

AT THE START THE CHILD WAS THERE... AND NOW?

Family therapy was founded by renowned psychiatrist & psychoanalyst, Nathan Ackerman. His clinical work with children and their families in New York started when he was 29 years old, just before the Second World War, and he published extensively till the late Sixties. Sadly, his work was largely forgotten after his premature death in 1971, even at his own place, the *Ackerman Institute for the Family*.

He was ahead of his time and placing the child at the center of the newly born “family therapy movement”, with the exception of Satir and Whitaker, was not among the main issues of the innovators of that time, more interested to study the *adult* as Bowen, Framo, Boszormenyi-Nagy or the *system theories* as Bateson and his group at MRI.

I remember that Ackerman was everywhere when I visited him for a month in March 1970, moving back and forth from his Institute to Columbia University. He would supervise a therapist staying in the same room with the family (at his Institute), and eventually call him out for as short time in order to instruct him. Or he would conduct a more formal supervision with a one-way-mirror at Columbia University, assembling, the family, therapist and trainees in the same room for a general feed-back at the end of any session.

For me, it was a full immersion in the Ackerman world and he was very enthusiastic to show me around everything. This visit was very powerful and was my main inspiration to leave my original country, Italy, and to move to New York under a fellowship in social community psychiatry at the Albert Einstein School of Medicine.

Living there, allowed me to get in close contact with the pioneers of family therapy. Among others, I got in touch and was mainly inspired by Minuchin, who was a former student of Ackerman during his residency in Psychiatry. From the direct and provocative interventions of his teacher, Minuchin developing the idea of “*a therapy of challenge*”, in which people are “challenged to change”. His work with children within their disadvantaged or multi-problematic families and communities at the *Child Guidance Clinic*, in the slums of South Philadelphia, was remarkable and the place became the *Mecca* of family therapy in the 70's and 80.s'.

Despite Minuchin's international resonance, at the end of his long carrier, he felt discouraged and unheard and a few months before his death at 96 years of age, he wrote to me a very moving email and said : “*Maurizio, we both suffer from the same disease, that is of thinking that we still need to communicate the truth known to us, to many people that don't want to listen to it*”.

Maybe the disease that Minuchin referred to was of believing in families and their social resources, beyond their appearance. Furthermore, that “this disease” consists in not seeing the child as a problem, but rather in considering him as an indispensable resource to enter into the complex adult world.