

## BOOK REVIEW

**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BIRTH: The foundation of human personality.**  
by Leslie Feher. Souvenir Press 1980

This is by the daughter of Elizabeth Feher, one of the pioneers of what she calls natal therapy. She was taught by her mother to do this kind of therapy, and most of this book is an account of their work, their tentative conclusions, their speculations and theories.

one of the best chapters, however, is by Lewis Mehl, a doctor who has delivered many babies, on psychophysiological aspects of childbirth. This is an excellent up-to-date rundown on what is known medically about birth, with such fascinating facts as:

*Caesarian birth poses a nine times greater risk of the mother dying than vaginal delivery, and maternal mortality rates have been on the increase in recent years along with the multiplying Caesarian birth rate. Infants born by Caesarian also have a ten times higher incidence of child abuse than infants birthed vaginally.*

Mehl gives chapter and verse for his assertions, and for anyone interested in this area (actual medical facts about childbirth) the book is worth getting for this chapter alone.

On regressive therapy involving rebirthing, the author is on familiar ground. Most of us would go along with her statements, such as:

*We see in natal therapy that when the patient re-enacts his birth, he does so by pushing himself. He acts both the mother and the foetus. It seems that at first any activity the foetus experiences is **his** activity.*

This makes a lot of sense to anyone who has been involved with this kind of therapeutic experience.

More controversial, though very interesting, are the author's remarks on intra-uterine life. According to her, life in the womb is always good:

*. . . the foetus before labour begins may be said to feel only sensations of floating and limitlessness . . . The first trauma is birth.*

This is a startling statement to those of us who have been familiar with the work of Frank Lake. Lake's work is lengthy and sound, and shows quite unmistakably that bad womb experiences are quite common.

Feher also has a good deal to say about the umbilical cord - she has a whole chapter called "Crisis Umbilicus".

*The embryo is physically dependent upon the umbilicus. And at first it is huge: originally larger than he. It looks down on him, a massive "phallic" symbol. It fills his sky, and surrounds him, protects him, feeds him and is always there for him. It is the first real parent: it gives him security and he clings to it . . . According to psychoanalytic theory, the penis is the phallus, is the phallic symbol. But what if the phallus itself represents something else? On closer examination we can see it as a physical representation of a huge umbilicus, as the embryo must perceive it . . . This theory casts a new light on castration anxiety and penis envy. What is castration anxiety but the fear of having something cut off? If the penis is in fact a substitute for the umbilicus, that fear would be obviously justified, because the cord **was** cut off at birth.*

This is startling indeed! It has a kind of plausibility, but much more research will be needed to establish the scope and limits of its truth. Certainly it seems different from what Mott, Lake, Swartley and others have put forward about the umbilical cord. Of course they were men, which may have something to do with it . . .

Feher is very keen on the umbilical cord, so much so that one even suspects it must have a lot to do with her own personal history: she even prefers to do her therapy over the telephone - this is carrying umbilical imagery a bit far, one feels! It makes her say this sort of thing:

*Loneliness is wanting a cord and not having one. Lonely people many times do not like themselves, feel incomplete, incompetent and vulnerable. This is because they cannot be their own cord and they cannot find an adequate substitute.*

Many of the statements made in this book are as unsupported as this - I would like to have seen more of a critical stance taken up than this. There is some interesting stuff here: chapters called **Emotional prostitution. Hidden seduction and sadism. The need to be god. The narcissistic-guilt dichotomy** and so forth. Anyone interested in regressive types of therapy would I think find this book worth getting. Read with a critical eye, it has a good deal to offer.

**John Rowan**

---

**CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES & ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLES** by Ed. Eleonor D. Macklin & Roger H. Rubin, 1983, Sage Pubs. Inc. £23.25  
416 pp

**SHAPING TOMORROW'S FAMILY: Theory & Policy for the 21st century** by John Scanzoni, 1983, Sage Pubs. Inc. £17.25/£8.50 272 pp

"Therapists are **paid** to accept the 'real you' for an hour or so a week; families have to take the 'real you' all the time, and they are not paid for this arduous task". This prologue is a Conference Compendium on Contemporary Families contributed to by 30 American sociologists points to the realism that has replaced the earlier romanticism with which Alternative Lifestyles had been welcomed. There is now in the States an increasingly old population and growing groups of vulnerable people whose needs are unmet by overburdened health, educational and welfare services. In a time of economic recession, professional caretakers have anti-institution perspectives and often a pre-family ideology based both on cost benefit analyses and academic theory; so the traditional family which cares for its members from the cradle to the grave is back in favour with most tax payers and many social agencies.

