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C. Terry Warner

Terrance D. Olson

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Another View of Family Conflict and Family Wholeness**

C. Terry Warner and Terrance D. Olson*

A family life educator's suggested solutions of family problems will spring from his beliefs about the sources of human conflict. This paper sketches a theory of conflict that is rooted in the individual's betrayal of his/her own fundamental values. Hypocrisy and self-deception ensue, and individuals insidiously provoke each other to do the very things for which they blame one another. This means that people can desist from the attitudes that throw them into conflict and live harmoniously. But because of their self-deception, seeing how to do this is not easy. Ultimately, the solution lies in moral responsibility. Implications for family life educators are explored.

Whatever we do in teaching people to live together productively and lovingly in families will depend upon our beliefs about why things go wrong in family situations. A family life educator's practice is tied to his or her theory, even though that theory may not have been explicitly formulated. Does he/she think that people whose families are in conflict can be victims of one another and the situation, or do they collaborate in the problems from which they suffer, even when they seem to be victims? This is the root question because its answer determines whether such people can in fact do anything to eliminate the problems, and, therefore, determines what educators should teach about how a healthy family life can be achieved. We think the next decade will witness revolutions in traditional thinking about this issue, and these revolutions will dictate new practices in all the so-called helping services, including education.

A basis for this hope is a new theory of human behavior that appears in a forthcoming book and includes a new way of accounting for conflict. According to the theory, participants in conflict situations systematically deceive themselves about the sources of their difficulties. The book explains how, in our era, we have tended to import these self-deceptions into our theories about human conduct; our prevailing conceptions of humanity tend to partake of our self-deceptions. To these culturally dominant conceptions of humanity there is an alternative that is shown to be conceptually more powerful than any of them and that unifies in a single point of view the manifold observations of social behavior that have led many to regard human beings as hopelessly complex.¹

This presentation does not set forth the alternative theory of which we speak, for doing so would require a careful dismantling of some of our fundamental presuppositions about people. Instead, we will provide a simple sketch of the outlook on human conflict that the new theory suggests. Our purpose will have been achieved

if the reader acquires a sense of how this outlook differs from the ways in which we usually perceive people.

Because its theoretical underpinnings are not included here, the sketch may appear deceptively simple; its implications may not be readily apparent to everyone. However, the theory from which the sketch is drawn accounts for much of what Freud called the "psychopathology of everyday life," including the difficult problems of modern family life, and it sets forth the conditions that must be satisfied in order for families to be healthy and whole.

There are two axes along which the theory intersects the theme of this issue. One concerns what we teach about the nature of family life and the other concerns how we teach it. We have chosen to concentrate on the first of these axes and to defer to another context a discussion of new directions in learning that are implied by our theory.

Values and Conflict

First, conflict among people is related to their values; we can act either in accordance with, or contrary to, those values. In particular situations we can feel morally summoned to do a particular thing, or constrained not to do something; it is in such situations that our values make contact with our conduct. These feelings to do or to desist may be called "moral imperatives."

Such felt moral imperatives do not necessarily express what others expect of us, or even the general morality of our community, but embody values that are personal and perhaps unique to us. We are not saying that there are universal moral imperatives, but only that people do, from time to time, feel morally constrained to do or not to do particular things. Examples: a father feels that it is right to spend time, this evening, helping his daughter with her mathematics assignment. An uncle senses that he is called upon by his conscience to apologize to a nephew whom he has treated demeaningly. A teacher understands that she is obligated to do the best she can to help her students learn and grow. There is nothing inherently immoral about refusing to help one's daughter or failing to apologize or even teaching moderately but not superbly well, but for these individuals, in these particular situations, the actions we've described would constitute actively going against their own commitments; for them, the actions would be immoral. We call this strictly personal immorality "self-betrayal," in order to convey the idea implicit in it of being untrue to oneself.

