

## FAMILIES AND FAMILY THERAPY IN GERMANY\*

Marie-Luise Conen

**ABSTRACT:** The author describes some of the effects of decades of life under a dictatorship for East Germans and the effects on family life and family therapy of changes following the recent reunification of Germany. A case example illustrates some intergenerational family problems associated with the changes. Contrasts are drawn between East and West Germany and family therapy's present stage of development is depicted in both parts of the reunified country. Germany has approximately 10,000 trained family therapists, a minority of whom work in private practice. The largest amount of family and couples therapy is performed in agencies.

**KEY WORDS:** family therapy (Germany); training in family therapy (Germany).

More than four years have passed since East Germans were heard to cry out, "We are the people!" Soon afterward they could be heard to say, "We are one nation!" But this state of euphoria in the fall of 1989 was not to last, and if today an East German says, "We are one!," a West German might be quick to respond, "We, too!" This bitter joke says much about a situation in which one nation still exists with two peoples. East and West Germans have far less in common than might have been expected when the Wall began to crumble: we live separate lives.

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## BEING SHAPED BY A DICTATORSHIP

Living in Berlin, one has many opportunities to observe the differences in attitudes, lifestyles, and interests between East and West Germans. For example, as I am sitting in an East Berlin restaurant with some friends and colleagues from both East and West Germany, we wonder how the food will be, since the prices had increased when an East Berlin friend had last been there. The food is lousy, almost cold, and the meat very tough. We are all critical of the food, but when the waitress asks how we liked the food, my East German friends are either quiet or mumble that it is fine. Two of us—from West Berlin—speak up and make some polite suggestions to the chef, and then ask the East Berliners, “Why didn’t you say anything?” “Oh, no,” one replies, “that would not help anyway!” This reminded me of a restaurant visit in East Berlin in 1982 when the food, again, was incredibly cold. When I spoke up and asked for warm food, everybody around me was silent until finally someone said, “You are right, but we do not dare to speak up. You never know . . . , and it does not help anyway . . .”

This helplessness, learned under the East German regime, and the total lack of experience with democratic freedom since 1933 (all told 56 years of experiences with dictatorships), can be seen in many areas of daily life: politics, couple’s relationship, job relations, children’s school performance, and so on. People in East Germany have learned to accept things as they are, not to ask too many questions, to talk about important issues only with close friends or relatives, and to get by without trying to change things. Avoidance and submission have become the major ways to handle conflicts and difficult issues. The common feeling of powerlessness has influenced people’s perceptions of their own lives and their surroundings in general. Because this perception is controlled by the accumulated experiences and the motivation to act, one’s surroundings are not sharply analyzed. But this analysis is necessary in order to develop ways of acting. Conflict ability becomes rudimentary because conflict solution has been shown to be impossible in any case.

The permanent feeling of powerlessness causes—as is true in general—changes in the psyche; for example, loss of self-confidence, depression, problems with physical health, and weakening of the immune system. East Germans have a life expectancy that is 2.5 years shorter than that of West Germans.

Today many East Germans are complaining about the loss of security and safety after the fall of the German Democratic Republic (GRD). But this “safety” was a pseudo-safety. In criticizing the West

German’s individualism, self-centeredness, and isolated way of life, many East Germans praise the warmth of the “GDR-We.” But this “We” needs to be seen as part of the “constraint closeness” of the GDR. It was a “We” that aided the survival of the “winter way of living” and created an “emergency association” of hostages who had to cope with their imprisonment and their exclusion from the remainder of the world. Accustomed to the fact that everything—really everything in one’s life—was taken care of and controlled by the government, East Germans were surprised and gained a weird feeling of joy about life after the fall of the Wall, but they also had to face the very simple and normal chaos of life in which one must take care of one’s own needs.

For most East Germans this has been a very difficult task, and many have not been able to find ways to cope easily with this normal chaos of life. Instead, they have felt that somebody has taken away from them the firm ground on which they stood for many years. This situation could be observed even before the economy declined to the extent it has in East Germany in recent years.

