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Salvador Minuchin: A Sociological Analysis of His Family Therapy Theory

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ABSTRACT

Various academic disciplines are involved in the analysis of marriage and the family (e.g., anthropology, economics, history, psychology, psychotherapy, social work, sociology), but they frequently work in ignorance of the research and theoretical findings of their sister disciplines. This paper is an attempt to establish a theoretical bridge between sociology and family psychotherapy.

Although these disciplines have been working independently, they have much in common. For this paper, the work of one prominent family psychotherapist, Salvador Minuchin, has been analyzed using two of sociology's theoretical constructs: structural functionalism and symbolic interactionism.

This analysis suggests that a fruitful dialogue could be established between these two disciplines which often use different concepts to make the same points and to reach very similar conclusions. Additionally, an exchange of ideas between these two disciplines could potentially foster new and important insights into classical studies, and promote valuable joint research projects.

One of the most unfortunate gaps for the field of family therapy is its separation from the field of family theory as found in sociology.
(Hansen and L'Abate, 1982:296)

In the course of reading a text by James Hansen and Luciano L'Abate (1982), the above quotation aroused my attention. As a trained sociologist who has taught marriage and family courses for the last 15 years, I had been surprised at all of the theorists and researchers who are involved in family therapy who

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were rarely mentioned in sociological literature, and I was equally surprised to discover how infrequently sociological researchers were noted in psychotherapy literature. Hansen and L'Abate's statement suggested that it might be useful to create a theoretical bridge between the related fields of family psychotherapy and sociology of marriage and the family.

The following article attempts to create that bridge by showing how the theory of one important family psychotherapist, Salvador Minuchin, fits into two major sociological theoretical constructs: structural functionalism and symbolic interactionism. This paper does not purport to be a thorough examination of every facet of Minuchin's theory; only an emphasis on its sociological content.

One of the serendipitous effects of engaging in this project was the discovery that although these two somewhat isolated schools of thought had been working independently for many years, they had developed many of the same ideas, but had simply used different labels in their work.

SALVADOR MINUCHIN AND STRUCTURALIST THEORY

Minuchin's theory reads like a sociology textbook on structural functionalism. Even before he presents his theory, he talks about the social context of the individual. . . . Minuchin is concerned with family as an interlocking set of small groups arranged hierarchically. The task of the therapist is to restructure these small groups (sub-systems) so that the whole (family system) can function adequately (i.e., adapt to the demands placed on it by internal and external forces). (Hansen and L'Abate, 1983:142)

Although he is not a trained sociologist, Salvador Minuchin's version of family therapy is very sociological. He primarily represents the school of thought that sociologists have named structural functionalism, but his theory also includes smatterings of symbolic interactionism. Structural functionalism was developed by Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, Kingsley Davis, and others, and it is one of the three major perspectives used by sociologists today (the third perspective is conflict theory). Many sociologists feel this perspective is inherently conservative, emphasizing maintenance of the status quo, and thereby discouraging social change (Robertson, 1981:17-18). However, some sociologists and Minuchin use the basic outlines of the approach in a more dynamic fashion.

Parsons (1951:27) analyzes a social system on three levels: the individual, the group, and the cultural. His views mirror the gestalt position in that "a gestalt is an organized entity or whole in which the parts, although distinguishable, are interdependent" (Eshleman, 1981:51). The essential premise of the structural functionalist perspective is that social structures, such as the family and society, are systems with interdependent parts, with each part making some contribution

to overall group stability. The component elements of a given structure are analyzed in terms of their specific function for that system's maintenance. Critics of this approach argue that a practice that is functional for equilibrium at one level may be dysfunctional at another level, and that change is an inherently disruptive process (Abrahamson, 1981:61-62). Minuchin's theory would represent a revision of the traditional structural functional model in that it is dynamic and that it considers disequilibrium to be potentially functional for the social group.

Family Therapy

Salvador Minuchin's family therapy is based on a highly developed theory of family structure and dynamics that recognizes most of the fundamental concepts in the structural functionalist position as outlined by Parsons. In particular, as Goldenberg and Goldenberg state about Minuchin,

The structuralists are interested in how the components of a system interact, how balance and homeostasis is achieved, how family feedback mechanisms operate, how dysfunctional communication patterns develop, and so forth. Beyond that, they are especially attentive to family transaction patterns because these offer clues to the family's organization, the permeability of the family's subsystem boundaries, the existence of alignments or coalitions. (1985:178)

In Minuchin's view, the family is a social structure with a variety of subsystems or coalitions (e.g., husband-wife, mother-child, father-child). When the family unit encounters pressures from internal sources (developmental changes) or external sources (the cultural level in Parsons' schema), it must make "adaptations," which may create dysfunction within the family. Dysfunctional families are the result of structural problems, thus therapy is aimed at changing the organization or structure of the family unit (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981:69-71). Therefore, part of the therapeutic procedure is to induce family interaction.

