There’s no quantifying the impact that Dr. Salvador Minuchin had on the development and establishment of family therapy, but if we gave it a shot, it would be our best bet to go with massive. Whether we keep him at the forefront of consciousness in our clinical work or not, his brilliance is with so many of us in so much of what we do. Writing, teaching, and engaging with others up to his last few weeks of life, few individuals are as deeply imbedded into the DNA of family therapy as Sal. So in the wake of his recent passing, as we reflect upon his endless teachings and reflections of wisdom left behind, let us remember Sal with gratitude and honor his life’s work by keeping it alive. Much was pioneered and accomplished over 7 decades of service, so reviewing the more refined aspects of Sal’s contributions can demonstrate the ways in which his teachings are truly transcendent. I imagine many of you may be surprised as to how much Sal’s teachings remain alive in your daily work, and that many others may take his lessons as an invitation to reintegrate them moving forward. To Sal, we thank you for your service, activism, courage, and tenacity. We thank you for remaining unfiltered in your criticism, modeling the growth you spoke, and perhaps most importantly, for your insatiable irreverence toward psychoanalysis and behavioral intervention. We thank you for the endless contributions that established the very profession we have come to love and for making its continued impact on families and society possible. Most of all, we thank you for the following lessons that we aim to keep alive in our ongoing work. Thank you for…(cont’d)

Photograph and caption borrowed from The Minuchin Center for the Family at www.minuchincenter.org

Sal is survived by his son, daughter, granddaughter, and sister.
Teaching us that we, as therapists, must be an agent of change…

In 1975, when I wrote Families and Family Therapy, I thought that all therapists needed to do to translate their interest in understanding families into becoming effective therapists was an alphabet of skills—how to join with families, do enactments, create boundaries, and so on. I believed that the poetry of therapy could be derived from this alphabet. But as I got more experience training therapists to use these techniques, it became clear that the techniques by themselves weren’t all that useful. It was therapists themselves who were the instruments of change, and to be effective, they had to recognize the way they were part of the system and the process in the therapy room, not just a neutral observer.

-Salvador Minuchin (2017)

That our clients are less fragile than we often lead ourselves to believe, and that change in therapy demands structure and expertise…

My idea that we’re all multiple selves led me to develop a therapy of challenge, rather than one of being gentle with people. My goal as a therapist wasn’t to be cautious and empathic, but to be an intervenor who creates uncertainty in clients about who they were and are and what they’re capable of becoming. I wasn’t interested in their “true self”: I wanted them to experience a series of selves and the expansion of possibility that can grow from that experience. Above all, I wanted them to recognize that there were more ways of being than what their life experience so far, whatever it was, had made them aware of. What I did in therapy was say to people, “You know, belonging may give you a sense of security, protection, harmony, but it also limits you and creates an invisible pattern of relationship that fools you into believing it’s the only way of being.”

-Salvador Minuchin (2013)

Teaching us to navigate the power struggle and dismantle resistance…

A therapist must walk both sides of the street. At the same time you are getting the parents to take control, you also talk about the girl’s autonomy. You explain that good parenting is not just control, it is also about giving space. And while you encourage the girl’s autonomy, you talk to her about the parents’ need to be respected. Bringing the conflict into the therapy room is just the first step in challenging the old pattern and moving parents outside of the world of the girl. Maybe I’m thinking of this particular family because Carol just called me a few months ago to tell me that her father, whom I had not seen in 25 years, was dying and wanted to speak with me one last time. After all these years, he still felt connected to me and what had happened in the therapy. Somehow talking with me at the end of his life was his way of closing a circle. I am frequently surprised how long the memory of a therapist can last in the life of a family.

-Salvador Minuchin (in Simon, 1996)

Reminding us that an intervention without self-awareness is useless…

“overwhelmingly, trainees are expected to be thinking about what to do, rather than on who they are in the room with their clients. The best way I’ve found to understand this kind of self-awareness is to envision a therapist with a homunculus on his or her left shoulder, observing the therapist’s mental processes and engaged in silent dialogues with the therapists as he or she works. All therapists need a range of tools to master their craft, but tools are just that—a means to accomplish an objective. When the carpenter begins with a piece of wood, he has an end goal in mind: to change that wood into something else. The saw, chisel, hammer, and nail are a means of transforming what the carpenter first sees into what he wants it to become. The effective family therapist also uses tools as means to an end, not as ends in themselves. The craft of family therapy lies in how these tools are used to produce a difference in the family—a useful change. An enactment on its own doesn’t move the family, but a therapist who understands that the enactment is a way to view the family’s interaction can shift the process. So the most important tool is the therapist’s use of self in guiding the process of change—and understanding how to use that tool is the biggest obstacle for beginning therapists. Ultimately, learning how to use the silent dialogue with the homunculus on one’s shoulder is central to mastering the craft of family therapy.”

