Can You Show How You Baby Her? Four Teachings of Salvador Minuchin Embedded In One Question

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An analysis of a brief sequence from a consultation with a family in crisis illustrates four seminal teachings of Salvador Minuchin, and contrasts them with assumptions underlying traditional psychotherapy: (1) Focusing on relations rather than individual psyches allows for change to proceed "from the outside in": individual change is the outcome rather than a prerequisite of a change in patterns of interaction; (2) Imagining the self as diversified rather than unidimensional –like a pizza more than like a section of an onion- allows for a more optimistic expectation on the clients' potential to change and grow; (3) When working with families who are overpowered by their social context, such as families caught in the child welfare system, analysis and interventions cannot be restricted to the family itself but must be expanded to take the larger context into account; (4) Whenever there is a conflict between the tendency to commune and the tendency to search for individual solutions, the structural therapist, far from staying neutral, decidedly supports the former.

> Sonia: Tanya is getting on my nerves. She doesn't do anything by herself. When she first came back she was so independent, she would comb and wash herself. Now I have to do it.

I am meeting with Sonia, her five children, and her social worker Paula. Tanya, who is 8 years old, has been recently reunited with Sonia and her baby sister after spending five years in foster care on account of Sonia's drug use. The three other children are still in foster care. Complaining that the stress of dealing with Tanya is "jeopardizing my recovery", Sonia is wondering whether Tanya should return to foster care.

As Sonia talks in a detached, impatient tone, Tanya sits downcast across

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the room. Sonia goes on to say that sometimes Tanya "manipulates me into babying her". Now Paula and I speak at the same time:

Paula: *How do you feel about that?*
Jorge: *Can you show how you baby her?*

Work with relations rather than individuals

Paula and I would like to see Tanya stay with her mother and sisters, but we differ on how to help that happen. Paula's approach is to deconstruct Sonia's feelings; mine is to have Sonia and Tanya "enact".

I used to think like Paula. Trained as a psychologist, I learned that change was supposed to proceed from the inside out, from the inner feelings to the outward behavior. But then I saw Salvador Minuchin eliciting change in the opposite direction. Rather than delving into his clients' inner experience, Minuchin prompted them to interact differently from how they usually did. If a mother professed incompetence in dealing with a rebellious child, Minuchin would experiment with different interactional scenarios, until the mother succeeded. She would *behave* competently, and hence *feel* competent.

With Sonia, I didn't even need to experiment. Sonia suggested an alternative scenario herself when she said that sometimes she babied Tanya. Faced with two different requests, Sonia chose to respond to mine. She summoned Tanya to her lap, initiating an affectionate interaction that climaxed minutes later when the rest of the children converged on the duo. The family, now literally reunited in a collective hug, spontaneously started reminiscing about their life years ago, before the children were removed from Sonia's care. They talked about food, play, funny anecdotes. Sonia was pleasantly surprised: "How can you remember so much? You were so little". Eventually we resumed the discussion of the difficulties in adjusting to the new family reality, but the possibility of Tanya's return to foster care was off the table. Sonia's attitude towards Tanya had changed, not as a result of discussing feelings, but from experiencing a moment of family togetherness.

Imagine a pie rather than an onion

Paula was skeptical. "I think Sonia put up a show", she told me after the

session. "Deep down she doesn't know how to be a mother, because she wasn't mothered herself", Paula added, reminding me that Sonia had been raised in a succession of foster homes.

Paula was reasoning along the lines of traditional psychotherapy, which imagines the self as a series of concentric layers, the outer one representing the observable behaviors while the innermost one represents the core of identity – shaped in early childhood and essentially driving what happens on the surface. From this perspective, Sonia's detached demeanor can be traced back to her not having been properly mothered. She will need to be nurtured herself, to be reached "deep down" before she can "be a mother". This is precisely what a therapist assigned to Sonia had attempted to do, in preparation for the return of the children to her care.

Minuchin's work suggests a different image of the self. His challenges, reframings and enactments are predicated on the concept of a diversified self – we are different in different contexts, there is always more than meets the eye of the therapist. The "incompetent" mother who can't get her children to do their schoolwork may be very efficient in her job as a manager. The "weak" father who cannot prevent his teenage daughter from running away may be successful as a leader in his congregation. Both may have performed better as parents in the past. Sonia, as I reminded Paula, was a good mother for her youngest daughter - who had never been separated from her.

While the traditional image of the self resembles the section of an onion, the diversified self looks like a pie, where the various slices represent different ways of interacting, in different contexts. The "pie" self develops over time, but it is a different kind of development than the "onion" version. A detached mother does not inexorably produce a detached child. Minuchin poses that we develop our diversified selves as we interact first within the various subsystems in our family (parent/child, brother/sister), and then within extrafamiliar contexts: school, friends, work. In the process, selective ways of relating become dominant in different contexts. We may be assertive at work and tentative with our children. But the slices not used in one context are active in others, and remain available to the rest in latent form. Sonia's relational history, which comprises much more than her relations with her various mothers, accounts *both* for the detachment that she shows at the beginning of the session *and* the connection with her children that is demonstrated moments later.