Symbolic Interactionism

The family's structure organizes the ways in which family members interact with each other, and creates *transactional patterns*, which can only be viewed when the family subsystems are interacting. These transactional patterns regulate the behavior of family members, and they are maintained by two systems of constraint: generic and idiosyncratic. *Generic constraints* are based on universal "rules," such as the traditional hierarchical relationship between parents and

children, and the *idiosyncratic constraints* are based on the unique "rules" that evolve in every family as the result of "explicit and implicit negotiations among family members (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin and Fishman, 1981:78-79).

Minuchin's concern with idiosyncratic constraints parallels the interests of symbolic interactionists. Symbolic interactionists, such as Erving Goffman, George Herbert Mead, and Charles Horton Cooley, address themselves to two questions, both of which are of importance to family theorists: socialization and personality. "The first—socialization—focuses on how the human being obtains and internalizes the behavior patterns and ways of thinking and feeling of the society. The second—personality—focuses on the way in which these attitudes, values, and behaviors are organized" (Eshleman, 1981:55).

Gilbert Nass and Gerald McDonald summarize the symbolic interactionists' concern with the family in a manner that is consistent with Minuchin's approach:

Interactionists examine the internal workings of the family. They attempt to analyze both observable behavior and the attitudes and expectations family members have regarding each other. In so doing, they consider symbols used in interpersonal communication, the meanings these symbols have for different family members, and how such shared meanings create, sustain, and change "definitions of situations" for families and individual family members. (Nass and McDonald, 1982:50)

It is also worth noting that there are several subdivisions of symbolic interactionism, and that one of these subdivisions, ethnomethodology, addresses the analysis of the unwritten rules and regulations that guide our everyday behavior and the social construction of reality (Douglas et al., 1980). Some important points developed by ethnomethodologists include: human beings actively shape their own behavior; human behavior is constructed in the course of its execution; and, most importantly for us, "an understanding of human conduct requires study of the actors' hidden behavior" (Manis and Meltzer, 1978).

The emphasis on rules is, on one hand, part of the family's structure (and therefore a characteristic of structural functionalism). On the other hand, the reference to rules that govern the system is a clear reflection of symbolic interactionism and, specifically, the ethnomethodologists' concern with the unwritten rules that organize our everyday lives. Part of the ethnomethodologists' concern is to discover these unwritten rules and regulations (Robertson, 1981:23; Douglas et al., 1980; Manis and Meltzer, 1978).

Manis and Meltzer (1978) indicate that rules governing any system are created by the systems' members, and that in order to understand the behavior of the system's members, one must uncover these "hidden behaviors." Symbolic interactionists also emphasize that the stability of any social group or relationship

is dependent upon three interdependent factors: an individual's norms (personal standards of behavior, which are learned in a cultural context); the definition of the situation (certain behavior is learned to be appropriate in some situations but not in others); and the perception of the definition of others (how we think other people are expecting us to act) (Robertson, 1981; Douglas et al., 1980).

In line with the previous statements, the therapeutic goal of Minuchin is to change the family's organization. As previously noted, the family is a rule-governed system with homeostatic tendencies. Its resistance to change is organized around rules that are frequently not conscious or explicit, and it is the function of the therapist to discover these rules and to restructure the family so that it is more capable of satisfactorily managing stress (Hansen and L'Abate, 1982:148). This is a good example of both structural functionalism, a homeostatic system, and symbolic interactionism, rules that may not be conscious or explicit that govern people's behavior.

One last reference to the symbolic interactionists and their concern with the social construction of reality is warranted here. These theorists note that "all analysis of everyday life . . . begins with an analysis of the members' meanings. . . . 'Meaning' is used to refer to the feelings, perceptions, emotions, moods, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, values, and morals of the members of society" (Douglas et al., 1980). Similarly, Minuchin focuses his attention on *framing* and *reframing*, which are fundamental aspects of the therapeutic process. Therapy starts with the therapist and the family, its individual members, and the therapist having different definitions of reality, different "frames" in Minuchin's words. "The family's framing is relevant for the continuity and maintenance of the organism more or less as it is; the therapeutic framing is related to the goal of moving the family toward a more differentiated and competent dealing with their dysfunctional reality" (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981:74).

