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Shared Obliviousness as a Family Systems Phenomenon

Imagine a family in which nobody is aware that their home is in grave danger from a flood that is bound to happen in a few days, that the value of their home and all the homes in their community is plummeting because the local and national real estate markets have been built partly on chicanery and illusion, that their religious leader is a sexual predator, or that the family history that is important to them and that they believe to be true is mythical. Imagine a family in which nobody realizes that Dad is an alcoholic, that their recurrent arguments are patterned in ways that prevent them from resolving any disagreement, that the grandmother who they think is perfectly healthy had a stroke last week, and that their favorite political leader systematically lies. Imagine a family in which nobody knows that he or she has been silenced in many ways by the way the family interacts. These forms of shared obliviousness and others like them occur in all families, because all families share obliviousness to a great deal. By obliviousness I mean a state of being unmindful or unaware of something, of being ignorant or not conscious of its existence. By shared family obliviousness I mean the family-wide sharing of lack of awareness and lack of knowledge. This book is not about what family members know but do not talk about. It is not about what they know but wish they did not. It is not about what they know but are too embarrassed to claim to know. It is not about what they know but are not sure about. It is about shared areas of inattention and ignorance.

The members of any family share obliviousness to vast amounts of information, and they must do so. But that does not mean obliviousness about any specific matter is good for the family. Sometimes a family's obliviousness can

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make serious trouble for it. Because families are oblivious to so much and because their shared obliviousness can make serious trouble, I believe that we cannot understand families, how they function, how they get into trouble, how they solve or do not solve problems, or how to help them without understanding the ubiquity and dynamics of shared family obliviousness.

This book is intended to open a new line of theorizing about families and family systems. It builds on many theoretical traditions, but most of all on family systems theory, and offers extensions to that theory. The topic of shared family obliviousness is new ground for the family field and the social sciences. There are works about individual awareness and unawareness and works about family members sharing values, a culture, and the like, but no published work that I know of has pulled that material together, provided a framework that covers the disparate areas, and opened up the broad area of shared family obliviousness for theoretical analysis.

The Necessity of Shared Obliviousness in Family Systems

Family systems, like other information processing systems, cannot possibly function or function well if the system as a whole and its members as individuals try to keep track of too much. There is an infinity of information available. Even a minute amount of all the information that is potentially available would be far too much for a family to process. And most of the available information is useless and would be distracting in terms of what a family and its members need or want to know or are capable of knowing. So the system must set priorities about what to attend to and what to ignore. In the sense that obliviousness to a vast amount of information means that a family has succeeded in prioritizing information so as not to be overloaded, shared obliviousness is an achievement of family system functioning.

How does a family achieve shared obliviousness? How does it come about that this is what the system is oblivious to and that is what it attends to? How is shared obliviousness built up and maintained? Presumably, family obliviousness is nurtured, demanded, and regulated by family system processes, including explicit and implicit family rules. That is, families are not randomly oblivious. Family system mechanisms are in operation that define what it is that family members should detect, attend to, know, perceive, talk about, remember, and respond to and what they should ignore and be unaware of. And these mechanisms are linked to societal rules and forces—including societal values, social pressures, what is in the mass media and in education systems, what is talked about in social circles in which family members travel, and what is important in family religious traditions and religious services.

However necessary shared obliviousness is, it can have its costs to a family. Shared obliviousness may block adaptations, interfere with connections

with other systems, and keep families ignorant in ways that prevent them from reaching goals that are important to them or that are even necessary for the continued existence of the family and individual family members.

Defining Shared Obliviousness

Obliviousness can be defined as a state of being unmindful or unaware of something, of being ignorant of it or not conscious of its existence. When obliviousness is shared in a family, the family members will individually and collectively distance, avoid, lack interest in, be unaware of, or lack engagement with relevant information, perspectives, meanings, interactions, places, memories, and events. Almost always, shared family obliviousness does not represent a choice by anyone in the family or by the family collectively. Shared family obliviousness just happens. And in that obliviousness they are unconcerned about (in large part, or quite possibly entirely, because unaware of) whatever it is they are oblivious about.

