sake, and is the instrument of exploitation.

The structure of the family echoes disordered values in the larger pattern of human relations. Family and society are organically intertwined.

Whatever happens in the family affects and is affected by the society in which it operates.

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