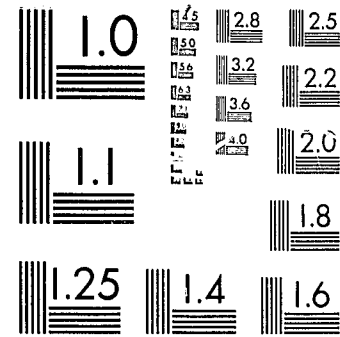


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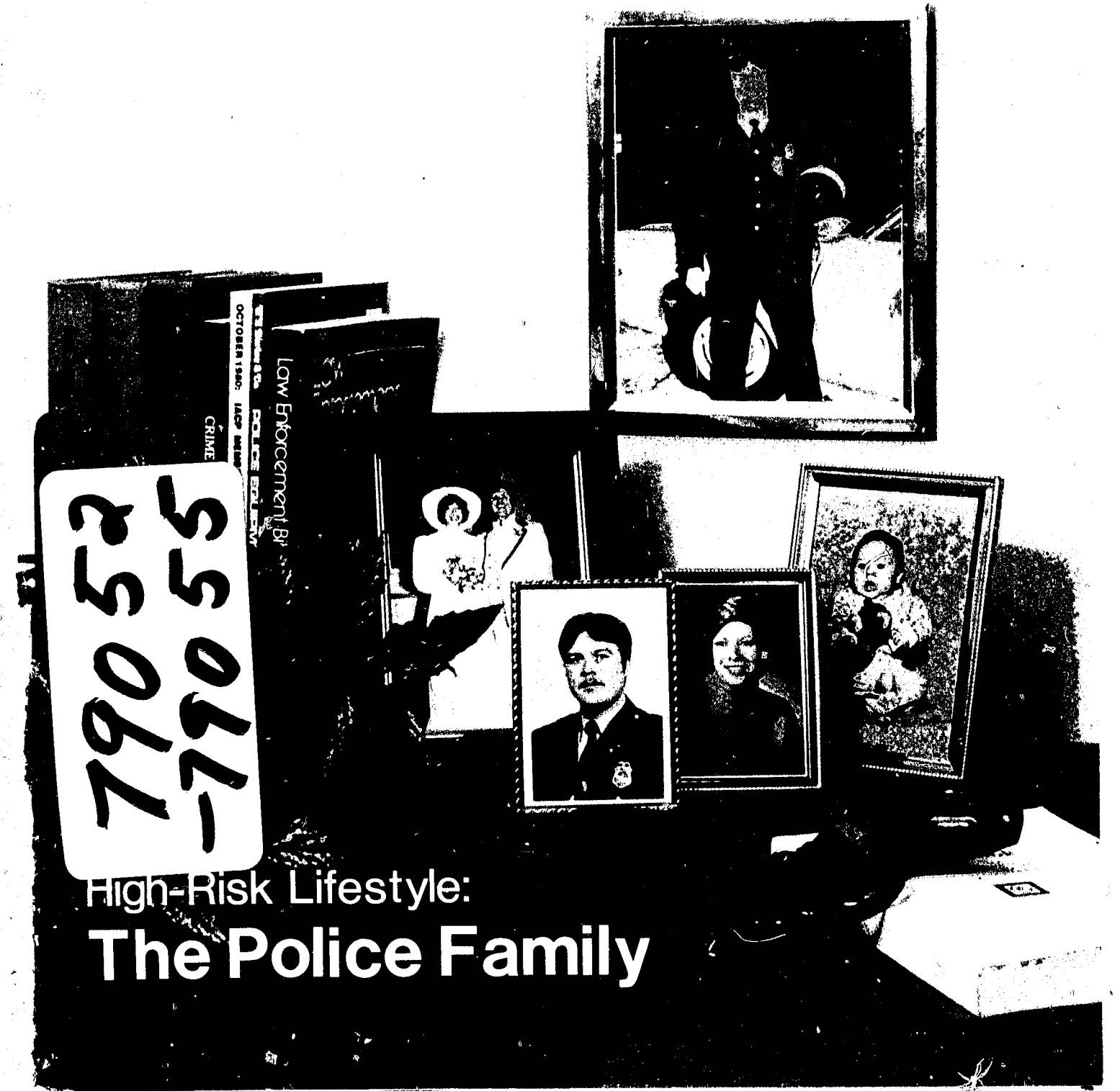
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# FBI LAW ENFORCEMENT BULLETIN

AUGUST 1981



## High-Risk Lifestyle: The Police Family

# FBI LAW ENFORCEMENT BULLETIN

AUGUST 1981, VOLUME 50, NUMBER 8 U.S. Department of Justice National Institute of Justice

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Trying to cope with a difficult lifestyle poses many problems for the law enforcement officer. See story page 7.

