

SYMBOLIC SEX IN FAMILY THERAPY

In the process of family psychotherapy organized towards a flexibility in family role function and role expectations with the premise that the greatest flexibility of role structure defines a healthy family, the basic taboo in most families is that of violence. As a way to build towards work in the area of violence it is highly useful to wander around in the family dynamic patterns hopefully in your bare feet so as to increase the sensual thermostat to make more feasible the warmth and sensual experience the family have with each other. This necessitates an implicit, or maybe an explicit contract with the family that what happens in the therapeutic setting is free of the usual taboos and that in the exploration of sexual and sensual territory one is dealing in a kind of pilot plant or pilot project for the family's living with each other. The most obvious thing is to define early who in the family are heaters and who are coolers. In each family there are role structures which mean that certain people are assigned the role of warming the family and certain others the role of cooling it. Usually the most warmth is in the youngest and cooling process is frequently divided between father and mother. He bases his on reality and she bases hers on morality.

For the therapist to invade the taboo structure of the family he must first become personally related so that he has an understructure of caring and so that his movement within the family sculpturing and the family role assignments is received as either amusing or tender or experimental. It must be set so that it is not binding. If the therapist's movement becomes binding on the family there is no alternative but opposing it. Thus the therapist must be willing and able to withdraw all of his moods if it seems that they are too painful. One of the most obvious things is the use of a pattern of double-talk and this can move back and forth from double-talk about life to double-talk about the household to double-talk about sexual excitation, cuddling, playfulness or childishness. It is import-

ant for the therapist and the family to see this as a valid structure although awareness is not necessary and sometimes may be harmful. Nevertheless, the socializing process is exaggerated in the bosom of the family and further augmented by the incestuous taboos attached. It's important to recognize that as Esselin says, "Direct input frequently only produces recognition. Real learning comes from indirect communication." Therefore the therapist is well advised to not talk straight, to stay obtuse and overt. Double-talk is an asset, not a problem. Double-talk can be, of course, done in many different ways. One can use upside-down-talk so he says the opposite of what he means and couches it in such a coy manner that everybody knows what's behind it or he can express the other half by his disbelief either in tone or in the quality of the sentence structure. The tone of the voice can convey the message "this is a put-on" so that the patient and family members recognize the tongue-in-cheek quality and with some families it's possible to set up an ongoing communication code with this double-talk.

It's important to state also that there is no danger in the children being part of family discussions of any character. It's my conviction that they can tolerate discussion of murder, suicide, divorce, infidelity, incest, etc. with no traumatic repercussions if the therapist is caring and personally concerned with the set in the family and if he is trying to be helpful rather than pornographic.

It's perfectly possible to say to the wife of a husband who's been unfaithful, "Have you ever thought of competing with him? You might even go into the business and offer him a chance to be Number One customer at double rates." Such undercover talk escapes no one and yet fulfills the basic role that the therapist should not demand confirmation, agreement or structure a war between himself and the family. The possibilities of "sexual symbolic carrying on" are almost infinite. For example, father sits by daughter Jane who is thirteen; mother sits by son Jim

who is sixteen and the therapist says part way along in the interview, "Jim, when did you get out of the doublebed and did Jane replace you at once? Or was there a time when Mother and Father cuddled up to each other?" - - - "I asked because I wanted to see if they'd ever let her out or would she have to stay home as an old maid for the rest of her life "to keep you folks apart" or go crazy. After all, she's thirteen, it'll only be three or four years before she has her first affair or gets married or has a sex change operation. One of the obvious ways to increase the sensual freedom and openness of the family is to carry on a tongue-in-cheek flirtation sometimes with one of the little children, sometimes with Grandmother, sometimes with mother or, more coyly, with Dad or one of the boys. To make this even more useful, it's helpful to get permission from the spouse; for example, one can say, "Dad, do you mind if I have a little affair with your wife during this hour? I have the feeling she's been making eyes at me and it's good fun and I'd like to retaliate in kind but I don't want you beating me up." Father, in this way, is put in a corner. He can't say "no" and it does accentuate the triangular potential of the therapeutic situation in the same way that you can say to Mother, "I hope you don't mind us boys talking about fishing or about baseball. We really don't ask you to sit quietly too long." I remember one family in which the seventy-year-old grandmother came with her hair fixed and I said at the end of the hour, "Grandma, you'd better not come back next time without the rest of the family. After all, abortions are still very expensive." In a strange way, this kind of innuendo is known to be silly and yet the fact that you thought of it makes it a compliment and makes it open the family for more fun with sex.

