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## Family Development in Structural Family Therapy



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### Introduction

Structural family therapy views the family as “an open sociocultural system that is continually transformed” (Minuchin 1974, p. 51) as it adapts to internal and external changes.

### Theoretical Context

To describe family dynamics, structural family therapy relies on biosocial metaphors. The chapter on families in *Family Therapy Techniques* (Minuchin and Fishman 1981) opens with a quotation from Thomas: “There is a tendency for living things to join up, establish linkages, live inside each other, return to earlier arrangements, get along whenever possible. This is the way of the world” (Thomas 1974, p. 147).

The family’s current relational patterns are seen as the result of the family members’ continuous adjustment to each other’s preferences, strengths, and weaknesses. The origin of those

patterns “is buried in years of explicit and implicit negotiations among family members, often around small daily events. Frequently the nature of the original contracts has been forgotten, and they may never have even been explicit. But the patterns remain – on automatic pilot, as it were – as a matter of mutual accommodation and functional effectiveness” (Minuchin 1974, p. 52.).

### Description

To explain how family patterns originate, are maintained, and eventually change, structural family therapy resorts to the complementary biological notions of homeostasis and adaptation. On the one hand, the family needs to maintain some kind of internal organization that prescribes how, when, and who should interact with whom about what. These transactional rules restrict individual freedoms: for instance, family members must accept some degree of interdependency (e.g., between spouses) and some form of hierarchy (e.g., between parents and children). On the other hand, those transactional rules need to change over time, to adapt to the demands posed by the family’s evolution (children are born, grow, and leave; adults also grow, develop new interests, and age), as well as by external events: a move to another city, loss of a job, divorce, and changed financial circumstances.

## Application in Couple and Family Therapy

Well-functioning families can reshape their relational patterns in response to changing contexts; conversely, dysfunctional families get “stuck” in a relational structure that no longer works.

Although structural family therapy focuses primarily on current relational patterns, an exploration of how patterns developed is part of the assessment. The history of the current family is granted more relevance than the childhood experiences of its adult members: a mother’s “weak” parenting is explained less by her own rearing than as a compensatory response to her perception of her husband as “rough,” a perception that in turn has grown from their shared experience as a couple. Structural therapists also search for forgotten strengths, the “paths not taken” that remain potentially available (e.g., “How did you manage to raise the children by yourself before you remarried?”).

When the parents’ families of origin are considered, the emphasis is on how they contributed to shape roles and worldviews (“You were trained to be a parental sibling”; “Your parents were very protective and gave you those glasses that make the world look threatening”). The implication is that roles and worldviews are not fixed and that alternative ways of relating to others – discarded as yesterday’s children developed into today’s adults – can be retrieved now.

## Clinical Example

A two-session consultation by Salvador Minuchin (Minuchin et al. 2007) begins with the father’s view of the problem: “The children agreed to come in order to help mother. We are all concerned. She is very nervous; everything upsets her. She argues with the children and me over the smallest things.”

Having assessed that the father has taken the role of the over responsible person and the mother that of patient, Dr. Minuchin asks the father: “Where did you learn to be this way?” The father responds:

LUIS: I come from a large family. We were very poor, and we were five children. We lived on a farm, and my mother sacrificed herself for us. She was always working. My father was older. He was a laborer, and then he couldn’t work. So when my older brother needed to go to high school in a larger town, it was decided that I should stop studying and go to work to help the family. I never finished grammar school. I was the second son. There were three younger brothers, and I needed to help them.

MINUCHIN (to Luis): So you learned very young to be a caretaker. (To Elena and the children): He was selected in his family to be the responsible one. (To Luis): So when you married, you took over another responsibility.

Later Dr. Minuchin transfers the role of “patient” from Elena to Luis:

MINUCHIN: I’m interested in you, Luis, because I see that Elena can change. She has changed from the previous session to this one. But can you change? You see the world as a place where there are problems to resolve and you are the problem solver. (To Elena): He was given the job of being responsible, and he is saddled with that job.

By the end of the consultation, the couple’s perspective has changed:

MINUCHIN (to Elena): It will be your job to help your husband. He has been organized by his childhood, by his love for his mother, and by the need to protect his siblings. He needs your help to slow down.

LUIS: I started at 12, and now I’m 47.

MINUCHIN (to Elena): It will be difficult for Luis to change. It’s a hard job you have, but he has changed for the children, so maybe he can change for you. I will say something absurd: Luis made you incompetent by the simple procedure of being responsible.

ELENA: We’ve been like this for 18 years.

MINUCHIN (to Elena): Do you like to be the one who’s helpless, while he does everything?

LUIS: I need to change. We need to change. I’m under tremendous stress. I know I’m a leader. I always was. I was a founder of the union in my province, and I worked in the union for many years. In one of the military dictatorships, I was almost put in jail, and when I realized that the union was taking over my life, I stopped. I just resigned. I feel like that now. Things need to change.

## References

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