Federal Bureau of Investigation  
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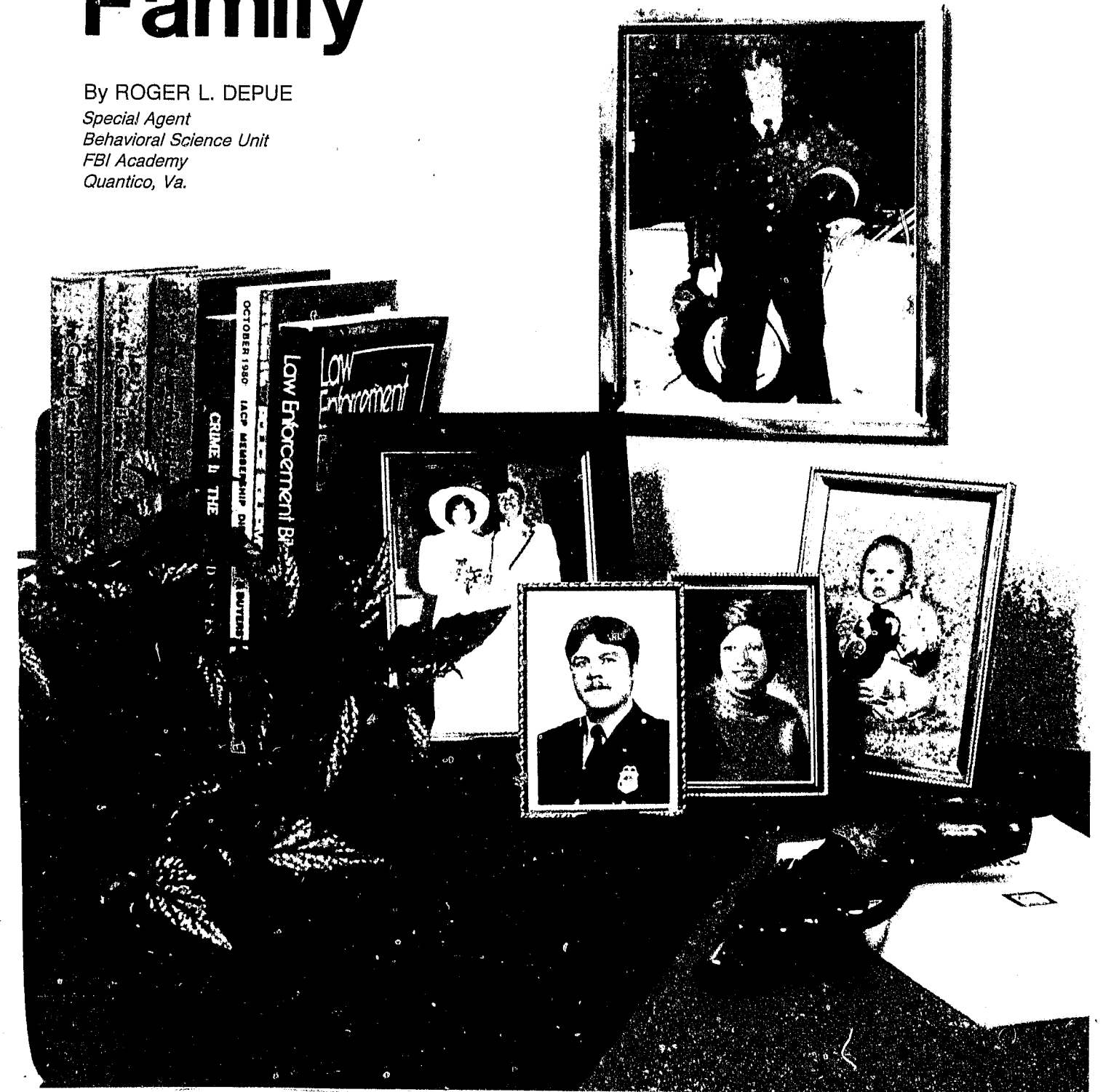


