



PROJECT MUSE®

---

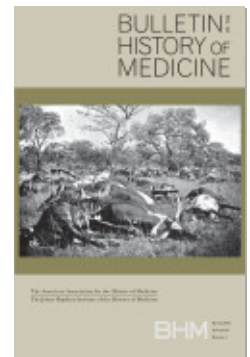
*The Pathological Family: Postwar America and the Rise of  
Family Therapy* by Deborah Weinstein (review)

Virginia E. Rutter

Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Volume 89, Number 1, Spring 2015,  
pp. 157-159 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2015.0021>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/579697>

Such personal histories, however, are submerged within a rather dry set of biographies and an archival recounting of the political and economic turmoil that beset the institute in the 1970s. This makes for uneven reading, but it also makes clear the book's central dilemma, inevitable when a history is written by one of its participants. *Genesis of the Salk Institute* is neither pure memoir nor pure history, and as such the diligence of its biography is offset by personal opinion. Bourgeois's characterization of institute president Frederic de Hoffmann—clearly the villain of the story—becomes personal (the chapter on his presidency is titled “A Napoleon from Byzantium”) and is not as well evidenced as her history of the early stages of the institute. De Hoffmann's tenure was controversial; his management style and politics have been justly critiqued by many. But Bourgeois's claim that he left the Salk Institute with “little endowment” (p. 180) is simply untrue, for instance: according to its own publications the institute's budget increased sevenfold under his leadership. Bourgeois is an unashamed Salk partisan—of the scientist and of his institute. She has channeled her enthusiasm into an important history of the building, the institute, and—most important—the community that founded and sustained it. If elements of the book show the difficulties in writing recent history, these are part of the subject matter's complex social, cultural, and political genesis, the events recent enough that they still inspire impassioned debate. The monument still attracts architectural tourists, the institution continues to attract the world's best researchers. Bourgeois's book is a rich, immaculately researched, sometimes less than impartial, but valuable as a record of the Salk's founding by an eyewitness.

Thomas Leslie  
Iowa State University

Deborah Weinstein. *The Pathological Family: Postwar America and the Rise of Family Therapy*. Cornell Studies in the History of Psychiatry. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2013. xiii + 262 pp. Ill. \$26.95 (ISBN-10: 0-8014-7821-9, ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-7821-5).

“The power of the family at midcentury,” writes Deborah Weinstein in *The Pathological Family: Postwar America and the Rise of Family Therapy*, “becomes particularly apparent when one examines the history of family therapy, which emerged as a new clinical field after World War II” (p. 2).

Family therapy today is a profession, blended with marriage counselors and the child guidance field within training programs, professional organizations, and much of their publishing. Yet Weinstein specifically describes “old school” family therapy's origins with its quirky, visionary, and (disciplinarily) diverse founders, their game-changing and sometimes damaging metaphors, and their

uneven epistemologies that continue today to rely on experts over sustained clinical research. Weinstein's history lends itself well to the project of understanding the weird contradictions of postwar America. Like postwar America itself, family therapy was simultaneously conservative and liberating.

Chapter 1, "Personality Factories," shows how families became emphasized as the "linchpin" (p. 26) between individual and society—and responsible for nothing less than well-being at the national level and psychosis or maladjustment at the individual level. The "broader sociocultural trends" (p. 27) surrounding family therapy included America's love affair with individual psychology, plus concern with preventing a resurgence of fascism. This gave the moral imperative for healthy individuals to become ideal citizens. Family therapy delivered a paradigm shift (a phrase early family therapists loved invoking!): the family—not the individual—was the patient. "Family" was the source of pathology and its solution: cause and consequence in a framework that saw circularity as a resource.

The other sociocultural trend implicated in family therapy is revealed by creepy images in chapter 1 of mothers as lurking sources of harm. Taking us briskly from family therapy's early, naturalistic descriptions of family (such as pioneer Nathan Ackerman's evolutionary pastiche, "The father's body is specialized for strength and potency. He is the protector of mother and young" [p. 29]) to early diagnostic interest in "schizophrenogenic mothers," readers put it together: even as family therapy was breaking from psychoanalysis's individual focus and moving toward context, it was trapped by its singular focus on family with its entrenched gaze of patriarchy.

The second chapter, "'Systems Everywhere': Schizophrenia, Cybernetics and the Double Bind," shows how pioneers' focus on schizophrenia offered cases for detecting patterns and guiding interventions. Weinstein skillfully sketches ideas and inspiration for the eclectic tools of family therapy. Early on, they observed paradoxes, chief among them "the double bind"—a case of an impossible command that amounts to "come here, go away." This pattern seemed present often in families with a schizophrenic member. While theorists recognized double binds came from anyone, clinical eyes were ceaselessly on those double-binding moms.

In "Systems Everywhere," Weinstein uses remarkable original material, including transcripts of research meetings. When anthropologists Gregory Bateson and John Weakland, psychiatrists Don Jackson and William Fry, and communication analyst Jay Haley began meeting in Palo Alto in 1952, they recorded themselves and archived diagrams. One passage shows what at first seems like a smallish argument about epistemology. Haley and Weakland find the others a little too in love with their hypotheses, and Jackson replies by contending that after all, physicists theorized long and hard before they ever actually saw an electron. It is wonderfully awkward. The passage concludes with Haley's saying, "All I'm doing is saying let us keep in mind that this (the double bind) is unobservable and hypothetical and try to work from this toward the observable" (p. 67).

This debate over epistemology loomed large as I read chapter 4 about pioneering psychiatrist Murray Bowen's hospitalizing entire families. Bowen had the imagination to say, let's just look at the whole thing and the authority to say

we need to study it. The hospitalizations had all the pain and opportunity for discovery of those very early MTV reality shows (*The Real World* ca. 1992). But like the Palo Alto audiotaping, Bowen's early hospitalization studies—and the later projects described in chapter 5 that emphasized video playback and one-way mirrors—show family therapists as great seekers of data for all the senses, even if little well codified. To wit, the book doesn't mention clinical outcomes or describe what worked and what didn't. That's a lapse of family therapy, but I would have valued Weinstein's addressing the concern.

Chapter 3, "The Culture Concept at Work," focuses on another contradiction: what to do or say about culture. Was "family" a universal category (like Ackerman's evolutionary description) or one inextricable from culture? Salvador Minuchin's work is focal. Tensions emerged early, but not until the late 1970s did family therapy begin to have a serious feminist critique let alone engage other facets of family diversity.

Weinstein's open-ended conclusion returns to the proposition at the beginning: "We have only to look at the enduring discourse of 'family values' to see that the popular notion of the family as the locus where everything can go right or wrong is still with us—and still contested" (p. 180). Weinstein doesn't overplay her framework of family therapy within postwar America—but she has provided many opportunities for others to continue the conversation.

Virginia E. Rutter  
Framingham State University