Shared obliviousness is a property of social systems. All social systems tune out a great deal of available information as they function and work toward what seem to be their goals. Systems can do this through a summation of individual obliviousness and through organizing in such a way that the system and everyone who is part of it is oblivious. This book is an extended commentary on how one category of systems, families, can organize to be oblivious. That organization includes values about what counts as interesting and important. It includes education that focuses family members here and not there, walls (literal and metaphoric) that block off certain information sources, and system-wide rules that define only certain information sources as worthy of attention.

General systems theories typically do not problematize inputs but assume that inputs are so obvious and can so be taken for granted that there is no reason for a system analyst to explore why it is that of all the potentially accessible inputs a system only detects and makes use of the ones it does. Similarly, in the information systems literature, information might be defined as any stimulus that has changed recipient knowledge (e.g., Lawrence, 1999, p. 2). By contrast, the concept of shared obliviousness introduces the notion that systems at some level must always select and filter information. They must always have processes for separating what to attend to from what not to attend to. Understanding the bases for those processes would tell us a lot more than simply assuming that inputs are whatever they are or that they exist if something changes in the system in response to them. Inputs to systems should not be taken for granted. It is better instead to raise questions about how it is that the system takes in or reacts to this and not that.

Shared family obliviousness does not necessarily involve a lack of focus or absorption. Indeed, an important process of achieving obliviousness about

some matters is to be focused on and absorbed in other matters. Hence, an important reason for a family system to focus on this or that is that it is then much easier for it to be oblivious to other things. For more on this, see chapter 2.

Shared family obliviousness often happens passively. Family members live their lives and only encounter certain information. They may not resist information that comes to them, but often, as far as they are aware, it is only certain information that comes to them. But then how is it that some potential information is welcomed and much is treated as though it is nonexistent? How is it that some things count as information and some things do not? At any one instant there are trillions of bits of information immediately available or easily reached. People hear, see, smell, feel, taste this or that, but tune out vastly more than they tune into. Something has sensitized them to count some things as signal or information and other things as noise or noninformation.

Shared Obliviousness versus Individual Obliviousness

Although in the dictionary definition, in ordinary English language usage, and in everyday conversation and writing, obliviousness is seen as an individual phenomenon, this book focuses on shared obliviousness, on obliviousness as a family property, occurrence, experience, and achievement. Individuals are always in social systems, including family systems, and they are rarely, as this book argues, oblivious on their own. They are almost always oblivious with others in a system or oblivious in part because others in a system in which they participate are oblivious or want them to be oblivious. Thus, any analysis and critique of an individual's obliviousness that focuses only on the individual misses how much the obliviousness is linked to what goes on in the individual's family and in the other parts of the individual's social environment.

If we only look at individual obliviousness, we will not understand how much individual obliviousness is created by, maintained by, and in service to the family system. That is, often it is in the family system that the matters about which individuals are oblivious are targeted for obliviousness, and it is in the family system that much goes on that maintains individual obliviousness. And that obliviousness often has a value to the family system in maintaining the arrangements, rules, power structure, comforts, patterns, images, etc. that it has as a collectivity and that the individuals in the family share. Additionally, obliviousness in a family system may at times be linked to the deepest, most difficult, most daunting, most disruptive, most divisive, most hard to resolve, most painful relationship problems in that system. Even obviousness to something outside of the family system may be about

matters inside the system. For example, if members of a white family share obliviousness to racism outside the system, that could be in large measure about dynamics within the family—perhaps shared aspirations for status or shared discomfort with the idea that the family has gained immensely from unearned privilege because of being white.

Shared Obliviousness versus Denial

"Denial" overlaps with obliviousness in that with denial, as with obliviousness, people have tuned out information. But with denial there is an ongoing rejection of information that is available to people if they only were to attend to it, and this is information that at some time and in some way they knew existed. With shared family obliviousness there may not ever have been an awareness of the information to which the system is oblivious. Following Cohen (2001, pp. 7–9), people may deny that something is true; they may deny certain interpretations of what they accept as true, or they may deny the moral, psychological, or political implications of what they accept as true. For example, a family that denies that a family member is an alcoholic will have the bouts of drunkenness, the alcoholic failures to follow through on commitments, the empty bottles, the smell of alcohol, and so on in front of them recurrently. One could say that they are denying the evidence that these things are happening. One could say that they are not denying evidence but are denying the interpretation that the evidence means that alcoholism is present. Or one could say that they accept that the evidence exists and even label the evidence as clearly indicating that "alcoholism" is present, but they deny the moral implications, the psychological implications, or the implications for the family and its internal workings. In any case, by using the term *denial* we emphasize how they must rather actively persuade themselves that things (facts, interpretations, implications) are not what they would seem to be to an observer who is open and not defended against the available information.