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# High-Risk Lifestyle: The Police Family

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MF 2

Personnel  
79053



As I erased the chalkboard after the class, I noticed he was waiting to speak to me. I finished my chore and turned to face a well-built young man about 25 years of age. A fine looking law enforcement trainee, I thought.

"Yes, what can I do for you?" I said.

He smiled briefly and then his face turned serious as he said, "How am I going to tell my wife that this job comes first?"

"Pardon me?" I said.

"How am I going to tell my wife that this job must take precedence over everything else?" he continued. "I mean, how did you tell your wife?"

I paused, my eyes searching his face and finding only sincerity in it. I answered, "I've never had to tell her that."

Law enforcement work is a special kind of job. Sometimes it can be regarded as too special and it interferes with other important areas of human development and life satisfaction. One area often negatively affected by the police occupational lifestyle is the formation of a family life that is satisfying to all its members.

We will examine human development from three perspectives—individual, occupational, and familial—briefly review the literature regarding personal human development, introduce the concept of developmental tasks, and then turn to occupational development. The police occupation will be examined as it affects the personality of the police officer moving through the law enforcement career from police trainee to veteran officer. Finally, literature regarding the developmental process of family living will be examined.

The three areas of human development mentioned previously are important to life satisfaction but they can, and often do, conflict with one another. Overemphasis in one area can cause faulty development to occur in other areas. A balance must be established and maintained between each of the three areas in order to achieve a rewarding and satisfying life.

There has been a great deal written about the high incidence of marital discord and divorce among law en-

forcement officers. Marriage to a police officer involves coping with a difficult lifestyle. Police occupational development often seems to have an adverse impact on familial development. This unfortunate situation may be averted through knowledge of human development and the cultivation of interpersonal awareness and communication skills which tend to facilitate healthy development.

#### Background

A study of human nature reveals that man attempts to adapt to the environment by developing patterns of behavior that allow much of one's daily activities to become almost automatic. These patterns of behavior become the daily routine. To the extent that the environment changes, the old patterns of behavior are no longer appropriate for successful adaptation and new responses are experimented with. Eventually, new patterns of behavior which are more appropriate to living in the changed environment are developed and the daily routine changes.

This process of readaptation is stressful in that a change upsets the balance an individual has worked out between himself and the environment. As the amount of change increases, the individual must expend greater amounts of energy in order to find behavior that will reestablish the balance. Difficulty in adapting to significant change(s) over a period of centuries threatens the very survival of a species. On an individual level, failure to adapt to life change produces stress powerful enough to result in the deterioration of health, both mentally and physically.<sup>1</sup>

#### Human Development

Developmental psychology is the study of the ongoing formation of the human personality. The developmental process is usually described in terms of predictable stages of normal (based on norms) development. That is, development based on observations made by scientists studying large numbers of persons over long periods of time. Child development literature offers examples of established norms of growth, maturation, and development for infants. The normal infant is expected to creep, crawl, stand, and walk at predetermined periods of time (age levels) in the infancy growth cycle.<sup>2</sup> Any significant departure from the established norms is cause for concern to knowledgeable parents, teachers, and physicians. The developmental process should be monitored in order to identify potential problems in time to take corrective action so that continued development will not be adversely affected.

In the general field of psychology, Sigmund Freud was among the first to account for human behavior as being largely the result of early learning experiences during certain developmental stages that occur in accordance with a predetermined natural plan. In his psychoanalytic theory, he discussed the stages of psychosexual development as oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital. Each stage of development was said to make new demands on the individual, to create new tasks which had to be dealt with successfully, and to arouse conflicts that had to be resolved before further growth and progress could take place.<sup>3</sup>

Today, the study of human development includes the entire lifespan of man. Among others, Erickson,<sup>4</sup> Havighurst,<sup>5</sup> Levinson,<sup>6</sup> and Sheehy<sup>7</sup> have identified stages, "seasons," or "passages" persons pass through on the lifelong journey from infancy to old age. Each development stage includes many predictable challenges, crises, and problems that must be met and resolved before further progress in life adaptation can continue.



