Jorge Colapinto

BACK TO THE FUTURE[1]

Reflections on Minuchin's *Families of the Slums*

> One essential feature of the family and home environment is its impermanence and unpredictability… The geography of the home and its arrangements impede the development of a sense that "I have my place in the world"… Interpersonal contacts have the same erratic and impermanent qualities… Sometimes they shower the child with stimulation, and at other times he is left alone for long periods while he wanders through the house unattended… Parents' responses to children's behavior are relatively random and therefore deficient in the qualities that convey rules which can be internalized; and the parental emphasis is on the control and inhibition of behavior rather than on guidance.

These lines could be from a contemporary report on the current living conditions of poor children. They are, instead, from the 40-year old *Families of the Slums*, where Salvador Minuchin and his collaborators recounted the transformation of a correctional facility for delinquent children into a family-oriented treatment program. It is both a testimony to the author's talents and a sad reminder of the persistence of inequality in our society, that four decades after the publication of *Families of the Slums* the rich descriptions of family dynamics that populate its pages continue to capture the reality of marginalized families. When the time comes for policy planners and service deliverers to deal with that reality, they could do worse than turning to this book for guidance.

Meanwhile, family therapists can find in *Families of the Slums* a detailed chronicle of the origins of structural family therapy's concepts and techniques, often illustrated in even more concrete detail than Minuchin's subsequent, better known works. Consider for instance this lucid articulation of *enmeshment* and *disengagement* as two phases of the same process:

> Usually the mother has been exhausted into despair and helplessness by her need to respond continually in terms of "presence control." She has been so overburdened that by the time the family comes to the community's attention, all one can witness is an overwhelming interactional system in which the mother attempts to resolve her plight by fleeing into absolute abandonment or disengagement from her children. One sees, then, no middle ground as part of the model of observable transactions between mother and child. It was this gap that impressed us during our first observations of these families. Unaware that this state of affairs was part of a natural process, we centered our attention primarily on the apparent disengagement, the relinquishment of executive functions, until we fully realized the other strains, reflected in the enmeshment processes discussed previously.

The correctional facility –the Wiltwyck School for Boys, located in upstate New York and serving Black and Hispanic children from Harlem– provided an apt environment for Minuchin's fledging ideas. Traditional psychotherapeutic approaches, fit for middle-class patients besieged by intrapsychic suffering, did not appear to help Wiltwyck's poor and discriminated clients. Working with a population that had proven "resistant" to traditional forms of psychotherapy guaranteed the tolerance of the psychiatric establishment towards innovative approaches.

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Minuchin and his collaborators started with a sociological analysis of the impact of context on the Wiltwyck clients. After reviewing anthropological reports on the life of the poor in various cultures, they zeroed in on the action-excitement orientation, the special styles of communication, and the limited number of usable roles, found among poor families in a variety of social settings. But they also noted that the poor differentiate into two subgroups: a more stable one, whose members enjoy at least the benefits of a support network, and the more unstable, disorganized, isolated group, plagued with alcoholism, disease, mental illness, addiction, and delinquency, from where the Wiltwyck residents typically came.

The observation that context is a most powerful organizer (or disorganizer) of the individual called for a therapeutic approach aimed at context rather than an isolated problem -the cornerstone of what would eventually become Structural Family Therapy . The notion of the family as shaper of its members' behavior, and many of the concepts that outline how the shaping occurs –family structure, subsystem, boundaries, coalitions, faulty conflict resolution, disengagement, enmeshment- permeate the pages of *Families of the Slums*, and would continue to anchor the structural approach as its range of application moved from delinquent to other problem behaviors.

The book also stories how the Wiltwyck experience begot the trademark techniques of the structural model. Because the style of interaction in the families tended to be concrete and action-oriented, rather than abstract and verbal, the team looked into alternative, "more doing than talking" therapies. A remarkable example was the technique of *enactment*, whose name was derived from Brunner's classification of experiential modes:

> The therapist can *say* something or *do* something that expresses the same meaning, or preferably, he can do both. For instance, in one family session a therapist found himself under heavy attack. He then changed his seat and sat among the family members. Pointing to the empty chair, he said, "It was very difficult to be there being attacked by you. It makes me feel left out." The therapist might have described in words alone that he felt left out of the family; instead, he changed his seat to be among the family members and then commented on his feelings. He senses that although his verbal statement would pass unnoticed by all but the most verbal members of the family, his "movement language" would be attended to by everyone.

When Minuchin moved from Wiltwyck to the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic in the mid-1960s, the same approach that had been useful for working with underorganized families proved also helpful with the overorganized families or children with psychosomatic disorders, and for the Clinic's population at large. By the 1970s, Minuchin's structural approach had established itself among the most popular models of family therapy in the USA and beyond. But only a decade later, the developing (or unraveling) socioeconomic context began to pull family therapists away from struggling with dysfunctional systems, luring them back to the more comfortable realm of reflexive conversations. The "passion to change" was out; "talking about talking" was in. As more and more family therapists bought into the notion that "we live in language" and therapy should focus on the family's narrative, it was once again left to structural family therapy to work with those who live in poverty and need the focus to be on their reality.

The problems of the poor are embedded in social, not just family context, and Minuchin

himself has pointed at the Wiltwyck experience as a reminder that therapy is not the answer to poverty. However, the modalities of intervention developed there, and even the awareness of the limitations of therapy brought about by their application, have served as an inspirational paradigm for other efforts. In the 1970s Harry Aponte, a disciple of Minuchin, worked on the concept of bringing organization to the underorganized family through the mobilization of family and network resources. Later, Minuchin himself led another group of collaborators in the application of structural thinking to the understanding and changing of relationships within the system of foster care, where many poor children get entangled. My own current work on challenging the "patterns that disconnect", the disempowering effect that large systems of service delivery may have on the families that they are trying to serve, is anchored on the key notions of boundaries, coalitions, and faulty processes of conflict resolution that were first posed in *Families of the Slums.*

Today's socially conscious therapists, committed to social justice, may feel that they are in a better position than the old masters to understand the relation between the underprivileged and the dominant culture. "Family therapists were slow to come to grips with the large social differences that surround the family," one of them explained to me. "The founders of family therapy saw the family as a shelter from the realities of the power relations that operate in the larger society. Nowadays, to understand the family we must be conscious of how power in society permeates its life". As an example, she offered the "new" notion of *internalized oppression*, whereby members of repressed minorities learn to see and treat themselves in the same ways as the privileged majority does.

I shared two quotes with the colleague:

> The family system is at a crossroads between society and the individual, transmitting social rules and regulations to the growing child and providing blueprints for his cognitive and emotional development. Investigations of family organization can provide vantage points from which to understand how social phenomena are incorporated into the intrapsychic life of the individual -the relationship, specifically, between the subculture of poverty and the person who is poor.

and:

> Is there a relationship between the undifferentiated communicational style at the family level, the inhibition of cognitive exploration in the child and his reliance on the adult as problem-solver, and at the social level, the undifferentiated mapping of the world by the poor, who are surrounded and trapped by institutions designed by and for the middle classes?

That was Salvador Minuchin, writing in *Families of the Slums* in 1967.