Subsystems

Returning to structural functionalism, Parsons and Minuchin stress that the family unit is not an isolated entity. The family of procreation has a history and it must be viewed within a cultural context. Minuchin notes that the first subsystem formed in the family, and in many ways the most important one, is the *spouse subsystem*. This subsystem can reconcile different sets of values brought by the spouses to their new relationship from their families of orientation, or these values may be retained by each spouse to maintain a sense of self (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981:16; Minuchin, 1974). Any dysfunctions in this subsystem that emphasize complementarity and mutual accommodation have significant consequences for the family's other subsystems, as children may be scapegoated or co-opted into alliances with one parent against the other. In addition, the spousal subsystem is important for serving as a model for appropriate male-

female interactions when the children create their own families (Minuchin, 1974:56–57).

The second subsystem that is formed is the *parental subsystem*. The partners “must now differentiate to perform the tasks of socializing a child without losing the mutual support that should characterize the spouse subsystem” (Minuchin, 1974:57). In this and the other subsystems, partners often expect that roles will be performed similarly to the way they were performed in their respective families of orientation. Negotiations and renegotiations characterize the family as parents attempt to establish transactional patterns that borrow from their own backgrounds, that are the product of their negotiations, and that are constrained by generic and idiosyncratic rules (Hansen and L’Abate, 1982:136).

The last subsystem to be formed, according to Minuchin is the *sibling subsystem*, but this may actually consist of several subsystems in a large family, as siblings may divide along lines created by developmental stages (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981:19). This subsystem is a social laboratory for children, who may use this social environment to safely experiment with peer relations, exercise their right to privacy, have their own interests, and be free to make mistakes (Minuchin, 1974:59; Hansen and L’Abate, 1982:132–133).

Several assumptions are made by Minuchin about these subsystems. First, each subsystem has a threshold of tolerance, and any behavior that goes beyond this threshold will cause the system to adjust and return to a more comfortable state of equilibrium; this parallels Parsons’ discussion of social control and system maintenance (Hansen and L’Abate, 1982:133; Parsons, 1951:297–298). Second, family subsystems are not as neat as the first impression may impart. Although there are only three subsystem categories, the family may subdivide into a variety of dyads, triads, and larger groups which are limited only by family size, but which can be labeled with one of the subsystem categories that have already been explained. It is an important part of the therapeutic process for the therapist to delineate the relevant subsystem groupings that exist in a given family and the dysfunctioning that exists within and between each. Third, individuals may be members of more than one subsystem at any given time, and they may play different roles and have different transactional patterns in each subsystem. Once again, this is an important concern for the therapist.

Finally, each subsystem establishes *boundaries* to separate it from other subsystems within the family.

A boundary of a subsystem is described as the rules that define who participates and how. The function of boundaries is to protect the differentiation of the system. All in all, the composition of subsystems organized around family functions is not nearly as significant, according to Minuchin, as the clarity of the subsystem boundaries. (Hansen and L’Abate, 1982:133)

These boundaries may vary from extreme rigidity to extreme diffuseness. In the former case, *disengagement* is likely. In disengaged families, communication across subsystem boundaries is difficult and family members may function separately and autonomously. They lack the ability to be interdependent. When a family member is under stress, the disengaged family has difficulty in coming to that individual's assistance (Minuchin, 1974:51-56; Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 1985:69). In the latter case, *enmeshment* is likely. The family turns in on itself and away from the cultural level discussed earlier, and the boundaries between family members become blurred. Family members in enmeshed families become overinvolved and overconcerned in one another's lives. "Members of enmeshed subsystems or families may be handicapped in that the heightened sense of belonging requires a major yielding of autonomy" (Minuchin, 1974:55).

Hansen and L'Abate make several important statements about "enmeshed" and "disengaged" families. First, they are labels for different transactional styles. Second, a normal family displays characteristics of each style at various times. Third, a pathological family is one that continually operates in an extreme "enmeshed" or "disengaged" manner. Fourth, a strong family is capable of mobilizing either transactional pattern to suitably meet internal pressures from the individual level, or external pressures from the cultural level (1982:133-135). In addition, Nichols notes that it may be functional for families to be enmeshed or disengaged. These interactional styles are not a problem in and of themselves. Problems occur only when families fail to modify their structure to fit changing circumstances (1984:65-66).

Causes of family dysfunctioning may emanate from one of four sources that may be related to the structural model developed separately by Minuchin and Parsons. One source of stress is extrafamilial and initially affects one individual, but this stress may, in turn, necessitate accommodating behavior on the part of one or more family subsystems or the family as a whole. A second source of stress is also extrafamilial, but it impacts on the entire family rather than on one member. A third source of family dysfunctioning is related to the natural developmental tasks that evolve during the course of a family's history. The fourth source of stress is "idiosyncratic" problems (e.g., retardation, handicaps, addiction) that overload the family's coping mechanisms (Hansen and L'Abate, 1982:135).

