

Family-of-Origin Therapy



An Intergenerational Approach

James L. Framo, Ph.D.

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My family has always been there for me; they have given me much more than I have given them.

I dedicate this book to my parents, James and Madeline, who gave me life; to my sisters, Viola and Eleanor, and to my brother Michael—my friends as well as my siblings.

I dedicate this book to my daughters, Joan and Patty, both wonderful human beings, and to the memory of my sons, Jimmie and Michael, who will always be with me.

I dedicate this book to my wife, Felise, who has given me the gift of love, which in turn has changed my view of myself, has renewed my faith in myself, and has shown me how to love.

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Preface

This book has truly been a labor of love and pain; its evolution has followed a tortuous course. Since my previous publications consisted of edited volumes, chapters in books, and journal articles, I wanted to write my very own book that would contain only my own thinking—one big book that was originally entitled, *A Dynamic Approach to Marital and Family Therapy*. Later the title was changed to the more ambitious one of, *An Intergenerational Approach to Marital and Family Therapy: Marriage, Divorce, and Family of Origin*. The book was to be my legacy to the field and was to contain the last word on the subjects at hand. This narcissistic grandiosity, of course, created such an impasse that I did not publish anything for years.

Eventually I followed the advice of my publisher, Bernie Mazel, and my wife, Dr. Felise Levine, to present my work in three separate volumes—one on divorce therapy, one on family-of-origin, and one on marital therapy. A piecemeal approach diminished my fear that when the large book was finished there would be nothing left to

say. I decided that the first book to come out that was wholly mine should be on the work closest to my heart and basic to all my other work—my intergenerational approach to therapy. So in 1988 I began work on this book....

Early in my career as a psychotherapist, it became apparent that the kinds of problems people had with themselves or in their intimate relationships had a lot to do with what they were still working out from their original family. Instead of having people talk *about* their families, as is customary in traditional psychotherapy, I took the unusual step of actually including the families of origin in the therapy of adults seen in family, marital, divorce, or individual therapy. There were no guidelines in the literature for doing this sort of work (e.g., Bowen rarely brought in the families of origin of his clients), so I had to learn the hard way. Having conducted over 500 family-of-origin sessions, I am now in a position to pass on my experience and to offer a kind of guidebook to therapists who would like to use this method.

I have attempted to present my work as honestly as possible, including even a chapter on the difficulties in doing intergenerational therapy as well as limitations of this method. Moreover, several times throughout the book I state the strong belief that therapists who do intergenerational work should work on their own family of origin issues. Trying to practice what I preach, I have not only had sessions with my own family of origin (siblings and other relatives since my parents were deceased when I started doing this work), but in the

Author's Family Biography at the end of the book I lift the roof of the home in which I grew up and reveal some key events in my own family of origin, which shaped my life. No one will be surprised to find out that there is a relationship between my own personal family history and my conceptual approach to therapy.

The thesis in this book goes against the trendy movement in mental health in the U.S. toward the programs that advocate staying away from one's family for the sake of one's own survival. ACOA's (Adult Children of Alcoholics), AMAC's (Adults Molested as Children) and ACDF's (Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families) are advised to follow the 12 steps of these programs and to save themselves by going to various kinds of therapy. The exclusion of the family of origin by these movements is a mistake in my judgment. People who think they can give up on their parents and brothers and sisters are, for the most part, deceiving themselves.

A major conclusion of this book is that family-of-origin intervention is not a complete form of psychotherapy and will probably always be a specialized, brief procedure that, conducted in the appropriate way, can have powerful therapeutic effects in bringing about change—intrapsychically, in marital relationships, in the relationships between children and parents, and in the systems of the family of origin and extended family. These changes can carry over to succeeding generations. As the reader has probably surmised, I really believe in this work.

Although I have, on the basis of accumulated experience, added to and modified the procedure, and this present book represents the state of the art as of 1992, in truth I think the dimensions and potentials of this intergenerational approach have only begun to be explored. I anticipate that future theoreticians and clinicians will extend this work in terms of theory building, research, and clinical application.

Despite myself, the book is done. Later I will think of things I forgot to put in the book. But now that it's finished, the tension and guilt are gone, but a sadness has taken its place and that will last until I get to work on my next book.

JAMES L. FRAMO

San Diego, California

Acknowledgments

I wish to recognize, first, with deep appreciation, my wife, Dr. Felise B. Levine. She has not only been my friend, companion, mate, and cotherapist, but also has read the manuscript in detail and made many theoretical and clinical observations, only some of which are credited in the footnotes as having originated from her. Without her support, affirmation, and encouragement, this book would probably never have been completed.

