PRACTICAL SOCIAL WORK

Series Editor: Jo Campling

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and Sue Walrond-Skinner

Social work is at an important stage in its development. All professions must be responsive to changing social and economic conditions if they are to meet the needs of those they serve. This series focuses on sound practice and the specific contribution which social workers can make to the well-being of our society in the 1980s.

The British Association of Social Workers has always been conscious of its role in setting guidelines for practice and in seeking to raise professional standards. The conception of the Practical Social Work series arose from a survey of the BASW members to discover where they, the practitioners in social work, felt there was the most need for new literature. The response was overwhelming and enthusiastic, and the result is a carefully planned, coherent series of books. The emphasis is firmly on practice, set in a theoretical framework. The books will inform, stimulate and promote discussion, thus adding to the further development of skills and high professional standards. All the authors are practitioners and teachers of social work, representing a wide variety of experience.

JO CAMPLING

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*For my children, Lucy and Christopher; and in memory of Henry,
my husband, to whom social work and family therapy were
familiar for eighteen years; with my love*

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Foreword

The publication of a new British book on family therapy is a welcome event. Whilst the deluge of American contributions to this increasingly complex subject-area continues, European participation is still minor by comparison. Much family therapy theory is generic, but its contextual premise makes it necessary that a range of books should be available that focus on the particular culture from which families and therapists are drawn.

This book is especially important because it is less dependent on American sources than were the first British books published in the mid-1970s. Family therapy has developed rapidly in Britain during the last ten years and it is appropriate that a book published in the mid-1980s should reflect the particular flavour of British practice and British research.

Few practitioners are better qualified to produce a book that is so relevant and informative as Gill Gorell Barnes. Her experience includes working in and consulting for both statutory and non-statutory agencies. Her previous writings and research have included work with immigrant families, children at risk, violent families and the seriously disadvantaged. She has made major contributions to teaching family therapy to multi-disciplinary groups through her work for the Family Therapy Programme at the Tavistock Clinic and she has been consistently attentive to the learning needs of social workers in statutory agencies. She is certainly one of the most competent people I know at conceptualising highly complex ideas and yet she possesses that rare skill of being able to convey their meaning through commonplace and homely examples, reducing (enlarging!) a discussion of systems theory to a matter of cornflakes and wellington boots!

The book describes a broad range of family problems and a variety of approaches to treatment. One of its many strengths is its transcen-

dence of methodological sub-divisions and its ability to integrate ideas from psychoanalytic theory with strategic and structural approaches and to see them all as contributing to a broad systemic view of family treatment.

Social workers will welcome the life-cycle format of the book and the attention paid to several family forms, including single-parent families, stepfamilies and foster families. The changing forms of commitment in intimate relationships makes 'family' as central as ever in most people's experience, holding out the possibility of intimacy and continuity but also the twin threats of fusion or disintegration. But for most people the family is a different kind of social group from the so-called 'ideal' or 'norm' and requires of the worker a deep understanding and knowledge, and new and relevant approaches to helping when the family encounters difficulties. As the author rightly points out, social workers are required, more often than other professionals, to help families who are in varying stages of fragmentation and transition and who are experimenting with new and atypical structures. Sources of knowledge for such work are derived primarily from clinical experience and the clinical literature but they also come from a close familiarity with family studies and particularly from recent British work directed towards understanding the context of the family at risk. Unlike the work of some writers in the field, who seem to work in a sort of therapeutic vacuum, Gill Gorell Barnes is clear that the work of sociologists and family theorists 'helps to develop the professional eye as to which families are most vulnerable'. This in turn enables the worker to understand the needs of the particular family more sensitively and accurately, and to introduce appropriate and perhaps novel tools for helping the family to evolve an unusual but satisfying pattern of group life during treatment.

Family therapy has proved to be a creative method of work for social workers. Despite the criticisms made by some social work theorists regarding its elitism and clinical bias, no such criticism is justified in relation to the present work. Indeed, the book represents just that blend of practical application, innovation and sound theoretical underpinning which makes the family therapy paradigm, at its best, of particular relevance to the social worker.

SUE WALROND-SKINNER

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GILL GORELL BARNES