Therapeutic Strategies

Minuchin's therapeutic strategy flows logically from his structural conceptualization of the family. He is primarily concerned with the flexibility of the family's boundaries, their developmental stage, and sources of stress and support. The identified patient's symptoms are equally important, as are the functions and dysfunctions of these symptoms within the family unit. The primary goal of

therapy is to change family organization, which the therapist does by creating a *therapeutic system*—a social unit composed of the family and the therapist. Hansen and L'Abate diagram Minuchin's view of therapy in the following manner: "(family) + (therapist) = (family + therapist) = (family + therapist's ghost) - (therapist)" (1982:138). As a result of changing the family structure, the subsystem members will undergo a change in transactional patterns that will enable them to better cope with various forms of family stress. Minuchin interprets the therapist's role as "extremely active," "confrontive," and "involved," and as emphasizing the present rather than the past (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981:20-22).

It is interesting to note that Minuchin makes reference to Parsons in one of his early works, *Families of the Slums*. Minuchin is discussing the initial contact with a family and what features one looks for in the interactional patterns of that group that might be indications of structural dysfunctioning. He quotes the following passage from Talcott Parsons, that focuses on structural determinants of family behavior:

The structure of the nuclear family can be treated as a consequence of differentiation on two axes, that of hierarchy or power and that of instrumental vs. expressive function . . . these two axes of differentiation as symbolized by the two great differentiations of generation . . . and sex, overshadow other bases of differentiation within . . . a 'typical' nuclear family. (Minuchin et al., 1967:218)

There are two intervention strategies that are used by Minuchin: *coupling*, or joining the family to increase therapeutic leverage; and *restructuring*, strategies aimed at changing the family's transactional patterns (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981:28-49, 142-145; Minuchin et al., 1978:94). *Coupling* takes place through the use of three techniques: maintenance, or supporting the family; tracking, or showing interest in the family; and mimesis, or modeling therapist behavior on the family's mood, tone, speed of speech and mannerisms (Minuchin, 1974:123-129).

Once Minuchin has established the therapeutic system, he attempts to *restructure* the family by a variety of techniques that vary according to the characteristics of the therapist, the family, and the symptoms. Some of the restructuring techniques relevant to us here include: "actualizing family transactional patterns"—the family enacts typical transactions for the therapist, and the therapist observes the patterns (structure) rather than the behavior; "marking boundaries"—the therapist helps the family to recognize subsystem boundaries and subsequently their importance; and "escalating stress"—the therapist blocks typical transactional patterns (Minuchin, 1974:138-157).

In conclusion, Minuchin is concerned with the family's structure and the

functions and dysfunctions of that structure for the family's members. The family is just one social unit situated in a hierarchy composed of individuals and increasingly more inclusive social structures. Minuchin moves from the family unit level down to the subsystem level, then down to the individual level; he may also move from the family level up to the cultural level in his analysis. The aim of therapy is a flexible family, one that has neither exceptionally rigid nor diffuse boundaries between its subsystems, and one that is capable of shifting the composition of its boundaries to manage different types of stresses.

CONCLUSION

As I have proceeded through the literature, I have become aware that several different individuals or groups of individuals active in the field of family therapy have attempted to develop typologies for creating some order in this theoretical field. It was of interest to me as I was involved in the early stages of research for this paper, that in some of these typologies Minuchin was included in different categories depending upon the criteria used by the typologist.

Specifically, in the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (GAP) model, Minuchin was designated as a therapist who used a systems approach (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 1985:123). Guerin, however, places him in a subgroup of systems theorists: "structural therapists" (1976). L'Abate and Frey classify Minuchin as an "activity" theorist (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 1985:124-125). And, Goldenberg and Goldenberg classify Salvador Minuchin as a structural therapist (1985:126-127).

The typologies noted above are interesting both for what they tell us and for their inconsistencies, which are the result of focusing on different aspects of a therapist's approach or style. The purpose of this paper was to discuss the family therapy theory of Salvador Minuchin and to place him within a sociological context. As we can learn more about the various family therapy theories by placing them within the typologies noted above, it is hoped that the sociological classification system that has been used in this paper sheds new light on important aspects of this theory. By emphasizing the structural functional characteristics of Minuchin's theory, it is hoped that the work of this important theorist has been clarified and extended in a significant manner.

Further research could place other family psychotherapists within appropriate sociological constructs. For example, Jay Haley, Murray Bowen, and Mara Selvini-Palazzoli could also be analyzed using both structural functionalism, and, particularly, symbolic interactionism, and the work of Gerald R. Patterson and other social learning theorists could be interpreted in light of the exchange theory developed by George Homans, Peter Blau, and others. These efforts to cross traditional academic boundaries give promise of shedding new

light on these theories and of promoting cooperative efforts in a field of mutual interest.

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