Not surprisingly, this inauthenticity shows up in whatever one does in carrying out one's self-betrayal. One will conduct oneself hypocritically—will live in a lie—in an effort to make the personal wrong that is being done seem

*C. Terry Warner is Professor of Philosophy and Terrance D. Olson is Professor of Family Sciences at Brigham Young University.

right. This inauthenticity can take such forms as depression, low self-esteem, bitterness, irritability, jealousy, and many other maladaptive attitudes. We have chosen to illustrate it initially with a very ordinary instance of family selfishness:

- Sara: Daddy, I can't figure this math problem out.
- Howard: (her father, watching Monday night football, and feeling that he should help Sara) Sure you can. You've just got to struggle with it.
- Sara: But I've tried, and I'm getting nowhere. If you could ... (Sara begins to cry, her head on her book.)
- Howard: You're trying to take the easy way. They wouldn't give you the problem if they hadn't taught you all you have to know to solve it. (His voice rising) Why do you wait until I'm right in the middle of watching my game? In fact, you should be in bed, young lady. Why do you leave your homework 'til the last minute, anyway?
- Sara: I didn't think it would take me very long. . .
- Howard: Well, ask your sister upstairs. She had the same math last year. She's going to know it better than I am.
- Sara: But I've just got one question.
- Howard: (his anger blossoming) Sara, I'm tired of you trying to get me to do your work for you. Now I've told you what you need to do to get that done and you're just avoiding doing it.
- Sara: (pouting) When Danny asks for help you help him. . .
- Howard: Oh boy . . . Look, if you would do what you are supposed to do, I would be glad to help you. There is a difference between helping Danny after he's struggled with something and helping you when the only struggle you've had is to ask me to do your work for you.
- Sara: But Danny's smart. He doesn't have to struggle. . .

Howard feels that he ought to help Sara, but is refusing to do so. His encouragement of her to struggle with the problem until she can figure it out might in other circumstances be good advice, but in this case he is giving it as part of an effort to mask and justify his own moral failure—to make it seem right. He also accuses her of procrastinating, complains that she is intruding unfairly on his time, and gets angry and impatient over her inconsiderateness of his own needs and desires.

Howard is not pretending; he is not acting a lie. He is, as we sometimes say, *living a lie*. The very way he sees Sara, as inconsiderate and intrusive, is part of the lie, and so is the anger he feels about her inconsiderateness. In this particular case the value he is placing on watching the football game, which makes her request of him insensitive and unreasonable, is part of the lie. These are all interconnected aspects of the lie he is living—the self-deception he is in. The way he sees and feels about the situation is part of his effort to justify himself in not doing what he himself feels is right.³

From Howard's point of view, Sara's inconsiderateness and procrastination is the problem; or else the pressure he felt at work, or else his strong desire to watch the game.

Now in our tradition of human behavior studies, as in our daily life, we tend to take Howard at his word. In his view, circumstances, either in his own make-up or in the environment, are responsible for his conduct; he has become angry *because* Sara has been pestering him, or *because* he wanted to watch the game, or *because* of his hard day. As observers, our assumption is that we understand Howard when we can explain, by reference to factors outside his control, why he acted as he did and that those factors make his irritability and impatience understandable. In the last analysis—so this traditional doctrine would have us believe—Howard is not an *agent* so much as a *patient*. He does not act but is acted upon. He is not responsible for his behavior toward his daughter, for there are extenuating circumstances which excuse him for his conduct.

Against this standard view of the situation, we are suggesting that the way Howard sees and feels about Sara is part of his endeavor to justify himself. He is actively insisting that he is Sara's victim. For if in this altercation with her he is seen as a patient rather than as an agent—if his perceptions and feelings are seen as caused by her or the circumstances rather than produced by him—then he cannot be held responsible. He is exonerated. Thus, his upset feelings are part of the lie he lives; they are evidence that something outside himself—his work, Sara's inconsiderateness, etc.—is responsible for the trouble that he is, in fact, stirring up. "See how inconsiderate you are," is the message he is conveying to her, "to produce this much anger in me?"

Does this mean, then, that Howard "really knows" what he's doing?—that he's just playing a part?—that he doesn't actually feel angry? No, he is not merely pretending; he is not harboring a secret knowledge that he is living a lie. His emotions are aroused and could be measured by a galvanic skin indicator. But there is nevertheless a sense in which his emotion is not genuine; for, contrary to what *he* thinks, nothing external is making him angry. Howard's anger is genuine in that it is felt, but inauthentic in that it is not caused by anything that is happening to him. He becomes angry as a non-verbal means of proving that circumstances are making him angry.

