

Book Review: Rewriting Family Scripts: Improvisation and Systems Change

Rewriting Family Scripts: Improvisation and Systems Change by John Byng-Hall.
New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1995, 271 pp., \$35.00 (cloth).

By
Christine B. Hagan

Christine B. Hagan, Ph.D., full-time lecturer, Department of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach.

John Byng-Hall is a Consultant Child and Family Psychiatrist at the Tavistock Clinic. He was trained at Cambridge University, University College Hospital London, and Maudsley and Bethlem Royal Hospitals. He is a past Chair of the Institute of Family Therapy, London.

Dr. Byng-Hall brings a wealth of family therapy experience to the writing of his book, which blends attachment theory, systems theory, and psychodynamic principles. Dr. Byng-Hall takes a unique perspective which applies the individual attachment theory of John Bowlby to family interaction and focuses on helping families to develop what he calls a "secure base" from which to grow. He further describes the concept of a secure base as providing a reliable network of care that gives every member a sufficient sense of security to explore and develop because members know that "the family" will be there for them if and when needed. The author credits much of his appreciation for attachment theory to Bowlby, but adds a unique concept of "family scripts." According to Byng-Hall, these family scripts are self-destructive routines that are so predictable that family members seem to be following a script. He outlines

two types of scripts: replicative scripts which transmit patterns from one generation to the next and corrective scripts which derive from family members trying to avoid or counteract uncomfortable past patterns. In either case, Byng-Hall points out that neither the replicative nor the corrective scripts provide helpful solutions to the current family problems. He points to family therapy which is aimed at teaching family members to explore and improvise new scripts as the way to stop the repetition of dysfunctional family patterns.

Rewriting Family Scripts is a valuable resource for clinical practice as many case examples are provided. Dr. Byng-Hall sees families at the Tavistock Clinic with observers watching his practice from behind a one-way mirror. He speaks of the importance of having feedback from the observers to help design creative improvisations and avoid countertransference. He adds a bit of self-disclosure as he discusses case material and is not afraid to look at himself and point out when he feels his upbringing may be interfering or causing him to focus on one aspect of the problem or solution, and avoid or fail to see other possibilities. He ap-

proaches families with respect and gentleness focusing on supporting new behaviors rather than criticizing the repetition of patterns which obviously have not been successful. He encourages parents by reframing corrective scripts as attempts to provide a better experience for their children, than their parents provided for them. In this endeavor, he demonstrates a great deal of patience, as he asks families to enact home situations in his office so that he may lend input and allow the family members to try out new behaviors. He then asks the family "What was the old way of doing things and what was new about it?" In this technique, he offers hope to families that they can change things for themselves. The author claims to have used this technique of enactment at the same time as Salvador Minuchin, but did not know Minuchin or of his technique at the time. Since that time, the author has met Minuchin, and says that the two therapists agree that this is a very useful family therapy technique.

In reading Byng-Hall's work, I was reminded of Michael White's Narrative Therapy and Insoo Kim Berg's Solution-Focused Therapy in that all three focus on the strengths of the family, rather than on the weaknesses, and focus on solving current family problems rather than on exploring past history. All three seem to dismiss James Framo's idea that in order to be rid of the patterns of the past, it is necessary

to confront the family of origin. In addition, I saw similarities between Melanie Klein's concept of projective identification and Byng-Hall's use of replicative scripts. The concept of corrective scripts is reminiscent of the object relation's concept of unconscious introjects from the past. However, in the case of corrective scripts and replicative scripts, Byng-Hall seems optimistic about the individuals' capacity to attain freedom from the past through family therapy which is focused in the present problem-solving process, rather than a traditional personal analysis. Byng-Hall remains committed to principles of systems theory, and gives several case examples in which children act out until the therapist convinces the parents to act as a team and stop giving children mixed messages. He also looks at each parent's family of origin in taking a genogram in order to explore how each member's script may relate to the partner's script. I found this concept very similar to Nathan Ackerman's concept of interlocking pathology, except that Byng-Hall places less emphasis on unconscious processes which guide behavior. Although many concepts do not seem new, this author offers a practical way to integrate and use this framework in clinical practice.

The stated purpose of *Rewriting Family Scripts* was to offer a model for change in which the therapist helps the family to feel secure enough to risk improvising in those relationships so they can explore solutions to

present and future problems. Through the use of case examples, the author demonstrates how to use his model with families who are struggling with bereavement, family breakdown, disability, and the birth of a new baby. He uses humor, and British phrases such as "I'll ring up the client" or "sorting things out" or "settle the child" which add a great deal of personality and charm to the work. In all respects, the author achieves his stated purpose and provides a comprehensive conceptual framework that illuminates the central issues of family therapy practice. This book makes a valuable contribution to family therapy practice. □

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.