Special Agent Depue

Yale social psychologist Daniel Levinson says in his book, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, that a man will experience at least three major life transition periods. He identifies them as early adult transition (ages 17-22 years), the midlife transition (ages 40-45 years), and the late adult transition (ages 60-65). Each transition period is a potential crisis and should be planned for, fully understood, and dealt with properly. A man must make appropriate adaptation responses to life changes or risk serious maladaptive consequences.<sup>8</sup>

Havighurst discusses the concept of developmental tasks.<sup>9</sup> Developmental tasks are adjustment problems tied to periods of life which must be successfully resolved before growth to more sophisticated levels of functioning can occur. Failure to resolve properly developmental tasks can, therefore, inhibit further development or cause "blind spots" to exist in certain areas of functioning. An example might be the need to learn appropriate intimate behavior between sexes during adolescence. Adolescents learning to embrace go through a trial and error period. There is desire, fear, uncertainty, awkwardness, groping, and misdirected aim. This unsophisticated condition is largely unnoticed by the adolescent partner, who is similarly confused. While the condition is appropriate for adolescents, it would certainly be inappropriate for a 30-year-old adult. An adult who does not have some level of sophistication involving skills for intimate contact with the opposite sex is socially impaired and may not find a partner with the patience and tolerance to afford the opportunity for this belated development. In other words, failure to develop certain life skills while in a particular growth phase can result in inappropriate functioning which adversely affects further development.

#### Occupational Development

Occupations also appear to have a pattern of development. For instance, there is the applicant phase, the recruit and training phase, the probationary period, the journeyman phase, the specialization, administrative advancement, or veteran phase, and the periods of preretirement, retirement, and postretirement. These stages of occupational development also have their attendant developmental tasks and conflicts. They, too, must be recognized and dealt with for successful adjustment to life circumstances.

In law enforcement, the applicant is often a person who views the job in an idealistic and "romantic" way. The fictionalized "super cop" image fostered by the media has frequently contributed to the occupational interest of this jobseeker. Screening and selection procedures also serve to give the recruit officer a feeling of joining a specially chosen and somewhat elite group of persons.

The training period can be likened to the beginning of an acclimation process. The trainee begins to attach to and identify with the police culture.

Dr. Martin Reiser, Los Angeles Police Department psychologist, explains it as follows:

"The recruit's concept of himself undergoes some modification as those attributes in his value system change along with his new identification as a police officer. He may see himself as opposed to and disliking people and behavior that were previously conflict free."<sup>10</sup>

The homogeneity of the peer group, the mutual expectations of the job, and the uniformity of standards contribute to the formation of an occupational personality. The young police officer actually looks, acts, and feels different from other members of society.

During the probationary period, the officer works hard to prove competence and gain acceptance within the group. He experiences "shock" at trying to provide services, maintain order, and enforce laws among persons who often hate and despise what police work represents. The officer becomes more and more defensive. It is a difficult time, requiring much new learning.

In the next stage the officer develops a tough exterior to help cope with the threats of abuse and the personal danger of the working environment. Reiser refers to this toughening process as the "John Wayne Syndrome."<sup>11</sup> It impacts both male and female officers and involves a cool authoritative demeanor and over-control of emotion. This behavioral syndrome lasts for several years. The officer spends long hours on the job, uses police jargon, associates with police types, and is suspicious and critical of nonpolice people. Niederhoffer examined the changes which occur in police personality from idealism to cynicism over a period of years, noting that cynicism peaks at about the eighth year of service.<sup>12</sup>

The journeyman phase is next. The officer begins to settle down and mellow. The years of experience have provided poise and self-confidence so the job can be accomplished in a more relaxed and comfortable manner.<sup>13</sup> It is at this developmental stage that serious career decisions are made. These decisions lead to a continuation in the present assignment as a veteran patrol officer, the development of a specialization (detective, training, police community relations work, etc), or to administrative advancement.

