Family Therapy in West Germany

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In the second half of the fifties the psychoanalyst Horst-Eberhard Richter took up the family-oriented treatment of mentally disturbed children in Berlin. In 1963 he published Eltern, Kind und Neurose, the first book on family therapy in Germany. Around 1960 the psychoanalyst Eckhard Sperling also began family therapy in Gottingen. A strong impetus toward family therapy in Germany, however, did not take place until 1974 around the time when Helm Stierlin returned from the U.S.A. where he had worked at the National Institute of Mental Health.

German family therapy tends to concern itself with social interrelations and the influence of economic and political systems. German psychoanalytic family therapists neglect the evaluation of their therapy and experimental research as much, if not more than American colleagues do.

Around 1975 Karl Herbert Mandel and Lorenz Wachinger started a series particularly devoted to the translation and publication of American books on marital and family therapy. Today, almost all standard works are available in German. The professional journal entitled Familiendynamik was published beginning in 1976.

During the second half of the seventies the number of therapists interested in family therapy increased rapidly. In 1980,
for instance, 1100 participants attended the third conference on “Analytische Familientherapie und Gesellschaft” in Heidelberg. Changing attitudes have forced an increasing number of institutions to adopt family therapy. This is particularly true of outpatient clinics and agencies. The number of training facilities has increased. Today, many universities and colleges offer courses on family therapy, but it is not yet possible to graduate as a “family therapist.” There are several private training institutes which are less concerned with psychoanalytic family therapy than with the approaches of Minuchin, Satir, Kirschenbaum, Patterson, and Watzlawick, etc. Advanced training in family therapy is offered by only a few professional associations and usually takes place informally by way of case discussions. In 1974 Richter and his co-workers founded the Psychosoziale Arbeitsgemeinschaft Lahn-Dill which has as members physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, pedagouges, etc., from the region. This association served to overcome the professional isolation of its members and to improve the care of multiproblem families as well as cooperation among various psychosocial services. In 1978 Richter, Stierlin and colleagues founded the Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft fur Familientherapie, whose 500 members belong to different professions. They develop their knowledge of family therapy in self-help groups through mutual supervision, joint studies of literature and weekend courses. In Germany there are hardly any family therapists in private practice, because as long as treatment is offered free, few families are willing to pay for therapy. Psychoanalysts, psychiatrists and “psychagogues” have the costs of family therapy refunded by health insurances only if their account is based upon the medical model and only if there are no additional costs compared with individual therapy. Most family therapists or counselors work at educational, youth, marriage or family counseling agencies, which are financed municipalities, the Protestant or Catholic Church, or by charitable organizations. They almost always offer their services for no fee. These agencies have formed an organization called Deutscher Arbeitskreis Jugend-, Ehe- und Familienberatung, but not all of the 850 agencies offer family therapy.

Problems result from the fact that family therapy is not institutionalized. Thus far it is still impossible to be officially recognized as a “family therapist.” Other problems occur in those institutions in which psychiatrists, psychologists, pedagouges and social workers employ family therapy methods. Although they may