I differentiate shared obliviousness from denial in that I think often families are oblivious without there ever having been the active elements implied in denial. There was, for example, never awareness in the family of anything concerning a family member's alcoholism or even of the concept of "alcoholism." Or if there was awareness of these things, there was never awareness of the meaning of what the family member did as representing alcoholism.

However, I can imagine situations in which shared obliviousness may arise from active denial mechanisms. That is, shared obliviousness can involve active efforts not to know, be aware, perceive, understand, interpret, remember, etc. Then it is not that family members only process the information that is available to them but that they actively work at keeping away from certain information or at not processing certain information. Perhaps it is too

uncomfortable for the family to think that Dad is an irresponsible drunk, so they do not (either because they avoid certain information about him or because they avoid interpreting that information). That raises questions about seemingly passive shared obliviousness. Is passive shared obliviousness sometimes a product of family members deciding not to seek or make sense of certain information? Is passive obliviousness at times a point in a process that at one time involved active choices about what to ignore or put aside? And is each family member on her or his own in being passively ignorant, or might others in the family help them toward that passive ignorance? Perhaps there are times when a family member becomes oblivious in order to please others in the family, to avoid family criticism or hostility, to honor family standards, or to be a proper kind of spouse, parent, sibling, offspring, grandchild, etc. The active versus passive distinction provides a point of differentiation between denial and obliviousness, but one could say that some areas of shared obliviousness involve denial or are based on past denials.

Shared Obliviousness versus Repression

"Repression" (Freud, 1924) can be understood as the psychological act by an individual of excluding memories, desires, feelings, wishes, or fantasies. From my perspective, many areas of shared family obliviousness have no relevance to Freud's notion of repression. These are areas that never have been matters of awareness, interest, emotional meaning, or psychological importance. For example, a family may share obliviousness to what for them is psychologically unimportant about politics in a distant country, the history of geology, or the meals eaten by their neighbors.

Freud certainly had a sense of larger social processes, for example, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1960), but the Freudian concept of repression rests on mechanisms of individual psychology. As such, one could make the case that Freudian repression is an engine that drives individual obliviousness in a system where the areas of shared obliviousness are ones in which people have tuned out information that once was known to some extent, that has great and challenging psychological meaning, and is therefore potentially of substantial importance. With "repression" and the forms of individual obliviousness that might be driven at least in part by repression, the information that is tuned out is never far from being available to know. With repression the mechanism of tuning out, at least in classic psychoanalytic thinking, involves active work that potentially could leak information (through errors and dreams, for example) about what was repressed. That could be true for some areas of shared family obliviousness (for example, when family members seemingly share obliviousness to sexual abuse within the family). But with most areas of shared family obliviousness,

there never was awareness or meaningfulness. So what family members are collectively oblivious to typically never had a meaningful place in memory, in thought categories, or even in language to put the information in if any family member should ever move toward giving up the obliviousness (cf. Bowker, 2005; DeVree, 1994). With repression and perhaps with areas of shared family obliviousness that arguably rest in part on individual repression, should the material ever become unrepressed, there would ordinarily be extremely meaningful, however uncomfortable, places to put the information. But I think most of what moves out of shared family obliviousness and into shared family awareness does not have much meaning to the family. So sometimes shared family obliviousness may be quite a bit like repression, but I think typically it is not.

Who Is to Say What Obliviousness Is?