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### **"Marriage to a police officer involves coping with a difficult lifestyle."**

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The retirement periods include dealing with preretirement, retirement, and postretirement developmental tasks. It is a time of "mustering out" of the brotherhood and rejoining the general society. It is often an unsettling time, involving a great change in lifestyle.

#### **Familial Development**

As in the studies of personal human development and occupational development, social scientists studying families have also identified a developmental process in the life cycle of the family. To start a family is to start a new organization. The partners bring with them hopes, fears, desires, expectations, habits, and values from the families of origin. It is very important for the partners to take the necessary steps early in the relationship to solve problems arising from differing personal histories and move toward a mutually satisfying lifestyle.

Noted family therapist Salvador Minuchin discusses the family as follows:

"The family is a social unit that faces a series of developmental tasks.

These differ along the parameters of cultural differences, but they have universal roots."<sup>14</sup>

Minuchin says that every family must solve the problems of relating to one another, raising children, dealing with the in-laws, and coping with the outside world. To make life together possible, a new couple must participate in a series of negotiations to arrive at necessary compromises. In an effort to arrive at mutual accommodation, negotiations are necessary to establish routines for such activities as going to bed, getting up, eating meals, being naked, achieving sexual satisfaction, "going out," and sharing such things as the bathroom, television, and the Sunday morning comics.<sup>15</sup>

Minuchin points out that each marriage partner must separate from the family of origin and establish a new satisfying relationship with the other partner. They must develop "patterned transactions"—ways in which one partner monitors and triggers behavior in the other. He refers to these transactional patterns as a "web of complementary demands."<sup>16</sup>

It is important to note that if these developmental tasks are not successfully resolved, progress toward mutual accommodation can be impaired and development of a deeper relationship inhibited. Just as with the adolescent who does not have successful experiences in building relationships with members of the opposite sex and is later "ill-at-ease" in their presence, so too is the marriage partner who has not worked out a system for resolving disagreements over lifestyle and is later uncomfortable and unable to move toward satisfaction of personal desires.

In his book, *Families and Family Therapy*, Minuchin gives an example of a young couple who delayed addressing some developmental tasks of early marriage because the male partner was a full-time college student and did not have the time to learn to be a husband and father. When he graduated from college, he was literally a misfit in his family roles. He had to attempt to learn what he had missed. He had to develop the patterned transactions leading to his own satisfaction, the satisfaction of his spouse, and each of his children. He had to struggle to learn that communicative behavior which he could have "naturally" learned at the appropriate time and phase of life.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of balance also enters into theories of family development. Dr. Murry Bowen, a pioneer in family therapy, has characterized the family as a system. Bowen states that "any relationship with balancing forces and counterforces in constant operation is a system."<sup>18</sup>

Family systems theory is a special kind of applied psychology that deals with intimate relationships. It examines the roles of the individual family members, the context, rules, alliances, and frequently traces family history and development back through several generations.

When it is operating in balance, the family represents one of man's most efficient methods for achieving satisfaction of human needs and desires. When the balance is upset, life can become miserable.

Entering police work imposes a significant change of environment for the officer and his family. The police officer is removed from the mainstream of American life. The uniform sets the officer apart from other members of society, and the nature of the work is unlike that of any other occupation. The officer is often awake while others are asleep, at work while others are at play, and at home while others are traveling on a holiday.

The occupational lifestyle all too frequently upsets the balance of family life. The new spouse of the officer has expectations of what married life will be like. These expectations are usually based on the lifestyle of an "ordinary" American family. The farther reality deviates from the expected, the greater the strain on the adjustment mechanisms.

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### **"Each development stage includes many predictable challenges, crises, and problems that must be met and resolved before further progress in life adaptation can continue."**

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Dr. Bowen puts it this way:

"When anxiety increases and remains chronic for a certain period, the organism develops tension, either within itself or in the relationship system, and the tension results in symptoms or dysfunction or sickness."<sup>19</sup>

#### **The Family vs. The Job**

When the developmental process of the law enforcement occupation is coupled with that of the family, severe strain can result, especially during the early stages of each. In other words, trouble can be expected in the relationship of the recently married "rookie" police officer. At the same time the job is making the greatest demands and exerting the most influence on the new officer, the marriage is requiring the most attention and positive efforts for relationship building.