The traditional image of the self is consistent with a therapy that pursues change by digging into and restructuring the clients' psyches. Minuchin's version supports the strategy of looking for interactional contexts that can trigger the actualization of those alternative "slices", latently available in the clients' repertoire albeit underutilized and often undervalued. Sonia refers to her occasional "babying" of Tanya in a negative way, as surrender to Tanya's "manipulation"; but at the same time she is letting us know that she has the capacity to relate to Tanya warmly - there is more than meets the eye.

Widen the lenses

But if we have the capacity to relate in many different ways, why do we narrow our choices? Why is the competent manager incompetent with her son, or the successful leader ineffective with his daughter? Why can't Sonia, who is a good mother to her youngest daughter, be a good mother for Tanya?

One could look for answers within the individual "onion": the mother has poor self esteem, cannot see herself as a competent mother, and even her success at work is a form of compensation. The father benefits from his weakness, in that he can be absolved from responsibility. Sonia may be good with babies but does not have the skills or the motivation to deal with the children as they grow up.

Alternatively, one can follow Minuchin's lead and look for answers in the organizing power of context that selectively encourages some behaviors and inhibits others. For instance, the mother of the rebellious child may be expected to make feeble attempts to contain him, but never have an opportunity to demonstrate a more competent handling, because the father rushes to "rescue" her. The father of the runaway daughter may not be in the position of applying his leadership skills with her because the mother is the designated expert in the girl.

In both of these examples, the context that organizes the family members' behaviors is the set of rules that they themselves have negotiated over time. In the case of Sonia and her children, on the other hand, the organizing context is wider. They have not been functioning as a family long enough to develop stable patterns of interaction. It is only recently that Tanya has returned, and three of the five children are still waiting for their turn. During the years that the children where in foster care, Sonia did not have much contact with them,

or even with the people who were taking care of them. She was given a "leave of absence" from parenting, so she could focus "on her own needs" – including the need to be sober, but not the need to raise her children. Meanwhile the children adapted to life in their foster families.

It is then no wonder that Sonia and Tanya find it difficult to reconnect. There is no need to attribute that difficulty to an attachment disorder or a limited parenting capacity; the five year breakup of their relationship is a sufficient explanation. From this perspective, Tanya's desire to be washed and combed, which may be considered regressive by the standards of the parenting skills classes that Sonia was compelled to take, looks more like an attempt to "catch up" with her mother. And when Sonia complains that the stress of reunification is "jeopardizing her recovery", one can hear the language of the substance abuse counselors who encouraged her to focus exclusively on overcoming her drug problem and not be distracted by anything else – including her children.

While all families are influenced by their social environment, families like Sonia's may be overrun by it. The intricate web of relationships that make up the fabric of a family, the continuous negotiation of distances and hierarchy are disrupted by the intervention of the social agencies that assists and control. Subjected to external regulation, these families lose the capacity to self regulate. To make sense of their problems and help them overcome them, the scope of observation and intervention needs to be widened.

Tools originally developed by Salvador Minuchin for the purpose of understanding and treating families – notions like conflict avoidance, triangulation, boundary making, and hierarchy are especially instrumental in dealing with this larger context.

Conflict

Conflict is normal in foster care: biological parents, foster parents, parent and child advocates, are all bound to pursue diverging agendas and to configure and reconfigure alliances and rivalries. Traditional policies tend to ignore, avoid, or detour these conflicts for the sake of "stability" – which usually means a relatively peaceful, "no-waves" environment for the adults. Biological and foster parents are kept at arms' length. Workers are expected to defuse the anger of a parent who feels unfairly treated.

Triangulation

Similarly to what happens in families, children caught in the foster care system are the ones who pay the price for the appeasement of the adults, in the form of loyalty dilemmas, anxious uncertainty and guilt. They often become hostages to the protracted struggles among the adults. As the decision to reunify the child with the parent or terminate the parent's rights is repeatedly postponed – waiting for the outcome of one more service, or for one more instance of noncompliance – many children linger indefinitely in what insiders recognize as the "limbo" of foster care, a place of tentative, unstable, and conflicted attachments. Tanya moved through three different foster homes between the ages of 3 and 8, while "seeing" Sonia for a couple of hours every week.

Boundaries

Minuchin's strategy of de-triangulating children caught in adult conflict, by restructuring boundaries within the family, can be applied to the reshaping of agency policies and practices. Instead of keeping biological and foster parents at arm's length from each other, agencies can promote dialogue between them. This can start with the initial service plan and continue through the duration of foster care and beyond, so that the foster parents may remain a part of the child's network after reunification. Workers can move from their current position of mediators or "buffers" between biological and foster parents, to a more decentralized position where they are still part of the communication loop, but do not interfere with it.

