



Editorial

What Is “Family”? Perturbations and Possibilities

What is your concept of family? Do you believe there is an entity called “family” that can be known clinically or through research? (Even as I pose these questions, I am wondering if it is politically suicidal to raise such an issue when we finally have a *Journal of Family Nursing*.)

As nurses, our ideas about family influence how we behave: whether we see pathology or health; whether we empower or foster dependency; whether we work with wholes or parts. Even our ideas about who constitutes the family have implications for practice and research. Many family health professionals have called for a definition of family that moves beyond the traditional boundaries of limiting membership by blood and marriage. Wright and Leahey (1994, p. 40) assert, “the family is who they say they are.” My favorite definition is a colloquial one, which defines a family as “those people who give a damn about you.” This definition invites the nurse to honor the individual person’s ideas about which relationships are deemed significant to the person and his or her experience of health and illness. Inviting the individual to define who constitutes the family provides access to important beliefs about family membership and roles.

In this issue, Gwen Hartrick calls for an alternate metaphor for conceptualizing family. She argues that we have become stuck in the systems metaphor and proposes a narrative metaphor instead. Larry Ganong calls our attention to the unique dimensions of families and argues that families are small groups that challenge the researcher’s effort to capture them. I invite you to consider still another distinction about family—a distinction between family and individual.

The idea of the family unit as a system composed of individual family members and having characteristics of its own which transcend the individual members is a foundational assumption of systems theory, that is, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (von Bertalanffy, 1968). However, the distinction between family and individual family member is an important one to consider. Although several authors (Patterson & Garwick, 1994; Reiss, 1981) have suggested that certain behaviors and beliefs of the individual are transformed through interaction and history with significant others to become family meanings or family paradigms, I disagree. Despite an interest in working with an entity called the family—a word used to symbolize a focus on relationships, interaction, and reciprocity—I do not believe that the clinician or researcher can ever know a “family.” Under the influence of Humberto Maturana’s (Maturana & Varela, 1992) ideas, family is an idea drawn forth in our minds through language to account for the special relationship that occurs over time between individuals who call themselves “family.” However, a family can be known only through its individual members.

Maturana and Varela (1992) argue that an independent reality does not exist but

is drawn forth by the observer. The act of drawing forth—describing, distinguishing—is done by the individual through language. ‘Without the observer nothing exists. . . The event itself has no existence separate from our distinguishing it through words and symbols’ (Efran & Lukens, 1985, p. 24, 25). If reality is observer- dependent, then there are as many families as there are family members—each with his or her distinct view of family. Even when meanings, beliefs, and experiences are consensually shared through language by several individuals within a family and evolved through interaction with each other, there is still no such thing as a family belief or family meaning or, for that matter, family health—just many observer descriptions of family belief, family meaning, or family health.

Efran and Lukens (1985) warn:

It is crucial to notice that the description of the family that a therapist [clinician/researcher] creates is not anymore objective or real than the families that exist in the language patterns of each of the family members. Further the words and symbols they each use for describing families (and other occurrences) are not just abstractions, but tools used to coordinate complex action patterns in social domains. But unless we are careful, we tend to fall prey to a common illusion: as social consensus in a domain is achieved—i.e., people in the same “club” begin to talk similarly—we think that something objective has been discovered. (p. 25)

So, what do you think? Can we ever know an entity called “family”? Are you skeptical or do you answer the question with a resounding, “Yes, Virginia ...“?

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Editor

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