

RP2 STRUCTURAL APPLICATION

I HISTORICAL APPLICATION

A. Assessment/Diagnosis

Salvador Minuchin was the theorist who put forward the Structural Family Theory which basically recognizes that the family represented a solid structure which was broken up into subsystems. Minuchin introduced the concept that these subsystems were separated by boundaries which regulated the kind of exposure which family members had with each other. It was the efficient interrelatedness of these three key constructs namely, family structure, subsystems and boundaries which determined positive functioning of the whole. A break-down in one area affected another area. When this occurred the family structure could not function adequately.

Each family structure has its rules, sometimes unspoken, which its members adhered to, and no family's rules were wrong even though it did not liaise with that of another family. Whatever pattern operated well in a family and enhanced relationships within the subsystems that is what was correct. Problems occur when the pattern is broken and the subsystems are thrown off guard in the family structure.

In relation to my family of origin at the young age of 12 there was a shift in the family structure when the pattern of interaction was altered from how I had known it to a different format. At such a young age of course, I did not conceptualize a change in the process of interaction and how it had or would affect me. A break had occurred in the pattern of interaction I had been accustomed to. I found myself in a new family structure with different

subsystems and operating boundaries. The problem which developed was as a result of there now being an absent father. A pattern of communication which I had been accustomed to had been broken. By the age of 12 there was a changed hierarchical structure in relation to an absent father figure. A new behavior pattern had to be developed. Whilst there was a rigid boundary which existed separating the subsystems of parents and children, when the hierarchical structure was affected the boundaries were also affected. The rigid boundary also encouraged disengagement in the emotional state.

The enmeshment which I experienced with my young brother also was an attempt to make up for the disengagement which was being experienced in the family in the absence of the father figure. More pressure was being placed on my mother and her hierarchical structure was weakened as she struggled to cope with stressful children in the absence of a father. The Whole family in fact was disengaged and an unacceptable family behavior emerged. My mother was the sole adult figure in the home acting as mother and father. A merging of roles in the structure had occurred and the subsystem representing the children had to alter its accommodation accordingly. The problem which could have been presented to the structural theorist is that there was a breakdown in the family structure pertaining to the parent child subsystem interaction. Boundaries had been damaged and patterns of behavior were no longer being understood by everyone.

B. Treatment Strategies

The goal of the structural theorist in therapy is to encourage structural change in the family.

This change is whatever the family has identified as the problem. It is not the role of the therapist to tell the family what they need to do to make this better, but to assist the family become aware of what is necessary to be done in order to get their lives running smoothly. The family's life was in order at one time so it is a matter of being able to once again bring it alive.

My mother had to regain her position as the head of the family, and the children had to accept that they did not belong to the same hierarchical position as the adult. For Minuchin the therapist would need to get involved with the family in therapy and let them identify the need for authority and pronounce the authority that was necessary. They had to discover that there had to be someone who was responsible for their movements, for their eating, clothing and shelter. The therapist would take on a rather active role in doing this, and help us as children come to terms with the fact that there is nothing to be gained from being rebellious. Perhaps letting us explain the advantage of being locked up if we decided to run away from home, or ending up spending a lifetime in employment packing boxes if we did not choose to go to school. Of course, as children, the therapist would be sensitive to our experience of not having a father around. He would be sensitive to the fact that my mother had a double part to play, but she too would have to acknowledge in her own words that her first allegiance must always be to her children – “What would you prefer your children to do about the absence of their father”. “How do you think you should behave with your children under the circumstances”.

The therapist would help us all to own up to our responsibilities if clear boundaries were to be re-established, subsystems function as they should and behaviors respected.

II.CURRENT APPLICATION

A. Assessment/Diagnosis

The family structure which I experienced as an adult was pathological because the people involved namely myself, and the partners concerned on two different occasions, brought into the relationship issues which were unresolved. Of course, without realizing it these un-resolved issues materialized into not allowing any new relationship from functioning in the smooth manner that it should. In the terms of the structural therapist my family structure was not secure. If looked into by a therapist they would assess the boundaries, the hierarchies and the subsystems in the structure in order to determine the ability of the members to have strong personal relationships.

