

Guest Editor's Introduction

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When I first decided to organize the one-day symposium which eventually became ‘*Sanity, Madness and the Family / Family Life: An Urgent Retrospective*’, in April 2015, in Birkbeck Cinema at 41 Gordon Square, the building where I have worked for just over a decade,¹ the decision arose from what felt like a genuine sense of *urgency* bubbling madly inside me. It wasn’t really just the fact that 2014 had marked the fiftieth anniversary of the first appearance of R. D. Laing and Aaron Esterson’s classic study of ‘schizophrenia’ in eleven young women. Nor was it the fact that Tony Garnett, the legendary producer of Ken Loach’s British film classic, *Family Life* (1971), had generously agreed to speak at such an event, were I to go ahead and organize it. It wasn’t even that I conceived this potential symposium as an exciting way of symbolically linking my two main ‘professional’ interests: psychotherapy and film studies. It was less rational than that.

Hilary Mantel writes tellingly in her article in this special issue that ‘Laing and Esterson are clear on what it [the book *Sanity, Madness and the Family*] is and is not. To every reader, it became perhaps a little more than the authors meant it to be...’ My own ‘use’ of Laing and Esterson’s book, ever since I discovered it second-hand in a charity shop in Finsbury Park in the early 2000s, had definitely been as a kind of post-traumatic Winnicottian transitional object. For years I was more interested in the

¹ Interestingly, to me at least, 41 Gordon Square is also the building where James Strachey analysed Donald Winnicott for around a decade in the 1920s, a relationship recently illustrated and entertainingly reflected upon in Alison Bechdel’s (2012) graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother?*

materiality of the book itself, and its name – its strangely reassuring name – than I was in the finer detail of the eleven fascinating case studies. The same could be said of my ‘use’ of Loach’s film *Family Life*, which I first saw even earlier, in a cinema in Paris one afternoon in 1997, and which remained stamped madly and foggily on my memory for a long time afterwards, compelling me to write about it (à propos of very little indeed, from what I can recall) in the French language final exam paper I took as an undergraduate at university in 1999. Needless to say, and without needing to go into excessive personal detail here, it was the way in which both book and film, almost by their titles alone, promised to make a much-needed sense out of certain *tangles* (also *muddles*, not to mention *knots*), which I had been carrying around in my mind ever since I left my own family home at the age of seventeen. Laing, Esterson and the writers and filmmakers behind *Family Life* were giving words and images to processes of disavowal and projection which, up until the point that I began to take in the fuller meanings of both film and book, had, at times, made me feel as if my head would explode.

As I grew older I began to become more aware of the book’s various faults, omissions and failings, many of which are discussed in the articles that follow in this special issue. But at the time these didn’t matter to me: what mattered was that my head no longer had to explode. Laing and Esterson’s book, together with Loach and Garnett’s film, joined the panoply of other cultural objects and icons – films like Brian de Palma’s *Carrie* (1976) and Jacques Tourneur’s *Cat People* (1942); poets like June Jordan and Gil Scott-Heron; novelists like Franz Kafka and Marie NDiaye – which I kept in my spirit as antidotes (the battle felt almost chemical) to the much older voices of ego-eroding confusion which furiously demanded their right to remain. When I

began training as a psychotherapist, after many years working as a full-time academic (first in French literature, later in film studies), I found it astonishing that no mention was ever made by my supervisors or seminar leaders of this book, *Sanity, Madness and the Family* which, to me, had been so indispensable. Surely Laing and Esterson would help us to get to grips with the traumatized aspects of this or that seemingly 'borderline' or 'schizoid' 'patient'; this or that suffering human being who had come into our care? The seemingly almost *possessed* person whose internal voices told them that they were worthless, wicked and ungrateful? Did those voices not only resemble parental (and often more widely environmental) implanted narratives, but also did they bear the unmistakable characteristics of hypocrisy and doublespeak so brilliantly thematized in the book? But it seemed instead that we, as budding clinicians, were being instructed to look only for phantasy, for the purely intra-psychic workings of the sufferers, when it came to our therapeutic work. Anything else did not seem to count as true psychoanalysis, or even psychodynamic psychotherapy and, as such, was not to be thought or argued about.²

Elizabeth Howell and Sheldon Itzkowitz (2016) frame the unfortunate therapeutic training situation well when they state:

² Little or no mention was made in the course of my training of Fairbairn (1952), Guntrip (1968), or Ferenczi (1995) either; and as for Fanon (2008) – well, let's just say you might be waiting a very long time for someone like him to show up. The Freud (with Breuer, 1974) of *Studies on Hysteria* felt conspicuous in his absence; and the very idea that we might begin to think critically, politically or historically about the various theorists we *were* being fed on a weekly basis (derived largely from the post-1897 Freud, and, of course, Melanie Klein) – why they might have assumed hegemony in the UK, and how we might seek to work with a knowledge of their ideological bias whilst at the same time taking in and using what was good from them – felt, by and large (although with important pedagogical and supervisory exceptions), like an institutionally threatening act of heretical insubordination.

A most remarkable thing about psychoanalysis is its checkered response to trauma-generated dissociation. Now one 'sees' it, and now one doesn't. Why can it not be recognized? Why does it disappear from 'sight' or thought? Even though psychoanalysis began in the study of dissociation, not long after its inception, Freud redefined the data of psychoanalysis, moving the topic away from an explicit exploration of trauma and of dissociated experiences and dissociated mental structure. And for the most part, psychoanalysts followed suit, like their forefather, all too often ignoring the importance of exogenous traumatic reality (p. 7).

They could almost be writing about Laing and Esterson's book as a kind of embodiment of trauma-generated dissociation. What really convinced me to go ahead with the symposium and, later, this special journal issue arising from it, was the sheer paucity of published work devoted specifically to *Sanity, Madness and the Family*.³ The existential psychotherapist Anthony Stadlen, whom I invited to the symposium, and who contributes an introduction to Hilary Mantel's article in this issue, was in the midst of his regular series of 'Inner Circle' seminars, many of which revolved around one or other of the eleven families who inspired the case studies in Laing and Esterson's book. Stadlen (2017) states the strange situation of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*'s neglect brilliantly:

³ See McGeachan (2014) for an important scholarly article on *Sanity, Madness and the Family* published just before the Birkbeck symposium took place.

Why is this nowadays rarely read or even referenced book so important? It is, after all, absent from almost all discussions either of ‘the family’ or of ‘schizophrenia’. I can only speak for myself. Reading it when it was published in 1964 gave me a gold standard by which to judge all my subsequent studies, training, and practice. My own practice of psychotherapy and my own research on the classic cases of psychoanalysis, analytical psychology, and Daseinsanalysis (including my research half a century later on the living families studied in this very book) has been guided by it. Almost everything I have read subsequently has fallen short of it. The extremely rare discussions of it patronise it, as if they had long passed beyond it, but without having begun to understand it, let alone catch up with it.

I wanted to draw on Stadlen’s expertise, familiarity and fascination with the material; and he kindly supplied this, in a highly arresting opening contribution to the day. To his voice (and to the voices of some of those families originally recorded by Aaron Esterson for the book with Laing all those years ago, which Stadlen played for the hushed audience at 41 Gordon Square), were added a range of other voices; not just academic, psychiatric and psychotherapeutic, but various different kinds of people, contributing both as invited speakers and as audience members, all of whom had something real and alive to say about the legacy of Laing and Esterson and the cultural, political and emotional traces left by their jointly authored book. Jacqui Dillon of the Hearing Voices Network (<https://www.hearing-voices.org/>) contributed a wonderful, accessible, self-reflexive presentation, sharing her experiences as a voice-hearer, and elaborating on the help she had found in her particular discovery of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Oliver James, the well-known writer, psychologist,

psychotherapist and broadcaster, and the author of *They F*** You Up: How to Survive Family Life* (2006), gave a usefully enraged presentation, in which he explained how Laing and Esterson's contemporary marginalization within the fields of psychiatry and psychotherapy constituted a source, for him, as both a psychotherapist and a person, of both puzzlement and genuine chagrin. After the symposium, the film and cultural theorist Vicky Lebeau (2015) published a set of fascinating reflections on the day and its longer-term implications, drawing particular attention to the crucial psycho-social significance of that cultural moment when 'psychiatry puts itself on the side of the daughter', a phenomenon inaugurated in the twentieth century by Laing and Esterson, but already seen some eighty years earlier, she suggested, in 'the origins of psychoanalysis in Freud's work at the Salpêtrière – [in] his monumental decision to listen to what hysterics were saying' (p. 306). And the artist Hannah Eaton (2015) was moved by the symposium to create a panel of disturbing illustrations, fusing her love for David Lynch's devastating 'family film' *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992) with her respect for Laing and Esterson in a terrifying dream-vision of the iconic, fictitious incest survivor Laura Palmer and her best friend Donna. The two friends united briefly in a shared ability to 'see' familial trauma when Donna mischievously borrows Laura's accursed sunglasses.

