

THE COUPLE AND FAMILY THERAPISTS' MANEUVERING TOWARDS THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCE IN THE FIRST CONSULTATION.

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AIMS OF THE STUDY:

To develop a comprehensive in-depth understanding of processes during the first family consultation.

METHOD:

Grounded theory methodology (Glaser, Strauss 1967; Strauss, Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2000). The data analyzed during the project were transcripts of videotaped sessions and transcripts of post-session interviews with therapists (Interpersonal Process Recall; Elliott 1986).

STUDY GROUP:

Seven cases of first family consultations.

RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS:

Building therapeutic alliance is one of the themes that emerged from the initial qualitative analysis of the processes during the first family consultation. Thematic analysis has shown how in the process of working on the therapeutic alliance, therapists maneuver between 'temporary individual alliances' with members of the family and 'temporary systemic alliances' with the whole family, and between developing 'emotional alliance(s)' and 'working alliance(s)' with individual members or the whole family (or couple). These processes - parallel to each other during the session - lead to systemic alliance between the therapist and the whole family or the couple, built on individual alliances with particular family members.

BETWEEN TEMPORARY INDIVIDUAL AND SYSTEMIC ALLIANCES

The therapist maneuvers in the session between temporary individual alliances with particular family members and temporary systemic alliances (with the whole family or couple). These temporary moves towards individual alliances are necessary steps in moving the work forward - e.g. by allying with the more motivated family member, connecting with the less motivated family member, more powerful or weaker family member etc. - although they lead to falling out of symmetrical alliance, which the therapist restores by addressing the family or couple as a whole, underlying common experiences, referring to circular hypotheses etc.

TOWARDS SYSTEMIC ALLIANCE

The therapist maneuvers throughout the session between temporary individual and systemic alliances, at times falling out of symmetrical alliance, followed by striving to restore symmetry in alliance with the whole family. All those steps are necessary to develop both emotional and working alliances with particular family members and - as a result - systemic alliance with the family or couple as a whole. The symmetry in focusing on the system by the therapist will in effect be more relative (complementary) to the family structure (e.g. devoting more time and attention to the weaker, or less motivated family member), than it would mean absolute symmetry. Towards the end of the session the therapist would address the system as a whole more often then she would connect with individual family members, striving more for symmetrical, balanced alliance (systemic alliance). It may require moving back and forth between the phase of connecting with the system and connecting with particular family members to explore certain areas to be agreed upon as the focus of further work in therapy (towards therapeutic contract as the final result of the consultation).

BETWEEN EMOTIONAL AND WORKING ALLIANCE(S)

The therapist may intervene to build emotional alliance(s) with particular family members or family as a whole, e.g. by clarifying emotional communication, using sense of humour attuned to the language used by the family, etc. At other times she intervenes more towards working alliance, e.g. by forming circular hypotheses, clarifying areas for further therapeutic work, etc. Occasionally, steps towards maintaining emotional alliance may hinder the development of working alliance, e.g. by avoiding difficult topics, being seduced by one family member into coalition etc.

THE TREE OF (MAIN) CATEGORIES

