Quick Study: Strategic Family Therapy

Three Major Schools of Strategic Therapy
1. Haley
2. Mental Research Institute (MRI- Palo Alto School)
3. Milan Group

Founders
- Based on Gregory Bateson’s model of Brief Therapy
- Milton Erikson and Jay Haley are the founders.

Underpinnings
- Focuses on the process versus the content
- It is prescriptive, sometimes manipulative, and focused on the function of the whole system around it’s current homeostasis
- Based on the premise that families are always communicating through **Reports** (what happens) and **Commands** (do something)
  - Command messages are patterned as family rules.
- Family rules around the hierarchical structure are often the cause of family problems
- Strategic therapists modify and alter these rules to elicit change.
  - Rules are changed by re-framing the interpretation of a behavior. For example, an overbearing meddling mother will be re-framed as concerned or looking out for the best interest of her children.
- Healthy families have the capability and willingness to adapt to changing conditions and situations.

Theory of Change
- Change results from alterations in the family system, which is seen as maintaining the presenting problem; the system is changed as the therapist provides directives that alter patterns of communication between family members.
- The presenting problem is a symptom of a larger system issue.
- Change is achieved through open and clear lines of communication, boundary flexibility and view change as an opportunity for growth.

Role of the Therapist
- The therapist becomes part of the family system through joining and delivers directives that facilitate change, particularly around patterns of communication.
- The therapist takes responsibility for the outcome of therapy.
Main Concepts

- **Family Homeostasis:** The rules that govern family interaction function as a method of ensuring the maintenance and preservation of the family's current functioning level.

- **Circular Causality:** A system view that one family member’s behavior is caused by and causes the other family members’ behaviors. They are each impacting the other, in a circular manner.

- **Feedback Loops:** Information pathways that help the system balance and correct itself. Can be negative (maintains the current bias and level of functioning) or positive (changes the bias/level of functioning). For example, a problem behavior from a child may elicit a response from a parent that continues the problem or worsens it.

- **Negative Feedback Loops:** Ways that families correct a deviation of their family functioning and return it to the previous state of homeostasis.

- **Positive Feedback Loops:** This concept is central to the Strategic model. In their effort to maintain homeostasis, family members participate in new behaviors, which then create and reinforce negative communication patterns and exacerbate the problem.

- **First Order Change:** A particular behavior in the system is changed.

- **Second Order Change:** Changes in the system rules that affect a behavior change.

- **Reframing:** Relabeling through language to give new meaning to a situation. The alteration of meaning invites the possibility of change.

- **Therapeutic Paradox:** Maneuvers that are in apparent contradiction to the goals of therapy yet are actually designed to achieve them.

- **Prescribing the Symptom:** A strategy in which the therapist encourages or instructs the client to engage in or practice the symptom.

- **Restraining:** The therapist will discourage change or changing too quickly in an effort to elicit the desire to change from the client.

Development of Behavior Disorders

- When families encounter problems that threaten to change the current family system (sometimes a healthy change), the family will try to stop the problematic behavior by engaging in other behaviors in an effort to address the perceived problem and maintain the current state of homeostasis.

- Families are stuck in dysfunctional patterns of communication and have rigid and inflexible boundaries; they view change as a threatening.

Explanation of How Problem Behaviors Develop

- **Cybernetic** (communication): Difficulties are turned into chronic problems by misguided solutions that maintain the problem

- **Structural:** Problems are the result of incongruous hierarchies, when a child uses symptoms to change the behavior of the parent.
• **Functional:** Problems result when people try to control one another covertly, so their symptoms serve as a function for the system.

**Treatment Goals**
• Identify issues that need to be addressed collaboratively with both the therapist and family.
• Goals as a result are created by both the therapist and family.

**Interventions**
• Homework assignments or directives are frequently used for the family to do outside of therapist.
• The therapist exaggerates the symptom in order to help the family understand how damaging the symptom is to the family.
• The connotation of one symptom is changed from negative to positive in order to give new meaning to the symptom.

**Strategic: Haley**

**Founders:** Jay Haley, Chloe Madanes, and Milton Erickson
• Influenced by Cybernetics, Structural Family Therapy, and Functional Theory

**Underpinnings**
• A family’s inability to adjust to life cycle transitions and symptoms are both maintained through the family’s unsuccessful problem solving.

**Theory of Change**
• Improving the hierarchies and resolving boundary problems; this occurs through directives that encourage and strengthen family members’ ability to find new methods or approaches they can use to resolve their issues.