Like the college student in Minuchin's example who was dominated by his student role, a police officer can be dominated by the occupational role. Dr. Minuchin points out that following marriage, the new couple must resolve a variety of developmental tasks leading to "mutual accommodation." For instance, he says, "Decisions must be reached as to how the demands of the outside world will be allowed to intrude on the life of the new family."<sup>20</sup>

Police wife Pat James described how the job of her husband became part of her married life:

"One of the first revelations was that I was involved from the very start in a triangle, a three-sided romance.

My rival was, is, and apparently always will be my husband's work."<sup>21</sup>

This statement characterizes the feelings of many wives of police officers. Elaine Niederhoffer, coauthor of *The Police Family: From Station House to Ranch House*, reiterates the feeling by entitling the first chapter of her book, "The Police Occupation: A Jealous Mistress."<sup>22</sup>

When one examines this view of the police officer's job from the viewpoint of family systems theory, it takes on rather weighty importance. When an occupation is viewed as being such an integral part of the family, there exists the very real possibility that the occupation will become part of a triangle.

Dr. Bowen defines a triangle as "a three-person emotional configuration. . . ." <sup>23</sup> It is the smallest stable relationship system.

Dr. Bowen explains it:

"In periods of calm, the triangle is made up of a comfortably close twosome and a less comfortable outsider. The twosome works to preserve the togetherness, lest one become uncomfortable and form a better togetherness elsewhere. The outsider seeks to form a togetherness with one of the twosome. . . ." <sup>24</sup>

The core problem in the relationship system is called fusion. Fusion indicates a blurring of self-boundaries, the merging of self and other, the loss of individual identity. Normally, if the pull for togetherness becomes too strong, and it threatens to usurp individuality, there is a counteractive pull away.

Family therapists Elizabeth A. Carter and Monica McGoldrick Orfanidis explain triangling as follows:

"Few people can relate personally for very long before running into some issue in their relationship that makes one or both anxious, at which

point it is automatic to triangle in a third person or thing as a way of diverting the anxiety in the relationship of the twosome. It is dysfunctional in the sense that it offers stabilization through diversion, rather than through resolution of the issue in the twosome's relationship. Thus a couple under stress may focus on a child whose misbehavior gives them something to come together on in mutual concern. Repeated over time, triangling will become a chronic dysfunctional pattern preventing resolution of differences in the marriage and making one or more of the three vulnerable to physical or emotional symptoms, because stabilization with dysfunction, although problematic, is experienced as preferable to change."<sup>25</sup>

Fogarty describes triangles as "the building blocks of the immature family." It is the effort to project the problem in a relationship outside and onto another person or thing.<sup>26</sup>

Carter and Orfanidis talk about detriangling as "the process whereby one of these three frees himself from the enmeshment of the three and develops separate person-to-person relationships with each of the other two."<sup>27</sup>

Applied to the police occupation, this means that a job viewed with such importance may be treated like a person by the officer and like a scapegoat by the spouse. Friction with the spouse may move the officer closer to the job as a source of satisfaction and pleasure. The same friction may cause the spouse to project the blame onto the occupation instead of confronting the officer partner.

Neither action does anything to address the real problem of the faulty family relationship. The unresolved conflicts build toward symptom formation and dysfunction within the system. Detriangling is necessary. The fusion must be broken up and person-to-person relations reestablished.

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All families experience conflict. The families affording the greatest satisfaction to their members have found ways to resolve successfully the serious conflicts. The process of resolving conflict involves dealing with developmental tasks which occur at various stages in the relationship so that progress toward greater satisfaction (Minuchin's mutual accommodation) can be accomplished. Until developmental tasks are dealt with, the relationship remains at a premature level of development. It is like the child who never learns to talk. Language is essential to most areas of further social development and without this communicative skill the person cannot proceed to higher levels of human functioning.

In addition, the police occupation imposes a nontraditional lifestyle on family members. To cope with the stress of a different lifestyle, it is necessary that a communication process be established that will allow negotiation of the many inevitable conflicts and lead toward mutual accommodation.

