Mastering Family Therapy
Other Books by Salvador Minuchin

Families and Family Therapy

Family Healing: Tales of Hope and Renewal from Family Therapy
(with Michael P. Nichols)

Family Kaleidoscope: Images of Violence and Healing

Family Therapy Techniques
(with H. Charles Fishman)

Institutionalizing Madness
(with Joel Elizur)

Psychosomatic Families: Anorexia Nervosa in Context
(with Bernice L. Rosman and Lester Baker)

Families of the Slums
(with Braulio Montalvo, Bernard G. Guerney, Bernice L. Rosman, and Florence Schumer)

Working with Families of the Poor
(with Patricia Minuchin and Jorge Colapinto)

Assessing Families and Couples: From Symptom to System
(with Michael P. Nichols and Wai-Yung Lee)
To Andy Schauer (1946–1994), a friend who was open
and lovable, lived his life without grudges, and
left us long before his time.
This book is a bottomless bag of tools. Part I is a pathbreaking contribution, in which Salvador Minuchin offers his unique perspective on the major ideas of the field’s luminaries, selecting some of the most exciting conceptual and clinical tools for helping troubled families.

In Part II, we hear the individual voices of eight therapist-supervisees as they struggle to transform themselves and the families in their care, under their supervisor’s masterful guidance. We watch them improve the complexity and accuracy of their interventions, and we observe them learning to abandon unworkable goals. We see how they use Minuchin’s catalyzing reactions, and we share their pain and joy as they sharpen their skills and enhance their styles.

The manner in which each therapist’s story is told, as well as Minuchin’s ongoing comments on their work, make reading this book become, in effect, like sitting in on a master class. We follow both the teacher’s and students’ perspectives and see how they intersect and how those perspectives affect the therapy. This work is especially impressive in light of the examples presented: a formidable gallery of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual casualties of high difficulty levels.

For the beginner searching for new approaches to problems that at first appear to be inside the individual only, Mastering Family Therapy is a remarkably rich resource. For the experienced therapist seeking to cultivate fresh ways of unbalancing pathologic systems, to amplify divergences, and to challenge the usual, the harvest has never been so abundant. This book is particularly valuable in stimulating the supervisor’s imagination. All of us who have found ourselves in conflict with a supervisee’s chosen direction will learn from the ingenious ways Minuchin finds to resolve clashes and promote growth. He shows how a supervisor can thrive on the differences between himself and the supervisees, and the supervisee and the family he or she works with, turning those differences into productive conflict, unexpected problem solving, and healing. He teaches how to make efficient use of the supervisor’s most fundamental instrument: the ability to join the supervisee in a tough and honest dialogue in which both search avidly for ways of anticipating and creating scenarios.

These ideas do not fit in a field inclined to sacrifice the use of the evocative and probing conversation in the planning and carrying out of
therapeutic interventions. These ideas do not accommodate the quick and automated protocol as a principal means of training. They do belong, however, in any professional setting that employs a family-based therapy, delivered by providers who value the relevance and usefulness of interventions above all. These clinicians will heartily embrace the book’s main point: discovering feasible goals and improvising a flexible trajectory for therapy by gaining a systemic understanding of families. Minuchin’s guidance in achieving such an undertaking cultivates and releases the therapist’s protean imagination—the endless capacity to shape new options. He teaches how to assume different forms depending on what the case requires.

In the future, when the field of family therapy is examined and the tools in its workshop are inventoried, Mastering Family Therapy will be counted as more than the work of a brilliant craftsman from whose forge came an extraordinary collection of tools that go on shaping the structure of family therapy. It will be remembered as the source book on inspiring therapists to fire their own imaginations and forge their own tools to better serve the families they work with.

BRAULIO MONTALVO
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Acknowledgments

To begin with, we owe a deep debt of gratitude to the therapists whose chapters constitute Part II of this book. Were it not for their courageous willingness to expose their clinical work to mass perusal, this book would have become a dry, academic affair, with lessened utility for those who are involved in the flesh-and-blood work of doing and supervising family therapy.

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of Richard Holm, our fellow faculty member at the Minuchin Center for the Family. Richard is present everywhere in this book, albeit invisibly. His contributions ranged from the sublime to the meticulous—from helping us crystallize some of the theoretical ideas to working with the analysis of videotapes.

Authors can count themselves blessed if they find an editor who can understand their material and make it better. In writing this book, we were fortunate; we had four such editors. Frances Hitchcock worked the basic transformations when the material first emerged from our word processors. Nina Gunzenhauser alerted us to the flaws in the manuscript when we believed it was already flawless. Jo Ann Miller, the executive editor at John Wiley while the first edition was being written, brought an understanding of the field and an ability to integrate the work of many writers into a coherent volume. And Patricia Rossi, our editor at Wiley for this second edition, managed to infect us with her enthusiasm for a project of revision and rewriting that we would never have undertaken on our own.

Our profound thanks also to Lori Mitchell, Jenny Hill, and Gail Elia. They labored tirelessly and with tactful patience to type the numerous revisions through which the manuscript passed.

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Preface

Once upon a time, a wise old rabbi listened fondly as his two brightest students engaged in a polemical discussion. The first presented his argument with passionate conviction. The rabbi smiled approval. “That is correct.”

The other student argued the opposite, cogently and clearly. The rabbi smiled again. “That is correct.”

Dumbfounded, the students protested. “Rabbi, we can’t both be right!”

“That is correct,” said the wise old man.

Like the wise old rabbi, the authors are of two minds concerning the making of a family therapist. Meyer Maskin, a brilliant and caustic training analyst at the William Alanson White Institute, used to tell his supervisees how once, when he wanted to build a summer house, he asked an architect to show him the plans of homes he had previously designed. Then he went to see how they looked when they were finished. Here Maskin would pause for dramatic effect. “Shouldn’t we take an equally rigorous approach when we are searching for an analyst? In other words, before we start the arduous psychological trek together, shouldn’t we look at how a potential analyst has constructed her life? How well does she understand herself? What kind of spouse is she? Even more important, how well did she parent her children?”

An equally critical observer of clinicians, the family therapist Jay Haley, would disagree with this point of view. Haley says that he knows many good people and excellent parents who are mediocre or miserable therapists; he also knows good family therapists who have made a mess of their personal lives. Neither life skills nor self-knowledge via psychoanalysis or psychotherapy improves the capacity of therapists to become better clinicians. Clinical skill, he would observe, requires specific training in the art of therapy: how to plan, how to give directions, how to rearrange hierarchies. It can be achieved, he would say, only via supervision of therapy itself. For Haley, to know how good a family therapist is, one would need to interview her previous patients. Even a therapist’s written work, he would say, tells us only about her writing skills, not about her therapeutic skills.

So here we find ourselves in a quandary because, as in the rabbi’s story, the two sides absolutely disagree, and we agree with both of them. In previous writings, I (SM) have indicated how I respond to the specific needs of patients by using different facets of myself. My