

Families, networks, and other strange shapes

Carlos E. Sluzki

The etymology of the word “family” is rooted in Middle English and originally was used exclusively in reference to the household servants. Around the 15th Century, it was expanded to encompass all members of the household including servants, captured women and offspring sired by the head of household. The crucial bond of this “family” was an agreement of mutual protection and loyalty. This reciprocal arrangement became more stable as time passed and the use of the term evolved progressively in the direction of the family contract as we know it today. Certain features, such as the notion of romantic marriage in which marriage is embraced for love rather than convenience, are very recent by-products of this evolution, dating from the 19th Century. In fact, the families we study and live in can be conceived as a contemporary construct in an evolutionary process, and will retain its present shape for only a fleeting moment, (100? 200? 300 years? - minute time spans were it not for the impatience which stems from our even more minuscule average life span), regardless of how much we disregard evolution, differences, anomalies, and portents of trends to come.

Most of us profess, indeed, this evolutionary awareness, but I must confess, each time I know it again I am again amazed. I wish to share some of this amazement.

The rather simple thesis of my presentation is that we see and treat the nuclear family (and occasionally, the extended family) because we are specialists in seeing it, not because it is out there as a clearly delineated shape. We treat

the family because we see the family and we see the family because we evoke the family with our models and our inquiry. People live at present - and at any other time - in multiple, complex, evolving networks, of which we “extract” the family by means of asking, for instance, “Who is in your family?”, thus evoking, both in us and the recipient of the question, legal, cultural, sometimes emotional, consensual sets.

I would like to supplement that constructivist thesis with a more mundane equation: middle class families are to family therapy as college sophomores are to Psychology. As we well know, a good part of the monumental edifice of American psychology has been built from the data collected from countless college students who participated in countless experiments. This led to most of those formulations on which current theory is based. Family therapy was built, in turn, with few exceptions, on the basis of countless middle class families seen in offices of therapists who then made generalizations that acquired universal value. (There maybe, indeed, some noteworthy exceptions, such as Salvador Minuchin et al’s “Families of the Slums,” but even there, what is the norm against which those families of the slums were compared? Middle class families!)

This cultural and class bias is so pervasive that any exercise in detachment from that skewed perspective is rather exhausting. I may have been aided a bit, in this arduous process of searching for the occasional blessed crack in my worldview, by the circumstance of having shifted milieu in the last few months: relocations and migrations tend to infect the actors with a mantle of increased distancing. (Is it indeed a meta-perspective, or is it an adaptive transient depersonalization or even perhaps only confusion?) This shift was further aided by the fact that my new professional territory included the “down to earth” experience of a psychiatric service with patients encompassing several social-cultural-class slots (even though few of them belong to cultural minorities in the traditional ethnic sense of the term).

With the hope of overloading your senses a bit, and perhaps thus increasing your uncertainties, allow me to introduce you to a few inhabitants of the Short Term In-Patient Section of my Department of Psychiatry.

We discover that the most meaningful support network of this thirty year old woman with the diagnosis of schizophrenia has been, for the past two years, a group of five ladies with whom she shares a semi-private dwelling. All of them are frequent users of the mental health system, two of them labeled as sociopaths and three as schizophrenic. Should we include as part of her stable network us and other agencies to whom this woman has access, and counts on? Or should we include her former husband, a very disturbed Viet Nam veteran on whom she can sometimes count, depending on the seemingly whimsical course of his own pathway? Should we add her own mother, hospitalized in a state institution for chronic psychiatric patients for the past twelve years?

How about this twenty-five year old man, who crashed through a window of his home in a suicidal gesture (even though he landed quite safely on the roof of a neighboring apartment)? He made this move because he was afraid of hurting his wife, he said. Should we include in our conception of his family the wife (stepdaughter of his natural father) whom he married after having a baby? And how about his father, who in turn abandoned his mother when the identified patient was one year old, never to see him again until the son sought him at age twenty? And the mother who left the kid to be raised by her own mother, disappearing when the boy was six? And grandmother, who raised him in Georgia? Father, in turn, is an alcoholic cook who, even though did not welcome the son, did not chase him away. In fact, the patient works as a dishwasher in the same restaurant. Should we include him? And how about the main confidant of both father and son, the fifty-year old cashier and factotum of the restaurant? And the violent gang with whom the man hangs around on a stable basis? Where and when to establish the limit?

