Research Report: Further Development of a Format for Family Description

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The description of families and family interaction is a central task for the family therapist if s/he is to work effectively. Whether s/he is in the clinical field, or involved in training or research, the therapist needs to have a systematic way of observing and noting the features of family functioning that s/he considers relevant to his/her assessment of the family.

In the Family Studies Group, we have developed and published the Family Interaction Summary Format (FISF), which is a guide to the full description of family interaction and family functioning (Loader et al, 1981). The FISF delineated eight dimensions of family functioning, each of which was broken down into smaller component parts to facilitate accurate descriptions. These dimensions were: I. Atmosphere, II. Communication, III. Affective Status, IV. Boundaries, V. Family Operations, VI. Alliances, VII. Parental Function, and VIII. Relation to the Environment. It was intended that the FISF would lead the therapist, trainee or researcher through these areas of family functioning in order to produce a systematic description on which to base an assessment or a treatment plan.

The first version of the FISF was brought out as a result of several years of development and has been used extensively since, especially for teaching purposes. We have presented it on over fifty occasions, and it has also been used by others for clinical, teaching and research purposes. For example, it is currently being used as the main instrument in a study looking at the families of school non-attenders. In addition, we have carried out a consumer report study on the use of the FISF.

As a result of our own experience of using the FISF and the feedback from others, we have identified certain problems that have led us to revise the instrument. In this paper, we intend to restate the principles underlying the Summary Format, describe the problems encountered in the use of the first edition of the FISF and detail the development of the new version, called the Summary Format of Family Functioning (SFFF).*

PRINCIPLES OF THE SUMMARY FORMAT

The SFFF, like the FISF before it, is designed to be a guide to the systematic description of family interaction and functioning. As with the first version of the Format, we have held to certain basic principles that we consider fundamental to the instrument. The first is that it should be suitable for use in a wide range of situations in which a family description might be required. This might include using it for the purposes of assessment for therapy, training, case discussion, report-writing or research. It should also be useful to clinicians of different theoretical orientations and varying degrees of experience. Secondly, the format should be comprehensive, covering all aspects of current family functioning, rather than emphasising one or two particular areas. It should also include several perspectives on the family: the family viewed as a unit in its own right, as a number of subsystems and as a group of individuals. Thirdly, the format should be constructed so as to make it reasonably easy to use. It should therefore be systematic, logical and clear, and broken down into memorable and manageable component parts. With familiarity it should be able to be completed reasonably quickly.

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PROBLEMS WITH THE FIRST EDITION

In reviewing our experience with the FISF, we concluded that it needed changes in both structure and content. In our view, the structure of the instrument did not emphasize the logic behind the choice of dimensions which were included in the format, or provide a sufficient sense of development and flow as it was being completed. We therefore reordered and regrouped some of the sections.

We also felt that certain crucial aspects of a family description were underemphasized or missing in the FISF edition. The whole family description focussed on a 'snapshot' profile of the family, centering on constructs such as alliances and boundaries, which provided a relatively static view of the family. The processes of interaction which form the basis for these structural descriptions of family functioning were, however, largely neglected. We have therefore introduced a section in the SFFF which specifically focusses on characteristic sequences of family interaction.

Since the publication of the FISF, we have received numerous requests for copies of the format and guide and have carried out a Consumer Report Study in order to gather an impression of the views of others using the FISF. Of the 150 questionnaires sent out, we received over 50 replies and many of the comments and criticisms offered by the respondents matched our own views. The respondents generally found the FISF useful, particularly for teaching purposes. They found it somewhat difficult to complete and rather time-consuming when they first began to use it. They thought that the instructions and guidelines were clear and useful. Like us, several of the respondents felt the need for a section on sequences of family interaction. It was also suggested that the section dealing with the family's relationship with the social environment needed to be developed, including the addition of a subsection on the family's attitude towards interviewer or clinician, and his/her reaction to them.

Other suggestions involved reorientating the FISF so as to focus on particular theoretical perspectives, such as problem-solving in families or their response to stressful life events. Both the FISF and the SFFF, however, are based on the principle of covering as many as possible of the different aspects of family functioning which have been emphasized in the various family therapy theories, rather than focussing on any particular theoretical model which seeks to explain family pathology. In addition, it also aims to facilitate the description of healthy as well as pathological family functioning. Other respondents wanted a method of description which quantified the various dimensions of family functioning. However, the purpose of the format is to assist in the systematic description of family functioning, rather than its measurement. It was also suggested that the FISF be shortened so that it provided a check list to help the therapist or clinician order his or her thoughts. In our view, any form of systematic information-gathering can be time-consuming initially, especially for so complex a task as family description. Once both the principles and practice of completing the format have been grasped, the user can produce his/her own abbreviated version to suit his/her own needs.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SUMMARY FORMAT OF FAMILY FUNCTIONING

Our impression is that the FISF has proved a useful instrument. It has been particularly valuable for teaching and in facilitating clinical discussion and planning. We have therefore developed a new version of the format, called the Summary Format of Family Functioning (SFFF), taking into account the various problems that have come to light. The SFFF has four parts. The first section is *Family Character* which is comprised of four aspects of family interaction. These consist of Affective Status, Communication, Boundaries and Alliances (see Table I). The second section, headed *Family Compentence*, covers the family's capacity to manage certain basic tasks which are essential to family life. These consist of conflict-resolution, problem-solving and the various tasks associated with the different stages of the family life cycle (see Table II). The third section deals with the *Family's Relationship to the Environment*. This includes the stability of the family unit, the nature of their connections with their extended family and local community, as well as the quality of their relationship with the interviewer (see Table III). The fourth section covers two different aspects of *Family Process*; the first being any characteristic sequences of interaction within the family which affect family functioning, and the second being any repetitive and problematic patterns of interaction between the family and their wider environment (see Table IV).

