# Tracking in Structural Family Therapy

Jorge Colapinto
Minuchin Center for the Family, Woodbury, NJ, USA

## Introduction

Tracking is a technique utilized by structural family therapists. Although primarily used for the purpose of identifying patterns of interaction, it also serves a therapeutic purpose.

## Rationale

Because Structural Family Therapy looks at individual problems in the context of the family's relational patterns, structural therapists do not try to find out *why* a problematic behavior happens, but *how* it happens: in which kind of situations, who are the participants, what they do before, during, and after the behavior in question occurs.

## Description

When assessing a family's relational patterns in a session, structural therapists pay more attention to the process being displayed than to the verbal content. As family members talk, the therapist notices who interrupts, who supports, if and how they disagree, all of which helps her or him map the "coalitions, affiliations, explicit and implicit conflicts, and the ways family members group themselves in conflict resolution" (Minuchin and Fishman 1981, p. 69).

Tracking interactions in the therapy room is usually complemented with an inquiry about events at home, the "there-and-now." For instance, if a child is not going to school, the therapist may explore how does that happen: Who or what wakes him up in the morning? Who does or does not do something when he stays in bed? Is there a struggle, an argument? When do the parents finally accept that the child is not going to school that day? What does the child do when he stays home, and how do the parents respond to that? What time did the child go to bed the night before, and if it was late, what was he doing instead of going to sleep, and how did the parents respond then?

Tracking interactions that happen in the therapy room and the home gives the therapist valuable information to plan the therapy: what relational patterns account for the problem, what are the constraints that make changing those patterns difficult, and what resources are available to overcome those constraints. Tracking also challenges the family's view of the problem: asking questions like "Is this how you and your father talk about your drug use?" "Is your daughter more hyper with you, or with your spouse?" "When you criticize your wife for being too lenient with the


J.L. Lebow et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-15877-8_973-1

children, does that make her more assertive?" encourages clients to look at problems as residing in complementary relational patterns, rather than on specific individuals. The therapist reinforces that message by sharing her or his observations: "You are protective of your daughter"; "This is a family of helpers"; "It must be confusing for you when your father says go and your mother says come."

## Case Example

The following excerpt from a first interview with a mother and daughter following a report of child abuse (Minuchin et al. 2007, pp. 53–54) illustrates the use of tracking to uncover the daughter's relatively elevated position vis a vis her mother, and how the intervention of a third family member influences the relationship between the other two:

WORKER: (to Tina) Do you remember what the stick looked like?

TINA: It was from the broomstick.

WORKER: Where did she hit you?

TINA: Well, she started beating on my leg. My grandmother was telling me, "Run." She said, "Run." My mother was swinging at my face. Then I run to the room, and . . .

WORKER: Wait a minute. Where did your grandmother come from?

TINA: This was in my grandmother's house.

MS. SILVA: That time that I hit her, right. That weekend I went to my mother's house. My mother sent her to the store and she left, and was away for hours, and I hit her.

WORKER: Let me ask you a question. How often did you do that, hitting her with a broomstick?

MS. SILVA: Only that time. Other times I hit her, but not with a broomstick.

WORKER: Well, do you think if that had happened in your home, just with the two of you, you'd still have hit her with a broomstick? Let's say that you are in your home and she takes off without permission.

MS. SILVA: She did do that here.

WORKER: But you didn't hit her with a broomstick.

TINA: She wasn't allowed to. It would be child abuse.

MS. SILVA: No, it's not that I wasn't allowed to. I try to control myself.

WORKER: When you are at home. Do you have broomsticks in your home?

TINA: Of course she does. She can't sweep without a broom.

WORKER: But she never hit you with a broomstick at home.

MS. SILVA: See, but with my mother she knew how to get her way, when my mother sent her to the store.

WORKER: She tricked your mother.

MS. SILVA: Right. Here she could do the same thing. She's done it. But I don't let her get away with it.

WORKER: So maybe the one you wanted to beat with a broom was your mom, for letting your daughter get her way.

TINA: She told my grandmother that if my grandmother didn't walk away she would hit my grandmother. And my grandmother said, "What? That you are going to hit who? I will beat you!"

MS. SILVA: No, it wasn't like that. I told her to move out of the way, because if she didn't she was going to get hit with the stick, not that I was going to hit her with it. My mother didn't want me to hit my daughter.

WORKER: (to Tina) I think you got hit with a broomstick because your mom was trying to teach a lesson to your grandmother.

TINA: And my grandmother would beat her butt.

## References

Minuchin, S., & Fishman, H. C. (1981). *Family therapy techniques*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Minuchin, P., Colapinto, J., & Minuchin, S. (2007). *Working with families of the poor*. New York: Guilford.

## References

Minuchin, S., & Fishman, H. C. (1981). *Family therapy techniques*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Minuchin, P., Colapinto, J., & Minuchin, S. (2007). *Working with families of the poor*. New York: Guilford.