Hierarchy

It is not enough for the biological parent to remain present in the life of the foster child; she needs to be present *as a parent*. The policy of giving parents a "leave of absence" from parenting disrupts the hierarchical structure of the family, by taking away not only the right but also the responsibility to parent. The expectation should be that as many parental functions as possible will be maintained throughout the stay of the child in foster care. Visits are not just an occasion for parents and children to "see" each other, but an opportunity for exercising and strengthening their parent-to-child relationship. Regular contact of the biological parent with the child's school, attendance to medical appointments, additional contact with the child over the phone, discussions of the child's needs and progress with the foster parent are better prognosticators of a successful reunification than the mere compliance with mandated services such as therapy, or even parenting skills courses.

Had Sonia continued exercising these parenting functions during the time that Tanya was in foster care, their reunification might have been less difficult. It might even have taken less than five years.

Encourage mutual reliance

The notion that the self is diverse and shaped by context is not enough to account for my request to Sonia. I could have taken a more neutral, "even handed" position, honoring the part of Sonia that prefers to be left alone as much as the part that enjoys babying Tanya. Instead, I chose to actively support the latter over the former. This was not a technical, but an ethical choice. I *judged* that it was *better* for Sonia and Tanya to indulge in some cuddling than to expect Tanya to wash and comb herself; and that it was *my responsibility* to encourage them to do so.

Thus, the question "Can you show how you baby her?" channels not only Minuchin's conceptual paradigm, but its underlying values as well. In his teaching and demonstrations, Minuchin challenges therapists to abandon the comfortable position of neutral observers and commentators, and to use themselves to influence the "family dance". He also insists that therapists should help families to improve on the choreography of that dance, rather than simply dismantling it. At the time when other family therapy pioneers were looking for ways to extricate the individual from family binds, Minuchin focused on making the binds more nuanced, allowing for both belonging and differentiation. When he intervenes to create more distance between a mother and a child, it is not to isolate one from the other, but to make room for them to participate in other subsystems – child/father, wife/husband, child/siblings. Minuchin's restructuring techniques are rooted in the belief that individual differentiation should not be pursued through a retrenchment into oneself, but through participation in multiple contexts. The ideal is not the self sufficiency of the "rugged individual", but the mutual reliance of the network.

Minuchin's insistence on the value of connectedness has inspired my work at the interface between families and the services charged with assisting or controlling them –an encounter that in the United States is inevitably shaped by the mythical ethics of individual self sufficiency. Before my meeting with Sonia's family, I was a consultant for the drug rehabilitation treatment program where Sonia worked on her recovery. The program, operating 7 hours a day from Monday through Friday, was offered to pregnant addicts as an alternative

to having the child removed from their custody at birth. During the initial assessment, interviewers tried to determine whether the prospective client was motivated to enter rehabilitation "for her own sake", or "just to keep the baby". As a consultant to the program, I was positioned to expose and challenge the ethics underlying the question – ethics that valued the individual's dedication to self-improvement, and devalued connectedness to others. What is wrong, I asked, about doing something good for the sake of your child? The question was then eliminated from the interview protocol.

Later, as the women in the program started to give birth to their children, the program administrators moved to secure the services of "home attendants", who would care for the babies during the day while the mothers continued participating in the program. The babies – or rather, the mother/baby relationship was seen as an obstacle that would distract the individual client from compliance with the program. I then confronted the administrators with an ethical dilemma: should the mother/child relationship be shaped by the needs of the program, or should the program be shaped by the needs of the mother/child relationship? Eventually the program structure and physical setting were modified so that the women could bring the babies with them.

It's not only the service providers who overvalue individual self sufficiency at the expense of mutual reliance; clients do it as well. Family connectedness is devalued by the worker who thinks "this child should never go back to that family", but also by the parents who think that their son should stay in a residential center until he is "fixed", by the therapist who sees his role as one of maximizing the individual potential of a teenager, in isolation from his family, and by the parents who feel that "he has to talk to somebody" – other than themselves. By the substance abuse counselor who thinks that Sonia should focus her energy on staying drug free, and by Sonia who feels that her relationship with Tanya is "jeopardizing" her recovery. When I asked Sonia to show how she babied Tanya, and then sat back as the family enacted "reunification", I was using my position as a trusted consultant to challenge individualistic solutions and promote togetherness. For the duration of the sequence, Sonia was not a recovering addict who happened to have children, but a mother who happened to be recovering from addiction.

A transforming experience? Hardly. As Minuchin reminds us, an enactment does not necessarily signal the end of a dysfunctional pattern; it just provides the family with the evidence that an alternative is possible. Then, even if a part

of Sonia reverts to a preference for being left alone, the rest of the family may refuse to cooperate:

> Sonia: Cut it out! Leave me alone! [But she is laughing, and she keeps her arms around them, and the children continue to laugh and hug her.] Why are you all over me?
> Son: Because you're our mom!

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