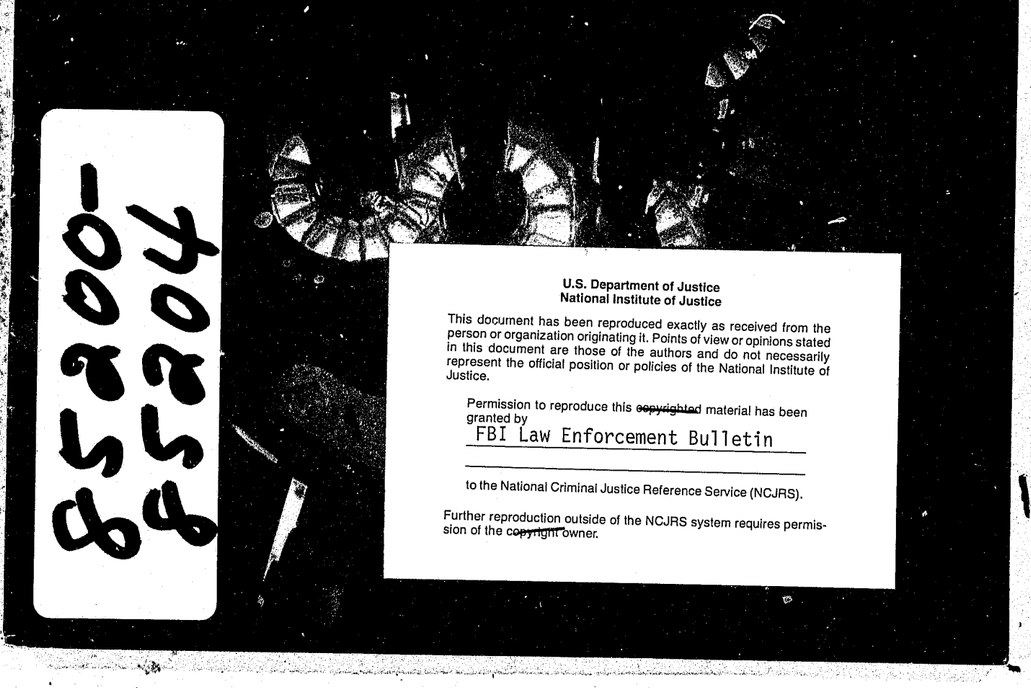
FBI LAW ENFORCEMENT BULLETIN

SEPTEMBER 1982

Nuclear Security



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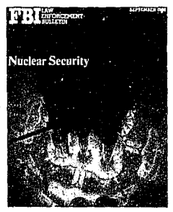

The Cover:
A remote location in Idaho provides an excellent setting for a nuclear testing site. See article p. 1.

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William H. Webster, Director

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Personnel

Family Therapy in Law Enforcement

A New Approach to an Old Problem

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Special Agent Reese

Much has been written about the law enforcement occupation. The stress of being a police officer has been researched and the major stressors identified.[1] Just as these various stressors affect the officer, they can subsequently impact upon the family as well.[2] All families have plans for achieving certain goals. Family therapists Kantor and Lehr define these family plans or strategies as "a purposive pattern of moves toward a target or goal made by two or more people who are systematically bound in a social-biological arrangement."[3] The family of a police officer is no exception. In many instances, the law enforcement occupation can upset, alter, or destroy this family strategy. It is important, therefore, to view the family as a whole, to consider the police officer (husband/father or wife/mother) as a part of this whole, and to consider the timeliness and usefulness of family therapy for the police family.

The Police Family

While the police family has been the subject of numerous written works, family therapy has not yet surfaced or been suggested as a possible remedy for problems within the police family. Increasingly, Americans are becoming aware that the family in America is changing.[4] Institutions such as schools and churches, which once had substantial influence on adults and children alike, are often no longer revered by either. The influence of these traditional institutions appear minimal, at best. There are those who even believe that the family, as we know it, is not just changing, but disappearing.[5]

Society has not totally ignored this changing character of families. Special groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, drug rehabilitation centers, and homes for unwed mothers, are attempting to save families by helping to solve family problems. Based solely on the vast number of these groups and the large size of their clientele, however, it seems that just treating symptoms and reacting to the tragedies of individuals is not enough. For many, perhaps all family members seeking help, their symptoms have a meaning only when considered in the larger context of the entire family.