Of course we wonder about Howard's authenticity when we hear his sudden pleasantness on the telephone with Fred (especially since Fred's call comes as Howard's team gets the ball, first and goal, on the opponent's eight yard line). If we have just entered the room we will not guess that a moment earlier he was angry. But we do not need to observe how chameleon-like Howard is in order to see that he is inauthentic. He is giving off clues constantly. We can see this by comparing him to another father, whom we may call "Howard II," who simply helps his daughter when he feels he should. Howard II will have no occasion to carry on defensively, to blame Sara II, or to value the televised game inordinately. He will simply help. The same is true of yet another Howard, Howard III, who when asked by Sara III for help, feels, for her sake, he should not help. So he says simply, "You need to work that out for yourself." Again, no defensiveness, no accusation, no inordinate lust for television. Proving themselves justified is not an issue for these other fathers, because their justification is not put in question by what they are doing. The telltale clues that

Howard gives off are his protestations and accusations—his stylizing of himself as being wronged. This would be true even if Sara were lazy and inconsiderate, as he says, and even if the game were the greatest superbowl contest of all time. Self-justification of the sort we are studying is a sign that, by the individual's own values, something is not right.

Another point about Howard's self-deception needs to be understood. The features of conduct that we have described *do not occur in sequence*; they are not mental steps he goes through in order to blame someone for what he himself is doing. He does not first feel he ought to help Sara, then betray himself, then cast about for a lie to live as a cover for this self-betrayal, and then work up an emotion to show that he is Sara's victim. Rather, his self-betrayal is the living of such a lie, the working up of such an emotion. It takes neither planning nor particular intelligence to do it; Archie Bunker, for example, is as adept as anyone you could meet.

So one can't "catch oneself" in the process of producing the sort of encompassing, behavioral lie we are describing. To betray oneself is already to be living it. Self-betrayal, in this sense, is a resistant perceptual style freely chosen by the individual.

There is more to say about the trouble that Howard creates and his method of creating it to make himself seem innocent. By seeing Sara as inconsiderate and by feeling inconvenienced, irritated and, finally, angry about her inconsiderateness, he makes himself out to be her victim. By this means he makes it clear that he bears no responsibility for the trouble he is helping create. But of course if he is her victim then she is his victimizer. Howard is accusing his daughter—letting the family think she is insensitive, lazy, and disorganized—as part of exonerating himself in his own failure to act responsibly.

What about Sara's feelings in the scene we have presented? How would you feel if you were Sara—fairly dealt with or put down? Would you want to take responsibility to do your homework? Whether or not Sara started out acting responsibly and unself-consciously in seeking her father's help, she did not do so once he attacked her. She began to sob softly. She made excuses. She followed the very pattern of her father's self-betrayal: she was defensive and accusing. From her point of view her father and the circumstances were responsible for the trouble. She is not the agent that he accuses her of being. She is a patient.

This brings us to a surprising and important principle: the responsibility-evading, accusing attitude of the self-betrayer—Howard in this case—tends to *provoke* in those he accuses the very behavior of which he accuses them. If they accept the provocation, as Sara did, then the self-betrayer has his proof that they are to blame and that he is innocent. Clearly Howard can say that he is not simply imagining that Sara is irresponsible. Her behavior even now proves that she is—she whimpers, she makes excuses, she tries to say that he is being unfair.¹

The variations upon this theme are many. For example, the style of self-betrayal that we have described for both Howard and Sara we call "childish." But Howard might act self-righteously instead of childishly. In such a case he might ceremoniously switch off the television—his team still has first and goal on the opponent's eight—and, with a

feeling of self-sacrifice and moral nobility, work out the problems with Sara. He would condescendingly answer her questions. His explanations would be attended by a strained patience. Inwardly, he would be congratulating himself on his self-control. In 15 minutes the homework would be done, and Howard would have a sense of having risen above the selfish level on which most fathers operate and, in spite of his daughter's irritating irresponsibility, done his duty. But he would have given Sara everything except himself. His would have been a refusal to help her in the guise of "doing all he could."

Moreover, Sara would not have felt helped. The attitude of her father would have put her down, just as, in the actual case, his anger did. She would not have responded well—would not have tried hard to solve the problem for herself. In the future she would probably be less inclined to ask for help when she needed it. And this would have given Howard more justification for feeling that his daughter was irresponsible and that he was, without losing his temper or even uttering a harsh word, rising above adversity.