In the realm of double-talk and innuendo it's very possible either when you see a broken family in a "divorce setting" or a family in which father is dead, to deliberately train the kids to pimp for mother. One can start out by talking about

how lonely it must be for her sleeping alone and counter the kids saying that they sleep with her by suggesting that that's not the same as Daddy and why don't they help her find a new daddy. The usual pattern of wife suffering no personal life for the sake of the children and the children trying to fulfil the role of the father in protection of their mother needs to be attacked and it can be done openly or with tongue-in-cheek.

Screwed-up families don't talk about screwing, but it's not difficult if you start the conversation to talk about sex using allusion rather than direct street talk. It's not hard to ask Mother if Daddy is warmer these days than he was before or has it cooled off between them. Was their life together fun last night? Do they dream of being married to somebody else? Do they believe that Daddy would like to be married to somebody else? Does he have someone in mind? etc.

It's also possible to talk again somewhat with tongue-in-cheek of "does anybody in the family have plans to be raped?" It looks as though one of the other entrees to a discussion of the affective component in marriage is to talk about the horrors of a husband and wife really falling in love with each other, of being married and having children and sleeping together is bad enough, whereas if you fall in love you're vulnerable for the rest of your life. One of the other ways of getting at the process of sexual interaction in the family is to refer off-handedly to illegitimate pregnancy or allude to some covert sense on father or mother's part that one of their kids is being delinquent and flip the situation by saying, "So what's V.D. A bad cold is a bad cold." It's also possible to get at the sexual component in the marriage by talking through one of the children. For example, we say to the nine-year-old when the whole family is assembled, "have you ever thought that when Mother's so angry at Dad for being late two hours, does she think he's dating his secretary?" The nine-year-old says, "no" and you're free to back out

but Mother and Father are left with their fantasy and they come back later with some relevant discussion.

In discussing the pattern of the family structure one can get into the sensual or sexual thermostat, defining for the couple the fact that one of them has to be the heater and the other one the cooler but that it's very permissible to reverse roles either gradually over a period of time or in a particular evening or even within the hour. But just as this kind of role reversal can take place in the middle of a couple's fight so that one minute he's attacking and she's silent and a short time later the roles are reversed so that the roles can be reversed sexually and they should feel free to do this at a moment's notice.

One can take up with the family also the restructuring of the oedipal pattern suggesting that the couple could plan to stay married by living close, that is back to back, and all it takes is another cooperative couple to have sexual relations back to back, and of course if one doesn't include sex the cooperative couple can be the son or daughter or even, more appropriately and implicitly, his secretary can be his other mate and her children can be her other mate or his mother can be his second spouse and her father can be her second spouse or it can even be more coy, he can use his golf partners to form his second coupling process and she can use her bridge partners or her league-of-women-voters group as her co-partners.

At times one of them can use the psychotherapist of his individual therapy experiences as a second mate or he can have an affair with his love of money. The symbolic aspects of sex can be augmented in family discussion by converting the oedipal triangle into the David and Goliath myth that in those families where the one spouse takes on the role of the Goliath, the other spouse, of course, can form a coalition with the child and gradually the child can learn to be the David that kills Goliath. This can be symbolic killing in the sense of the teenage daughter becoming a sexual delinquent as a way of punishing mother or father at the behest

of the partner, of course, or it can be in much more realistic terms and one child can be brought up - a son for example - to hate his father with such bitterness that he eventually gets to the stage of physically beating up on father when father is mean to mother. One can expand the relationship of sex and aggression by getting into the problem of multiple affairs and the family expectations associated if a couple having sensed that their relationship is cooling decide to precipitate into an affair which is kind of an amateur way of getting into psychotherapy then they have to decide by multiple cues arising out of their conversation over a newspaper article or some rumor in the neighborhood which one is going to have the affair and then when that one capitulates, the other one, of course, will increase the temperature by having a fight about it. For example, if it's agreed that he will have the affair and that he will then find a way of exposing himself to her then she feels free to hate him and he is guilty and then she can have the fun of forgiving him time after time as a wife does to a chronic alcoholic. This may even go so far as O'Neil has demonstrated in "The Iceman Cometh" when the alcoholic comes back into the bar and says to his friends, "Well, I finally did it." They asked "did what?" "I killed my wife. She forgave me once too often."

The most important component in all of this discussion of the sexual aggressive combines in the marriage state is the recognition that the system is in control, that the plans are jointly laid by the couple and that the person who activates them is doing so under contract and by careful agreed-upon plans. Fighting, like sex, is a gradually escalating contract with careful arrangements established between them on implicit and covert communication pattern. The best example of this, of course, is "Who'se Afraid of Virginia Wolfe," as beautifully described and portrayed by Watzlawich in "The Pragmatics of Communication."