Similarly, here in England, our most avant-garde social workers advocate delinquents being fostered with stable conventional families who, in the pioneer Kent scheme, are paid £80 p.w. per adolescent. Geriatric specialists, as at the London Hospital, are organizing Family Support Schemes in which medicare is taken to the elderly in their relatives' homes, so that hospital admission is arranged only in emergencies or when the family is liable to break down under the strain. Our hospitals for the mentally subnormal and ill are being closed so that patients can live with their families, supported by the as yet largely uncreated community health services.

Thus the relevant cultural dilemma for Western society is how far the variety, mobility and impermanence of emerging alternative lifestyles will be able to absorb, protect and nurture the dependants of their members, especially in being able to care for them during crises, illness, handicap and dying.

Thus the learned contributors of both books indicate that they do not know the answer to this question, but at least they offer us heavily referenced texts that testify to the scholarly research and practical experience which has been the outcome of their work with major alternative lifestyle groups. The Macklin & Rubin book has sections on single parent families, singles, non-marital heterosexual cohabitants, gays and lesbians, the divorced, the remarried, the voluntary childless, ethnic minorities, the radical communes, and others. These are full of interesting facts: in the States, men remarry at four times the rate of women, older women having a particularly difficult time; 50% of all black children are reared by single mothers; there is a 61% increase since 1970 of people living alone; S&S readers will find valuable documentation and statistics with regard to their own particular interests. General problems emerge such as the rising cost of alimony which can cause bankruptcy, the added expense of living alone, and the feminist complaint that the pressure of changes, however liberating, have been much harder on women than anticipated. Also, people still suffer from stereotyping and sanctions.

However, the contributors stress that the immeasurable gain is that of **choosing** and changing one's lifestyle, whatever the price to be paid. They defend their belief in 'letting many flowers bloom' against the charge that the 'flower children' of the hippie era became a subsequently destructive deviant sub-culture, and say that there is no substantial and consistent proof that traditional families rear more mature children. They blame the economic recession for causing the joblessness, homelessness and rootlessness of many young people, rather than the absence of continuity of good quality parental care. Although they are aware of the perilous pressures on the world's resources and the political and racial conflicts which tend to make survival more difficult for groups which do not have the traditional family's bonds, loyalties and establishment support, they are all nevertheless optimistic that the alternative lifestyle movement is sufficiently courageous and creative to endure, prosper, and differentiate progressively.

The book by Scanzoni, who is also an American sociologist, is a more general philosophical inquiry in larger print, although its views are also well referenced. They are divided into three main sections:

where we have been; where we are; where we are going. He makes interesting distinctions between the structure and process of family living, saying that preoccupation with the former leads to morphostatic conceptualization, when we should be concerned with morphogenesis, or the development of the family organism. He points out that contemporary society is marked by participatory democracy, whereas the traditional family has been based on hierarchical models. Yet, ironically, governments appear to be having more power over the new alternative lifestyles of non-traditional families simply because these, and particularly the children, need more cultural and economic support.

He is also concerned that developing family systems still retain a popular stigma of being socially amoral, and considers it vitally important for them to evolve value patterns which are as normative and respectable as those of traditional families, and equally satisfy the basic human search for meaning and belonging.

Here S&S readers may be interested in Scanzoni's list of qualities which he feels marks the most satisfying alternative lifestyles: equity and unselfishness; genuine democratic decision-making; free negotiations; job and role interchangeability; freedom for creative interests; agreement about child-rearing objectives (socialization). However, he does not minimize the difficulties of acquiring and maintaining these virtues which he says demand as much painful adherence as the old mores.

He also suggests that the human search for intimacy, and the flight from intimacy, will still cause problems: people still fall in and out of love in ways that defy reason and cause suffering to other as well as themselves. Jealousy, he says, may always be a problem.

The forward-looking part of the book describes Scanzoni's plans for 'Family Life Educators' who are to be neither 'advocates' nor 'suppressors' of emerging forms of cohabitation. They should have the ethical task of transmitting accurate knowledge and clarifying values through open discussion, and model a tolerant attitude to genuine developments. Above all, they must scrupulously see that the myths of the past with regard to the success of the traditional family are not replaced by myths of the present, or projections for the future which are messianic.