So whether Howard is childish or self-righteous, he provokes Sara to do what he blames her for, and thus validates in his mind his self-justification. In both of these cases she is reciprocally provoking him by the way she evades her responsibility and accuses him in her heart. Whatever their styles of self-betrayal, they are both provoking the other and by this means extorting validation for the lie being lived.

We can represent this situation in the following diagram:

Figure 1. Collusion

Collusion

We call this kind of destructive cooperation *collusion*. When people collude—when each provokes or entices the other to do the very thing he says he hates—each is making himself out to be the other's victim. Each is constantly ready to take offense at what the other does. Without their collusive self-betrayal, there would be no occasion for enmity between them.

Let it appear that the simple model we have been developing is simplistic, let us consider a more involved and convoluted instance. The marriage of Robert and Marcia was on the verge of ending. Marcia was at the end of her tether because Robert was insensitive, thoughtless, and unwilling to "communicate." She was obsessed with the idea that he was philandering, or at least flirting; she was sure that he wanted to abandon her in favor of someone less dowdy and more exciting. She blamed him for her claustrophobic feelings in the confined world populated only by herself and her children.

For a long time neither family nor friends had observed evidence of what she accused Robert of; on the contrary, he seemed to them to love her genuinely. In fact, she herself never cited evidence of his supposed infidelity; she simply "knew" that it was so: "A woman knows," she often said. When he protested his innocence, she accused him of compounding his unfaithfulness with dishonesty. When friends or family defended him, she accused them of collaboration. She sobbed on her pillow at night until she thought her heart would break. Her contention was that she grieved more than other women who were similarly situated because of her idealism about marriage and because she had "given my heart totally to my husband." She told her troubles to anyone that would listen, asking them how she could possibly have the marriage she had longed for—how she could possibly cherish, honor, and be intimate with a man who was as self-interested and callous as Robert.

In fact, despite her endless protestations, Marcia never lovingly gave Robert her heart. Many times she felt that she ought to; "giving oneself" in marriage was an obsession with her. But she did not. The moral imperative that she felt, or placed upon herself, did not come to her in the form of a general requirement to love Robert: instead it was specific to situations. Sometimes she would feel that she ought to prepare a favorite dish for him; other times to touch him, to look into his eyes, to make him a gift, or to thank him for something he had done. On these occasions when she felt a particular action morally required of her, she violated her moral sensibility and did not act as she felt. The result was that she saw him through accusing eyes. From her point of view, even the expressions on his face were irritating. It wasn't simply in her manner that she insisted that Robert was preventing her from loving him, it was in the very way she saw him that she carried out this insistence.

No one will be surprised to learn that this continuous hostile behavior of Marcia's provoked Robert's retaliation. Feeling wounded and unfairly dealt with, he viewed coming home as a trial by fire, and stayed away as often as he could. The more he stayed away, the more Marcia had her proof that he didn't love her and the more reason she had to complain, to withhold her favors, and to feel depressed. For his part, the more Marcia attacked him, the more reason Robert had to feel abused, and the more justified he felt in not wanting to come home. So Robert and Marcia helped each other create the forces that separated them from each other.

To each of them it looked like the other was at fault, and an outside observer might well have said that they were incompatible. But our view is that each engaged in a series of free acts of self-betrayal that not only took the other's behavior as an excuse but actually provoked the other to that behavior.

What we have been exploring here is a way of understanding human conflict that differs from traditional explanations. We are suggesting that, at least in many cases, human beings are not the victims of provocations; situations do not overcome them. Their provoked responses—whether of impatience, resentment, anger, irritation, self-pity, or fear—are not effects of causes that lie beyond their control but are instead means of justifying

themselves. "See how irresponsibly you have been acting," Howard seems to say, "in order to irritate me to this extent!" Their responses to one another are not passive, but purposeful. In an enormous variety of ways people make themselves unhappy in order to justify themselves in the compromises they are making of their own values.

