

structural family therapy enactment

Structural Family Therapy Enactment: Unlocking Change Through Real-Time Interaction

structural family therapy enactment is a powerful therapeutic technique that brings family dynamics into the therapy room for direct observation and intervention. Unlike traditional talk therapy that often relies on verbal reports and retrospective accounts, this method invites family members to act out their typical interactions during sessions. By doing so, therapists can identify patterns, boundaries, and roles that contribute to conflicts or dysfunction within the family system. This hands-on approach is central to structural family therapy and offers a unique pathway to meaningful change.

Understanding the core principles behind structural family therapy enactment helps in appreciating how it differs from other family therapy models. Developed in the 1960s by Salvador Minuchin, structural family therapy focuses on the organization of the family system rather than individual psychopathology. The enactment process is a tool that therapists use to observe the family's hierarchy, subsystems, and boundaries as they naturally unfold, providing rich material for intervention and restructuring.

What is Structural Family Therapy Enactment?

At its essence, structural family therapy enactment involves encouraging family members to reenact or simulate real-life interactions within the therapy session. This can be anything from a routine disagreement to a critical conversation that often triggers conflict. By recreating these moments, therapists gain a live window into the family's relational dynamics, which might be hidden or minimized in casual conversation.

This approach contrasts with therapists merely listening to clients' descriptions of problems. Instead, enactments allow therapists to "see" the interactional patterns, such as who dominates conversations, how alliances are formed, and where boundaries are either too rigid or too diffuse. This live observation is key to facilitating change, as therapists can intervene immediately, redirecting interactions or highlighting dysfunctional patterns.

Why Use Enactments in Family Therapy?

Enactments serve several essential purposes in structural family therapy:

- ****Reveal Hidden Dynamics:**** Families often have unspoken rules and roles that influence behavior. Enactments expose these implicit patterns.
- ****Clarify Boundaries and Hierarchies:**** By observing interactions, therapists can assess whether

boundaries are too rigid or blurred and how authority is distributed.

- **Engage Family Members Actively:** Instead of passive listening, family members participate directly, increasing investment in the therapeutic process.
- **Facilitate Immediate Feedback:** Therapists can intervene in real time, helping families practice healthier interaction styles.
- **Promote Insight and Empathy:** Experiencing interactions firsthand often leads to greater understanding among family members.

Key Components of Structural Family Therapy Enactment

To appreciate how enactments function, it's helpful to explore the main components that therapists focus on during these sessions.

Subsystems and Boundaries

Families are composed of various subsystems, such as parental, sibling, or spousal units. Each subsystem has boundaries that regulate interactions and protect the integrity of relationships. During enactment, therapists observe how these boundaries function—whether parents effectively lead, siblings compete or cooperate, or if roles are confused. Dysfunction often arises when boundaries are either too rigid (leading to disengagement) or too diffuse (resulting in enmeshment).

Hierarchy and Power Dynamics

Healthy families typically have clear hierarchies where parents or caregivers maintain leadership and decision-making authority. Enactments reveal whether this hierarchy is intact or disrupted—such as when children assume parental roles or when one family member dominates communication. Recognizing these dynamics enables therapists to guide families toward more balanced relationships.

Communication Patterns

How family members communicate—verbally and non-verbally—is central to structural family therapy enactment. Therapists pay close attention to interruptions, tone, body language, and emotional expression during interactions. Patterns such as avoidance, blaming, or triangulation often emerge, giving clues about the family's functioning and areas needing change.

Implementing Structural Family Therapy Enactment in Practice

For therapists, skillfully facilitating enactments requires sensitivity and a clear strategy. Here's how this technique typically unfolds in a therapeutic setting.

Setting the Stage

Therapists begin by creating a safe and supportive environment where family members feel comfortable expressing themselves. They may invite the family to recreate a recent conflict or a typical interaction that has been problematic. It's important that the enactment feels authentic rather than scripted or forced.

Encouraging Spontaneity

Rather than directing specific lines or actions, therapists encourage family members to act naturally. This spontaneity is crucial to capturing genuine relational dynamics. The therapist observes closely, taking note of interaction patterns, emotional responses, and shifts in alliances.