Thanks go to Bernie Mazel of Brunner/Mazel, for his patience, for his confidence in me when my own flagged, and for not giving up on this project.

Natalie Gilman, the Executive Editor, who went over the raw manuscript and rearranged paragraphs and sentences, who corrected my confusion over “that's” and “whiches,” is owed credit for shaping the book into its final form.

I want to express my gratitude to the couples, families, and individuals who allowed me access to their private

pains and relationship struggles and who provided the basis for the observations made in all my writings. My ideas really came from them as they grappled with their personal demons and relational difficulties.

I am grateful to my students, who kept me on my toes, challenged me, and opened up their private lives in their family biographies.

There are many people in the family therapy field with whom I have shared ideas, friendships, and collegueship. To list them all would fill many pages. They know who they are.

I have been heavily influenced by the theories of Murray Bowen and Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and the clinical artistry of Nat Acker-man and Carl Whitaker, all of whom I regard as my friends as well as colleagues.

I appreciate the warm receptions and hospitality that I have received from organizers and participants of workshops that I have given at various agencies and institutions around the U.S. and internationally.

Thanks and gratitude are owed the various typists who worked on the manuscript over the years: Janet Gibson, Debbie Kidd, and Angelina J. Gonzalo.

“Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship,
which struggles on in the survivor's mind toward some
resolution,
which it may never find.”*

*From Anderson, R. (1970). *I Never Sang for My
Father*. New York: Signet. (A play produced on
Broadway in 1968 and made into a motion picture by
Columbia Pictures, released in 1970.)

1

Introduction: An Overview

In this volume I will discuss what I consider to be the most important aspect of my work—involvement of the family of origin in the therapy I do with adults in marital, family, and individual therapy. My 35 years of experience in working with couples and families has led me in that direction, and since first publishing on this subject (Framo, 1976), I have conducted many more family-of-origin sessions. This family-of-origin procedure, which has been fine-tuned and has undergone important modifications over the years, will be described in such detail that others who wish to try this method will have adequate guidelines. In response to the many inquiries I have received about my intergenerational method, I will present as clearly as possible, with clinical examples, what I usually do in working with adults and their families of origin.

Repeated experience with this family-of-origin method has convinced me of the power of the approach in producing change, although I have a more sober appreciation of the limitations of the method, the precautions that must be taken, and the formidable technical difficulties involved. It is not an easy kind of procedure to do and it certainly does not always work. On the other hand, I believe that one session of an adult with his/her parents and brothers and sisters, conducted in this special kind of way, can have more beneficial therapeutic effects than the benefits derived from the entire length of a course of psychotherapy. Aside from the clinical validity of this intergenerational approach, a systematic research study on a follow-up of partners and their families of origin whom I had seen in the past presented data-based evidence of the effectiveness of this method (Baker, 1982). The method is considered a general one, not just applicable to people in marital and family therapy, but to those in individual therapy as well—indeed to all adults who need to sort out mixed feelings about parents and siblings.

This family-of-origin method is foundational and basic to all other therapies I do—individual, family (Framo, 1965a), marital (Framo 1978b, 1980, 1981), couples groups (Framo, 1973), and divorce therapy (Framo, 1978a). My book of” collected papers contains the foregoing papers (Framo, 1982).

Even though I have the reputation for doing long-term therapy, family-of-origin therapy could be regarded as the ultimate *brief* therapy, in that the method involves

approximately four clinical hours with the family. Ideally, the family-of-origin sessions are most generative when integrated with ongoing psychotherapy, but the family-of-origin work can stand on its own as a meaningful therapeutic experience.

Utilizing family of origin as a resource in marital, family, and individual therapy is the logical outcome and clinical application of the conceptual formulation that hidden transgenerational forces exercise critical influence on present-day intimate relationships (Framo, 1970). That is, current marital, parenting, and personal difficulties are viewed, basically, as reparative efforts to correct, master, defend against, live through, or cancel out old, disturbing relationship paradigms from the original family. In their choices of intimate relationships people attempt to make interpersonal resolutions of intrapsychic conflicts.

Most people do not *see* their spouses, children, or intimate partners as they really are since old ghosts stand in the way; the current significant others are shadowy representatives of past figures and are responded to as if they were split-off aspects of the self. When clients are prepared to deal face-to-face with the critical, heretofore avoided issues with parents and brothers and sisters, taking the problems back to where they began, they can clear away some of the filters and cobwebs that exist between them and their intimate others. Most people, for years, have been telling friends, therapists, spouses, and Dear Abby all the things they should have been telling their parents and siblings, the people most concerned.

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