beyond the nuclear family to include significant non-family members in the therapeutic process. These methods, however, have evolved in an ad hoc clinical fashion with no clearly defined link to a scientific base of theory and experimental data. In short, these efforts have brought emphasis to bear on the need for social diagnostic techniques that would adequately assess the social context of those persons linked together in a common social support network. Thus, what we have is an array of innovative clinical ventures on the one hand and provocative research findings on the other, but no substantial link between the two realms of research and practice. Recently, however, a new paradigm of social relations with particular relevance to this situation has emerged termed the social network.

Social Networks as the Social Context

The concept of social network has emerged from attempts in various social science disciplines, social anthropology in particular, to comprehend the form of structural and organizational continuity as it persists or endures through the whole of social behavior (Whitten & Wolfe, 1974). John Barnes is credited as being the first to move beyond metaphorical and non-specific usages and expand the concept of social network into an analytically useful tool when he distinguished a field of social relationships that was based, to a large extent, on the personal choices of the individuals concerned (Mitchell, 1969).

Since the concept was first introduced a number of social anthropologists, both in Europe and America, have been developing methods for the definitional analysis of social networks (Barnes, 1972; Mitchell, 1974; Whitten & Wolfe, 1974). This deceptively "simple" concept has provided a means whereby social scientists have been able to more precisely define the social context within which a person exists. By identifying the actual set of links within which a person may be embedded and by delineating their interconnections, or relationships, a level of abstraction is achieved which goes beyond traditional categorical and person/group dichotomies to encompass an analysis of the structural and interactional characteristics of the social milieu. The importance of this approach is that it has allowed for the examination of relationships among a specific number of people in a variety of normative contexts along more than one dimension (Whitten & Wolfe, 1974). In short, it provides an operational definition of a functional social system of relationships. As such, the network concept would seem to hold considerable potential by
providing a tool for unifying the framework of social analysis—both in terms of research and clinical practice.

Social Network Characteristics

The concept of social network has been utilized in basically two differing fashions: 1) from the perspective of an inter-connected chain or system defining a total network, and 2) from the perspective of social units (individuals or groups) with whom a particular individual or group has contact. The latter has been termed a personal or egocentric network and a sociocentric network (when reference is to a group). In a general sense a personal social network may be defined as a set of observed social relationships linked to an index person that have been chosen as the unit of focus. These social relationships may be portrayed by a set of points (representing people) in which some or all are connected by lines (representing who is related to whom).

Specific properties or features of social networks have been defined by network analysts in terms of their structural and interactional characteristics (Mitchell, 1969; Boissevain, 1974). The structural characteristics of a network refer to the relationship or patterning of the links in the network with respect to one another. These include such variables as anchorage, network size or range, density, degree of connection, centrality and clustering. These structural characteristics are conceived as statements about the theoretical possibility of a person to transact within a network. The interactional characteristics refer to the nature of the links themselves and include such variables as multiplexity and transactional content, directedness, reciprocity, intensity, durability, frequency of contact, etc. These interactional characteristics are seen as indicators of the possible importance of various links or relationships.

"Normal" Support Networks

Little information is available that describes the extent of the personal social networks of normal individuals. Data from anthropology suggests an individual’s ability to sustain face-to-face relations lies somewhere in the area of 1500 persons (Wallace, 1952, Bossevain, 1974). For present purposes however, we are interested in only a relatively small segment of all the people a person may know. That is, the personal social support network, or that portion of a person’s total network which provides the major sources of emotional and instrumental support. It is here in social