



## Families as relationships

**Publication Title:** Families as relationships.

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**Publisher, year of publication:** John Wiley and Sons, New York, 2000.

This volume provides a wide-ranging look at family functioning from the particular perspective of personal relationships. The approach taken emphasises the functional, or process, nature of families rather than the structural or systemic approaches that have typically dominated family therapy. The chapters cover a wide range of relationships including parent-child, spousal, and relationships with people outside the family. As well as individual relationships, the various authors address family life cycle transitions such as the early years of marriage with the introduction of children, children growing up, divorce, and the inclusion of elderly parents into families. In this review, I will describe some of the aspects that I liked and some of the aspects I didn't like.

First – the things I liked. Almost all authors argue for an approach to understanding relationship functioning that is dyadic and context dependent. For example, Crouter and Helms-Erikson point out that “much of the literature on child development has focused on the impact of maternal employment status on children's psychological adjustment rather than on the connections between mothers' and fathers' ongoing daily experiences at work and their children's ongoing daily experiences at home” (p 114). Cooney argues for a more dyadic approach to the study of adult-child relationships across the lifespan, rather than investigating individuals outside of the context of their relationships. Duck makes a plea for researchers to investigate *relating* rather than *relationships*, attending to the reciprocal processes operating within relationships rather than the apparent structure of the relationships. In the reality of clinical practice with families, context and reciprocal relationship processes are where interventions are often directed, making these approaches indispensable.

I found a number of research findings that will be helpful in my clinical work with families. For example, Cooney makes an important point in noting that the separation-individuation processes typically identified with adolescence are usually assumed to be a function of the adolescent's drive for autonomy. However, this approach does not take into account of the parents' role in this process and, in particular, the developmental challenges facing the adults at this time (approaching middle age), and the effect of this transition on their parenting.

It was encouraging to note that, in contrast to popular perception, most children whose parents have divorced are resilient, adapt well to parental divorce, and function in the normal range of adjustment. Fine and Demo did a good job of debunking some of the popular myths surrounding the effects of divorce on parents and children alike, for example, providing evidence that the altered authority structure in single-parent families facilitates closeness, autonomy, and mutual support in parent-child relationships.

An interesting approach was that taken by Klein and Johnson. In their chapter, marital conflict is analysed using a dual concern model – two orthogonal dimensions of other-concern and self-concern. What is helpful about this model is that motivations involved with conflict can be assessed on two dimensions – selfishness and selflessness are not necessarily mutually exclusive. This approach could be used to help couples understand that the apparently hostile partner is likely to have some degree of selflessness in their motivation.

Freud emphasised the roles of love and work in human functioning, and therefore, there is the appropriate inclusion of the impact of work on the family. Apart from the usual research on the division of housework, attention is paid to the nature of the work performed by the adults in the family. Crouter and Helms-Erikson addressed issues such as the nature of the work that men and women perform. For example, they reported findings suggesting that quitting work has the positive effect of reducing subsequent behaviour problems in children “only if the mother’s job had been characterised by low occupational complexity or very long hours”. It is suggested that complex jobs reinforce and strengthen mothers’ intellectual skills in ways that pay off for their children’s learning. Good news for working mothers who enjoy their jobs but feel guilty about not being at home full-time! However, when both parents are in particularly complex jobs, time and energy for children can be compromised.

Second, the things I didn’t like. I was irritated by the fact that the references are all put together at the end of the book rather than at the end of each chapter. This means that I cannot photocopy an individual chapter for teaching purposes. Attention to gender and cultural issues are also welcomed, but the view is predominantly North American, leaving us with the usual questions about the applicability of the findings to our culture.

All in all, this is a useful text that I will be dipping into from time to time to broaden my outlook on family relationships. It is a good example of a book written by academics that has plenty of potential for practical application – a scientist-practitioner’s dream.

Reviewer: Fran Vertue

Review date: 2004