## CHANGES, CHANGES, AND AGAIN CHANGES

Looking at the unemployment rate in East Germany, one is shocked. It is worse than during the “depression” of the late 1920s, a time during which a third of the German labor force was unemployed:

1,343,000	Officially unemployed
762,000	In early retirement (over 55 years of age)
445,000	In job training programs (Funded by the “Bundesanstalt fuer Arbeit” - the national program for unemployment insurance)
512,000	In “Kurzarbeit-Null” (Short-time-work-zero. Officially employed with a company, but having no work)
393,000	In “Arbeitsbeschaffungsmassnahmen” (some kind of CETA program) funded by “Bundesanstalt fuer Arbeit” in which people get jobs which serve the community and are paid about 2/3 a normal salary.
3,455,000	Total of those who are more or less unemployed or do not have a regular income

(These numbers have never been published as one set of statistics. I had to draw them from several statistical studies.)

Taking into account a labor force of approximately 8,000,000 East Germans, an unemployment rate of about 44 percent has to be

considered. The official statistics indicate a rate of approximately 17 percent in East Germany, but even here there are indications of unemployment rates of between 25 to 30 percent in certain regions in East Germany. By comparison, in West Germany, a region with an unemployment rate of 13 percent is considered a problem area. Before 1989, West Berlin used to have a higher than average rate of unemployment (10 percent, as compared to an average of 6-8 percent for West Germany) because of its industrial structure in which industrial plants received subsidies from the West German government. Since those subsidies have been reduced, the city is struggling to establish new businesses within the city limits, begging for the removal of government offices from Bonn to Berlin in order to increase employment in the areas of services and office jobs. In East Berlin an unemployment rate of approximately 17 to 18 percent still exists, due mostly to the problems of integrating older employees into new jobs and also to the effort to get young adults and adolescents into apprenticeships or any kind of training-based jobs.

The fear of unemployment causes extensive changes in the lives of many East Germans. One hospital in Magdeburg (Saxony-Anhalt) in 1991 reported, for example, that in relation to the fear of possible unemployment, 1,200 women asked to be sterilized, in a single clinic. In the GDR, before 1989, only 200-400 sterilizations of women aged 19-33 were carried out per year.

There have also been significant changes in marriage customs. Because of the long period of training and apprenticeships in the west, West German couples used to get married later than East German couples. In East Germany it was necessary to be married in order to get your own apartment. East German couples not only got married earlier but also had their first baby earlier than West Germans. Having a baby in East Germany did not mean that one had to leave school/university or the work place. Day care was typically offered in the east, contrasting with the West German social system where day care is relatively rare as compared to other western European countries. Only about 5 percent of mothers did not marry in the west, whereas in the east approximately 20 percent did not do so.

#### *Married Couples*

<i>Under 25 years</i>	<i>Under 30 years</i>	<i>Over 30 years</i>
East 28%	80%	20%
West 6%	37%	63%

(Source: Berlin Parliament Statistics of the Senator for Youth and Family. 1992: Tagesspiegel of June 28, 1992; Tagesspiegel of May 20, 1993.)

In East Berlin a large decrease in marriages can be noted. In 1989, when the GDR still existed, approximately 131,000 couples got married, but only 102,000 got married in 1990. The marriage rate continues low, and East Berliners and East Germans now put aside weddings as well as their plans to have babies.

Some surveys of East and West German perceptions (Emnid Survey, 1992) about changes which have taken place since the fall of the Berlin Wall show some interesting differences: Even though East Germans often complain about their difficulties and problems in coping with western lifestyles, a large portion of East Berliners (56 percent) are in general satisfied with the reunification of Germany, as compared to 58 percent of West Berliners. Because of the many changes which have had more far-reaching effects on East Berliners than on their West Berlin counterparts, about 60 percent of the East Berliners say that their quality of living has improved since the reunification. Only 38 percent of the West Berliners found improvement in their lives since, for them, things have not changed as dramatically as they have for East Berliners. Approximately 60 percent of the East Berliners are dissatisfied with life and have little or no hope for the future. Unfortunately, survey results do not indicate why the dissatisfaction and hopelessness exist, but one can assume that the high rate of unemployment as well as the loss of the old "GDR safety" together with still other as yet unknown factors cause some of this dissatisfaction.