The Self-Betrayer is Self-Deceived

In considering this possibility that we conspire with others to produce the unhappiness that afflicts us, we encounter a peculiar problem. The problem is that this conspiratorial behavior does not look like what it is. From an observer's point of view it appears that either Howard is sincerely put out by the unreasonable request of an irresponsible daughter or else that he is producing his irritated behavior "on purpose." If he is producing it on purpose, he is merely pretending—play-acting, if you will—and is not really unhappy at all. If he is sincere, then the explanation we are giving of his behavior is far off the mark. Thus, it appears that our explanation can't be right; Howard's irritation is either intentional, and he's not *really* irritated, or else he's really irritated and not acting intentionally. Howard can't be actually making himself miserable.

This conclusion is not valid. In the new personality theory from which this article is drawn, it is shown that the conclusion is fallacious because it is based on Howard's own self-deceiving way of seeing the situation. Howard and Marcia blame others as being causes of their feelings. They are, therefore, deceiving themselves as to the fact that they themselves are producing these feelings as means of accusing Sara and Robert. They are, therefore, not simply pretending to be irritated; being deceived, they are in earnest about it. Their irritability or suffering is something *they actually feel*, in spite of the fact that it is a falsification (neither Sara nor Robert is really causing it).

But if we were to ask Howard if he is being completely honest in his interaction with Sara, the only way as a self-deceiver he could interpret our question would be: "Do you sincerely feel put out, or are you merely pretending?" Since it is obvious to him that he is not pretending, he thinks our question is ridiculous; he wonders why we mistrust him.

"Howard, we think you are blaming Sara so you can cover up your unwillingness to help her as you should."

"You think I'm just pretending to be upset so I can watch the game? Is that what you think?"

"No, you're really upset all right."

"That's right! So I can't be just pretending, can I?"

"Well, no."

"So quit accusing me of being dishonest. Look, I'm so aggravated I haven't even enjoyed the game."

Even if no such confrontation takes place, Howard may succeed in deceiving us as well as himself by his performance. This he does if we accept his self-deceiving viewpoint, which is that either he is sincere, really feels put out, is Sara's victim and is not responsible, or else is only pretending to feel this way, is cynically manipulating and misusing Sara, and is, therefore, responsible.

From Howard's point of view, if he is not being honest it can only mean that he isn't really upset. He cannot be both upset and responsible. So if, like Howard, we let the issue become, "Is he sincere in his feelings or not?" then we also

will be assuming that he cannot be deceiving himself in these feelings—that he cannot really make himself miserable! We will be rejecting out of hand the kind of theory being discussed in this paper—not because of any evidence we have, but because we are colluding in, and taken in by, the self-deceptions of self-deceivers.

We cannot stress this point too strongly, for it follows that if Howard *can* deceive himself, he *can* make himself miserable, and he *can* provoke Sara to act irresponsibly so that he will have proof that it is she, and not he, who is responsible for his misery. Similar comments can be made about Marcia. People *can* turn their families into battlegrounds and simultaneously insist, in earnest, that it is not their fault—indeed, that they are doing everything in their power in spite of the offensive behavior of the others involved.

In our era it has been unfavorable to speak this way. Holding people responsible for their misery seems a callous attitude. Often the most miserable among us come from pathological homes—surely they are not responsible.

But we suggest that it is not the theory we are presenting but the currently accepted ones that tend to be callous. If people are not responsible for their emotional problems, then it is not in their power to correct them. But if they are responsible—if their unhappiness is the product of the morbid collaboration we are calling “collusion”—then they *can* change. They can cease to betray themselves. They can come out of self-deception. Correcting family problems is, in general, not something they *do*—it requires no special expertise—but something they *undo*: they stop living a lie.

Howard (entering Sara's room): May I talk with you a minute? (Sara does not answer, but leaves her head buried in her hands.)

Howard: Sara, I'm I, er... Well, I shouldn't... Gee, I don't know how to...

Sara: It's okay, Daddy. I forgive you.

When Howard gives up his self-betrayal his anger dissipates. The feelings he then has for his daughter are non-accusing. He feels love. And even though his confession of the truth is inexperienced in the extreme, it is genuine, and she senses how he cares. (This is equally true of Marcia. Her fears and self-pity will vanish as she begins to do precisely as she feels she should.)

That is the conventional situation. But there is another, equally appropriate possibility.

Sara: Daddy, can I talk with you?

Howard: Have you got that homework done?

Sara: Daddy, I've been having bad feelings toward you.

Oh, Daddy, I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

Howard (melting): Sara, you shouldn't be asking for forgiveness. I should.

