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## Enactment in Structural Family Therapy

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### Introduction

In an enactment, family members are asked to talk with each other rather than to the therapist. This serves the dual purpose of allowing the therapist to *see* firsthand how clients interact, instead of relying on their descriptions, *and* having clients *experience* different ways of interacting (Nichols and Fellenberg 2000).

### Theoretical Framework

Enactments are an essential component of Structural Family Therapy (Minuchin 1974; Minuchin and Fishman 1981). They are used to explore and change interactional and organizational problems in families: how couples talk to each other, how parents relate to their children, and how relationship triangles influence family dramas. By bringing the actual dynamics of those relationships to life in the consulting room, enactments lend immediacy and authenticity to family therapy.

Although enactments are also used in other therapeutic modalities, there is an important distinction. Outside of structural family therapy, the use is generally more directive, with therapists interrupting to coach communication skills, often after almost every client utterance (e.g., Butler and Gardner 2003; Davis and Butler 2004). The familiar tactic of having couples take turns talking and listening is an example of this approach, as is the rehearsal in behavioral marital therapy (Jacobson and Margolin 1979), the directed dialogues in emotionally focused couples therapy (Greenberg and Johnson 1988), and the role-playing and problem-solving practice in couple enrichment programs (L'Abate and Weinstein 1987). By contrast, enactments in Structural Family Therapy are relatively unstructured. The therapist acts as a facilitator rather than a coach. Although he or she may need to be active in setting an enactment up, once underway the therapist intervenes only when necessary to keep it going. Forced to rely on their own devices, some clients will find a way to get through to each other; others may continue to communicate in ways that are counterproductive. When this happens, the therapist points at what the clients are doing that keeps them stuck.

### Rationale

Because family members often describe themselves more as they want to be seen than as they are, structural family therapy works by doing

rather than talking. It relies on the observation of actual family transactions – the “family dance” – to identify and highlight the dysfunctional patterns that embed the presenting problems; and on the family members’ practice of alternative ways of relating – a new choreography – as the way to develop healthier patterns. The purpose of an enactment is not necessarily that the family members will reach agreements or the solution to their problems, but that they will have the experience of a better relationship. New relational patterns need to be experienced repeatedly until they hold; each successful enactment contributes to the expansion of the family’s repertoire, showing that change is possible and what it may look like.

## Description

Enactments can be used as an assessment tool or as a therapeutic intervention. When used for assessment, the therapist initiates an enactment and waits to see where communication breaks down. Suppose, for example, that a wife complains that her husband never talks to her. When the therapist asks the man to talk to his wife about a project at his work and she interrupts with frequent criticisms, the husband grows silent and the enactment comes to a close. In this case, the therapist might conclude that the husband doesn’t talk to his wife, because when he does, she criticizes him – and because rather than answer her, he withdraws.

When used as a therapeutic intervention, the therapist’s job is to push family members to continue talking until there is a breakthrough in the way they interact. In the previous example, when the husband grows silent in the face of his wife’s criticism, the therapist could simply say “Answer her.”

In families with young children, enactments may take the form of action rather than conversation. To see how effectively parents deal with their children, a therapist might ask them to control an unruly child or encourage a shy child to play a game. Are the parents able to get their children to sit quietly in the corner if the therapist asks them to? Can a parent sit and play with his or her child without trying to control the game?

Using enactments effectively is more complicated than generally assumed (Nichols 1997). Though some clients are all too ready to argue among themselves, most are reluctant to address their conflicts directly with each other in therapy sessions. They’ve tried, but it’s been painful and unproductive. So by the time they get to a therapist’s office, many people are ready to give up on each other and turn to the therapist for understanding.

Therefore, it’s useful to carefully prepare the groundwork for an enactment. Before staging it, the therapist gives everyone present a chance to share his or her point of view about the problems that plague them. Unhappy families are often short on mutual understanding, and therefore the first task of a therapist is to give each of them a sympathetic hearing.

Once a therapist has acknowledged what each family member has to say, he or she identifies a problematic interaction. Perhaps, for example, a father sits back silently while his wife and son argue fruitlessly. The therapist may probe the flexibility of this arrangement by asking the father to talk with his wife about her concerns. If the father’s conversation with his wife is interrupted by the son, and the father is silenced, this will support the hypothesis that the mother and son are overinvolved and the father is disengaged.

After a specific subject of concern to both parties has been identified, the therapist then initiates an enactment, making a production of it: he or she describes a problem, show that it is an important issue for the family, asks the participants if they’d be willing to talk about it, brings them physically closer to each other, and may prescribe who should begin the conversation.