Police families differ in makeup as much as any other family. Thus, there is no stereotypic police family. Efforts have been made, however, to determine whether there is a stereotypic police officer. Dr. Michael Roberts, Director of Psychological Services, San Jose, Calif., Police Department, has determined in his studies that the majority of male officers are only sons or first-born sons. His theory of the stereotypic male officer revolves around the concept of "responsibility absorption" behavior; that is, the only or oldest son is always given the responsibility to "look after things" in the father's absence. As early as age 5, the son may be told, "Take care of mom while I'm gone."[6] It has long been recognized that as adults, people recapitulate experiences they had as children.[7]

Dr. Martin Reiser, Director of the Los Angeles, Calif., Police Department's Psychological Services, is a pioneer in the field of police psychology and police stress. Reiser contends that there is an inculturation process in police academies which "shapes" young officers. In essence, he states that recruits learn more than just skills for policing. They also learn behavior

"Family therapy is a new and different concept which takes into account the philosophy and orientation of the human condition in a family context."

and attitudes in keeping with the police image. Still later in their careers, they succumb to the "John Wayne Syndrome," which leads officers to exhibit "macho" behavior, lose sensitivity for the public they serve, and become very authoritarian.

As there are some definable officer traits and stresses, so are there comparable family experiences and stresses which are stereotypic to police families. Police work continually calls upon the resources of all family members. The wife resents the term "pig" and defends her husband's career in the face of all odds. The daughter worries about returning home late from a date because she knows her dad, "the cop," will be waiting to interrogate her boyfriend. The 14-year-old son's friends dare him to sneak into a circus, telling him he won't because his dad is a policeman. Thus, the officer's job comes home regardless of his efforts to leave the problems of the day at work. And when the stress of the officer's job gets to be excessive, help is in order for the entire family.

Psychotherapy has long been the suggested remedy whenever any member of a family experiences mental difficulties. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychotherapy, emphasized certain types of expression in mental illness, such as intrapsychic events, defense mechanisms, conflict, and the subconscious. Although psychotherapists since Freud have varied in their approaches, the theme continues to be treatment of the *individual.* Family therapy is a new and different concept which takes into account the philosophy and orientation of the human condition in a family context.

In a traditional psychotherapeutic approach, the person designated as the "patient" begins therapy sessions with a mental health professional, i.e., psychiatrist, psychologist, or other counselor. Unfortunately, however, the patient may only present to the doctor selected behaviors from his environment. Behavior does not occur in a vacuum.

Mental health professionals are now beginning to look at the family as a system and as an extremely influential variable in the behavior of individuals. Law enforcement is also beginning to view its officers in the family setting. Although an integral part of any law enforcement agency has long been thought to be the individual police officer, this concept has undergone some modification in the recent past.[8]

The FBI has taken significant steps through its psychological services program to view the working unit in the Bureau on more than just an individual basis. Rather, the Agent and his family are of group importance.[9] Instituting this concept and attempting to apply it on a national level is a formidable task. It necessitates that the needs of the Bureau be met in conjunction with family considerations whenever feasible. It is a progressive and challenging step.

Family therapy views the family as a system in which each member is an integral part of the functioning whole. The family system has been defined as an organizationally complex, open, adaptive, information-processing system.[10] In family therapy, the focus is not so much on the relationship between the therapist and the patient, but rather on the relationships between the various members of the family. Because the symptoms are viewed as byproducts of relationship events, the processes within the family unit become of paramount importance.

Human beings are products of their environments. It seems logical, therefore, that no other environment would have greater impact on an individual than the family. When problems arise, whether mental, behavioral, or emotional, it seems wise to treat the environment—the family—not merely the one who exhibits the behavior. After all, in the final analysis, the individual will eventually have to return to the system.

It would be worthwhile, therefore, for police departments to consider the option of family therapy. Numerous departments now have in-house psychological services programs; other departments have mental health professionals on call. These services are accessible, by choice, to officers who believe they are in need of help. There are also specific instances when an officer may be ordered to have a session or sessions with a psychologist or psychiatrist. These sessions are usually mandatory when an officer has been traumatized in conjunction with his job. He may be experiencing trauma or survivor's guilt, or his behavior and/or decisionmaking may have been challenged regarding his suitability to continue his career in law enforcement. Some of these same departments have realized the effects of the police profession on officers' spouses. Many departments have spouse programs which provide special instruction in the unique stresses of police work.[11] Since

"Continually existent stressors, such as role conflict and role ambiguity, affect the officer."

many departments already have some psychological services available, it would be advisable to consider expanding services to incorporate family therapy.

Officer Trauma

The following scenario provides an example of how the family therapy concept can work. While based on purely fictitious events, occurrences of this type are not uncommon to law enforcement in America.

John Lewis is a police officer. He has been on the force for 14 years, is 35 years old, has been married for 17 years, and has two children, Mark, 14 years old, and Alice, 16 years old.

One particular evening, not unlike any other evening on the traffic detail, Officer Lewis observed a car with a rear red lens missing. He pulled the vehicle over, got out of his patrol car, and began to approach the other car. The vehicle appeared to be occupied by two males. It was dark—10:05 p.m.—and further identification was not possible during his approach. When Officer Lewis was approximately 10 feet from the vehicle, the driver brandished what appeared to be a small handgun. Lewis, out of options, drew his service revolver and fatally wounded the driver. He then arrested the other male and called for assistance.