Given that obliviousness can only be identified and reacted to if someone is not oblivious, the questions arise, "Who is to say what obliviousness is?" "Who is to say when there is shared family obliviousness?" From a postmodern perspective (e.g., Rosenau, 1992), there is not a solidly objective position from which to evaluate the world. One person might claim that obliviousness is present, while another sees things differently. Person A says something was overlooked; person B says there was nothing there to overlook. Person A says something was forgotten; person B says there was never anything to forget, or embedded in what is remembered is all that A says is forgotten. Person A says that a family is oblivious to something very important; person B says that A is concerned about trivia. Whose perspective counts? Who is correct? What are our criteria for deciding what is correct? Are these questions resolvable? If we believe they are, then a case can be made that a key issue for systems thinking is the question of who has standing to judge which viewpoint is correct or relevant (Flood, 1999, p. 70).

Related to the question of who is to say what obliviousness is, to say obliviousness is present one must be good at detecting what people are aware of, know, perceive, and think about. And this requires some location for observation, but any location for observation may be embedded in a system that creates, shapes, and sustains its own obliviousness. Moreover, some locations come with vested interests such that judging others to be ignorant or oblivious serves the economic or other interests of those doing the judging (Hobart, 1993). So in the perspective of this book, an observer's location is always open to question as a source of valid information untainted by the observer's own obliviousness. The detectors of obliviousness are inevitably limited by their own obliviousness and the systemic embeddedness, biases, values, and goals that are served by that obliviousness.

Obliviousness and Awareness Are Linked

Obliviousness is produced in systemic connection to what is attended to. In a sense, each needs the other. We could not be oblivious to a, b, and c if we were not looking at x, y, and z. We could not look at x, y, and z if we were not oblivious about a, b, and c.

From another perspective, obliviousness is always about difference, about what information is to be perceived or thought about or known versus what is not. For this difference to exist, there must be some awareness of the difference (Bateson, 1980, p. 76). Once something counts as information, other things do not. People might not have any reason to know much about what does not count as information, but at the very least by knowing what does count they have some sense of what does not, even though they might not know specifics about any of the things that do not count.

From still another perspective, a case can be made that obliviousness and awareness are at times in dialectical relationship. Discomfort with obliviousness or the realization that a certain area of obliviousness is not good for the family can motivate family discovery, curiosity, and learning. More generally, awareness of ignorance can lead to new knowledge (Schneider, 2006). The dialectic can also work the other way, with awareness and knowledge somehow pulling a family toward obliviousness—for example, if some sort of knowledge is too uncomfortable to deal with. The continuing discomfort may be in ongoing relationship with continuing efforts to be oblivious. And to the extent that the concept of dialectic calls for a synthesis of obliviousness and awareness we might look at situations where people work for superficial knowledge, for example, the skimming of headlines referred to in chapter 9. That is, resolution of the tension between knowledge and obliviousness might involve a synthesis that is part way between complete obliviousness and full knowledge, perhaps superficial knowledge or a commitment to knowing only the major, overarching information.

Shared Family Obliviousness as a Metaphor

One can take my usage of shared obliviousness as applied to families as a metaphor that draws on what we know about the obliviousness of individuals. Ordinarily, when English speakers use the term *oblivious*, it is the individual who tunes things out, is totally ignorant, even to the point of not being aware of his or her ignorance. As a metaphor, this usage of the term *oblivious* or *obliviousness* in writing about shared obliviousness highlights some matters and obscures others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). It highlights that families are like individuals in clearly being aware of some matters and clearly not being aware of others. It draws on the entailments of individual obliviousness to

suggest that certain things may go on with shared family obliviousness, for example, selective perception, having no interest in learning certain matters, turning a deaf ear to this or that, not giving a thought to certain matters, and lacking curiosity about those matters. However, to use the term *oblivious* or *obliviousness* metaphorically obscures that a family consists of diverse people, whose attentional interests, capacities for curiosity, remembering, and nondefensive information processing are likely to be diverse. From that perspective, all the members of a family may share obliviousness to some matter, but that obliviousness may be accomplished through family dynamics that swamp the individual diversity in the family. The metaphoric application to families of a concept usually applied to individuals also obscures how much family members may be diverse in what brings them as individuals to shared obliviousness to some matter, and they can also be diverse in how much they push on other family matters to be oblivious to these matters. It can be one person's anxiety, defensiveness, rage, hunger to learn, curiosity, moral outrage, or accidental learning that can drive what a family shares obliviousness to and what it is not oblivious to.