Pointing out a relationship problem that the therapist has observed increases the clients’ motivation to engage in enactments. It is important to choose a subject that both participants have something to gain by discussing. Some subjects are a no-win proposition for certain family members. Suppose, for example, a teenager has trouble expressing himself to his mother, and she has trouble listening. Asking them to talk about why the boy should stay in school is unlikely to lead anywhere because the boy has nothing to gain in

this conversation. This discussion is almost certain to take the familiar form of a parent nagging a recalcitrant adolescent. On the other hand, asking the mother to find out what the boy wants to do after school may give him a better chance to speak up, and her a better chance to listen.

To use enactments effectively, a therapist should focus on the process, not the content, of communication. When the Johnsons complained that their teenage son David had frequent outbursts of anger, the therapist asked David if his father understood what made him angry. The boy answered, "No. He never listens to me." The therapist said, "This sounds like an important issue. If a father can't talk to his son, and a son can't talk to his father, how will the boy learn to get along in the world? David, would you be willing to talk to your father about some of the things that make you angry? Mr. Johnson, would you be willing to help David explain why he gets so upset?" They both agreed, and the therapist turned their chairs to face each other.

Once an enactment has begun, the therapist sits back to remove himself or herself from the dialogue. By avoiding eye contact with the person speaking, the therapist encourages clients to continue talking to each other and not to her or him. During this phase of an enactment, the therapist should say only enough to block third parties from interrupting, and to redirect or "jump start" the dialogue if necessary.

In the case of "A Father's Rage" (Minuchin and Nichols 1993), Dr. Minuchin asks a father to talk with his 16-year-old son, Keith. Despite the therapist's best efforts to encourage a supportive connection between father and son, the father begins by criticizing his son's choice of clothing. "So you'd rather go around wearing rags . . . than wear nice slacks and have them think you're a nerd. . ." Keith nods. The boy and his father have had run out of lines.

To restart the conversation, Minuchin says "You see, this was a perfectly good conversation between two cultures. It happens in this crazy culture in which these kids live, ragged pants are in and dressy pants are out." (To Keith:) "It is your job to explain yourself to your father so he can

understand you." (To the father:) "Your son is a member of an alien culture that thinks knees are beautiful. Who knows?" (To the son:) "Keith, can you explain this to your father?" "Please," the father says. As the therapist sits back, this stubborn and unhappy father and son begin to open up to each other. They talk about feeling excluded and feeling misunderstood, about needing to belong and not belonging – and what had begun as another failure of communication becomes a genuine breakthrough of understanding.

When an enactment comes to a close, the therapist can comment on what the clients are doing that keeps them stuck, or how they were able to get through to each other. If a real conversation has taken place, it is a good time for encouragement and suggestions for improving communication and cooperation to resolve family problems.

### Case Example

In the process of raising their children, the Diamonds have allowed the spark to go out of their marriage. They work well together as parents, but as a couple they have drifted apart. Tony Diamond complains that his wife is always too busy with the children to spend time with him; she complains that he is always complaining about his job and never seems to care how she feels.

After hearing these complaints, the therapist says, "It seems like you're both feeling neglected." They nod. "Maybe the problem isn't that you don't make time for each other, but that unspoken resentment makes you not want to." She looks down, he looks away. "This seems like an important issue. Tony, would you be willing to ask Kristina to tell you what she's feeling about your relationship?" "I guess," he says, not too convincingly.

The therapist turns their chairs to face each other, and says, "Kristina, can you help Tony understand why you've been feeling neglected; and, Tony, can you try to understand what she's feeling?" They both agree, and Kristina talks about how she misses the early years of their marriage when Tony always seemed willing to

listen to her concerns. When Tony counters by saying that he also needs to be listened to, it seems that they are about to revert to the familiar pattern of complaining back and forth with neither one really listening to the other.

So the therapist says, "Kristina, can I ask you a very personal question?" "Sure," she says, "I'm a very open person."

"Are you sometimes too angry for sex because you feel that Tony doesn't care what's going on with you?"

"Exactly!" she says. "Whenever Tony listens to me, I just melt."

The therapist takes Tony's hand and had him take Kristina's hand and says, "Keep talking. I think this guy really loves you, and he wants to understand how you feel."

That simple gesture and the physical closeness it fosters helps the two of them open up their hearts to each other. They talk about feeling misunderstood, about missing the good times they used to have, and about feeling that the other one no longer cares. It is a good talk, and it goes on for quite a while. After several minutes, the therapist begins to sense that the conversation is winding down, and wanting to punctuate their success, he moves their chairs apart and says, "It seems that you both miss the closeness in your relationship. I'm impressed with how meaningfully you can talk with each other when you take the time to hear what the other one has to say."

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