



Therapy

Is Structural Family Therapy Obsolete?

Sergio Stern MSc

In the autumn of 1997 the distinguished family therapist, Salvador Minuchin known best for his pioneering work at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic presented a workshop at the Marlborough Child and Family Consultation Centre, London. The workshop was attended by Sergio Stern an MSc graduate in Family Therapy, and also by Dr. Eia Asen, the therapist who featured in the BBC series Family Therapy for Everyone, and the author of the book of the same title which was written to accompany the series.

I would like to tell you about my experience of coming to London for one year to do an MSc in Family Therapy at the Institute of Psychiatry.

I was born in Mexico and lived and practiced as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist in Mexico City for some years before deciding to come to this country, but my family is of European descent, so crossing the Atlantic meant for me some sort of reencounter with my past and with my origins. Since my arrival in London, I have been assaulted by a clash between the old and the new, between the necessity to retrieve hidden memories and understand where I come from and the exciting world of rapidly changing realities surfing in front of me, multiple and diverse; between the grip of well-worn ways that no longer work and the fear of being swallowed by images without history, ever new proposals that move even faster than velocity itself.

I think this dilemma was clearly manifested in the workshop held by Salvador Minuchin at the Marlborough Centre in London on the 2nd and 3rd of September of the current year. Both, the best and the worst of this transition in which family therapy is involved at present came to the foreground for me. The post-modern notion of individual freedom,

which comes with the realisation of a lack of absolute certainty for the things we believe in, is one that I very much value, as I have always felt that difference and the possibility of questioning enrich rather than subtract from experience. Nevertheless, I have also felt that current trends in therapy emphasizing positive thinking and re-authoring sort of leave something out, including the encounter with human limitations and finitude, and the very real opportunity, offered in therapy, of speaking about the unspeakable, about things that often cause pain, shame or remorse, either to ourselves or to others, in reality or in fantasy. So, in the first day of the seminar, I welcomed Minuchin's proposition concerning the need to approach in therapy what is disavowed, the sources of conflict and the difficult affects.

I saw a group of people, including myself, proud of being post-modern and not considering for a moment the impact on a vulnerable family of somebody that was going to come and go and would not see them ever again, bent on the lofty concern of proving a theory to an avid audience. Here, I welcomed the revelations brought about by a movement towards a more egalitarian mode of practice, based not so much on expert truths but on the conjoint exploration of fixed and alternative meanings around a family's predicament. I also welcomed the possibility of family therapy of becoming even more reflective about its methods and ways of disseminating knowledge.

Vienna and London, the beginning and the end of the century, it all made so much sense, the negative side which causes harm when unacknowledged and the positive side which people ignore they possess, self-perception bearing the mark of a repetitive litany based on negative comments and love of suffering. Maybe it is context. It all depends on the perspective taken and the spirit of the times. No wonder family therapy is striving now to bring these two aspects into a fruitful collaboration.

My introduction to family therapy in this country has also been marked by this confrontation between the old and the new. Family therapy is undergoing a period of transition, like the world itself, tormented by extremes which reveal, at some moments, that it might be possible to implement a really democratic, respectful and pluralistic practice, while at other times, the specter of a world without substance and roots appears to take hold of even our most important dreams, making of therapy a shallow and managerial enterprise. Process and struggle seem to be two words surreptitiously slipping away from a world centered too much on quick fixes and magical solutions.

On the next day, however, when I saw him work directly with a family through the closed-circuit video system of the clinic, my perception of him radically changed. I saw a

powerful man trying to inflict change at all costs on a family plagued by severe and long-standing difficulties. I saw a man defining himself as a consultant but acting instead as an agent which thought he possessed the truth, relating to the family as if it were an "enemy" because of their "unwillingness" to change, overlooking completely the work initiated by the family's real therapist.

As part of my adventure of re-visiting this continent and thus my emotional and intellectual origins, I made a trip to Vienna for a few days at the beginning of the Spring. I went to see Freud's house and consulting room in Bergasse and it dawned on me why psychoanalysis had to be born in Central Europe. Under a precise, round-the-clock perfect order that seemed to characterise the city and its even-tempered inhabitants, I realised how important it was to have exposed the veil of human omnipotence and hypocrisy, in the middle of two World Wars, and reveal the dark and obscure side of it all. The repressed contained the dangerous side but also a store of creativity. Humanity blossomed when it could acknowledge both. But here and now I am in London at the end of the millennium, and it seems to me that in a world where getting excited with the fragments, fragments of everything, has turned out to be the rule, what has become repressed is the possibility of being and doing good. Sexual repression is no longer the issue, but the difficulty of expressing tenderness and making human contact.

Minuchin is not a psychoanalyst but a founding father of family therapy. As for myself, I have been greatly interested in psychoanalysis, systemic thinking, the problems and opportunities posed by post-modernity, and the movement towards a mode of therapy that is sensitive to what refuses to be put into words, the unspoken truth of otherness, but also to the potentialities and resources implicit in our quest, the pain and struggle and uncertainty involved in being human. I witnessed a clash in Minuchin's workshop that left me thinking, and I might experience another one soon of stronger proportions when I return to my country, Mexico, which I would like to call home. My hope is to see more of a dialogue between the old and the new as family therapy rides the storm and experiences the thrills of this changing world. Psychotherapist, Sierra Chalchihui 235-1101A, Mexico 11010, D.F., Mexico.

A reply from Dr. Eia Asen

I was at the very same workshop about which Sergio Stern writes. I saw him there and he saw me there. Yet, our experiences of what happened were quite different. In fact, I was - what Sergio refers to as - the 'real' therapist of the family which Minuchin saw.

Interestingly enough I did NOT think that Minuchin was "completely overlooking the work initiated by" me, but that in his pre-session discussion he proved to be very sensitive to the therapeutic work I had done to date. I did not perceive Minuchin in the first session with this family behaving as if "he possessed the truth", but I saw him successfully challenging ways in which the parents had "used" their 21 year old daughter and how she had put on "a private show for the parents". This reframe, developed WITH the family, proved a strong perturbatory force as far as all three family members were concerned: they simply had not seen things like that before - and nor had I. It made them think, it made me think. I was not alone in thinking that this had been a brilliant session - even the family acknowledged it (a few weeks later in a session with me). Unfortunately - and this had to do more with the context of the conference than with his 'method' - Minuchin decided to see the family a second time on the same day, after their lunch break. It was then that he became, in my view, inducted: the family, already well practiced in the art of devouring or disqualifying therapists and psychiatrists (about 10 to date) managed to lock him into a fight -and he fell for it, like so many of us do, no matter whether we are beginners or 'masters'. In doing so, Minuchin became frustrated by the family's apparent "unwillingness to change" (Sergio's words) and, of course, the more he tried the more they resisted. Naturally he failed - and he knew it. On the way out he told me that he had 'messed up the session' and in the subsequent discussion with the workshop participants he posed in no way as an 'expert who possessed the truth' but instead came across as a fallible therapist. I and many other workshop participants who spoke to me subsequently learned more from this session than I might have learned from observing a bland, politically correct 'egalitarian' post-modernist therapist. What does this prove?

Nothing really other than that Sergio and I had a different experience and constructed different meanings out of apparently the same event. It made me question not only Minuchin's work but also my own and that of many of my colleagues. It apparently confirmed Sergio's -and "a group of people's approach and position and made them feel "proud of being post-modern". I personally felt proud to have witnessed the struggle of a guru (Minuchin) working with a very difficult family, with Minuchin emerging as a Mensch rather than a God.

Eia K. Asen