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Mapping in Structural Family Therapy



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Introduction

Mapping is the visual representation of a family and of its members' relationships with each other and with the outside world.

Theoretical Framework

Mapping is a primary assessment technique used in Structural Family Therapy.

Rationale for the Strategy or Intervention

Structural therapy poses that problematic behaviors are embedded in a family's relational patterns. Visually representing those patterns on a diagram serves the dual purpose of identifying how problems are maintained by the family's dynamics and guiding the therapeutic intervention.

Description

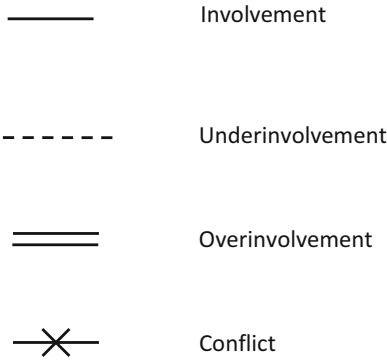
The first draft of the family map may be drawn on the basis of the referral information. Who live in the household? What are their genders and ages? How are they related to each other? This gives the therapist a basic sense of the "shape" of the family: "trigenerational," "blended," "single parent," "one-child." The referral information may also include data on the larger system: individuals and organizations that are relevant for the family, such as extended family, school, church, child protection agency.

When the therapist first meets the family, involving them in drawing up their own map has the additional value of helping with their engagement: "Inviting family members to place the people and write their names inside a circle promotes a recognition of their mutual belonging, an awareness that 'these are us.'" (Minuchin et al. 2007, p. 45). The therapist also begins to develop first hypotheses about the nature of the family's relational patterns, by observing how they interact during the session and tracking how they interact at home.

The family map indicates the position of family members vis-à-vis one another. It reveals coalitions, affiliations, explicit and implicit conflicts, and the ways family members group themselves in conflict resolution. It identifies family members who operate as detourers of conflict, and family members who function as switchboards. The map charts the nurturers, healers, and scapegoaters. Its delineation

of the boundaries between subsystem indicates what movement there is and suggests possible areas of strength or dysfunction. (Minuchin and Fishman 1981, p. 69)

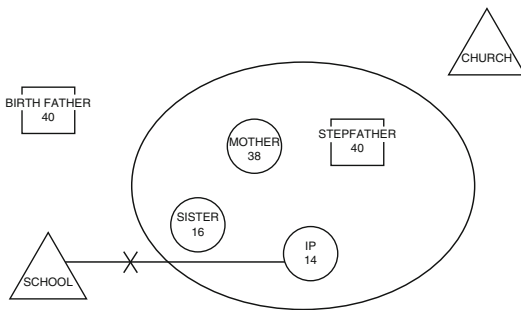
Structural therapists use symbols to represent these different relations in the family map. For instance:



Case Example

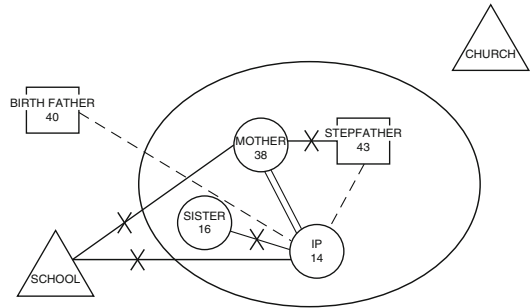
A 12-year-old girl is being repeatedly suspended from school due to her fighting with schoolmates and disrespectful interactions with teachers. The referral indicates that she lives with her mother, stepfather, and one siblings. Her birth father lives out of state. The family belongs to a church.

A first draft of the family map looks like this:

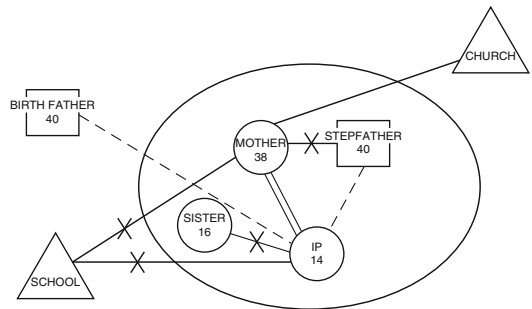


In the first meeting with the family, the therapist learns that the 14-year-old girl is very close to her mother, has a distant relationship with both her

biological father and her stepfather, and quarrels often with her older sister.



The therapist also finds out that the mother and stepfather often quarrel about how to raise the children, that the mother confronts the school about what she sees as unfair treatment of her daughter, and that not all the family members participate in the church, but only the mother.



This map draws the therapist’s attention to a couple of three-way relationships in which the identified patient is involved. One is the pattern that links her to her disagreeing (close) mother and (distant) stepfather, and the other is the conflictive relationship that both she and her mother have with the school.

The initial map just allows for a preliminary organization of the complex data presented by a family. “It does not represent the richness of family transactions any more than a map represents the richness of a territory.” It is static, whereas the family is constantly in motion (Minuchin 1974, p. 90). As therapy proceeds, the map is constantly revised and refined.

References

- Minuchin, P., Colapinto, J., & Minuchin, S. (2007). *Working with families of the poor*. New York: Guilford.
- Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families and family therapy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Minuchin, S., & Fishman, H. C. (1981). *Family therapy techniques*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.