His final chapter deals with religious attitudes to family change, showing his own preference for the Socratic principle of **order** and reliability which he says provides the essential security which children need in order to thrive, whatever the system. He also believes that now that mass communications have brought religious pluralism into

hearth and home, the old rigidities of dogma should dissolve and bring differing groups closer to each other.

So it seems as if this American cohort of sociologists face the transition of family life fairly fearlessly, despite all the global and cultural uncertainties which threaten conflict rather than peace. Here in Britain, the National Marriage Guidance Council has just compiled a massive report of its own regarding transitional family mores, called **Asking About Marriage** (£2.50 plus 40p postage from NMGC, Little Church Street, Rugby); and **New Society** also published a special article, **Family & Beyond** (19.5.83. p.xi-xii). These seem more sanguine about following American trends, if only because we do not have the Californian climate to encourage more warm experimental living, and, as a small island, have to live closely with our problems, without space for escape. Also, although we may not be so tolerant of avant-garde lifestyles, neither do we tolerate the social dustbins of acute despair, discrimination and deprivation which are more acutely featured in American jails, ghettos and socially handicapped groups. For us, additionally, there is a popular tendency to equate the decline of our nation with the decline of the traditional family, and we do not really know any more than the Americans whether such feelings are irrationally destructive or intuitionally protective. There is always a struggle between needs for fulfilling both our personal and collective identities, and every civilization must find the most compassionate way of caring for its young, its old, its lonely, and its dependants. Traditional families have much to be ashamed of in this respect. It is not so much the structure or system that matter, but, as Scanzoni says, the unselfishness and equity of its members.

Ironically, this review has been written in Kibris, Turkish Cyprus, where I have been involved in some of the extension family networks amongst the many poor (and occasionally rich) settlements here. I am reminded that over two-thirds of the world lives in similarly underdeveloped poverty. The only core in their lives which provides meaning, jobs, alliances, a future, is their family life and the children whom they almost worship as their seedcorn. Granted that the Third and Fourth Worlds have problems of stasis or stagnation, how incumbent is it upon us in the West who write books to remember the parochialism rather than universality of our wisdom? In my saddest CND moments, I sometimes console myself with the thought that if the West commits genocide with atom bombs - abortion, then life will be carried on in the jungle, desert and scrubland by the primitive family groups to which we once belonged. How will our contemporary literature of the sociology of the family help them, now or later, if, like previous civilizations, only our artefacts survive?

**Yvonne Craig**

## **SEX AND THE BRAIN** - Jo Durden-Smith & Diane de Simone - Pan Original

Basically this book sets out to unfold, like a detective story, in easy journalistic style, the fact that there is an essential difference between males and females which is not essentially behavioural and culturally induced, but is biological, controlled by the brains, hormones and the genetic code. It does this through a series of interviews with American scientists, presenting a multitude of facts, many inconclusive, some provocative. If one has the patience to slog through all of this for the punch line, the ending is less clinical and does not, as one fears, prescribe chemical/hormonal intervention or genetic engineering to replace behavioural therapy.

It points to a need to return to intimacy and responsibility in male/female relating. It shows how our culture has moved us away from this by expecting us to be equals, going against what our biology dictates, that we are different, leaving us stranded as stressed in marriage, divorced, single, secondarily homosexually (ie not born that way), or frustrated men violent against women. It states that denial of motherhood has bent men out of shape. I can accept this but would have preferred that the authors spent more time defining this statement and less time trying to prove their point with accounts of scientific researches, mainly carried out on animals. They do allow that women's role is not just childbearing, but also pleasure and that they can have careers too, although they might lose their chances then of mating and having children.

At the end they state that men have reduced the world, in their inherited analytical way to its component parts and ask whether women, with their inherited ability for communication and integration can put it together again. Can we return to, "partnership of male and female in the enterprise and continuation of human life". This seems to consist not only of women taking all the responsibility for leading as the "continuers of the species", but also, "organising as mothers to save the planet from destruction". All this and also giving back to men their involvement in the processes of reproduction, is not taking the responsibility for contraception, so that men can be freed from the culture they have made for themselves, and feel safe enough to give up their traditionally held privileges. But the questions asked are all hypothetical. The authors make no commitment to answering any of them.

I suspect their interest lies in selling the book. By the size of the title it is obviously intended to be a best seller and the cover picture promises secrets revealed.

**Wendy Freebourne**

---