Intervention During Enactment

Once dysfunctional patterns are identified, the therapist intervenes strategically. This may involve:

- Redirecting communication to reduce hostility.
- Highlighting unhelpful roles (e.g., scapegoating or overfunctioning).
- Reinforcing positive interactions and healthy boundaries.
- Coaching family members to express feelings constructively.

These interventions help the family experiment with new ways of relating in the moment, promoting real-time learning and change.

Processing the Experience

After the enactment, therapists typically debrief with the family. They discuss what happened, how members felt, and what new insights emerged. This reflection helps consolidate changes and encourages family members to apply new interaction patterns outside therapy.

Benefits of Structural Family Therapy Enactment

Using enactments within structural family therapy brings several benefits that enhance the therapeutic journey.

Enhanced Insight and Awareness

Enactments often reveal dynamics that family members were unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge. Seeing patterns unfold in real time promotes a deeper understanding of roles, alliances, and conflicts.

Promotes Responsibility and Change

Because family members actively participate in the enactment, they become more aware of their contributions to problems and gain a sense of agency in changing these patterns.

Builds Empathy and Connection

Experiencing interactions firsthand helps family members step into each other's shoes, fostering empathy and strengthening emotional bonds.

Facilitates Lasting Structural Change

By addressing the organization of the family system directly, enactments help families establish healthier boundaries, clearer hierarchies, and more effective communication—changes that tend to endure beyond therapy.

Challenges and Considerations

While structural family therapy enactment is highly effective, it also requires careful handling.

- **Emotional Intensity:** Enactments can provoke strong emotions or conflict. Therapists must manage the emotional climate skillfully to avoid escalation.
- **Resistance:** Some family members may feel uncomfortable acting out interactions or worry about judgment. Building trust is essential before attempting enactments.

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Different cultures have varying norms about family roles and communication. Therapists should adapt enactments to respect these differences.
- **Therapist Skill:** Facilitating enactments demands experience and intuition. Poorly managed enactments can reinforce negative patterns rather than resolve them.

Integrating Structural Family Therapy Enactment with Other Therapeutic Approaches

Structural family therapy enactment often works well in conjunction with other methods. For example, combining enactments with cognitive-behavioral techniques can help families not only recognize patterns but also develop specific skills to change behavior. Similarly, incorporating narrative therapy elements allows families to reframe their stories while exploring interactions in enactments.

This flexibility makes structural family therapy enactment a versatile tool adaptable to various family issues such as divorce adjustment, blended family challenges, adolescent behavioral problems, or chronic relational conflicts.

Exploring structural family therapy enactment offers a fascinating glimpse into how families function beneath the surface. By stepping into the moment and witnessing interactions as they happen, therapists and families alike can unlock new possibilities for healing, growth, and connection. Whether you're a mental health professional or someone interested in family dynamics, understanding this approach sheds light on the powerful role of real-time relational work in fostering lasting change.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is structural family therapy enactment?

Structural family therapy enactment is a therapeutic technique in which family members are asked to role-play or recreate specific interactions during therapy sessions to observe and modify family dynamics in real-time.

How does enactment function in structural family therapy?

Enactment allows therapists to identify dysfunctional family patterns and boundaries by observing interactions as they occur, facilitating immediate intervention and restructuring of family relationships.

What are the key goals of using enactment in structural family therapy?

The key goals include clarifying family roles, revealing relational dynamics, highlighting communication

patterns, and enabling the therapist to guide the family toward healthier interactions.

How is enactment different from traditional talk therapy in family counseling?

Unlike traditional talk therapy, enactment involves active participation and real-time role-playing of family interactions, providing a more direct and experiential approach to understanding and changing family structure.

What role does the therapist play during enactments in structural family therapy?

The therapist actively observes, facilitates, and sometimes intervenes during enactments to challenge dysfunctional patterns, set boundaries, and promote healthier family interactions.

Can enactment in structural family therapy be used with all types of families?

While enactment is versatile, its effectiveness depends on the family's willingness to participate and the therapist's skill; it may need to be adapted for families with high conflict or communication barriers.

What are some common challenges when using enactment in structural family therapy?

Challenges include resistance from family members, emotional intensity during role-play, difficulty in accurately representing real-life interactions, and managing conflicts that arise during sessions.