Officer Lewis remained at the scene for approximately 90 minutes, during which time he was questioned extensively by the backup unit. He was then ordered to return to the department, where he was again questioned, once by the homicide unit, in the event it was a "bad shooting" and thus prosecutable, and once by the internal affairs unit to determine whether Lewis had acted within departmental guidelines.

Following this grueling experience, Lewis was sent home. With him went the memory that for approximately an hour he stood by the man he killed. He also believes that the department is no longer supportive of him. Rather, it appears to be seeking his indictment in order to avoid vicarious liability. The impact of such an event on an officer can be devastating. In only some departments will he see a mental health professional before his release. But the impact does not end there. The effects on the family may be even greater. One part of the family system has undergone some serious alterations; in systems theory, the entire family system will be affected.

Communication may be one of the first areas of the family system that is affected. Consider the case of Officer Lewis. Communication in his family may be nonexistent at this point. Lewis has told the story so many times, he is tired of it. He does not care to sit down with his wife or other family members to discuss it. The media floods the airwaves with their version of what happened or what their sources say happened. This may be the only version the family hears. The phone begins to ring at the officer's home. Callers include other officers offering congratulations, friends seeking the story firsthand, and friends of the deceased saying "we'll get even." Thus, this event has had an impact on the entire family. While the officer may be offered assistance, the family is typically ignored.

"Obviously many of the job stresses from within and outside the organization impinge not only on the officer, but also on his wife and family." [12] Many officers make the decision not to communicate the details of their job to their families. They believe that only another officer can understand what they are experiencing or feeling. A comment by Virginia Satir is therefore relevant. She states that it is impossible to *not* communicate. In fact, she places the spoken word toward the bottom of the list of effective ways to communicate. [13] Thus, even silence or the withdrawal or isolation of an officer is powerful communication and has great influence upon the family system.

It is not necessary for an officer to be involved in something as serious as an armed confrontation for this lack of communication to occur. Officers are confronted daily with frustrating situations and untold departmental pressures. "These pressures affect their relationship with their wives and children as well as the difficulties subsequently encountered." [14] Continually existent stressors, such as role conflict and role ambiguity, affect the officer. Due to the paramilitary structure of the police profession and the inculturation process to which the officer has been subjected, there is no place on the job to vent anger or show pain. When anger is vented on the job, it is occassionally aimed against the public the officer serves or is in the form of a "grumble session" over a cup of coffee with fellow officers. These officers are just a few steps closer to succumbing to burnout.

"Because there is no place at work to disperse the anger and frustration of the job, it is often carried home, and the wife and family may 'get it' without provocation. After a rough day, an officer may arrive home and snap at his wife because she is the first one to greet him." [15] Murray Bowen, a noted family therapist, refers to this type of activity within a family as "triangulation." [16] He notes that the pressure need not be from an external source but can be created within the family configuration. The best-known triangle is that of the husband/wife/mother-in-law. Using this same concept, the job can become the third corner of the triangle, along with the husband and wife. It is not unthinkable that the husband, due to lack of support and positive reinforcement at work, will unnecessarily scold his children. He may merely be attempting to determine whether his wife is supportive. Thus, he scolds his children and looks to his wife to see if she will support him or counter his efforts. Usually, no one in this family is aware that the purpose of this intense triangulation is to gain support, not to punish the children. Family therapy clarifies this issue.

In all these situations, the family must be viewed as a system. Systems of all kinds work on an "input-output" basis. If, as in the earlier example, the output, or behavior, is a shooting, it is not a solved problem if, through therapy, only the officer's feedback is clarified and subsequent input is altered. Family therapy ensures that all the parts are informed and gets the *process* back into syncronized movement.

Systems have homeostasis (staying power), communication between parts, and a circulating feedback mechanism. They must all work together in balance and harmony. The therapist in family counseling is a facilitator assisting the family in resolving differences, clarifying issues, solving problems, and taking the pressure off the "identified patient." In this sense, the therapist is a coach—one who keeps the clients from getting caught in an emotional system that assigns blame or guilt.

It is important to note that while the concept of family therapy is somewhat consistent, the various therapists engaged in this field of practice have varying opinions and individual styles. Much like the many forms of psychotherapy, family therapies differ. While some therapists will deal with the husband and wife,[17] others will include the children and any other adult significant to the family.[18] The concept is innovative—the first "whole family" treatment was only in the mid-1950's—therefore, more changes can be expected.

Conclusion

Families are significant systems of paramount importance to individuals. The family system should be balanced and a state of homeostasis should be maintained.[19]

Regardless of the style of therapy, the importance lies in the fact that the *family*, not just an individual in the family, is treated. This concept of therapy has very special applicability for dealing with stress within the police family.

"Change is inevitable, but the radical changes are behind us and not ahead of us. We now possess a family system congruent in many ways with our urban-industry society." [20] Efforts must continue to be focused on the police family as a system, for this is the environment in which we all live and find our greatest support.

FBI

Footnotes

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END