-Salvador Minuchin (2013)
That even an intervention with self-awareness is nothing without the therapeutic relationship...
For people to accept my interventions, they must know that I really see them. They must say to themselves, "Yeah, that's me. Yes, he has my number." I think that what it comes down to is that I really care. Once I work with a family, I am absolutely concerned for them. I suffer with them. I cry with them. Even though I am like Jiminy Cricket I am their conscience I also care for them. When Jay Haley wrote about Milton Erickson, he emphasized his inventive interventions and his command of hypnosis and metaphor. But when you look at tapes of Erickson with patients, what you see above all else is a man who is absolutely benign.
-Salvador Minuchin (in Simon, 1996)

Being a voice of skepticism amidst the wave of postmodern therapies...
But today therapists are wary of my brand of therapeutic interventionism. They seem to believe it is impossible for a therapist to produce specific, targeted changes in a family. They want to be noninterventionist and turn therapy into a simple conversation among people. The therapist asks questions that provide people the opportunity to reconsider meanings and values that up until then they have considered as "given" or normative. The solution-focused and the narrative therapists say, "Let's not deal with problems. Let's deal with solutions." But in the process, it seems to me, the therapist is restricted to operating only in a collaborative, symmetrical posture. Gone is the latitude to play, to give opinions, to be the complex, multi-faceted person in the therapy room that you are outside of it. All that remains is to be a distant, respectful questioner.
-Salvador Minuchin (in Simon, 1996)

Being a voice of praise amidst the wave of postmodern therapies...
I no longer believe that I own the truth and I have become more accepting of other points of view. I know myself better and realize that when something new happens in the field, my first response is to oppose it and only later do I begin to incorporate it. My first response to the feminist group was to respond negatively to what I saw as its stridency, especially since I was the target of much of its criticism of the field. But I learned to incorporate many of the feminists' ideas. And even though I still have problems with the constructivists, as I was saying earlier, the same was true of the work of Michael White and Steve de Shazer. I begin with polemical opposition and move toward assimilating what I find useful.
-Salvador Minuchin (in Simon, 1996)

Modeling to us Whitaker's saying of “learn to retreat and advance from any position you take” amidst the wave of postmodern therapies...
The feminists made me realize that I had put women in certain narrow categories and that my labels for women had gender biases: for me a mother's concern could too easily be dismissed as "overprotectiveness." I focused on men providing guidance and women nurturance, and my work emphasized the importance of guidance and took nurturance for granted. I don't think I do that anymore. I'm more aware of the messages of the labels and I pay attention to what I privilege. But I still work systematically, seeing how couples trigger each other in their interactions. I've always thought that working with the man is an important way to bring him closer to the family, make him more of a participant and ease the burdens of the woman, but I pay more attention now to making sure that her voice is heard, her pain expressed and her need for respect understood.
-Salvador Minuchin (in Simon, 1996)

Warning us from becoming what you saw today as the noninterventionist—the restrained therapist...
We all offer our patients a language, and we say, "Let's begin to see your life in this language, and I will give you solutions in this language." I do it. Everybody does it. What disturbs me now is that, as a field, we have gotten so interested in these therapeutic techniques and our particular language that we are paying little attention to the family therapist as a system and the therapist as an instrument of change.
-Salvador Minuchin (in Simon, 1996)
Modeling to us again, Whitaker’s teaching to fracture role structures at will and repeatedly.

How Richard Simon experienced Sal amidst professionals:
“Minuchin, a compact, dapper man with a Latin accent as thick as his black mustache, exuded an air of brusque command at odds with the traditionally pacifist culture of psychotherapy. Heaven protect anyone who stumbled through a lame question or tried to say a kind word about psychoanalysis. He seemed to me the most confident person I had ever met, as if he had been to the mountaintop, seen the Truth and discovered he was It. Of course, he was exactly the kind of hero I was looking for. And when he began to explain a clinical strategy by quoting from a 16th-century book called The Way of the Samurai, any last reservations I may have had completely disappeared.”

How Richard Simon experienced Sal with families:
“Once the interview started, Minuchin’s intimidating aura dissolved and he became a kind of therapeutic sleuth patient, respectful, infinitely curious, frequently playful, surprisingly gentle, but, above all, utterly focused on figuring out the puzzle of what was maintaining the problem the family was trying to resolve.”

-Richard Simon (1996)

Challenging our notion of “work” in general and “retirement” in particular…
I thought that at 75 I was going to retire and become a full-time grandfather. But retirement is not a comfortable niche for me. Other people at 75 find that this is a time to paint, to play the piano. But that is not enough for me at this point. Pat and I have moved to Boston to be near our children and our granddaughter. My relationship with my granddaughter is very, very special. So there is renewal in that. But I am a person who likes to help other people. I don’t find it useful to look too much at the past or way ahead to the future. I relate to the immediacy of the present. Even though financially we are okay, I need to work in order to maintain myself intellectually and because I love it. After all these years, if a family calls and wants to come to therapy with me, I still love it.

-Salvador Minuchin (in Simon, 1996)

Modeling to us what Plato may have meant in his encouragement to “Practice Dying”
So when I look back on my life, I see a sheltered Jewish child, a rebellious young adult, a revolutionary, a soldier, a stammering, helpless immigrant, and many, many, other things. At 95, I think of myself as having journeyed through life as many different people, and I think of a line from Antonio Machado, one of my favorite Spanish poets: “The road is not the road; you make the road by walking.” I hope in my own walking I’ve cleared away some debris for those who will follow…

-Salvador Minuchin (2017) 10 months prior to his passing

We salute you, Dr. Minuchin! Rest peacefully.

-From the MAMFT Membership

References


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