How does enactment help in restructuring family subsystems?

Through enactment, therapists observe interactions within subsystems (like parental or sibling relationships) and guide members to establish clearer boundaries and roles, promoting healthier subsystem functioning.

What evidence supports the use of enactment in structural family therapy?

Research indicates that enactment enhances engagement, improves communication patterns, and leads to significant improvements in family functioning by making invisible dynamics visible and modifiable.

How can therapists prepare families for enactment in structural family therapy?

Therapists prepare families by explaining the purpose of enactment, establishing a safe environment, setting clear guidelines, and building trust to encourage open and honest participation.

Additional Resources

Structural Family Therapy Enactment: A Closer Look at Techniques and Therapeutic Impact

Structural family therapy enactment represents a pivotal intervention within the broader framework of family systems therapy, designed to illuminate and reshape dysfunctional family dynamics through direct observation and interaction. As a therapeutic strategy, enactment enables therapists to identify underlying relational patterns by encouraging family members to act out real-life conflicts or interactions within the therapy session itself. This article delves into the intricacies of structural family therapy enactment, examining its theoretical foundation, practical applications, benefits, and challenges, while highlighting its role in fostering healthier family functioning.

Understanding Structural Family Therapy and the Role of Enactment

Structural family therapy, developed primarily by Salvador Minuchin in the 1960s, emphasizes the organization and structure of family systems as determinants of individual behavior and relational health. The underlying premise is that families are composed of subsystems, boundaries, and hierarchies that govern interactions and roles. Dysfunction often arises from rigid or diffuse boundaries, unclear roles, or imbalanced hierarchies.

Within this model, enactment is a core technique whereby therapists prompt family members to demonstrate their interactions during sessions. Instead of merely recounting conflicts or patterns, enactments bring these dynamics into the therapeutic space, making them observable and manipulable. This process allows therapists to assess communication styles, power structures, alliances, and conflict resolution approaches in real time.

The Mechanics of Enactment in Therapy Sessions

Enactments are not passive observations but active interventions. Therapists guide families to reenact typical conflict scenarios or relational exchanges that have been sources of tension. By doing so, several

therapeutic objectives are achieved:

- **Revealing Hidden Patterns:** Enactments expose implicit family rules and unspoken assumptions that might otherwise remain concealed during verbal discussions.
- **Clarifying Roles and Boundaries:** Families often assume roles unconsciously. Through enactment, these roles become explicit, enabling therapists to detect enmeshed or disengaged subsystems.
- **Facilitating Real-Time Intervention:** Therapists can intervene immediately, helping family members experiment with new ways of relating, communication, or boundary-setting.
- **Enhancing Emotional Expression:** Direct enactment often evokes authentic emotional responses, which can be therapeutic and informative.

Comparative Analysis: Enactment Versus Other Therapeutic Techniques

While enactment is integral to structural family therapy, it is also utilized in other systemic approaches, such as strategic family therapy and psychodrama. However, its use within the structural model is distinctive due to the focus on altering family structure as opposed to solely addressing symptomatic behavior or communication.

In comparison to talk therapy or cognitive-behavioral approaches, enactment offers a more experiential and behavioral method. For instance, cognitive-behavioral family therapy emphasizes cognitive restructuring and skill-building, whereas enactment immerses family members in their relational context, making abstract dynamics concrete.

There are, however, limitations to enactment. Some families may resist direct confrontation or find reenactment uncomfortable, potentially limiting engagement. Additionally, therapists require skilled facilitation abilities to manage the emotional intensity and ensure the enactment remains productive rather than escalating conflict.

Advantages and Challenges of Structural Family Therapy Enactment

A critical examination reveals both strengths and potential pitfalls of enactment in therapeutic practice.

Advantages:

- **Enhanced Diagnostic Accuracy:** By observing interactions as they naturally occur, therapists gain more accurate insights into family dynamics than through self-report alone.
- **Empowerment Through Change:** Families can practice new communication patterns and boundary adjustments within the safety of the therapy room.
- **Accelerated Insight:** Enactments often lead to rapid breakthroughs as latent issues surface vividly during sessions.

