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Ethnicity and Family Therapy

Betty Reid Mandell

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Review Essays

ETHNICITY AND FAMILY THERAPY, edited by Monica McGoldrick, John K. Pearce, and Joseph Giordano. New York: The Guilford Press, 1982. 600 pp.

Reviewer: Betty Reid Mandell

Ethnicity and Family Therapy is a comprehensive collection of articles that addresses ethnic issues in family therapy, and it is apparently the first such collection to be published. It is divided into three parts: (1) the conceptual overview, (2) the paradigms, and (3) the special issues. The paradigms includes nineteen chapters on different cultural groups, combining, in varying degrees, historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and demographic information with a discussion of appropriate treatment methods, often illustrated by case vignettes. The authors are professionals in the mental health field — social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists, plus one anthropologist.

The study of ethnicity has been late in coming to professional schools, and sometimes has been incorporated in the curriculum. Because the literature on ethnicity is so sparse, it is always a pleasure to greet a good new book on the subject. After reading *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, I saw more clearly how ethnic understanding might be applied to family therapy.

Yet, as I read, I had an uneasy feeling that these “simplified pictures of the cultures, ‘snapshots’ frozen in time” (McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano 1982:xv) could also perpetuate cultural stereotypes. The authors, too, had this uneasy feeling, admitting that these snapshots could be misused (xvi). Anyone with a modicum of exposure to other cultures knows that a good many Chinese and Puerto Ricans do not lower their eyes to avoid direct eye contact, nor do all British Americans serve roast beef to the family on Sunday. We all probably know Irish who do not drink heavily, Italians who do not eat heartily, and Greeks who do not run restaurants. And many WASPS are lazy and show no initiative whatsoever, nor are they all optimistic — many, in fact, commit suicide. Of course, all Asian cultures cannot be lumped together, as they are in the chapter “Asian Families.”

James Green, a cultural anthropologist, describes (1982:9) two broad categories of explanatory models to account for ethnicity: those explanations that focus on categories of behaviors and traits, and those that approach ethnicity in a “transactional” way, focusing on strategies for defining and preserving cultural differences. Categorical approaches tend to pigeonhole, while transactional approaches study ethnicity as one of the ways that people find meaning in communication. In *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, Falicov, writing about Mexican families, notes the problem with a categorical approach:

Broad cultural generalizations do not do justice to regional, generational, socioeconomic, and idiosyncratic variations in life-style found in Mexican American families. . . . Cultural norms tend to refer to the *public* reality of how relationships or behaviors "ought" to be. These internalized behavioral prescriptions sometimes do not coincide with *private* realities, that is, how things "really" are for each family. . . . (137)

The articles in *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* reflect both approaches, but put a heavier emphasis on the categorical approach. Those authors who take a systems or ecological approach, however, try to view ethnicity in a broad historical and socioeconomic framework. In "An Ecological Model of Ethnic Families" John Spiegel attempts to take that approach. He presents a typology of ethnicity in relation to Kluckhohn's value orientations (1951; 1961). Yet, even placing ethnic groups in a particular category of values can again fall into pigeonholing; the American middle class is future oriented, so they work hard to achieve; the Italians, however, are more present oriented, so they talk less about their work when they come home.

In her overview, Monica McGoldrick mentions the importance of looking at social class, religious and regional identities, and gender, in addition to ethnicity. Still, she does not propose an orderly typology to use in studying ethnicity. In contrast, in *The Ethnic Dilemma in Social Services* (1981) Shirley Jenkins proposes a useful typology that specifies important variables to be considered in determining the strength of the ethnic variable. Her typology proposes three levels of analysis: micro, mezzo (intermediate), and macro. The levels of analysis that I found particularly weak in *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* is the macro level, which considers the political climate on a national level. Jenkins points out that while cultural pluralism in the United States "is essentially documented by demography," its social acceptance was brought about by political movement of ethnic groups that forced concessions from the sources of national power. Thus, "ethnicity in service delivery received more support from the 'maximum feasible participation of the poor' in community programs than from any ideological concern with 'role' or 'identity'" (1981:1961). Jenkins pays more attention to these political factors than do many of the authors in *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, in which the political thrust often seems to follow the motto "Our status is quo, come weal or come woe." Spiegel summarily dismisses Rousseau's "Good-but-corruptible" view of human nature as "Held today by only a few 'flower children,' most of whom have disappeared into rural settings where they can cultivate goodness far from wicked civilization" (42). Attneave dismisses the occupation at Wounded Knee by Native Americans as "impractical but admired, much like the Charge of the Light Brigade" (64).