Defining Family and Family System

Defining family is not simple, since many people, both the general public and scholars who focus on families, seem to be oblivious to how people define family as they live their everyday lives (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990). Defining family is also subject to hot political debate these days—for example, as it applies to same-sex couples or to whom an employee can designate as family for purposes of family medical benefits. Complicating efforts to define family, there is an enormous diversity of families within and across cultures and also an enormous diversity of conceptions of family across cultures and history. I believe the analyses in this book hold up no matter how family is defined, as long as the definition excludes groups of people who have no interactions. I do not assume that couples in families must be heterosexual or married to count as part or all of a family. I do not assume that a family must share a house or must be multigenerational. I do not assume that members of the family see the family in the same way or that family members agree on who is in the family or whether they are a family. I do not assume that families are egalitarian or patriarchal or dominated by one person. And even though I write about shared family obliviousness, I do not assume that family members see things in the same way or know the same things. In fact, it is a central characteristic of families that family members are diverse in opinions, knowledge, awareness, memories, and much else. So this book focuses on shared obliviousness but also pays a great deal of attention to situations in which family members do not share obliviousness or come to shared obliviousness from the same place.

A family is a system because of the interdependency and connection of at least some of the members and because there is a certain amount of order and pattern to what goes on among its members (see Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 51). The patterning, though recurrent, also may change (because situations change, individuals change, relationships change). In focusing on the system, the focus is on interaction and process, not separate individuals and not a personified family that thinks, feels, acts, and remembers as though it were an individual. The focus on family system is then on what goes on between and among family members. So this book on obliviousness in family systems focuses a great deal on how shared obliviousness is shaped, determined, and often shared as a result of the interconnections of family members. It also focuses on how the differentiation in awareness and knowledge is shaped and determined as a result of the interconnection of family members.

In saying that a family is a system, I am not saying that family members are in agreement about who is in the family. Family members may often differ about who is in the family or whether they are a family. The outside analyst offers one view of the system, not the only view. And if an outside analyst relies on the views of one or several family members in order to build up a view of a family, that does not mean that is the only view that could be derived from how family members characterize the family. So when it comes to thinking about obliviousness in a family, perhaps the members of the family share many areas of obliviousness, and perhaps they are in agreement on a number of matters, but there will always be areas of difference. Family members may be oblivious to some of their differences, assuming that they are similar or alike when they are not. But they will also have differences that they are aware of, and some differences will be matters with which they struggle (Gilbert, 1996). Family members may also be oblivious to their interconnections and to the ordering and patterning of their relationships, which is interesting from the point of view of trying to understand the family but also challenging from the point of view of using what family members say in order to understand the family.

First Theoretical Tools for Thinking about Shared Family Obliviousness

System Control

From the perspective of family systems theory (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1994), systems need order. Without order there is no system and quite possibly no capacity to maintain an adaptive fit to physical, social, symbolic, etc. environments (Buckley, 1967, pp. 164–206; Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Family systems operate with mechanisms that maintain order (Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Rosenblatt,

1994, pp. 128–51). Among those mechanisms are explicit and implicit rules about what family members may or may not do and feedback loops that stop deviations from accepted patterns (quite possibly including chiding, correcting, threatening, or even expelling rule-violating family members). Shared family obliviousness is an important mechanism for maintaining order. It can be, for example, a defense against information that would disrupt family order. It can be a shield against what is outside and a protection of what is inside the family. It makes it difficult for certain kinds of outside information to enter the system and then rock the boat or change the system. This does not mean that system order is necessarily benign or that the information from the outside would be harmful to family members. It only means that systems tend to maintain the order they have, whether that order is good or not by some standard. One might think, for example, that once the members of a Florida family understand that there is a good chance that global warming will lead to the destruction of coastal and southern Florida in their lifetime, they could hardly maintain their current system of mundane priorities, plans, investments, and activities. So a control system that pushes for shared obliviousness to global warming maintains the family system as it is and blocks it from taking global warming as a serious threat.

