

Nathan Ward Ackerman

Birth date and location

Nathan Ackerman was born in Bessarabia, Russia on November 22, 1908 and died in 1971.

Educational background

Nathan and his family came to the U.S. in 1912 and were naturalized

in 1920. He attended public school in New York City, earned a BA from Columbia University in 1929, and an MD from Columbia in 1933.

Influences leading to interest in family-based interventions

Nathan became chief psychiatrist at the Menninger Child Guidance Clinic in 1937. He also was the chief psychiatrist at the Jewish Board of Guardians from 1937 to 1951. His work in these two positions greatly influenced his thinking about family systems. In 1938, he published two books, *The Unity of the Family* and *Family Diagnosis: An Approach to the Preschool Child* that contributed to the development of family therapy. After World War II, Nathan began to experiment with seeing patients and their families in a group. He published, taught and showed movies demonstrating this new method, pioneering not only a new type of therapy, but also the tradition of the audiovisual documentation of clinical work that became one of the cornerstones of family therapy training.

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Contributions to the field

Nathan Ackerman is widely acknowledged as a pioneer in the field of family therapy and is credited with developing the concept of family psychology. In 1955, he was the first to initiate a debate on family therapy at a meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, with the intention of opening lines of communication in this new branch of psychiatry. He believed that the mental or physical disposition of one family member would effect other family members, and that often the best way to treat the individual was to treat the family as a whole. In fact, he was a very strong advocate of treating the whole family in order to solve the problems of the individual. Nathan devoted most of his career to family psychotherapy.

How this work is being carried on today

Nathan Ackerman founded the Ackerman Institute in 1960. For almost half a century, the Institute has continued his pioneering work by engaging in a three-pronged effort that encompasses: 1) innovative clinical family therapy services through its onsite clinic (licensed by the State of New York Office of Mental Health) and in community settings; 2) state-of-the-art training programs for mental health and other professionals onsite and in community settings in and around New York City and internationally; and 3) cutting-edge research initiatives that focus on the development of new treatment models and training techniques. Through this dynamic interaction of treatment, training and research, the Institute helps families, serves mental healthcare professionals, and brings innovative perspectives to a broad array of community service agencies and other healthcare facilities.

Information and photo provided by the Ackerman Institute for the Family, New York, NY.