

The New York Times

Carl Whitaker, 83, Therapist Who Focused on Family Life

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April 25, 1995

Dr. Carl A. Whitaker, a psychotherapist who overturned prevailing orthodoxy by focusing on the family rather than the individual in therapy, died on Friday at his home in Nashotah, Wis. He was 83.

The cause was complications from a stroke, said his daughter, Nancy Whitaker-Emrich of Portland, Ore.

Among Dr. Whitaker's contributions to the field that became known as family therapy was the idea that troubled children were often symbolically expressing family problems, like marital tensions between their parents.

He also was an early exponent of the concept of "co-therapy," in which therapists work together in pairs, and of live supervision, in which a master therapist watches a student at work with a family and teaches by intervening on the spot. These innovations have become standard procedures among family therapists.

"Carl Whitaker was one of the founding generation of family therapists who broke the rules of the psychotherapeutic orthodoxies of the time, such as that therapy focused on a single client and was totally divorced from family life," said Richard Simon, editor of *The Family Therapy Networker*, the leading publication in the field. "His idea was that the entire family was the client."

Dr. Whitaker, who was known for his charm and charismatic manner, was one of the most powerful voices in shaping the practice of family therapy as it began to develop in the 1960's. Often provocative in his teaching, he told one interviewer, "Every marriage is a battle between two families struggling to reproduce themselves."

Recalling an incident in which Dr. Whitaker arm-wrestled with a teen-ager in a family he was treating, Mr. Simon said: "Dr. Whitaker was often outrageous in what he would do as a therapist. He was a fearless and idiosyncratic spirit."

Trained as an obstetrician and gynecologist, Dr. Whitaker went to work in 1938 in a psychiatric hospital, his first job, and soon became fascinated by the challenge of treating schizophrenia. Observing that some patients seemed to recover only to have their problems re-emerge when they returned to their families, Dr. Whitaker began to focus on treating the whole family rather than the one patient.

One of Dr. Whitaker's innovations, co-therapy, came about in World War II when he counseled workers in Oak Ridge, Tenn., where a top-secret atomic bomb project was under way. The pressure of a long stream of back-to-back 30-minute therapy sessions led to an experiment with co-therapy, which became a standard practice for Dr. Whitaker both in treatment and in teaching.

In 1946 he became chairman of the department of psychiatry at Emory University in Atlanta. While there he wrote "The Roots of Psychotherapy," with Dr. Thomas Malone. In 1955 Dr. Whitaker left Emory to establish the Atlanta Psychiatric Clinic, where he concentrated on working with the families of his psychiatric patients and began to develop his ideas about family therapy.

He was appointed to the psychiatry department at the University of Wisconsin in 1965, and taught there until he retired in 1982. During his tenure there Dr. Whitaker articulated his ideas about psychotherapy, which he called "experiential/symbolic" family therapy, and his national influence on the emerging field grew stronger.

He summarized his views in "The Family Crucible," written with Dr. August Napier, in 1978, which became an influential tool among family therapists. In 1982 Dr. Whitaker's major articles on family therapy were collected in "From Psyche to System" (Guilford Press) edited by John R. Neill and David Kniskern.

After his retirement Dr. Whitaker continued to teach and lecture widely, and he and his wife, Muriel Schram Whitaker, consulted with and supervised family therapists around the world. His last book, "Midnight Musings of a Family Therapist," was published in 1988 by W. W. Norton.

Besides his wife, and his daughter Nancy, Dr. Whitaker is survived by four other daughters, Elaine Morgan of Atlanta, Anita Whitaker of Carmel, Calif., Lynn Scheidenhelm of Boulder, Colo., and Holly Warner of Nashotah; a son, Bruce, of Houston; 14 grandchildren; a brother, Lee, of Palm Harbor, Fla., and a sister, Miriam Dowd, of Vancouver, Wash.