The SFFF has a front sheet where basic details of the family are recorded, and space is set aside for noting any relevant characteristics of individual family members. An introduction and instructions for using the format are provided to orientate the user to the structure and to facilitate completion of the format. A detailed guide to describing families using the SFFF is available. It provides an account of the rationale behind the four sections of the format and how these are broken down. It also elaborates on the terms and concepts used in each of the guidelines.

CONCLUSION

The SFFF is designed to guide the interviewer or observer in the construction of a systematic, comprehensive and reasonably detailed description of both family interaction and family functioning.

The Summary Format of Family Functioning does not tie the therapist, trainee or researcher to any one perspective on family functioning because it is not based on any particular theoretical model of family functioning.

The SFFF focusses on current family functioning and requires some direct observation of family interaction. It does not provide a complete family assessment, giving no consideration to other components of family description, such as family history or family beliefs and meanings.

Family description is an essential part of training for family therapists and the format appears to be valued for its contribution to the teaching of this aspect of family therapy. Although initial use of the SFFF can be time-consuming, our experience is that it does become easier with practice, and does provide the trainee with a clear framework for the description of current family functioning. In clinical work, the format has proved a useful basis on which, along with other information such as family history, to plan therapeutic interventions. Systematic family description is often an important aspect of family research, and the SFFF can form the basis for more detailed analysis, or for the rating of particular aspects of family functioning or overall family health.

REFERENCES

1. Loader, P.J., Burck, C., Kinston, W., and Bentovim, A., 1981. A Method for Organising the Clinical Description of Family Interaction: The 'Family Interaction Summary Format'. Australian J. Fam. Ther., 2(3), 131-141.

TABLE I: Pages 3, 4, 5 and 6 of SFFF (Condensed)

SECTION A: FAMILY CHARACTER

1. **AFFECTIVE STATUS:** the emotional life of the family.
   Family Atmosphere: Describe the overall and pervasive 'feel' of the family, including the degree of safety/danger, warmth/coldness and comfort/tension. Is humour available?
   Nature of Relationships: Comment on the general nature of relationships in the family, e.g. the degree of supportiveness, valuing and appreciation.
   Emotional Expression: How openly and clearly are feelings expressed in the family? Comment on the range of feelings expressed, their appropriateness, and their intensity.
   Emotional Responsiveness: Describe sensitivity and responsiveness of family members to each other's feelings, wishes, and ideas.

2. **COMMUNICATION:** verbal and non-verbal interchange amongst family members.
   Overall Patterns: Describe the general features of communication: the noise level, equality of participation, pathways (e.g. all messages channelled through mother).
   Continuity: Comment on the family's ability to talk about things together. Can they focus on a topic, develop it and move on?
   Expression of Messages: Comment on the clarity, verbal/non-verbal congruence, directness and spontaneity of messages between family members. Is there an excess of deficiency of control messages (orders, demands, questions).
   Reception of Messages: Describe how family members listen to and acknowledge each other. Are their responses appropriate?

3. **BOUNDARIES:** the separateness and connectedness of family members.
   Family Cohesion: Describe the degree of closeness or distance between family members. Note any over- or under-involvement.
   Family Roles: Describe the family's capacity to adapt the roles of its members, and their relationships with one another, to meet changing needs and circumstances.
   Inter-Generational Boundary: How distinct and appropriate are the roles of children and parents?
   Sexual Identity: Are there problems with the assignment, adoption, or family support of appropriate sexual identities?
   Individual Autonomy: Comment on the level of individuation shown by family members. How independent and self-assertive are they?

4. **ALLIANCES:** the relationship between family members.
   Family Structure: Comment on the pattern of relationships within the family. Note any alignments, coalitions, splits, triangulation, or scapegoating. (A diagram might be helpful).
   Marital Relationship: Describe. For example: affection, support, balance of assertion, commitment, satisfaction, sexual relationship.
   Parental Coalition: Describe. For example: ability to work together, balance of parenting, support and cooperation.
   Parent/Child Relationship: Describe. For example: parental attitudes towards, and management of, the children; and the children's behaviour towards both parents.
   Sibling Relationship: Describe. For example: tolerance, affection, common play, rivalry.

TABLE II: Page 7 of SFFF (Condensed)

SECTION B: FAMILY COMPETENCE

Conflict Resolution: Are any conflicts apparent in the family and who are they between? Are conflicts acknowledged? How are they resolved?

Problem Solving: Comment on the family's ability to solve problems. Can they recognise problems and tackle them constructively? Are they able to make decisions and put these into effect? Do they review the outcome and attempt alternative solutions if necessary?

Family Life Cycle Tasks: How are the family managing their current stage in the family life cycle? Are their expectations of one another's behaviour appropriate to that stage?

TABLE III: Page 8 of SFFF (Condensed)

SECTION C: RELATIONSHIP TO THE ENVIRONMENT

Family Stability: Does the family have a clear identity and a sense of security as a continuing group? Describe any evidence of fragility and instability.

Community: What are the family's connections with, and attitudes towards, the community? For example: school, clubs, church, helping agencies (including this one).

Extended Family: Describe the contact and relationship between the family and the extended family.

Interviewer: Comment on the family's attitude and behaviour towards the interviewer. What impact do they have on you?

TABLE IV: Page 9 of SFFF (Condensed)

SECTION D: FAMILY PROCESS

Family Interaction: Describe any characteristic sequences of interaction between family members. In particular record any patterns of interaction which are repetitive, include symptomatic behaviour or interfere with effective functioning of the family.

Interaction between Family and Environment: Describe any patterns of interaction between the family and its wider environment which are repetitive and problematic. E.g. a family may repeatedly appeal to agencies for help but refuse any offers made.