One framing that some general systems theories offer is the idea of systems as about information (e.g., Bertalanffy, 1968, pp. 41–44; Frick, 1959), the transmission of information, the exchange of information, limits on where information goes, and inputs of information being transformed by the system into informational outputs. If we think of family systems in terms of information, we can also think that family information systems only work well if they are not overloaded (Paolucci, Hall, & Axinn, 1977, pp. 116–17), and if they manage information processing effectively. Thus, information processing would ordinarily require ignoring substantial amounts of information. As Frick (1959, p. 614) wrote, in information theory "information, and ignorance, choice, prediction, and uncertainty are all intimately related." As he saw it, information processing is limited by the capacity of the system to make use of information. From that perspective, if a family system is not attuned to information about how the choices being made about where to live are bad for the health of people in the system, it cannot make use of the information, however plentiful and accessible such information seems to others. Or consider, to take another kind of example, family systems as being about genetic information. Genetic information is combined to make new humans. Genetic systems only work because they are closed to all sorts of information that is irrelevant or harmful, so in a sense the biology of DNA, gametes, and reproduction hinges on the obliviousness of reproductive systems to almost all the information that is out there. Genes only use the DNA they are organized to use in the ways they are organized to use it,

not all the other DNA and combinations of DNA and not the other combinations of proteins that fill their environment. The information that is kept out would, if allowed in, create disorder or undermine the system's functioning. Extending the analogy to family systems, all family systems maintain system control by being closed to a great deal of information, and they must do this in order to function.

Congruent with the idea that systems must maintain system control through obliviousness, Frick (1959, p. 615) asserted that a system that is open to a greater range of information faces more uncertainty, and that uncertainty requires even more information and information processing. For example, if a couple considering where to settle in retirement knows a great deal on many dimensions of importance to them about a thousand different possible retirement locations throughout the world, their lack of obliviousness will make it difficult to come to a decision. If they only consider two locations and do not know much about them, their decision will be much easier. So obliviousness helps to make easier and quicker decisions. It does not necessarily make wiser decisions or the best possible decisions by all criteria, but it makes things happen.

Another perspective on system control through obliviousness comes from the Corning and Kline (1998) view that information is not a thing in itself but an aspect of the relationship between things. So obliviousness is, in that sense, nonrelationship. Thus, if a system is oblivious to certain events or phenomena there is no capacity in the system to control or use whatever comes from those events or phenomena. And conversely, if a system has no capacity to use or control a certain body of information, then obliviousness to that information makes perfect sense. On a related line of argument, thinking of family systems holistically demands that we understand how obliviousness is meaningfully linked to the other elements of the systems. Klinger (1977, pp. 42–43) argued that a primary mechanism for selective attention by individuals and hence for individual obliviousness is the importance or interest value of what is attended to. From that perspective, people are oblivious to what they think does not matter much or at all to them, and hence if something becomes important for some reason it becomes a new source of selective attention. As Klinger saw it, there is an attentional mechanism which he called "preattentive processes" (Klinger, 1977, p. 44, citing Neisser, 1967). These processes represent motivation, interests, and related matters that make some things important to attend to and others not and apparently are in operation while attention seems fully focused somewhere else or, as in sleep, nowhere at all (Klinger, 1977, p. 46). Extending Klinger's analysis to families, we would expect family obliviousness to be linked to shared family values and goals, and these "preattentive processes" are central to the attentional control system of families. (For more on this, see chapter 9.)

In the Kantor and Lehr (1975) analysis of family systems, there is a kind of obliviousness in the sense that information remains unimportant as long as family members do not recognize it as being relevant to the family (p. 40). Furthermore, in the Kantor and Lehr analysis, the information that counts is information that regulates emotional and physical distance among family members. Since, in their thinking, each family member is also a semiautonomous system, it is possible for family member A to bring information into the life of other family members, because for family member A the information has some interest. Once it is brought into family interaction, it can become important if it is shaped to fit into and become part of the distance regulation of the system.