Sara's unhappiness was her own responsibility; she made herself a victim and, by this ploy, accused her father of being a monster, unfeeling, and unfair. The only way out for her too, is to cease to live this lie. And we can say the same of Robert.

Of course, one colluder cannot, by giving up his self-deception, guarantee that others in the collusion will follow suit. But he does, by withdrawing his accusing attitude, give them the best possible encouragement to do so. This is not all; we believe that what people feel when they cease betraying themselves is love and authentic concern for

others. It is this newly released set of feelings that can touch the hearts of former colluders and prompt them to respond in kind.

After observing hundreds of cases, we have become convinced that although the solutions to the self-deceiver's personal problems are complicated and difficult from his own perspective, they are actually as simple as telling oneself, and living by, the truth—which is that he himself has been collaborating in the conflict situations that trouble him. It's the best—the only—way to invite the other family members to reciprocate. We have witnessed this in cases of infidelity, depression, alcoholism, teenage rebellion, intensely recriminatory divorce proceedings, and many others. The offendedness of each party, the psychic pain, the feelings of being trapped, the inconsolable feelings, even the self-deceiving tactics by which the principals both retaliate and make it appear that the course of events is beyond their control—all these tactics can be given up—summarily.

Self-Betrayal and Family Life Education

Suppose that all we have been saying is true. How would an educator get someone to see that it is so? What strategies might he teach by which families could abandon their tactical devices of hostility, fear, impatience, and self-pity and leave self-deception behind? How, in short, would he recommend that people release the love for one another that is in them? Recall that it didn't work when Howard was confronted with the truth; his self-deception meant that he also deceived himself about the suggestion that he might be self-deceived.

In responding to this question, we want to draw on an implication that our view has for the conduct of family counselors and therapists as well as educators. Indeed, we think that it obliterates the distinction between them. For if it is correct and people come to understand family conflict in terms of it, that very understanding requires a letting go of their former views so they no longer betray themselves; one cannot freely acknowledge the truth and simultaneously live a lie. By this means they put themselves in a position to see what needs to be done to heal the family relationships and to have the caring attitude necessary to do it without collusion.

Let us imagine that we have just finished a lecture on marital harmony. A student, Tammy, comes up seeking further understanding. We sense that the question she asks is not as hypothetical as she wants it to appear; there is urgency in her voice. She asks about her friend, Marcia, whom we have already met, and she describes Marcia's situation.

What will we say to Tammy? We have already learned that if Tammy suspects Marcia of provoking the problem in any way—if she tries to see the husband's side of it, suggesting that Marcia's definition of the situation is not completely accurate—Marcia can only understand Tammy as saying that she's insincere. Tammy may have wanted to explore the possibility that Marcia might be trapped in a tragic self-deception, but she can only be heard as accusing her of crassly manipulating both Robert and Tammy! In her very way of seeing Robert and hearing criticism, Marcia will pervert the truth into something that is patently false.

Marcia might react in any number of ways, all of which will be furtherances of the lie she is living.

"Are you suggesting that our troubles are *my* fault? I thought you were my friend and would help me cope with the terrible situation, but instead you take his side!"

Or: "You think I *enjoy* being hurt, like some kind of martyr? You're as insensitive as Robert is. I want to be happy, just like other people."

Or: "Look, I've tried everything I know how to do. I start conversations, cook things Robert likes, get the children to bed early so we can have time together. But he leaves to go out with his friends or watches television."

Or even (objectively): "I know you're right. It must be my fault. I think another woman could have made him happy. I'm just not the kind of woman who appeals to men."

If the attitude that we lead Tammy to have toward Marcia provokes Marcia to respond in any of these ways, Tammy will have "climbed into Marcia's world" with her, allowing her to define the situation for Tammy, and will be colluding with Marcia in her lie.

Tammy's advice is very useful to Marcia, because, by seeing Tammy as either agreeing with her or as rejecting her, she has evidence that *she can't help what's going on*. Marcia's offense-taking is useful to Tammy also, for she then has proof that Marcia even mistreats those who are trying to "help" her. Tammy will be colluding with her in the way Sara colluded with Howard: she will be validating Marcia's lie.