### DEMOCRACY AS THE BEST ALTERNATIVE?

Seventy-eight percent of East Berliners see themselves in some sense as second class citizens who do not have the same chances and opportunities as those from the west. Because they are unaccustomed to western styles, attitudes, and standards, East Germans still feel—four years after the fall of the GDR—not fully accepted. There is, however, some increased sense of self-esteem, particularly among younger people. The same study cited above (Emnid Survey, 1992) showed that 52 percent of West Berliners see East Germans as a kind of second class citizen, thus reinforcing East Berliners in their assumptions about the ways in which westerners perceive them. This attitude of "looking down" on those from the east may be even more noticeable in West Germany than in West Berlin; West Germans have not had the same opportunity as West Berliners to observe differences between east and west because of the simple reason of lack of proximity to the east.

Today, four years after the fall of the Wall, East Germans are more willing than previously to differentiate and speak openly about the disadvantages of the GDR regime. This may not lead to greater satisfaction with the democratic system, but it does help East Germans to realize the necessity of changes which they will still need to go through.

Life for decades under a regime has clearly shaped the lives as well as the political attitudes of the population. An East German would have to be 77 years of age to have participated in a democratic election. The election results in the GDR (99.8%), the alignment of parties, and the impossibility of voting in secret worked against the establishment of democratic customs and an understanding of democracy that developed in western societies. When talking to friends and colleagues in the east before 1989, I kept them informed about problems and difficulties in our society, but I almost always felt that there was a reluctance on their part to hear that all was not ideal in the west. It was as though those in the east felt a need to maintain an image of "paradise" on the other side of the fence. Nowadays, many East Germans quarrel about the many disadvantages of a democratic society. It is especially difficult for unemployed young adults to understand as Winston Churchill noted, that democracy is the best alternative of all the state systems.

The survey shows that 62 percent of East Berliners are satisfied with the democratic system. This result can be interpreted to mean that in a very short time people learned to adopt and to make use of a democratic system. For example, the percentage of East Germans participating in the election was higher than in the west (although many have assumed that 1994 elections on local, state, and federal levels will show a big drop in participation because of dissatisfaction with the Kohl chancellorship and the opposition party). In all likelihood, questions will need to be raised about the profoundness of the democratic attitude of East Germans when it comes to conflicts and problems.

But this may be true for West Germans as well. Eighty-two percent of the West Berliners surveyed claimed to be satisfied with the democratic system, but if you look at the increase of right wing parties at the last city election, you may find city regions in which such parties gained approximately 20 percent of the vote. Those areas do have a high rate of unemployment and bad housing. This could mean that West Germans have yet to examine fully their democratic understanding, because some assume that West German democratic self-

perception might be much connected to the economical well-being of the West German society.

## THE IMPACT ON FAMILY LIFE

The increase of Neo-Nazism and other right wing oriented parties and organizations—mostly in West Germany—needs to be seen in connection with:

- the self-hatred of Germans in general
- the low self-esteem of the people as a nation
- a sense of disorientation because of recent changes in history
- the inferiority complex Germans have had for generations and still have
- forms of defensiveness through denial of recent history (Nazi regime).

In East Germany, adolescents are those who have reacted the most to the political, economical, and social changes. Because the big state-run holding company, Treuhand, has caused so many sellouts and takeovers by western companies, leading to higher levels of unemployment, one might assume that most anger would be directed against the Treuhand, but this is not the case. Only recently have people dared to strike and fight against the decisions of this holding company. If one wonders where this displaced anger is going, it might be seen in adolescents directing it against foreigners, only a small percentage of whom live in East Germany. These adolescents do not attack the western system and its major representative, the Treuhand, because the Treuhand still represents the system to which people have wished to belong for many years.

Adolescents, much more than older generations, have been experiencing a total collapse of the former value system. Their parents may have been party members, and now children and parents are experiencing the breakdown of their beliefs. Many parents cannot cope with these changes in an appropriate way, whatever this may be. Children see their parents' loss of values and orientation while still experiencing some sense of parental direction (as adolescents do). Parents, however, are themselves occupied with coping with the new system.

Families are confronted with different sets of values and a totally

different economic system. Depending on the political background on the one hand parents are relieved by the economical changes, and on the other hand parents have not yet developed coping strategies to deal with the demands placed upon them. East German families in most regions with high unemployment rates are confronted with an insecure financial perspective and therefore an unstable social situation. They experience the burden of making decisions and taking responsibility for those decisions. This is in some ways an unknown responsibility; some take on and cope with the challenge while others still struggle with it. Later, some complain about the loss of the old "coziness" and "safety" of the GDR.

