Mastering Competencies in Family Therapy

CHAPTER 9

Systemic and Strategic Therapies

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Systemic / Strategic Therapies

Developed by 3 teams of therapists

- Mental Research Institute (MRI; Palo Alto)
- Milan Systemic Therapy (Italy)
  - Long-term Brief Therapy, language shapes family dynamics
- Strategic Therapy
  - Jay Haley developed own form of systemic therapy, focuses on the use of power
  - Cloe Madanes worked with Haley, focuses on motivating power of love

Systemic Therapists

Systemic therapists:
- Conceptualize symptoms of individuals within the larger relational network of family and social systems
- Maintain a non-blaming, non-pathologizing stance
- Tap into systemic dynamics to effect change
- Intervening at the systemic level can effect change quickly - thus, brief therapies

Significant Contributions to the Field

MRI at Palo Alto:

- Reframing
  - Technique found in most forms of systemic family therapy
  - Can look like interpreting but has different purpose
  - Considers the role of the symptom in the broader relational system
  - Involves finding an alternative yet equally plausible explanation for a set of facts (bad vs. mad)
  - Uses constructivist philosophical position
  - Alters the “viewing” of a difficulty
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Significant Contributions to the Field

Milan:
- **Circular Questions**
  - Used to help assess or make systemic dynamics overt, expose interactive patterns
  - Specific forms of circular questions include:
    - Behavioral sequences questions
    - Difference questions
    - Comparison and ranking questions
    - Before and after questions
    - Hypothetical circular questions

Strategic (Haley and Madanes):
- **Directives**
  - Complete a specific task to alter communication dynamics (change sequence or pattern)
  - Interrupt the behavior sequence
  - Smallest change possible
  - “Ah-ha” moments may occur in the middle of the action
  - Aiming for 2nd order change (change in the rules about the rules of interaction)

Systemic / Strategic Therapy Process
- Assess the **interactional sequence** and associated **meanings**
- Intervene by **interrupting the interactional sequence**
- **Evaluate** outcome and client response
- Often step-wise

The Therapeutic Relationship
- Respecting and trusting the system
- Adapting to client language and view
- Neutrality
- Irreverence
- Maneuverability
- One-down stance, not understanding
- Social courtesy: focus on client’s presenting concern
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Case Conceptualization/Assessment

- Interactional focus, dyadic and multiple
- “More of the same” solutions
- Focus on presenting concern, not “underlying” dynamics
- Observation team
- Greek Chorus

Goal Setting

- Symptom-free interaction patterns
- No theory of health
- The problem is the attempted solution (MRI)
- Individualized goals

Language-Based Interventions

- Hypothesizing Process (Milan)
- Positive Connotation (Milan reframe)
- Reframing
- Circular questions (Milan)
- Therapeutic double bind and counterparadox (MRI & Milan)
- Invariant Prescription (Milan)
- Dangers of Improvement (MRI & Strategic)
- Restraining/Go Slowly (MRI & Strategic)

Action-Oriented Interventions

- Directives (Strategic & MRI)
- Paradoxical intervention and symptom prescription (all three)
- Metaphoric Task (Strategic)
- Pretend Techniques (Madanes)
- Ordeals (Haley)
Systemic Therapies: Diverse Populations

- Excellent support for working with diverse populations because focus is on relational patterns
- Systemic and strategic therapies do not rely on a therapist-defined theory of health and normalcy, making them more easily adapted to different cultural groups and subpopulations