USING MINUCHIN’S STRUCTURAL FAMILY THERAPY TECHNIQUES WITH ITALIAN-AMERICAN FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT: Italian-American families have general characteristics about which family therapists should be informed in order to select appropriate and effective family therapy for this cultural group. The author identifies Minuchin’s structural family therapy techniques as relevant for working with Italian-American families, adding a note of personal validation of the need and efficacy of the Minuchin approach.

This paper represents an attempt to suggest and illustrate the appropriateness of Salvador Minuchin’s structural family therapy techniques (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981) for treating Italian-American families. In order to demonstrate the “goodness of fit” between Italian-American families and Minuchin’s structural family therapy, it is necessary to present the following: the importance of cultural sensitivity, general characteristics of Italian-American families, the importance of selecting an appropriate family therapy methodology for working with such families, and some of the techniques and interventions of structural family therapy that can be helpful with Italian-American families.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

In the United States at this time, we are becoming more acutely aware of the reality and importance of culture in human behavior.
Hardy's (1993) proposal that an individual views the world through a "perceptual lens" which is significantly influenced by one's own culture is particularly relevant. In multicultural therapy, it is critical for therapists to understand the developmental needs and mental health issues of the various racial and sub-cultural groups with which they work (Lee & Richardson, 1991).

If effective cross-cultural therapy is to occur, the therapist-client communication must be appropriate as well as accurate. The therapist's credibility hinges in large measure on the quality of the understanding communication offered. If there is a mismatch between the therapist's communication style, for example, and that of the client from a different culture, several problems may arise, the important connection between the therapist and client may never occur, and the client may not return.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF ITALIAN-AMERICAN FAMILIES**

Italian-American families distinguish themselves by maintaining strong family ties and transmitting cultural traditions (Quadagno, 1981). Traditionally, anyone suspected of harming the family, not being helpful, or being a threat was fiercely and, at times, violently resisted (Gambino, 1974). This attitude of outsiders—which includes therapists—originated in Italy after a history of domination and powerlessness in which the only system that one could trust was the extended family (Carricola, 1982). For therapists, one significant implication of this kind of background is that the therapist must prove trustworthy and certainly must ensure confidentiality once he or she has established contact with the family.

The family is of prime importance with Italian-American families. The individuality of individual members is secondary to his or her place and role in the family. The individual's rights, wishes, or obligation are suppressed by the members of the family. Depending in part on how many generations the family has been in the United States, this system has a built-in support system which after long years of familio-centric socialization processes serves the family well and ensures its continuity and health.

**Role of the Husband-Father**

Family roles tend to be well-defined. The husband-father is the breadwinner. In this capacity, he is the captain, steering the family