The loss of identity has caused crises for many East Germans. Counseling centers and clinics are full of patients who do not feel they are able to cope with the new demands on them. For an East German, the loss of a job can only be understood in the framework of the great importance of integration into the work force. Therapists and counselors report an increase of suicidal thoughts and attempts by East Germans, especially after losing their jobs. Statistics in Berlin show a higher rate of suicides in East Berlin, 50 percent more than in West Berlin.

Dramatic changes are also taking place in East German families in terms of the role of women. From 95 percent full-time employment of women, the rate dropped to only 40 percent. As noted above, the importance of being integrated into the work force and the definition of oneself as employed does have much influence on the way East Germans experience unemployment and layoffs from work. For women to work was taken for granted. In West Germany with its lack of day care and part-time jobs, the opposite is true. Being laid off from work strikes East German women first and causes an increase in depression, drug problems, and loss of identity.

Because of these many changes, parents and their adolescent children have many disruptive discussions about political issues. The parents often sense a considerable loss of parental authority. Accustomed to following the orders of authorities, the parents are astonished at the children's opposition to authority figures such as teachers, police, elders, and, of course, the parents themselves. These parents experience significant clashes between their strong achievement orientation (which was often the only way to get into privileged, high ranking positions) and their children's rejection of such values. For example, the rate of adolescent truancy has skyrocketed in some East Berlin schools. Because of the often rigid achievement orienta-

tion of parents, the children have figured out easily that this area can be a strong vehicle for arguing with parents and a means to attack or at least to criticize the values that parents represent.

## A CASE EXAMPLE

Mrs. G., a high school director, called a counseling agency and asked for advice because the son of one of her teachers was causing problems at school and at home. The mother, Mrs. B., who was teaching at the school her sons attended, had asked Mrs. G. to make the first contact with the clinic. Finally, Mrs. B. called and told her story:

She relates that she has already been to several counseling centers and urgently needs help with Stefan, her 14 year-old son, about whom she is extremely worried. He lives in the household with his parents and his 11 year-old brother. Mrs. B. and her husband, both 40, have been married since 1977. Mr. B., who used to be a high ranking police officer, is unemployed at the moment.

Since the beginning of 1990, Stefan has caused much trouble; his school performance has decreased so much that special education is being discussed. His behavior at school was no longer tolerable, and changes of schools were initiated since he promised to improve. Because of his poor test results, the school psychologists had told the mother that there was a possibility the boy was retarded. This interpretation was used exclusively by the mother at the new agency, and she failed to mention the circumstances of the test taking in which the boy refused almost entirely to cooperate.

Both parents had been members of the communist party of the GDR, as was true of many police and teachers. Stefan obviously was giving his parents a hard time by becoming involved in a skinhead group in his neighborhood. He even went so far as to get his head shaved, to the disappointment of his mother. As it was discovered later, his father had given him the money for the barber. His mother had put Stefan into a day care unit for children in a psychiatric clinic in order to have further tests done. All previous efforts to change his behavior had failed. She seemed to be under much pressure, and, as a teacher, felt much embarrassment to have a son who was the source of so much disruption. Her primary belief as a mother and teacher was that the children of teachers have to behave better than other children. Stefan had certainly shown her just the opposite.

The East German trainee in family therapy who was working

with Mrs. B. realized the political dimensions of the case when she found out after several sessions that the father had been forced to leave his police job as a result of his role as an informant for the "Stasi," the state secret police. This fact had been kept secret from Stefan, but in one fashion or another, the boy had found out and was full of disgust for his parents, at his father for having been an informant and at his mother for siding with the father. Since he had admired his father a great deal when he was a child, Stefan could not overcome his despair about his father's involvement with the state secret police. As a result, he struck out with antisocial and delinquent behavior.

Further sessions showed that Stefan tried to protect his father by causing problems which would involve and embarrass his mother even more, because he saw his mother as the major reason that his father became an informant. Because of the father's involvement, the family had received quite a few privileges (a better apartment, a preferred automobile obtained more quickly than normal, vacations in Eastern European countries, etc.). The mother had complained about not having such privileges, and the father saw a way to acquire such things by becoming an informant. He also saw this as part of his work as a dutiful police officer in line with his belief in the rightness of the "socialist" government of the GDR.