Challenges:

- **Emotional Risk:** The intensity of enactments can provoke distress or resistance among family members.
- **Therapist Skill Demands:** Effective enactment requires therapists to balance intervention with containment, preventing destructive escalation.
- **Variability in Family Readiness:** Not all families may be suitable candidates for enactment, particularly those with severe trauma or high conflict levels.

Implementing Structural Family Therapy Enactment: Best Practices

Therapists employing enactment must consider several factors to maximize efficacy:

Assessment and Preparation

Before initiating enactment, comprehensive assessment is crucial. Understanding family history, individual vulnerabilities, and presenting problems helps tailor the enactment to the family's unique context. Preparing family members by explaining the purpose and process of enactment can reduce anxiety and increase collaboration.

Facilitating the Enactment

During sessions, therapists typically:

1. Invite family members to reenact a recent or recurrent conflict or interaction.
2. Observe verbal and nonverbal communication closely.
3. Intervene to highlight patterns, challenge dysfunctional roles, or adjust boundaries.
4. Encourage experimentation with alternative behaviors or communication styles.

Post-Enactment Processing

After enactment, debriefing is essential. Therapists guide reflection on the experience, emotional responses, and insights gained. This step consolidates learning and helps family members integrate new patterns into their daily lives.

Applications Across Diverse Family Contexts

Structural family therapy enactment has been effectively applied in various settings including:

- **Couples Therapy:** Addressing power imbalances and communication breakdowns.
- **Parent-Child Dynamics:** Clarifying parental authority and promoting healthy boundaries.
- **Blended Families:** Negotiating roles and alliances amid complex relational structures.
- **Substance Abuse Treatment:** Modifying enabling behaviors and improving family support systems.

Research indicates that families engaging in enactment-based interventions often report improved relational clarity, reduced conflict, and enhanced emotional connection. However, outcomes are contingent on therapist expertise, family engagement, and the severity of presenting issues.

Integrating Enactment with Modern Therapeutic Modalities

With the rise of teletherapy, adapting enactment techniques to virtual platforms presents new challenges and opportunities. Therapists must creatively facilitate interactions via video while maintaining the immediacy and authenticity of enactments. Additionally, combining enactment with mindfulness or emotion-focused approaches can deepen therapeutic impact by addressing both structural and emotional dimensions.

The exploration of structural family therapy enactment continues to evolve, underscoring its significance as a dynamic tool for fostering systemic change within families. As therapists refine their skills and adapt to diverse clinical contexts, enactments remain a cornerstone technique that brings family systems theory to life, offering tangible pathways toward healthier relational patterns.

Structural Family Therapy Enactment

structural family therapy enactment: Family Therapy Skills and Techniques in Action

Mark Rivett, Joanne Buchmüller, 2017-10-02 Please watch the following short video advertisement for the book, featuring the Editors:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1ApHAQIMzQ&feature=youtu.be> Relationships are a resource for healing a range of psychological difficulties. This is the fundamental principle of family therapy, an increasingly influential form of psychotherapy that is building up a strong evidence base in a range of psychological problems across the life cycle. Family Therapy Skills and Techniques in Action is both a guide to a variety of family therapy techniques and a review of their history. It provides a thorough explanation of the techniques, explaining their origins and use in contemporary family practice, whilst guiding readers in learning new skills. The authors provide film examples and transcripts of the techniques in action so that readers can develop their skills in a practical way. The book is divided into sections that describe and demonstrate skills such as: Assessing a family; Building a therapeutic relationship with multiple family members; Enactment; Reframing; Using circular questions; 'Externalising' the problem; Using family therapy skills in individual work; Understanding and utilising systemic supervision. Family Therapy Skills and Techniques in Action will be an essential practical manual for a range of family therapy skills which can be used in family work by family practitioners from a variety of backgrounds: counsellors, support workers, social workers, psychologists, generic therapists and nurses.

structural family therapy enactment: Systemic Family Therapy Jon L. Winek, 2009-07-27

No other available text offers such a hands-on approach to marriage and family therapy theory. At the core of Systemic Family Therapy are comprehensive sections devoted to each developmental phase of the family therapy movement. With clear descriptions and session-by-session case examples, the author explores specific approaches within each of these phases. With this pragmatic tenor, students will gain a clear and in-depth understanding of how family theory concepts relate to practice—as well as ways those concepts interact with each other. Key Features Uses specific examples and session-by-session case studies to illustrate how theoretical construct actually work in practice Outlines the shifts in thinking of the family therapy field—from modern to postmodern Uses rich graphic representations and straightforward tables to illustrate key theoretical concepts Incorporates compelling questions and learning exercises that will lead to dynamic class discussions Intended Audience A refreshing departure from traditional instruction of family therapy theory, this

core textbook is an excellent resource for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students of family therapy, counseling, social work, and family studies.

