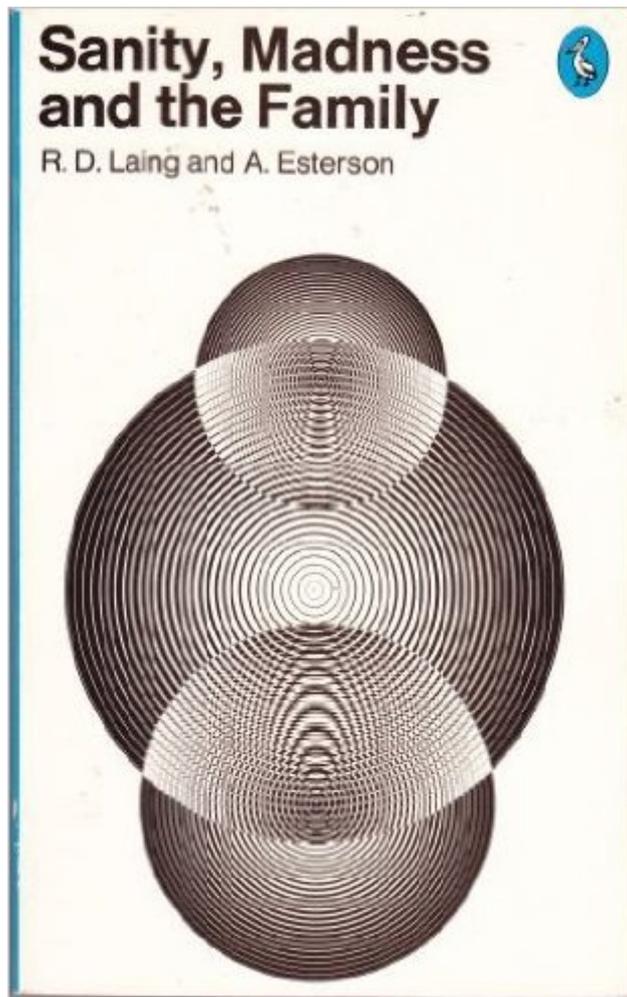


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Sanity, Madness And The Family: Families Of Schizophrenics (Pelican)



Synopsis

Sanity, Madness and the Family: Families of Schizophrenics by, R.D. Laing and A. Esterson
Paperback book published by Pelican Books, 1970

Book Information

Series: Pelican

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; New edition edition (July 30, 1970)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140211578

ISBN-13: 978-0140211573

Product Dimensions: 7 x 1 x 5 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (7 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,122,808 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #252 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Mental Health > Schizophrenia](#) #465 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Mental Illness](#) #8900 in [Books > Medical Books > Psychology > General](#)

Customer Reviews

Famed psychiatrist R. D. Laing gives a study of eleven families and their children who are schizophrenic. Laing gives no interjections, but rather lets the conversations that the families have amongst themselves give their own testimony. Laing lets the reader know where language patterns occur, in which he believes is largely due to the psychic split. The "double bind" theory introduced by Gregory Bateson, in which the child has been given mixed messages. In the cases given, the studies are all female, and the mothers are usually the aggressor, while the father the passive, and if other siblings are included, they usually side with the mother against the sibling. Shocking, sad and enlightening all together, Laing gives a great look on how schizophrenic in this light can and does occur. Highly recommended and should be read by all psychologists entering or in the field (it is a shame that this book, like so many of R.D. Laing's books are out of print). One should include with this book Gregory Bateson's "Steps to an Ecology of Mind" which includes the essay which explains the "double bind."

This book is a series of interview transcripts of the families of schizophrenics, with a forward

describing each family situation and the patient. The authors' theory was that schizophrenia in a person could be a result not of illness in the patient, but of family dynamics. To test this theory, Laing and Esterson interviewed the patient's families -- usually the mother, father, siblings, and grandparents if available, as well as the patients themselves. The interviews certainly show that many jumbled signals were being received by the child; and many factors (projection, denial, extensive control of the child's behavior etc.) were at play. For example, a patient might say, "I was very unhappy at school... I felt ashamed of my (whatever)," And the mother chimes in with, "You enjoyed math, didn't you?" Even though she and the father actively discouraged the child to study mathematics. Thus the patient stops talking, mystified by this comment which is so at odds with what was actually their experience.... and forgets to pursue their telling the mother about the shame they felt. These poor souls become catatonic, unable to speak or unwilling to. Often it seems that the parents had a stake in denying the patients their selfhood. Like Laing's other work, the feeling one comes away with is of empathy and sympathy with the patients, and a feeling that they are not so insane as others think them to be. This is what I take away from Laing's work -- empathy ---- but also a focused look at what could be causing the mental illness. This wasn't as helpful to me as "The Divided Self," but I still found it to be sobering and in some places humorous, in a sad way, because it was quite familiar in spots, the convoluted way these families "communicated."

That is to say there are logical means to schizophrenia, and nothing that confers to a physical disability. An amazing study of eleven families and the children who are hospitalized because of their "illness" (incidentally noted, they are all female patients). Dr. Laing and Dr. Esterson's account of schizophrenia all points to the facts that this mental illness is not a physical impairment, but a distrust in a person's reality, through communication, through insecurity of beliefs and senses. Schizophrenics choose logically and intelligently under the confines of family life with the parents (who are more delusional than the patient). Although this book is primarily a psychological study, it reads like a novel.

One can subscribe to a totally "environmental" etiology of schizophrenia. One can subscribe to a totally genetic induction. The evidence piled up since the 1940s (and before) supporting the "diathesis-stress" model suggests otherwise... however politically incorrect it may be to suggest that family dynamics and confusing communication have a significant -- if incomplete -- role. This, and several other little gems from the '50s, '60s and '70s (from authors like Gregory Bateson, Aaron Esterson, Jules Henry, Don D. Jackson and Theodore Lidz) described the often subtle family

behaviors and communication styles common in the families of origin of psychotic spectrum patients with genetic predispositions for hyper-sensitivity, reduced neural linkage from the pre-frontal cortices to the limbic system, and diminished trans-hemispheric connectivity decades before those genetic (and epigenetic?) factors were either identified or understood. If we can let go of the black-and-white, nature-or-nurture thinking, replace that "or" with an "and," and get up out of the common cultural, dualistic box, we may be able to help patients with such disorders to climb up out of their own boxes without having to =blame= anyone.

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