There are no outspoken feminists in this company of authors. For most of them, the patriarchy will remain firmly in place after the therapy is finished. The one universal value in *all* ethnic groups is the patriarchy. Falicov draws on functionalist theory to justify this, discussing an alliance between mother and children: "Sociologists regard this type of alliance between mother and children as functional when parental role segregation is high (such as in the patriarchal households of technologically simple societies) and will not label this pattern as 'pathological stable coalition' in need of change" (141). Spiegel shows how this works out in practice: "Because we are dealing with families based on Lineal or Collateral orientation, it is important to line ourselves up with the head of the family. This is normally the father; . . . we would not be able to get very far if we indicated that one of our goals was to obtain autonomy or individuation for a wife or daughter" (48). He illustrates this point by an interview with a Puerto Rican father in which the therapist "agreed with the father's view about the importance of maintaining control over his daughter's activities and preserving her virginity" ["Respect for the male role being of prime importance in Puerto Rican families" (49)]. This theme is repeated by Falicov in "Mexican Families"; ". . . addressing questions to the father first, then to the mother, then to other adults, and finally to the older and younger children, respects traditional age/sex hierarchies and conveys *respecto*" (151). Yet Falicov also suggests the alternative of allowing the family to elect its own spokesperson, and is one of the few authors who discusses the validity of sometimes opposing cultural norms which "inhibit the development of personal identities." Garcia-Preto in "Puerto Rican Families" repeats the advice to address the husband first but is also the only author to suggest women's self-help groups to support the woman. Shon and Ja also tell us to address the father first in Asian families (223), and, according to Welts, a Greek woman who marries a non-Greek man "will be a satisfactory sexual partner since she has been brought up to believe that wives must be sexually accommodating to their husbands" (280). Jalali advises the Iranian family therapist to join with the father, acknowledging his hierarchical position in the system (304) and addressing the father first (308). While advocating strengthening of peer relationships and the father-child relationship in order to weaken mother-child bonds, he never suggests support groups for the women. Jalali not only reinforces the patriarchy (never mentioning the small but influential feminist movement in Iran); he is also an apologist for an authoritarian government: "Iranians' sense of individuality has always been so powerful, that authoritarian controls have had to be exerted to ensure their allegiance and support" (292).

After all this deference to the father, I was relieved to read in Rotunno and McGoldrick's "Italian Families" some suggestions for fostering individual initiative in family members other than the father: "The father could be com-

plimented for creating a family in which each member took individual initiatives that reflected positively on the family" (351). Yet, turning to Portuguese families, we again find the therapist beginning with deference to the father, to whom "initially all remarks should be directed" (427). Treatment of a man who beats his wife and child was successful when he shifted from physical to verbal abuse (430). Interestingly, the only chapter that lists as a primary goal of therapy the increase of opportunities for independent achievement for women was the one on British families by McGill and Pearce. A single mother is recognized as "overworked and undersupported" in "Intervention in a Vietnamese Refugee Family" by Lappin and Scott. However, family therapy with an Indian family is declared successful when the woman is scared into submission (Landau, "Therapy with Families in Cultural Transition"). A male Indian "link therapist" (member of the family who is coached to do therapy with the family) persuaded his uncle to lecture the mother and girls on how to behave:

Ganesh: My mother is scared of my uncle, and she was silent as soon as he came. She listened to every word.

Therapist: So, you are happy about things now?

Ganesh: Yes, things are coming straight now.

Problems were once more resolved according to strict traditional prescription within the boundaries of the family system (564). No one asked the scared mother if *she* thought the problems were resolved.