Mr. B. also talked in one session about his father, who had been a Nazi party member, and about how he had tried to make up for the Nazi involvement by becoming a good member of society and by helping the GDR state to conquer its enemies. The therapist assumed that there were other hidden agendas in the context of the grandfather, who in some ways also encouraged Stefan's behavior by telling him stories about belonging to a Hitler Youth group. These were topics that the grandfather had never talked about before, and it appeared that Stefan was acting out old family issues.

When the family was able to talk about those secrets and taboo topics, the problems of the boy diminished immediately. Both parents had a difficult time explaining their attitudes and their understanding of things they had done and had not done. Both boys—the younger brother eventually came into the sessions—found it quite difficult to listen to the parental explanations. It would have been easier for them to take it out on themselves or on somebody outside the family rather than to listen to the problems the parents had to face.

The family went through some tough times in terms of mourning the past and dealing with the belief that they mistreated themselves

and felt mistreated by others. Feelings of guilt were expressed, and the sons were able to ask questions about why these things were possible in their family. Both the children and the family had to face their own limits and the difficulties found in coping with the recent political and social changes. At the end of the family therapy the family still had to struggle along a difficult line of sticking to their values as well as developing new values. Stefan in particular was trying to find out what values and norms he could accept, but this found expression in questions and doubts which other 14 year-olds might have. He had left the skinhead group but was still against foreigners and people whom he perceived as being too different from "normal" Germans—gays, the physically impaired, the mentally retarded, and so on.

The last news I had from Stefan was that he and his classmates at his new school are now meeting with students from other Berlin districts which have larger populations of Turkish and Arabian students. Talking about differences—between the students from east and west, natives and foreigners, girls and boys—has left Stefan with some different thoughts and a plan to go on a trip with his classmates to Turkey in the next summer.

## FAMILY THERAPY IN EAST AND WEST GERMANY

In the former GDR, as in most Eastern European countries, most psychotherapy—if it existed at all—took place in psychiatric clinics. Some psychotherapy was done by counselors and psychologists in health centers. East German alcohol abuse—at a rate that was much higher than in West Germany—was generally treated in a residential setting. Psychiatric symptoms were treated mostly with drugs. Methods of psychotherapy in which people received some training were mostly "Gesprächspsychotherapie" (Rogerian-oriented psychotherapy) and, in some areas, psychotherapy oriented toward psychoanalysis. The most common approach was group psychotherapy.

East German staff members in some clinics became interested in family therapy by the mid-1980s. Informal and unofficial workshops with West German colleagues took place mainly in connection with clerical affiliations and in sites which often were located in churches. Later, informal training was performed by West German trainers who traveled unofficially to East Germany. The systemic approach in particular spread during this period, advanced by the Heidelberg

group centered around Gunthard Weber or Klaus Deissler's Marburg institute of systemic studies. After the fall of the GDR, many professionals in the field of psychotherapy got interested in family therapy. But eastern colleagues did not have the money for training programs offered by the mainly private training institutes in Germany. This is due mainly to the fact that East Germans receive only 80 percent of the salary of West Germans. More East German colleagues will get into training, especially in the field of family therapy, when their salary is raised in 1995.

Because of a large conference of the German Association of Family Therapy (DeutscheArbeitsgemeinschaft fuer Familientherapie/DAF) in Berlin in 1991, much attention was gained for family therapy by East German colleagues. The conference included many East German presenters and featured a large variety of approaches within the field of family counseling and family therapy.

Approximately 400-600 trained family therapists in East Germany are working mainly in clinics, hospitals, and counseling centers. Only a few psychotherapists work as free lancers in private practice; most of those do not work as family therapists and/or have training in family therapy. Staff members in clinics, counseling centers, and mental health centers are in search of concepts which pay special attention to the dramatic changes in society and families. East German agencies are in the process of developing a profile which will go further than simply treating just the symptom of one's family.

Family therapy training in general is performed in private institutes in Germany. In West Germany, approximately 60 training institutes exist. By comparison, only two institutes exist in East Germany.