A final way to introduce the idea that obliviousness and system control are linked is to consider the concept in systems thought of structural coupling (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 102). It is the idea that a system and its environment are a unity and must co-evolve. From that perspective, obliviousness in a family system co-evolves with aspects of its environment. So, for example, if shared obliviousness to racial, class, and other privileges exists in a family, it co-evolves with segregation in neighborhood, workplace, religious congregation, local schools, and health care, so that, among other things, the privilege never has to be questioned or challenged. It also would co-evolve with a political and economic system that maintains the other parts of the ecosystem that co-evolve with the shared family obliviousness. So the control aspects of a family system are not only inherent in the family system. They are also inherent in the systems with which the family is coupled.

Shared Obliviousness and the Analysis of Family Systems

Another relevant area of systems thinking is "critical systems heuristics" (Ulrich, 2002, 2003). In Ulrich's (2002, 2003) perspective, "boundary critique" is at the core of critical systems heuristics. It is the idea that decisions are always made about which facts and norms are considered relevant in systems analysis and which are not. What is included within the boundaries is the basis for rationality, systems analysis, and everyday life. What is considered outside the boundaries is generally ignored. This selectivity, Ulrich wrote, merits critical analysis in order to understand what underlies the selectivity and to explore the ethical issues involved. Thus, boundary critique may lead to a challenge of boundary decisions and to competing ideas of what should and should not be brought within the boundaries. By bringing in new facts or values, we can reach new boundary judgments, and these judgments may often lead to new benefits as previously ignored system pieces and phenomena are included and as those people who were not benefited or were even harmed by the prior boundary judgments possibly find their realities

and needs counting more with the new boundary judgments. Underlying critical systems thinking is sensitivity to the social and political power issues underlying one systems analysis versus another (Midgley, 1996). I think the analysis this book offers of shared family obliviousness is in the spirit of critical systems heuristics in challenging systems views that do not pay attention to shared obliviousness.

Family Obliviousness and the Construction of Reality

From the viewpoint of social construction theory and symbolic interaction theory, one can think about a couple or family as constantly in the process of constructing and reconstructing reality together (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 157). In this view, the key to reality construction is talk. By talking together, couples and families talk the day's events at home and at work, the events in the news, the meaning of their meal together, and so on into reality. Part of the reality they create has to do with importance. By not talking about X and Y but talking about Z, they are saying X and Y are not important, but Z is. There is only so much family or couple time for talk (in fact, often very little—Rosenblatt, 2006). So reality construction in a family or couple requires obliviousness to a great deal.

In the process of reality construction, a couple or family selects and organizes information, symbols, and concepts in order to create realities that have some coherence and consistency. That means that they must put aside and ignore information that does not fit those realities, and they will not seek information inconsistent with those realities (Rosenblatt & Wright, 1984). However, some of the information they have put aside because it is inconsistent with their constructed realities will be in the shadows, not lost (Rosenblatt & Wright, 1984). Thus, if their constructed reality is that they are a good and loving family, they may have in the shadows information about the times they have been nasty to each other, bored by each other, emotionally distant, and disgusted with each other. If they remain even somewhat aware of inconsistent or contradictory information, that information threatens to undermine their constructed realities. One would expect that they would work at being oblivious to what does not fit their current constructed realities. However, to the extent that the inconsistent and contradictory information still exists in memory or in their everyday interactions, it may at some time lead to an abrupt flip out of the current reality and into a new one that fits what has been in the shadows (Rosenblatt & Wright, 1984). Then they might have the reality that they hate each other, are emotionally distant, and do not love each other, and what they would then work at being oblivious to and keeping in the shadows is information inconsistent or contradictory to that reality.

Family Obliviousness as a Defense against Other Systems

A family system exists in a world of many systems that are or could be in contact with the family—for example, the systems of employers, schools, and neighboring families. The family and these other systems may at time be in conflict for resources (for example, a family member's time). They may at times be in conflict over competing views of reality (for example, that the good life involves dedication to one's family versus the good life involves dedication to one's work). Certain aspects of shared family obliviousness may be understood as strategic acts in these conflicts. If, for example, a family's obliviousness means that the family members tune out the standards, claims, and arguments coming from another system, that helps the family to maintain its own standards. The obliviousness closes the family to, for example, hostile ideas and bits of information from the other systems that could undermine commitment to the realities of the family's current system. From a family systems theory perspective (Rosenblatt, 1994), one can understand the defense as a matter of establishing and maintaining the external boundaries of the family. If a family cannot resist the forces for change coming from outside, at the very least it cannot remain stable. Perhaps it cannot even continue to exist as a system of meaningful, organized relationships.

