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## Individual in Structural Family Therapy

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### Introduction

Unlike other systemic approaches that may “carry the practitioner into rigidities that mirror the mistakes of linear therapists, denying the individual while enthroning the system” (Minuchin et al. 1978, p. 91), Structural Family Therapy takes into account the idiosyncratic characteristics of individual family members, both for assessment and intervention purposes. However, those individual characteristics are defined differently from how they are from a traditional psychodynamic perspective.

### Theoretical Context

Structural Family Therapy conceptualizes the individual as a subsystem of the family, with roles and functions within the larger whole. Participation in family life and individual differentiation are not seen as opposites but as two sides of the same process. The child’s identity begins to

develop in interaction with parents, siblings, and other family members: “The child has to act like a son as his father acts like a father; and when the child does so, he may have to cede the kind of power that he enjoys when interacting with his younger brother. The subsystem organization of a family provides valuable training in the process of maintaining the differentiated ‘I am’ while exercising interpersonal skills at different levels.” (Minuchin 1974, pp. 52–53). As the child’s relational context expands to the extrafamilial to include peers, teachers, and later spouse, own children, coworkers, the self continues growing in complexity and differentiation.

### Description

The individual self is described as a diversified structure, consisting of the various identities that have been formed throughout the life of the individual. This differs from the traditional image of the self as a series of concentric circles, the outer one representing the observable behaviors, and the innermost one the individual’s “essence” (“the mother is not affectionate with her daughter *because she is* a cold person). From a structural point of view, not being affectionate is just one of many possible ways for the mother to be, that coexists with others: she may be affectionate with another child, or with the same daughter

when nobody is looking, or she may have been more affectionate at an earlier time. In any case, she is not unidimensional (“a cold person”) but a complex individual whose various ways of being are activated within different contexts and at different times (Colapinto 1987).

## Application in Therapy

The image of the self as diversified challenges the family’s (and/or the therapist’s) certainty that each family member’s identity is fixed (“the mother *is* distant,” “the husband *is* controlling”). The structural therapist assumes that clients are functioning with just a fraction of their potential, and that latent traits that may be not apparent at first sight – such as the capacity to nurture, or to exercise responsible leadership – may be present in other contexts, or have been active at earlier times in the family members’s lives, and can be retrieved in therapy. The “distant” mother’s capacity for closeness may have no place within the current patterns of the family but is available in latent form. “A therapist functions as a midwife, making available alternative ways of being that increase the flexibility of people’s relating with their significant ‘others.’” (Minuchin et al. 2013, p. 29). *Enactment* is the primary technique utilized by structural family therapists to help families develop those alternative ways.

## Clinical Example

The following excerpt from a consultation by Salvador Minuchin (Minuchin et al. 2013) shows (in added italics) how the consultant challenges the perception of a youngster as essentially “immature” and “irresponsible,” opening a path for a more constructive father/son relationship.

Father: You were acting like a little kid down there with that paint. Didn’t you?. That was a very irresponsible act that you pulled there. Let me tell you.

Minuchin: Did you do it *as a mischief?* Or did you do it *because you’re a klutz?*

Son: Not because I’m a klutz. I had gold paint and I painted my bike with it and there was a little bit left and I was at the sink and I spilled it and I turned the water on and all this paint flooded on top of it and got on the sink.

Minuchin: So it was not on purpose – some mischief – it was just because you were incompetent.

Son: I’m not incompetent...

Minuchin: That’s incompetent. *But that’s different from being a baby.* That’s an incompetent youngster, you know, *maybe he did not learn from you* to be competent. Probably you are a very competent man if you had been working all this time and you’re a foreman you are probably a person that takes care of your tools and all those things. Is that true?

Father: Yeah.

Minuchin: And he does not – *he has not learned that yet.*

Father: No. He has no respect for tools whatsoever. Minuchin: *And you would like to teach him that.*

Father: Yeah.

Minuchin: And is he a very incompetent student that you cannot teach him?

Father: No. He can be... He’s smart. He just doesn’t want to listen and that’s a problem...

Minuchin: I am not certain. I am listening to him and my feeling is *that there are two parts of him and that you are looking at the worst part of him* and certainly the worst part of him is pretty bad but there are some aspects of him that I am listening now. You painted your bike?

Son: Yes.

Minuchin: *So you were responsible* there with your bike and you painted it. Try to convince your Dad that this is one of those things that it’s a mistake and you learned from it. I don’t know. Convince him that *you are not a klutz.*

Son: It’s just a mistake, you know? Next time I know. Next time if I spill paint I will know to try and wash it off the floor. Cuz I thought that it would just wash down the drain.

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**References**

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