**Role of the Therapist**
• Therapist is responsible for outcome, directs & becomes part of the system.

**Main Concepts**
• **Therapeutic Paradox:** Interventions that are in contradiction to the goals of therapy although are designed to achieve them.
• **Symptom Prescription:** The therapist instructs client to engage in or practice their symptom with the objective of ameliorating the symptom and acknowledging control over it.
• **Restraining:** A therapeutic paradox where the therapist discourages change and warns client of the dangers of changing.
Treatment Goals
   ● Change the system in order to change the symptom
   ● Solve the presenting problems

Intervention
   ● Brief 10 sessions
   ● What function does the symptom serve?
   ● What is the payoff in the system?
   ● Four Stage Model
     1. Social Stage: Joins with the family
     2. Problem Stage: Elicits each member’s view of the problem behavior while remaining neutral
     3. Interaction Stage: Family members are instructed to talk to each other about their view of the problem.
     4. Goal Setting Stage: Moving families through their dysfunctional stages to get to a functional one.

Mental Research Institute (MRI, Palo Alto, Brief Strategic Therapy)

Founders
   ● Paul Watzwalick, John Weakland, Dick Fisch, and Carlos Sluzki
   ● Influenced by Cybernetics

Underpinnings
   ● Dysfunction occurs within a family when attempted solutions have become the problem and as a result maintains homeostasis in the family. The attempts go awry and make the problem worse.

Theory of Change
   ● Shift the solutions that aren't working by identifying the feedback loop, the rules governing it, and changing the loops and rules.

Role of the Therapist
   ● The therapist is directive and part of the system.
   ● The therapist acts as the “consultant.”

Main Concepts
   ● Punctuation: Attribution of different meanings to events as members of a system focus on different parts of the cycle.
     ○ Example: The wife nags or the husband withdraws in the same situation.
Feedback Loops: Positive feedback loops and negative feedback loops.

Utopian Syndrome: This is the belief that if we solve the client’s presenting problem they will lead a happy life. This ideal needs to be avoided, and focus needs to be placed on relief from suffering and not an idealized happiness.
  ○ Families who believe in this frequently change therapists in pursuit of this idealized happiness.

Treatment Goals
  ● Brief therapy, 10 sessions maximum
  ● Solve the presenting problem
  ● Identify the feedback loop and identify family rules that maintain it
  ● Alter sequences and patterns of interaction around the presenting problem

Interventions
  ● Focus on the symptom.
    ○ The symptom points to the system; define a resolvable complaint.
  ● Look at the family life cycle.
    ○ Look at individual parts of the system but treat the system.
  ● Understand the family interactions and sequences around the symptom-like problematic positive feedback loops.
  ● Identify the attempted solutions to the problem that maintain the cycle.
  ● Reframing: Use language to give new meaning to a situation that may result in change.

Strategic: Milan Group

Founders
  ● Mara Selvini Palazzoli and Luigi Boscolo
  ● Influenced by Structural Family Therapy and Functional Theory

Underpinnings
  ● 10 Sessions held about once a month to let things incubate; considered “long” short-term therapy
  ● Participants include whomever is contributing to maintaining the problem
  ● Therapist is neutral, uses a team/co-therapy approach and is active & directive.
  ● Second Order Cybernetics: same underpinnings of Milan but sees therapist as belonging to the system as well.

Theory of Change
  ● A family’s ability to accept a change in the family system and adjust to changing roles and rules.
Role of the Therapist
   ● The therapist is directive and part of the system.

Main Concepts:
   ● **Circular Questioning**: Questions for family members that help therapist learn more about family patterns and relationships and allow the family to begin viewing themselves systematically.
   ● **Prescribing**: A family ritual or series of actions designed to alter the family’s roles.
   ● **Positive Connotation**: Relabeling of family behaviors in a positive light.

Treatment Goals
   ● Understand the family rules and attempt to change them.
   ● Develop an alternative family belief system.
   ● Clarify the rules of the “game” and help loosen the rigid family transactions
   ● Introduce interventions, ideas and ways of thinking that will “perturb” the system and allow the clients to make the changes.

Interventions
   ● Process of therapy sessions (2-3 hours)
     1. **Pre-session**: Starts with a phone call
     2. **Hypothesize**: Formulate a test hypothesis
     3. **Interview the family (Therapy)**
     4. **Team discussion** (Check in with team during therapeutic session to make any alterations to hypothesis and treatment)
     5. **Team message to family**