Family therapists Bandler, Grinder, and Satir have divided disturbed family relationships into two conceptual areas—content and process. Content involves the actual problems that exist in the family; process is how the family attempts to deal with the problems. Process which is independent of content "focuses on the patterns of coping within the family system, irrespective of the specific problems found within the family."<sup>28</sup>

Bandler, Grinder, and Satir's "model of family therapy is designed to assist the family in coping effectively at the process level."<sup>29</sup> Assisting family members in having new choices at the process level in any area of content will generalize naturally to other areas of their experience.

In the dysfunctional (police) family, it is absolutely necessary to improve the process of communication by which conflict is resolved and mutual satisfaction is accomplished. Miller, Nunnally, and Wackman discuss a style of communication to accomplish these ends. This style involves learning skills for expressing one's intention to deal with an issue openly and directly by setting forth a procedure for discussion, by being in contact with accepting and disclosing one's self-awareness, by trying to understand and value the partner's self-awareness, and by taking responsible action to improve communication.<sup>30</sup>

That conclusion was also reached by Nancy Welch Maynard and Peter W. Maynard of the University of Rhode Island. The Maynards have conducted research on police family stress at the Minnesota Family Study Center and were responsible for instituting a communication training program in the police academy. "Mindful of the fact that divorce among police couples is soaring, officials of the Rhode Island Municipal Police Academy initiated offering the Minnesota couple communication program to police couples as a preventive measure."<sup>31</sup>

Since the police family lifestyle is atypical, it is probable that there will be more adjustment necessary for family members and more areas of conflict to resolve. If, during the early years in the

relationship, a process for dealing with conflict is not maturely developed, anxiety and discomfort mount. The parties of the relationship must work out developmental tasks which were not addressed at an earlier, more appropriate time. They must work out a negotiation process. This is very difficult to do, but the alternative is likely to be a life of frustration and/or separation.

#### Balanced Development

A balance must be maintained between the three areas of human development. Each area can interfere with the other. For instance (as we saw in the Minuchin example) personal development, such as pursuing a college degree, can sometimes detract from occupational and/or familial growth. We have all observed instances where a student is so concerned with studies that occupational performance and familial relationships deteriorate. For such a person, everything must revolve around school attendance. Many police officers are also attending college classes, and it is not uncommon to hear their supervisors question their dedication to the job and spouses question their dedication to the family.

Extreme dedication to the family can also serve to upset the development balance. An example of family domination might be an individual who must call the spouse from work many times a day. There is usually a ritual of endearments recited to assure each other that the family relationship is foremost. The individual who cannot even temporarily separate from the family influence is often inhibited from personal growth and/or occupational development. Business travel or working overtime is out of the question. During any temporary separation, the telephone line becomes the umbilical cord. In this relationship, occasionally stopping for coffee or a social drink after work is unthought of by one spouse and is positive proof to the other that such a person cannot love his or her family.

From the occupational standpoint, we have all seen the person who is totally absorbed in the job. Personal growth is equated with occupational growth. Family seems to exist only to support this person in the pursuit of occupational goals. This overemphasis of the occupation leads to underemphasis on nonoccupational personal growth and family life. For example, such persons may realize too late in life that they have always wanted to learn to play a musical instrument but somehow never had the time to do it. Worse yet, they may realize that they barely know family members and can reflect on few meaningful family memories.

#### Conclusion

Healthy human development requires balance. None of the areas of development can be "sacrificed" for the sake of the others—growth must occur in each area.

Most police families run the risk of occupational domination, especially during the early years of the relationship. Family development and personal development unrelated to the job are often relegated to the "back burner" by the officer. Developmental tasks in these areas are not addressed and negotiations leading to a lifestyle providing satisfaction to each family member are not accomplished.

In response to the young officer who asked how he should explain to his wife that the job must take precedence over anything else, we must answer, "Yes, the job is an extremely important one, but balance is even more important." Human beings are multidimensional and must grow in a variety of ways to attain life satisfaction. A healthy family relationship is a

great source of support during times of stress. The law enforcement occupation is a stressful job and a good police officer must take care to protect and cultivate this source of strength. The job does not take precedence over the family. The job takes its place in the total balanced developmental scheme. If we are to speak of precedence at all, it is balanced growth that takes precedence over lopsided development. FBI

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**END**