We see already that *teaching is not therapeutically neutral*. Attitudes, even of friends, either calm or fuel self-deceptions and either quell or exacerbate family conflict. Family life education is a weightier matter than some sorts of instruction. This becomes more obvious when we realize that Tammy might be Marcia herself. She comes with a disguised plea for help against her husband. If we have the wrong kind of theory, we will collude with her; we will provoke her to pursue even more aggressively than before her evasion of responsibility.

We are no better off if we teach Tammy to regard Marcia's husband as a problem to be dealt with and to think that Marcia needs to learn assertiveness, strategies for coping, or counter-manipulative tactics. If Marcia is provoking or at least utilizing her husband's insensitivity in order to justify her own failure to give herself to the marriage, then by thinking that Marcia must learn *any* techniques for dealing with him, Tammy will again "climb into her world" as surely as if she opposed her, and reinforce her lie that the problem is *how to deal with him*. Or, if Marcia is Tammy, we, the teachers, will be the ones to reinforce the lie.

The pitfall for family life professionals of all kinds, including teachers, is the danger of participating either theoretically or personally in the collusive mix of the families they talk about or counsel. When we suppose that people can be victimized by one another—when we accept their contentions that their anger, hostility, offendedness, depression, indifference, self-pity or bitterness can be caused by the other parties involved—we collude. We validate their attempt to shift responsibility to others or to circumstances beyond their control. We give them the message: "Either these people are indeed victims, or else they are phonies, deliberately causing all of this trouble. So

I'm going to suggest either that they be indulged, because their problems aren't their fault, or condemned for being cynical manipulators." If this is our position, we will not be able to see the real solution to the problem, for the problem involves them in being neither victims nor phonies. Whatever we suggest will only lead them to deal with counterfeit symptoms and may make matters worse.

Fortunately, we are often guided in our professional roles more by our deep human responsiveness to people than by our theories. As a result, good things frequently happen: some of the individuals we teach discover that the key is simply for people to be honest with themselves, to forgive and forget, to reach out in love toward others. We are more effective than we would be if we always relied on current theories of conflict, but not nearly as effective as we could be if we understood that it is as people rather than as experts and manipulators of lives that we help others.

For several years we and several colleagues have been developing and informally testing an approach to teach people the principles we have discussed in this paper, believing that for a person simply to understand them is for him to clear away some of the evasion and cover-up by which he avoids the truth. We use case studies. We have the students write cases on their own. Almost always they identify with the cases they hear and write and in so doing are already telling themselves the truth about past self-betrays. We have designed learning exercises in which they imaginatively enter a world that is free of offendedness and blame. The imaginative exercises can be as good as actual experience when students see others realistically—with compassion and without accusation. Those who do this are truthful about circumstances that have troubled them. In this, they are true to their own values; we have not imposed values upon them.

The learning experience we have described is not painful; the truth is painful only for those whose private recollections are counterfeit "confessions." For others the experience is liberating. Moreover, the relief and freedom that is enjoyed is the achievement of those who have it; while no one else could have charted the path that would lead them there, they themselves follow it unerringly. Once people have this experience, they own the secret; they are independent of us; they can continue their self-liberation into as many facets of their lives as they will.

In describing all of this so facetiously, we do not mean to give the impression that just because this process is simple, it is also easy. It isn't. The process is meticulously designed to avoid collusion between teachers and students—to keep from assisting them in any evasion of responsibility they might attempt in the guise of "getting an intellectual understanding." For this reason, it is more demanding than any other teaching we have tried.

Implications for the Future

We think that besides our own approach, others will be developed, based upon the sort of understanding of family problems that we have sketched in this paper. Whatever form they take, we suspect they will all imply that the distinctions between educator, counselor and therapist will

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tend to fade. They should all teach rather than counsel, guide, manipulate, so that students will more likely act self-reliantly rather than feel provoked to either capitulate or resist.

There will be no room in this broadly conceived educative function of professionals for taking responsibility away from the individuals in the family. By what they teach and the attitude with which they teach, the professional should help individuals take responsibility. If family members refuse to take responsibility, the professional will have done all that could have been done.

For example, there should be little need for the professional to hear histories of family troubles, for it is usually counterproductive. Family members tend to repeat their accusing perception of conflict, helplessness, and suffering, and to ask the professional to reinforce it, either by agreeing or disagreeing with them. In rehearsing his "story," a person can be "honest" in conveying his real feelings, but be as self-deceiving in continuing to have these feelings as he was in having them in the first place.