The boundaries in the family structures which the partners and I had over time were rigid boundaries. Neither partners had the ability to take care of their emotional needs and certainly not mine. Our relationships were not sufficiently bound. We were very much still very separate. The rigid boundary which existed resulted in disengagement. Each of us was left to operate very much as separate individuals. The development of real warmth and support was absent. The extent of disengagement at the time experienced did not turn us to seeking support but turned us on each occasion to separation. There was very little commitment which existed between us.

We all had been accustomed to relying on the strong mother figure who took care of everything. We brought that expectation into the new relationship that we established. There was a mix-up of the roles and for the structuralists this not only reflected in an invasion of the boundaries, but on the hierarchical patterns which should exist in all family structures. It is important that everyone be sensitive to the roles which different members in the family should perform. When this function is not clear then a confusion transpires. In my relationship the parties could not adhere to appropriate hierarchical patterns and perform roles accordingly. Being able to differentiate how a mother should provide, what a father should provide and what a child should expect from the relationship. Accepting that it is not the responsibility of the woman to provide everything in the home. This was the pattern which had existed just to allow for a smooth running of the home in the absence of a father. In relation to structural theorists we had all learnt to be the way we were through necessity. The healthy functioning of the subsystem between two partners was almost non-existence. Functioning of the family was not occurring and was desperately in need of attention.

B. Treatment Strategies

The Structural Family Therapist would devote him/herself to trying to encourage change in the family structure. The problems which we experienced were in the family structure.

Theorists would not tell us that the family structure we had was bad – the map which we had become accustomed to following – but that it needed to be changed and only we could ultimately allow that change to occur if we were willing to cooperate with the theorist and be guided by him/her.

We would have to present our problems to the therapist, and through a process of interviews he would observe how we interact with each other, or see the lack of interaction, in order to be able to make a comment on what he/she saw happening. Theorists do not presume that certain things are in existence. Their views are based on enactments which they have seen happen. It was clear that a re-mapping was needed of the family structure. What each partner and myself had been exposed to had to be redirected. We had become accustomed to somewhat moving around on our own self-pity because certain things had been absent in our previous lives. The therapist would have to work on the now and how he/she could establish a more positive attitude. The rigid boundaries which had been developed had to be broken down and clear boundaries encouraged. Clear boundaries which would promote healthy communication between us and yet allow us to retain ownership of our selves. The boundary which we still had was very much in tune with our mother's and had been brought over into our new relationship. That had to be left behind if it was not to continue having an effect on us and the expectation which it carried with it. To this end our family structure being

reformed would also identify the need for different roles from each member - from the new subsystem -which previously was not operating successfully.

The therapist would encourage healthy communication in therapy between us always attempting to help us restructure how we spoke and phrased different things. Becoming very active in our transformation not by saying we 'ought' to but perhaps could 'try' doing a certain thing. The therapist would encourage us to take charge of everything that was being done right there in therapy and not wait until we got home. By no means would it be an easy process. We had all been accustomed to a certain way for such a long time, but having someone actually take part in the reframing of our family structure and pointing out to us the reasons why we are perhaps the way which we were would certainly have been beneficial. It would have been of benefit also to have the therapist engage in trying to unbalance certain thoughts and actions presented in therapy to help keep us on our toes. There is nothing worse sometimes than to have to defend yourself against more than one person. The exercise though would force one to be more sensitive to what is being said or done. The therapist would encourage healthy enmeshment of our subsystem. This would affect our closeness whilst also acknowledging that we each need to retain our individuality. A re-organization of our thought processes and of our family structure would be needed if we were to be able to function in a meaningful healthy relationship. Having the therapist working with us by actually taking part in the restructuring would be a beneficial experience.