Family therapy in Germany is not as established in the academic field as it is in the United States. Since German university institutes have a strong emphasis on either the psychoanalytic approach or behavioral therapy, only limited opportunities exist for other ways to become involved in academic psychology. Better chances for family therapy exist in schools of social work, but social workers are not eligible for doing psychotherapy (they may only do counseling) and, therefore, are not included in the health insurance system. All of the picture has much to do with the German system of eligibility for insurance, which only accepts psychoanalysts and behavioral therapists for reimbursement by the health insurance system.

At this point, a heated discussion is taking place between the federal government and several associations of psychologists and

counselors. The federal secretary of health plans to regulate permission to perform psychotherapy: the Psychotherapeutengesetz (Bundesministerium, 1993; Meyer, Richter, Grawe, Schulenberg, & Schule, 1991: Stellungnahme, 1991-1992). Since this draft of a bill favors the medical professionals, psychologists oppose it. About 70 to 80 percent of psychotherapy is done by psychologists and, therefore, all professional affiliations and organizations for psychologists and counselors are in opposition to these plans, which would place psychologists in roles of assistance to medical professionals.

Professionals originally placed much hope in this proposed law since many hoped a) to get out of the delegation system which now exists and means that psychologists can only treat patients under the supervision of medical doctors and b) to gain an extension of accepted methods in psychotherapy, extending beyond the limitations to psychoanalysis and behavioral therapy and thus giving family therapy/systemic therapy a greater chance to grow farther.

In preparation of the draft for the Psychotherapeutengesetz, several assessments were made on different therapeutic approaches. Family therapy/systemic therapy was considered an approach with great potential which could lead to later acceptance as a method of psychotherapy eligible for coverage by different kinds of health insurance. The assessment of systemic therapy was closely connected with criticism concerning the lack of well-developed concepts for the treatment of adults, especially the treatment of individuals as well as groups. These are aspects which family therapists and family therapy organizations are taking into consideration in their discussions and research efforts.

A great uproar has developed in the family therapy field because of the literature which the assessors have not taken into consideration. The assessment was done in 1990 and took under consideration only the literature until 1984. Because of these considerations, the assessors found only a few research outcome studies, because some German studies and also some American outcome studies appeared only after 1984. The assessment's conclusion was, naturally, that family therapy/systemic therapy needed further research and evaluation concerning its outcomes. Because of well-integrated connections to the governmental body, the German Association of Family Therapy (DAF) is pushing forward research projects. In the winter of 1993-94, research projects were to be established in order to perform a multicentric study of family therapy with a wide range of topics, symptoms, clients, and settings.



A survey by the German Association of Family Therapy indicates that there are about 10,000 trained family therapists in the country. Some institutes started doing training in 1975. Two of them, the oldest and most established, trained approximately 4,000 therapists. Since family and couples therapy are not accepted for insurance reimbursement, family therapy is most often done within agencies, hospitals, and clinics, and couples therapy is often performed in private practice.

Results of a pilot study (a questionnaire filled out by participants in Cologne at the yearly conference of the German Association for Family Therapy) showed that most family therapists in Germany are in the following age ranges: 40 percent are between 30 and 39 years of age, 30 percent are between 40 and 49 years, and 11 percent are 50 or older. The average age is approximately 40. One-fourth of the participants in the study work in private practice, one-third in counseling centers and child guidance clinics, one-fifth in clinics and hospitals (psychiatric as well as psychosomatic and drug clinics), and 10 percent in residential settings, homes for children, or departments of special services. Approximately one-third are social workers, 45 percent psychologists, and 10 percent medical professionals. Family and couples therapy is performed to a large extent (41 percent) within the work place.

Family therapy is primarily (more than half) financed by agencies which are funded by public funds. One-third is paid by health insurance and one-tenth by funding from the social welfare act for children and families (Kinder und Jugendhilfegesetz—KJHG). In 14 percent of the cases, clients pay for the sessions.

Half of the participants in the DAF pilot study had training as family therapists. The largest proportion (41 percent) of the trained family therapists went through training that lasted three years, the average length of training offered by German institutes. One-eighth had four years training in family therapy, and one-fourth had two years of training.

More significant results than these findings from a pilot study are expected to come from a study currently underway and which will be published in 1995.

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