The chapters I liked best gave a rich historical and cultural background, showed some political sophistication as well as sophistication about treatment techniques, and did not propose techniques to keep the women and children in their place. These included Hines and Boyd-Franklin's "Black Families," Pinderhughes' "Afro-American Families and the Victim System," Attneave's "American Indians and Alaska Native Families," Brice's "West Indian Families," McGoldrick's "Irish Families," Midelfort and Midelfort's "Norwegian Families," Lappin and Scott's "Intervention in a Vietnamese Refugee Family," and Garcia-Preto's "Puerto Rican Families." "Portuguese Families" by Moitoza drew upon the author's original research, and therefore seemed more authoritative than some.

Several of the authors gave astute suggestions about differential treatment, pointing out strengths and weaknesses of various treatment methods. "Paradoxical" treatment struck me as usually manipulative and sometimes downright dishonest. Sluzki's "Latin Lover Revisited" seemed padded, with a thesis that could be stated in a couple of sentences: the Latin lover is in the mind of the Anglo woman. Not being accustomed to standing as close to people as are Latino people, she assumes that she is being seduced and signals that assumption to the Latin male, who has been acculturated to believe he must always be ready for sex, and responds to her assumptions by becoming her

stereotype of the Latin lover. This logic struck me as a bit like blaming the victim.

Friedman's "The Myth of the Shiksa" presented the most carefully thought through theoretical formulations, though I did not wholly agree with them. The author's thesis ran counter to those in most of the articles, arguing that cultural traits are used as camouflage to cover up basic and universal emotional processes. Friedman argues that the therapist's focus on values and ideological positions "is often just another form of displacement. To offer reasonable alternatives to such positions, therefore, is once again only to conspire in the family's denial of its emotional process" (526). By the way, Friedman has the best sense of humor of any of the authors. His prescription for stopping a Jewish mother's nagging of her daughter about marrying a non-Jew is worth passing on. The Jewish daughter is advised to send the following letter to her mother:

Mother, I know you are opposed to John, and you have a right to your position, but you are still my mother and I believe you owe me one more thing before John and I marry. We have never had a frank talk about sex. What has been the secret to your marital success? How many times a week would you say a man likes it? And when you don't want it, how do you keep a man away? (513)

I think this book could have been improved by more detailed attention to the effect of the therapist's ethnicity and social class. In cultures where a language other than English is spoken, authors always said it is preferable (practically essential, in fact) for the therapist to speak the same language, but they did not go further than to discuss the research on this subject. It would also have helped to have had more anthropologists involved in writing articles, and to discuss at greater length how therapists can go about learning more about cultures. As the authors admit, this book is only a beginning. James Green offers some good cultural study guides for social workers, borrowed from anthropological methodology.

Ethnicity and Family Therapy could also have used some more imaginative suggestions for increasing a culture's own ethnic understanding and pride. The authors would have benefited from reading Jane Addams, whose ethnic museum of work did so much to help the children of Chicago immigrants understand their parents' work and values. In addition, some data could have been updated by using 1980 Census figures.

The chapter on Irish families is artistically rich, since it draws heavily on literature. It is also one of the most anthropologically solid chapters. However, all the chapters could have dealt more thoroughly with social class. Oscar Lewis believes that in some ways social class is a more important deter-

minant of behavior than ethnicity. An upper-class person in Mexico may have more in common with an upper-class person in the United States than he or she has with a poor Mexican. While several authors mention the importance of social class, the only article that deals with it in depth is that on the Iranian family, which alone focuses on upper-class people and their needs. The article on black families by Hines and Boyd-Franklin could have been strengthened by a fuller discussion of the black bourgeoisie as compared to poor blacks.

I would not want my criticisms to discourage people from reading this book. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* contains some rich information and ideas for family therapists and, I hope, will stimulate the reader to study more deeply the ethnic groups with which she or he is working.

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CONNECTIONS: UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS by Harry Cohen. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1981.

Reviewer: John F. Glass

Connections is a unique and engaging book. Cohen writes clearly and in a lively and personal style on how sociological knowledge can be used for group and individual improvement. This is not a self-help book; Cohen's study is theoretically sound and contains many examples and cases to clarify and explain.

Each chapter covers a major sociological perspective: symbolic interactionism; the exchange perspective; conflict theory; dramaturgical analysis; labeling; and structural functionalism. Cohen clearly explains these perspectives, how they are useful as guides for qualitative research and understanding about human behavior and the social world, and how they can be applied to