Diagnosis of specific emotional patterns and prescriptions should be eliminated inasmuch as these procedures set the professional up as a "doctor of the soul": if the "doctor" professes to know what is wrong, his pronouncements will tend to be self-deceivingly heard by his "patient" and thereby validate the self-deception. The "patient" is then assisted in evading his responsibility for the problems that beset him. All of this implies that the family life professional can only be effective when his own life is an honest one. Otherwise, he will inevitably use the teaching situation for his own self-justifying purposes. He may, like Howard, see his students as irritants and himself as doing all he can in spite of the difficulty of teaching such people. No expertise will protect him from the effects of this kind of self-deception. If he relies on techniques, he will be manipulative, and his attitude will be that techniques are responsible if good things happen (rather than the honesty of the individuals involved), and he will encourage his students or clients to rely on such techniques themselves, rather than simply tell themselves the truth. People might resist his gem-like utterances or become his devoted disciples, but either way, they will be assisted in their flight from being the independent, whole human beings they are capable of being. Ultimately, the best family life educators will be the persons who teach students what it means to be independent of them.

To our schematic vision of families, their problems, and their hope for wholeness, some might say, "Perhaps so. But then again, perhaps not. What we have read is not an empirical treatment. It might be a fairy tale—a behavioral science fiction." There is an error in this objection. We cannot blithely gather data about the etiology of family problems without incurring the risk that these data are drawn from the self-deceptive worlds of families in collusion. Examples: "Marcia and her husband do not communicate. Her husband either won't or can't. This isolates and wounds Marcia. She withdraws, pouts, and falls into depression." But the truth may be that it is Marcia who helps prevent communication by taking offense in a

manner which Robert, also betraying himself, sees as making it impossible to stay home: "She just wants to harangue. I'm getting out of here." Our data may actually be skillful collaborations in the "non-communication" of Marcia and Robert. (For an observer who is not self-deceived, it is clear that Marcia and her husband are sending messages which are being received very well indeed.) Where the possibility exists of the counselor or researcher participating in the self-deceptions of families, then neither diagnosing nor data-gathering can be a straightforward thing.

This means that in the end we cannot abdicate our own humanity in our study of and assistance to families. An authentic, open, caring relationship with them is a precondition of both understanding and helping them. There can be no dispassionate science of family life nor a detached, quasi-medical treatment of its miseries. Here is one region in which the effective professional is first and last a human being, in every respect one with the people he serves, and in which effective service is only partly a matter of art and even less a matter of science, but predominantly a matter of love.

We do have to pay attention to our experiences; social data are not irrelevant. But they are unreliable unless we make our observations with the totality of ourselves, in community with the families we serve. The idea that we can stand apart from this community, scanning it as if it were a cadaver, responding to it with only the "objective" portions of ourselves and suppressing our full range of human, compassionate responses, and obligations—this is a repudiation of our own humanity, which is our only instrument for understanding and helping others. This repudiation may be the most destructive self-deception of all.

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Endnotes

This theory is set forward in a forthcoming book, by C. Terry Warner, that deals with self-deception, compulsivity, interpersonal conflict, authenticity, freedom, and individual and social cohesiveness. The present article is also based in part upon materials used in the alternative to therapy and counseling that we shall mention later.

¹So Howard's irritability is not something Sara is provoking; it is not an ingrained love of football; and it is not a residue of day-long pressures at the office. (Indeed the compelling attraction in the game lasts only so long as he needs it, in helping him justify his now leaving it, and his having felt the office pressures all day may well have been the very sort of self-exonerating behavior he is exhibiting with Sara.) The irritability is instead Howard's way of betraying himself and getting away with it—of defaulting upon his responsibility by making Sara seem responsible for the trouble he is creating.

²A substantial part of Howard's self-justification in his self-betrayal consists in provoking the daughter he blames to betray herself. Her misbehavior serves well to exonerate him. Self-betrayers are trouble-makers who can't see that they are. This, then, is the surprising principle concerning human conflict: by his accusing attitude, the self-betrayer provokes those he accuses to do the very kind of thing he accuses them of; he collaborates in producing the problems that make him miserable; he lends his energies to create the very troubles from which he suffers.