



NEW ORLEANS

BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

ANSWERING GOD'S CALL

Treating the Whole Family

Rediscovering the Magic of Systems Theory and Models



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Objectives

- Review traditional systems models for marriage and family counseling.
- Analyze specific strategies for engaging entire families in a contemporary context.
- Explore case studies of families or family members resistant to participating in the whole family process and practice specific scripts for gaining cooperation of resistant client families.



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Systems Review

Characteristics of a Family System (Chalquist, 2003)

- Organized around interactions and within a hierarchy of interrelated subsystems.
- Wholeness: the system is greater than sum of the parts.
- Each part of the system affects all others.
- Interrelations emphasized more than components; systemwide ripples ("these cause each other") emphasized more than linearity (this causes that).
- Calibration: setting of a present-oriented, systemwide range limit around a comfortable emotional "bias."
- Self-regulating via feedback loops--negative (toward stability) and positive (toward change)--that maintain the bias.



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Family Systems Approaches

- **Structural family therapy**, designed by Salvador Minuchin, looks at family relationships, behaviors, and patterns as they are exhibited within the therapy session in order to evaluate the structure of the family.
- **Intergenerational family therapy** acknowledges generational influences on family and individual behavior. Murray Bowen designed this approach to family therapy, using it in treatment for individuals and couples as well as families.



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Insight Oriented vs. Action Oriented

- Bowen and others sought to offer individuals insight into Systems dynamics with the expectation that such insight would naturally result in change.
- Minuchin and others sought to help families experience changes in their relational patterns that would result in reorganization of the family unit.

The Man Who Started it All

Minuchin says, “We were all psychoanalytic therapists frustrated by the lack of change in our clients. Then we read Don Jackson’s article and suddenly became family therapists.” (video, *Minuchin Center*)

Jackson’s article, The Question of Family Homeostasis, was published in *The Psychiatric Quarterly Supplement* in 1957.



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Two Crucial Concepts Originating with Don Jackson (<https://mri.org>)

- Interactional Theory places emphasis on what is transpiring in the present between people as the primary data relevant to understanding human behavior.
- Conjoint Family Therapy is a term coined by Jackson to characterize therapy in which two or more people who are vitally important to one another are seen simultaneously (i.e. conjointly) in psychotherapy.



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It Still Works

- The field Family Therapy has been growing worldwide for decades. (Trepper, 2005)
- Meta-analysis studies provide evidence that Family Therapy produces meaningful change in even the most difficult cases. (Baldwin, 2012)
- Creative therapists continue to discover the power of the family working together.



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Are we still Family Therapists?

- MFT's are accepted by the mental health community, but without clear distinction.
- Practicing MFT's only work with whole families 10% of the time. (Morris, 2017)



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Why are we letting it all go?

- Families are overscheduled and don't do anything together anymore.
- We've lost our nerve.



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Beginning Again

- Renewing our knowledge of and commitment to Systems principles.
- Starting with Family Therapy instead of telling ourselves we will engage the whole family later if necessary.
- Refusing to reinforce the belief that only one person needs to change.



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A Few Caveats

- Not every presenting problem is appropriately addressed by Family Therapy.
- Safety within the family is crucial.
- Some families will simply refuse to participate.



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First Things First

- First Contact/Scheduling:
 - Identify self as a Family Therapist.
 - Ask who lives in the household full or part time.
 - Ask “when” everyone in the family can come in (not “if”).
- Reschedule if notified that one or more family members will not attend.



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Practical Exercise #1

- Take turns practicing your script for scheduling the whole family.
- Role-play clients should be creative with resistance.

Fulfilling the Promise

- Many competent MFT's hesitate to push the whole family model because they fear that they won't be able to sell it to the family when they do come in together.
- We need to be prepared to demonstrate to every family member who attends that their presence is meaningful.



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Joining

- Joining with each member of the family may be the most important thing to get right.
- Joining well allows us to work with the system rather than competing individual perspectives.
- “The most crucial task in the first session is for you to successfully join with your clients. Joining means that clients feel a sense of connectedness with you, which usually arises when they feel you understand, respect, and care about them.”
(Patterson, et al, 2018)



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Minuchin on Joining

(Minuchin & Fischman, 1981)

- “Diagnosis in Family Therapy is achieved through the interactional process of joining.”
- The structural therapist joins a family through contact with individual family members, not with some abstraction called the system.
- The specific relationship that develops between the therapist and a family will be a unique product of the personality of the therapist and the individual personalities within the family.



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Minuchin on Joining (cont.)

(Minuchin & Fischman, 1981)

- Joining is more than building rapport. Though the process should look and feel natural to the family, the process of joining is more strategic than small talk aimed at setting a pleasant tone. The therapist must sense and respond to the established rules of interaction in the family system.
- The therapist must be prepared for resistance to attempts to join the family. This resistance can be a very useful diagnostic indicator and can direct the therapist's joining maneuvers.



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Minuchin on Joining (cont.)

(Minuchin & Fischman, 1981)

- “Joining a family is more an attitude than a technique, and it is the umbrella under which all therapeutic transactions occur. Joining is letting the family know that the therapist understands them and is working with and for them.” (M. & Fishman, 31)
- The most useful tool for affiliation is confirmation.
- The therapist needs to confirm every family member, even those who have been unlikable thus far.



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Types of Resistance to Joining

- A family member tries to introduce or speak for everyone.
- One or more family members want to skip ahead to a detailed description of the problem.

🧠 It is important for the therapist to counter these forms of resistance creatively.



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Practical Exercise #2

- Take turns practicing your script for joining with each member of a client family.
- Role-play clients should be creative with response and resistance.



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