

## **BELONGING**

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Towards the end of his life, as he looked back at 56 years of practice as a family therapist, Salvador Minuchin identified the theme of *belonging* as the focal point for his efforts to understand and help families.

This insight casts a new light on the underpinnings of his theoretical and clinical achievements.

Minuchin saw the family as the “matrix of identity,” the primary context where a child begins to develop a multifaceted identity, by belonging in various subsystems:

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).

Later belongings in other systems –school, friends, work, couple, new family –add complexity to the organization of the self. Thus individuation, for Minuchin, does not require separation from one human group, but rather belonging to many.

The notion of a multifaceted self, shaped by multiple belongings, underlies core components of Minuchin’s innovative approach: the purpose of his therapy; his reliance on hidden strengths; his positioning as a therapist; boundary making; and the quest for family friendly social services.

### **Purpose of therapy.**

While other family therapists were looking for ways to extricate the individual from noxious family binds, Minuchin focused on making the binds more nuanced, allowing for both belonging and individuation. He did not look for solutions in the self sufficiency of the individual, but in the mutual reliance on the network. To the traditional mantra, “You can only change yourself,” he responded, “You can only change the other, and only the other can change you.”

### **Reliance on hidden strengths.**

For Minuchin. the therapeutic endeavor rests on the assumption that family members are always richer, more complex than what they appear or believe to be –that they have the capacity to

change how they relate to each other, in the form of interpersonal skills that may be hidden from view, either because they have been forgotten or because they are exercised out of the sight of other family members. A mother's apparent ineffectiveness with her son does not need to be seen as the manifestation of low self esteem, but rather as her way of belonging in her family. She may appear incompetent in the presence of her husband, but not when alone with the children. She may think poorly of herself as a leader at home, but be self confident with her colleagues at work. The father may be a heartless disciplinarian when responding to conflict between mother and son, but show a tender side when playing with the children. The son may display more maturity when functioning as the older sibling than when relating to his parents.

"I create scenarios," Minuchin used to say when asked about the nature of his therapy. While traditional psychotherapy encourages change "from the inside out" –from individual's feelings to the observable behaviors–, Minuchin's therapy proceeds in the opposite direction, from the relational context to the individual. Rather than seeking to raise a mother's self esteem so that she can deal more effectively with her rebellious son, he would "set her up for success," eliciting an experience of being effective that in turn will make her feel better about herself. Observing that the mother cannot complete a satisfactory interaction with her son because the father rushes to "rescue" her, Minuchin might set up an enactment where the father is not allowed to interfere –thus creating a scenario where mother can utilize the leadership skills that she may be applying in other contexts.

Minuchin's conviction that family members possess latent capacities that are hidden from others' and their own view, but may manifest in other contexts, provided him with a firm platform from where to issue his trademark supportive challenges. His message was not a put down "You are wrong," but a hopeful "You can do better." After a session where he successfully challenged a father's and his family's certainty that he had no influence over his daughter, Minuchin was asked how he could be so sure that the father, who presented as extremely weak, could raise to the occasion. His answer: "He is a surgeon. In the operating room, he must lead and be assertive, because that is what is expected from him. In his family, not so much." Different belongings.

### **Positioning as a therapist.**

The theme of belonging is also present in Minuchin's preference for working in close emotional proximity to his clients. His therapy is not the calm, rational, distant endeavor that avoids the intensity of family interaction and plans strategic interventions to bypass resistances, double binds, or family plots. He could not afford the comfortable position of the neutral observer; he needed to be accepted as a temporary member. "Joining is letting the family know that the therapist understands them and is working with and for them. Only under his protection can the family have the security to explore alternatives, try the unusual, and change. Joining is the glue that holds the therapeutic system together." (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981, p.31)

Neither could Minuchin afford to be inducted fully into the family. He needed to be free to challenge the rules of engagement that facilitate but at the same time constrain the development of family members. For an anorexic teenager to eat, a truant child to improve his attendance, a spouse to get out of his depression, all family members would need to modify patterns of interaction constructed over years. As a new member, Minuchin saw his role as one of questioning those patterns and assisting in the development of new ones. The family system thus became part of a larger one –the therapeutic system, that included the therapist as challenger. When Minuchin set up enactments, prescribed changes in the seating arrangement, blocked family members from interrupting a transaction, unbalanced, or induced crises, he was not applying disembodied techniques. He was exercising his specific membership rights.

As a member of the therapeutic system, Minuchin carefully monitored his participation so as not to become central. He intervened actively, but briefly. Dialogues with individual family members were not about discussing their feelings or thoughts but about how they were relating to others and how they could relate differently.

### **Boundary making.**

Boundary making, a staple of Minuchin's therapy, is an exercise in shifting belongings. The question guiding the boundary making intervention is who belongs with who, in what kind of situation.

Viewers of edited versions of Minuchin's work, which often highlight the most dramatic moments of his sessions (standing in between a mother and child to block their visual contact, raising his arm to stop a father that moves to intervene when his wife in dealing with their daughter) may conclude that his therapy consists mostly of disarticulating enmeshed relationships. But one gets a different impression when longer sequences of a session are watched. He is not simply dismantling the dance, he is improving the choreography. When he intervenes to create more distance between two family members, it is not to make them into self sufficient individuals, but to make room for both to belong in other groups –child/parent, wife/husband, child/sibling. Drawing a boundary around two people that excludes a third one may take only a few seconds of the session; a much longer time is devoted to helping and coaxing the dyad, now protected by the boundary, to work on their relationship without the interference or the assistance of the third one.

### **Family friendly social services.**

Starting with his early work in a residential center for delinquent children (Minuchin et al., 1967), and culminating with his consultation with child welfare agencies in New York and Boston in the 1980s and 90s, Minuchin noted that families are shaped by the social context

where they belong, as much as individuals are shaped by their families; and that agencies charged with assisting (or controlling) the multicrisis poor, their good intentions notwithstanding, often have a traumatic effect on the children's and other family members' sense of belonging.. The removal of a child from a biological family and his placement in a foster home or a residential placement, whether justified or not, breaks up connections not only between the child and the parent who has been identified as neglectful or abusive, but also with siblings and other family members. Once the removal has taken place, separate services are provided to the child and the parent or parents; the parent-child relationship is not protected or treated, beyond a weekly hour visit usually monitored by agency staff.

Minuchin endeavored to introduce family friendly practices in foster care, substance abuse, and mental health programs –practices oriented to support the integrity and autonomy of their client families. He reached some success but was not fully satisfied. The closing lines of *Working with Families of the Poor* entreat younger generations to continue the effort.

The introduction of procedures that include families in treatment and emphasize the coordination of services involves swimming against the current in times such as these, and that is always difficult. It requires tenacity, endurance, and a concern for the human suffering of people at the bottom rung of society. It also requires a degree of optimism. We know, via history and experience, that times change. Especially with social support, but even without it, the teaching of new ideas can take effect; institutions can integrate more constructive ways of working, and professionals can become broader, more compassionate, and more effective in their contact with individuals and families. We hope that readers will be part of such changes, and that they will experience their efforts as worthwhile. (Minuchin et al., 2007, p.245)

## References

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