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structural family therapy enactment: Family Therapy with Muslims Manijeh Daneshpour, 2016-07-22 *Family Therapy with Muslims* is the first guide for mental health professionals who work with Muslims in the family therapy setting. The book opens with a section defining the similarities across Muslim cultures, the effects of postcolonialism on Muslims, and typical Muslim family dynamics. The author then devotes a chapter to different models of family therapy and how they can specifically be applied to working with Muslim families. Case studies throughout the book involve families of many different backgrounds living in the West—including both immigrant and second

generation families—that will give professionals concrete tools to work with clients of their own.

structural family therapy enactment: *Handbook of Family Therapy* Mike Robbins, Tom Sexton, Gerald Weeks, 2004-03-01 This new Handbook of Family Therapy is the culmination of a decade of achievements within the field of family and couples therapy, emerging from and celebrating the dynamic evolution of marriage and family theory, practice, and research. The editors have unified the efforts of the profession's major players in bringing the most up-to-date and innovative information to the forefront of both educational and practice settings. They review the major theoretical approaches and break new ground by identifying and describing the current era of evidence-based models and contemporary areas of application. The Handbook of Family Therapy is a comprehensive, progressive, and skillful presentation of the science and practice of family and couples therapy, and a valuable resource for practitioners and students alike.

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structural family therapy enactment: *Mastering Family Therapy* Salvador Minuchin, Wai-Yung Lee, George M. Simon, 2007-06-15 A master class in family therapy--now updated with an additional ten years' case experience Few people have had as profound an impact on the theory and practice of family therapy as Salvador Minuchin. As one commentator put it, Memories of his classic sessions have become the standard against which therapists judge their own best work. This new edition of the classic, *Mastering Family Therapy*, offers beginners and experienced practitioners alike the opportunity to learn the art and science of family therapy under this pioneering clinician and teacher. In elegant clinical interplays, Minuchin, his colleagues Wai-Yung Lee and George Simon, and eight advanced students provide answers to such critical questions as: * What does it take to master the art of family therapy? * How do I create an effective personal style? * How can I become an instrument for growth for troubled families? This updated Second Edition features: * An overview and critique of new models of treatment in the field, especially evidence-based models of family treatment * New case material highlighting the impact of societal context on families * Minuchin's conceptualization of a four-step process of family assessment, including how history can impact current family functioning A new and thoroughly revised version of the classic text, *Mastering Family Therapy*, Second Edition is essential reading for all those who practice, study, or teach family therapy.

structural family therapy enactment: *Systems of Family Therapy* Robert Sherman, Don Dinkmeyer, 2014-01-09 First published in 1987. This book connects Adlerian theory, defined as a human systems approach, with the other systems theories of family therapy. By comparison and contrast with five other popular family therapy theories, the authors suggest that Adlerian family therapy can well serve as a much-needed integrative model—a need often stressed in the literature and in many conference presentations. Adlerian psychology is described as an open system theory that provides the theoretical base for synthesizing the multitude of concepts and techniques now extant in the burgeoning field of family therapy. *Systems of Family Therapy* fulfills the need for integration and synthesis and enables clinicians to make use of the broad range of ideas and methods generated in contemporary family therapy theories within an internally consistent framework. Chapters describe the history of the theory, basic principles and concepts, structure of the therapy, the behavior change model, and specific techniques for conducting the therapy. Many case examples are used throughout. The volume is enhanced by five distinguished contributing authors who are skilled in both Adlerian theory and another major theory. They each make a detailed comparison of the two theories with respect to history, major concepts, definitions of well

and dysfunctional families, diagnoses, change models and techniques, and a summary of their findings. The theories analyzed are Satir's model, the M.R.I. Interactional View, Strategic therapy, Structural therapy, and Rational-Emotive therapy.

