

phase 2

COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

unit 2.1

February 24

Theme:

**Clinical Application of the "Family Systems" Approach to
Diagnosis and Treatment in a Case of *Anorexia Nervosa***

FACILITATION: **Study Group # 1**

PREPARATION OVERVIEW:

Remember that assignments should be
done **in the order as numbered**

READ by **yourself** then DISCUSS in your **study group**:

2.1 – 1 Human Systems: A Selection of Developmental Schemes
handout # 4 (which you were given in the first class;

2.1 – 2 Jackson, D. D., The Individual and the Larger Contexts

2.1 – 3 Minuchin, S., et al. Psychosomatic Families: Anorexia Nervosa
in Context.

THINK OVER by **yourself** then DISCUSS in your **study group**:

Introductory Notes:

By hypothesis, families are comprehensible as human social systems in which the thoughts, feelings and actions of all members are influenced by prevailing rules that tend to be obeyed by all in the family. The rules create and maintain social/psychological "homeostasis" (a more or less stable state of family system equilibrium) in which the mental life and behavior of the membership reflects and reinforces (shapes, directs, determines, preserves, engenders and drives) the ongoing organization/development of the system as a whole.

Homeostasis is not (whether defined as "functional" or "dysfunctional" with respect to certain standards or norms) a state of fixity. Rather it is a dynamic rule-governed process involving an ongoing exchange of matter, energy and information – both within the system, and externally between the system and surrounding systems (other people, peers, friends and enemies, homes, neighborhoods, towns, linguistic communities, schools, teams, gangs, socioeconomic classes, religious affiliations, organizations, bioregions, etc.)

Such exchanges take place through interactions and relationships with consensual agreement to conform with certain core beliefs, values and practices.

Prevailing patterns of thought, feeling and behavior within the system are created and maintained, and sometimes changed. But one can know the range of thoughts, feelings and actions that are appropriate for each member of the system and behave accordingly without explicitly knowing the rules. Like the speaker of a natural human language who adheres to grammatical rules not "known" or explicitly articulated, members of families commonly maintain the prevailing "family homeostasis" without being able to state the rules that they are obeying.

Rules governing family homeostasis (like grammatical rules) are discernible through observation and analysis, and can be recognized as relevant and operative by family members when they are explicitly stated.

Notes On Assignments:

By way of background:

- 81% of American 10 year olds report fear of being fat
- An estimated 5-10 million American women and girls struggle with eating disorders. Some with tragically fatal outcome.

By means of a "role playing" exercise, we will explore in class a clinical application of the "family systems" approach to diagnosis and treatment of a potentially fatal case of self-starvation in which the "identified patient" is a teen-age girl. Using the transcript of an interview from the foregoing book Psychosomatic Families), we will "stage" an interview with the Kaplan family – Deborah, the youngest daughter, has been hospitalized with a serious eating disorder (anorexia nervosa). The family interview takes place around lunch, and we are thus able to observe the family's interactions in the face of Deborah's refusal to eat.

The interview is conducted "behind a one-way screen" by a family therapist/family systems researcher and various assistants. The demonstration helps us to understand the difference between a dispositional and a situational interpretation of human problems – when made by someone with "the power to define". The interview is both dramatic and instructive because of influential links between (1) the way problems are defined, and (2) the way they are (or are not) dealt with.

Can you think of any other situations in which the difference between systemic and reductionist definitions of problems was, is, or could be tantamount to the difference between life and death?