Next comes this sixty year old very depressed lady. Should we invite her husband, presently in a nursing home, devastated by Alzheimer's disease? Or his brother, whose recent move to Florida triggered the patient's depression? Since two years ago she has lived in a mobil park, where she moved in order to be near her progressively crippled husband. Are her present neighbors available? And willing?

And so on. And so on.

The first question that comes to my mind is : For whom is this a meaningful network? For us, the providers? For them, the family members? And then where do we trace the boundary of that microsystem, if any? And how do we even operationalize it, beyond its attribute as primary anvil of growth for children and early adolescents socialized in that context? The unshakeability of the familial bond is, of course, just a linguistic artifact: A link that has a name to denote it persists, by definition, as long as the people tied by the named link are there. The name of the process-link of non-familial ties is, on the contrary, quite blurry and shaky, regardless of how persistent it may be. In fact, the very act of naming a genealogical link leads us to attribute it to additional stability and strength. The contrary occurs with the non-familial link (perhaps with the exception of the naming of some non-familial link,) padrino and madrino, which are as unshakable as a family name and as stable or as feeble as any other family link in places such as Spain, Latin America, and the Philippines. It could be argued that , in case of need, blood relationships can be called more dependable than non-blood relationships. This description sometimes holds and sometimes doesn't, even when it does, it is sometimes the result of people not mobilizing non-family network links, not because they wouldn't be effective, but because of not feeling entitled. In turn, not infrequently family resources are activated by social expectations and pressures as much as by loyalty drives. In fact, if we test that relationships respond with care, responsibility and loyalty unparalleled by many of the more labeled ones. It could be argued, in a conciliatory mood, that perhaps it would make sense to speak of boundaries

between internal and external networks are so permeable or thin or whimsical as they appeared to be in the course of our tour of the ward (and in our clinical practice), does this demarcation of fields hold any meaning?

It could also be argued, in an effort to muddle issues, that family boundaries are particularly difficult in this period of social transition. However, *every period is a period of transition*. This latter statement, obvious as it may be, constitutes a powerful argument that emphasizes that our scientific enterprise as behavioral and social scientists must be constantly under review and revision. Therapists, let us face it, tend to follow cultural evolutions at a discrete distance. Our statements about what we see are statements about what we see are statements about what we evoke, and what we end up studying tends to be configured by reasons that drastically transcend our little province. We define a fleeting evolutionary shape such as the family, just in order to catch, freeze, and study that shape for what it is worth. But we may risk confusing a heuristic device for a thing (unless we choose the vocation, not infrequently seen in behavioral scientists, of becoming normative buffers and the voice of conservative forces). In order to make an attempt at neutralizing, in a minimal way, this tendency toward reification, it becomes necessary to state once again, that our field is in continuous construction. The cultural context constantly redefines both how the family defines itself and how we represent or conserve the family. And that is, indeed, neither good nor bad, it is simply the way things are: systems and environment co-evolve. Our object of study, thus, is not the true family, or any person's view of the true family, but the ever changing diversity of social shapes, networks and contexts. The challenge is formidable. It requires constant questioning and constant reformulation, as we observe the observer and the observed co-evolving.

Shep White, in an article in the *American Psychologist* in 1979 discussing child psychology, wonders how can one rebuild a ship at sea. He says, "Imagine going for a voyage on a boat while you are still rebuilding it, arguing with your crew mates whether it should be a motor boat or a sail boat and simultaneously

arguing with paying passengers about where your whatever it is is going to take them.” This metaphor represents most appropriately the crucial challenge of our endeavor in the field of family studies and family therapy: we are at sea navigating in a rather loosely assembled vessel and we have to keep on rebuilding it at sea, over and over again questioning our premises and our premises about premises. Fortunately, I should add, it may be unnecessary to sink our ship to rebuild it. At the most it will sink at its own pace when the material becomes debilitated and undermined enough by our illusions of certainty.

---0000---

This piece, presented as a keynote in the Annual AFTA Congress the previous year, was written while the author was Chair, Department of Psychiatry, Berkshire Medical Center, Pittsfield, Massachusetts and Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Massachusetts Medical School at Worcester (BMC campus)