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structural family therapy enactment: The First Session in Brief Therapy Simon H. Budman, Michael F. Hoyt, Steven Friedman, 1992-08-07 In all models of therapy, the initial interview is a significant component: It sets the tone, structure, direction, and foundation of treatment. In brief therapy, the opening moves are even more important because there is less time later to correct errors or change direction. This volume provides practitioners with an up-close view of exactly what expert brief therapists do at the beginning of treatment and why they do it. Each author describes his or her particular orientation, presents annotated transcripts of actual initial sessions, and responds to pointed questions from the editors about their cases. Following an introduction by the editors, the first section of the book covers initial sessions in therapies for individuals. These include the rational-emotive approach, a one-session intervention, an interpersonal psychodynamic model, neurolinguistic programming, and the I-D-E (interpersonal-developmental-existential) approach. Beginning cognitive-behavioral therapy with depressed or drug abusing adolescents is covered, and a directive approach strongly influenced by the work of Milton Erickson is presented. The next section addresses methods and strategies for working with couples and families. Chapters on marital therapy cover an integrative approach that combines an intra- and interpersonal focus in marital therapy, a cognitive-behavioral approach that is based on principles of social learning and social exchange theory, emotionally focused therapy, and an approach that utilizes reflective conversation. A solution-oriented model, the possibility paradigm, for helping families amplify their strengths is

delineated, as is a strategic MRI-style model for working with an individual family member, and a structural approach for creating familial change. An ideal companion to Budman's *THEORY AND PRACTICE OF BRIEF THERAPY*, this illuminating and unique casebook is essential reading for all clinicians who need to learn more about time-effective models. Offering a comparative view of a variety of models, it is an ideal text for undergraduate and graduate students.

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structural family therapy enactment: *A Practical Guide to Family Therapy* Andrew Wallis, Kerrie James, Paul Rhodes, 2024-06-12 Grounded in systemic family therapy and drawing on a variety of other models to enhance skills development, this book is a comprehensive, practical guide to working with families. This second edition is thoroughly updated and includes new chapters which cover working with First Nations Families, diversity and family therapy, understanding emotions, and dialogical reflective processes. The book begins with a focus on the therapeutic relationship and use of self as a foundation, and from there provides the reader with practical, skill-oriented guidelines for working with families. From the first session to addressing the complexities of separated parents, parent-child relational breaches, family of origin issues, wider systems, managing emotions, diversity, and much more, the book takes the reader through core practices that will become essential skills for family work. Written by an expert team of authors committed to innovative and contextual practice, this book is for experienced clinicians who want to learn to work with families and for beginning therapists to learn from a structured approach to developing complex skills.

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prepare for their licensing examination and subsequent practice as MFTs. Written for students seeking to be MFT practitioners, this important volume adds a fresh perspective to teaching and application of family therapy.

structural family therapy enactment: Handbook of Family Therapy Thomas L. Sexton, Jay Lebow, 2015-12-07 Integrative, research-based, multisystemic: these words reflect not only the state of family therapy, but the nature of this comprehensive handbook as well. The contributors, all well-recognized names who have contributed extensively to the field, accept and embrace the tensions that emerge when integrating theoretical perspectives and science in clinical settings to document the current evolution of couples and family therapy, practice, and research. Each individual chapter contribution is organized around a central theme: that the integration of theory, clinical wisdom, and practical and meaningful research produce the best understanding of couple and family relationships, and the best treatment options. The handbook contains five parts: • Part I describes the history of the field and its current core theoretical constructs • Part II analyzes the theories that form the foundation of couple and family therapy, chosen because they best represent the broad range of schools of practice in the field • Part III provides the best examples of approaches that illustrate how clinical models can be theoretically integrative, evidence-based, and clinically responsive • Part IV summarizes evidence and provides useful findings relevant for research and practice • Part V looks at the application of couple and family interventions that are based on emerging clinical needs, such as divorce and working in medical settings. Handbook of Family Therapy illuminates the threads that are common to family therapies and gives voice to the range of perspectives that are possible. Practitioners, researchers, and students need to have this handbook on their shelves, both to help look back on our past and to usher in the next evolution in family therapy.

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