What follows in the present special issue of the *Journal of Psycho-Social Studies* are the adapted versions of all the *other* papers and presentations that were given on that moving and memorable day or else contributed subsequently. Multiple Booker-Prize winning author Dame Hilary Mantel, introduced by Anthony Stadlen, kicks off the volume with a deeply absorbing account of her own personal discovery of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, sharing how this event altered the course of her own life and

deepened her understanding of the unconscious dynamics operating within her family and within families and society at large. Next, academic and clinical psychologist Lucy Johnstone shares her research and experience working with individuals and families affected by diagnoses of schizophrenia, arguing that Laing and Esterson's research has not only been extremely relevant and useful in her work, but that it *must* be drawn on by contemporary researchers and clinicians if a highly repressive medical model of treatment is not to engulf all forms of intervention. The writer, academic and psychiatrist Suman Fernando then offers a crucial analysis of the racialization of 'schizophrenia'. Showing how, since the time that Laing and Esterson were writing in the mid-1960s, the projective and scapegoating mechanisms which they so brilliantly exposed as taking place within the nuclear family have been extended to take place – and on a horrifying scale – within the larger 'family' that is racist British society itself. Fernando reveals Black and minority ethnic individuals as the unfortunate inheritors of the 'mad-bad-daughter' role: they are the present-day psychic receptacles of the unwanted thoughts and feelings of the disavowing (White) 'family members', the new patients whose internal muddle is blamed on them and labelled 'schizophrenia'. Closing this opening section of the special issue, Robbie Duschinsky, Daniel Reisel and Morten Nissen, in a fascinating, interdisciplinary article, explore the modes and techniques of behaviour open to the family member who is positioned as 'schizophrenic'. Particularly interested in the phenomena of 'flat affect', reserve, and psychic unreadability, they tease out, with the help of a number of cultural theorists, the various ways in which we might come to understand 'emotional opacity' as a peculiar kind of psychosocial strategy of resistance.

Moving the reader towards a more critical position with regard to Laing in particular, writer and psychoanalyst Chris Oakley offers a compelling account of the various projections and disavowals which took place within the group of psychiatrists, 'anti-psychiatrists' and activists of which Laing, Esterson and – crucially – David Cooper, author of *The Death of the Family* (1971) – were the most well-known members. Arguing that the pathological interactions between these men could largely be understood as fuelled by 'rivalrous resemblance', Oakley underlines the extent to which the insights into the workings of diseased family groups which Laing and Esterson elaborated in their classic study could equally be applied to the pseudo-familial group which they themselves went on to form. Then, in an important gendered critique of Laing's work and legacy, the academic and activist Lynne Segal (herself the editor of the important sociological volume *What is to be Done about the Family?* (1983)) points out how Laing's failure to incorporate a feminist analysis of power relations within the family leads to a caricatured, misogynist and ultimately dangerous representation of post-war family life. The legendary television and film producer and director Tony Garnett closes this special issue, as he did the original symposium, with his moving, personal account of the circumstances under which he came to be interested in producing a BBC television drama (*In Two Minds*, 1967), and later a bigger-budget film (*Family Life*, 1971), both written by David Mercer and directed by Ken Loach, both taking the family dynamics of a young woman diagnosed with schizophrenia as their central focus. Reflecting candidly on the direct connection both projects had with R. D. Laing and Aaron Esterson's work, Garnett meditates also on some of the problematic issues – notably the question of gender and mothering – which were raised in earlier contributions to both the symposium and to this volume. His offering is a fitting conclusion to an extremely rich and varied range

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of articles, the combined effect of which was for me a powerful spur to return, in both a personal and professional capacity, to the text which inspired the symposium.

It still seems to me, despite everything, that one ignores *Sanity, Madness and the Family* at one's peril. It is not a question of venerating or idealizing Laing and Esterson, as either researchers or people. But if we give up on them as our allies in the quest – more urgent now than ever, it seems – to join up the dots of alienation in an increasingly muddled and muddling society, we risk losing an extremely valuable tool of simultaneously emotional and political reorientation indeed.

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