Family Obliviousness and What Members Are Set to Sense

Obliviousness in families can be understood as a product of what it is that people are organized in their families to sense. For example, we humans are generally unaware that gravity waves generated in deep space are constantly passing through our bodies (Blair & McNamara, 1997). Our bodies did not evolve to detect gravity waves, and our families have not given us any reason to build and use artificial sensors to detect gravity waves in our everyday life. So we are not organized to sense them. On the other hand, many families have organized to detect the dangers that are meaningful to them in the environments in which they function. For example, if a family has decided that the members are vulnerable to drive-by shootings, any family member might be instantly aware that it is evening and a car with its lights out is moving slowly down the street toward the family house.

From the perspective of Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974), people are oblivious to what is not in frame. The frame defines what it going on, what is important, what has meaning, and what language should be used to talk about what is going on. Whatever is out of frame is irrelevant. Frame and the selective attention that is part of it are constructed out of sociological processes, including, to a very important extent, family conversation (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 157). From a frame

analysis perspective, while one is in a frame established by family it would typically be strange and meaningless to leave the family frame behind and to move into a very different frame. However, in Goffman's view, it is certainly possible to move to a new frame, a new definition of the situation, and that could open up areas to which one has been oblivious. It also seems possible for frames to clash in a particular setting—for example, for people with very different views of something to debate with each other or for an individual to be torn between, say, a family frame and an occupational one. But even with frame switching or situations where more than one frame is functioning, I think it is safe to assume that there still is an enormous amount that would remain matters of obliviousness to all the frames in play.

Obliviousness and Attentional Economics

There is vastly more going on in the world and even in a family than any individual or an entire family can attend to. Of necessity, there must be some sort of attentional economics operating to select what is attended to versus what is ignored (Bateson, 1972, p. xv; Schneider, 2006; Thorngate, 1988).

I believe that the chaos that comes with trying to process too much information is something that the members of many families have encountered. The family at times attempts to take on too much information, and then problems arise. Communication errors occur, misperceptions and errors of judgment increase, important information is missed, possessions are lost or misplaced, high priority chores fail to be done, things are forgotten or overlooked that are much too important in the family priority system to be forgotten or overlooked, accidents happen. At this point family members might quite possibly become conscious that they have tried to process too much information and that they must do something to lighten the information load. I think that many families will have had such experiences and will have family values that give importance to something like attentional economics, to keeping things more simple than they might be.

In a rational attentional system, choices would be made in terms of likely gain from paying attention to this versus that, or perhaps there would be a more basic principle of attending in order to minimize harm, damage, or threats to survival. But there is so much to attend to that it is impossible to know even the littlest bit about more than a very small fraction of it all. So I think it is impossible for a family system to be perfectly rational in sifting and evaluating all possible choices of what to attend to.

Also, what can seem to be about attentional economics is often, as I argue more fully at a number of places in this book, not about attentional economics but helps families avoid what is threatening or dangerous, uncomfortable, disruptive of a wide range of routines, or capable of making family

members feel guilty, ashamed, or diminished. Connected to this is the question of whether, when, or how often decisions to attend to this or that and to be oblivious to other things are made consciously or represent unconscious processes. I would imagine (following Cohen, 2001, pp. 3–6) that these decisions are sometimes made consciously by at least some members of a family, sometimes made unconsciously, and sometimes a blend (for example, family members may choose consciously not to learn enough to have to make a conscious decision about whether to attend to information about how many children starve to death in the world each day). I would also think that what is conscious may become unconscious and vice versa. I am sure, for example, that there are conscious mechanisms that at times move family members or a whole family from obliviousness to attention. That is, even if there were unconscious processes underlying a family's obliviousness to, say, global warming or their own heterosexual privilege, events could occur that would make paying attention to these matters a fully conscious act.