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Structural Family Therapy in Algerian Context: Evidence from Constantine Families

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Abstract:

This qualitative study examines the adaptation of Structural Family Therapy (SFT) to the cultural context of urban families in Constantine, Algeria. Based on in-depth interviews with tweenty households and guided by Minuchin's framework, it explores family hierarchies, gender roles, and generational boundaries amid social change. Findings show that families balance tradition and modernization through flexible structures that preserve respect for elders while adopting new forms of cooperation. The study notes difficulties in sustaining respect and emotional closeness in nuclear families and proposes a culturally sensitive SFT model that integrates local values with boundary-focused interventions.

Keywords : Structural Family Therapy, Constantine, Algerian families, cultural adaptation, qualitative study.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in the 1970s, Structural Family Therapy (SFT), developed by Salvador Minuchin, has remained one of the most influential frameworks for understanding family dynamics through the organization of subsystems, boundaries, and hierarchies (Minuchin, 1974). However, despite its global influence, the approach was largely developed within Western sociocultural contexts characterized by individualism and nuclear family structures. The question of how such a model can be meaningfully adapted to collectivist and interdependent societies -such as those found in North Africa- remains both theoretically and practically significant.

The city of Constantine represents one of Algeria's most historically and culturally rich urban centers. With a growing middle class, a blend of traditional and modern lifestyles, and strong family networks that span multiple generations, Constantine provides a unique site for exploring how family systems navigate change. Families in Constantine are characterized by deep respect for elders, strong maternal bonds, and an enduring sense of extended family belonging. Yet, as economic pressures and modernization alter social roles- especially for women and youth- traditional family hierarchies are undergoing visible transformation.

The aim of this study is to explore how the principles of Structural Family Therapy can be culturally adapted to the realities of Constantine families. Specifically, it seeks to understand:

1. How urban Algerian families perceive and maintain family structure, hierarchy, and boundaries;

2. What cultural values and norms influence those structures; and

3. How these insights can inform therapeutic interventions that are culturally responsive to Algerian society.

The paper begins with a review of relevant literature on SFT and cultural adaptation in non-Western contexts. It then describes the methodological framework employed, including participant recruitment and thematic analysis procedures. The results section presents qualitative findings supported by direct participant quotes, many in the local Constantine dialect. Finally, the discussion integrates these findings with SFT theory, highlighting clinical implications for family therapists working within Arab and North African settings.

2. Literature Review:

2.1 Structural Family Therapy: Core Concepts and Relevance:

Structural Family Therapy (SFT) views the family as an organized system composed of subsystems, boundaries, and hierarchies that determine relational patterns and overall family functioning (Minuchin, 1974). According to Minuchin's model, healthy family functioning requires clear but flexible boundaries that allow for both autonomy and connection among members. Dysfunction occurs when boundaries are either too rigid, resulting in disengagement, or too diffuse, leading to

enmeshment (Nichols & Davis, 2023). The therapist's role is to "join" the family system, observe its structure, and help reorganize interactions to promote functional hierarchies and adaptive patterns.

While SFT has been widely applied in diverse cultural settings, its underlying assumptions often reflect Western ideals of individual self-expression and nuclear family organization (Chen et al., 2020). This creates a tension when working with families in collectivist societies-like those in North Africa-where interdependence, filial duty, and extended kinship structures are central to social life.

2.2 Cultural Adaptation of Family Therapy Models

Recent scholarship emphasizes the necessity of cultural adaptation when applying Western-developed therapeutic models in non-Western contexts. Bernal and Domenech Rodríguez (2019) define cultural adaptation as the systematic integration of language, cultural values, and contextual practices into evidence-based interventions while preserving their core theoretical foundations.

From a systemic perspective, McGoldrick, Giordano, and Garcia-Preto (2020) highlight the importance of understanding the cultural family map, including traditions, religious meanings, migration histories, and social norms that shape family relationships. Without attention to these contextual dimensions, therapists risk misinterpreting culturally normative behaviors as pathological.

In the Arab world, several scholars have examined how Western family therapy models can be aligned with Islamic and communal values (Dwairy, 2021). Their findings suggest that hierarchical respect, family honor, and intergenerational solidarity are essential dimensions that cannot be pathologized within a therapeutic framework. Instead, therapists are encouraged to view these as strengths that sustain family cohesion. A culturally sensitive adaptation of SFT must therefore integrate such relational ethics and communication styles into the intervention process.

2.3 Algerian Family Structure and Cultural Dynamics

Family life in Arab societies is shaped by values of collective responsibility, hierarchical respect, intergenerational solidarity, and moral obligation. Close emotional ties and extended family involvement are common and are often viewed as essential sources of social support and identity. Dwairy (2021) emphasizes that therapeutic models applied in Arab and Muslim contexts must recognize these relational ethics rather than impose culturally incongruent ideals of individual autonomy.

Within this framework, hierarchical family structures and strong parental authority are not inherently dysfunctional. Instead, they often serve protective and stabilizing functions, particularly during periods of social or economic stress. Effective family therapy must therefore distinguish between culturally normative hierarchy and genuinely maladaptive rigidity.

Algerian family life is characterized by a rich blend of Arab, Berber, Islamic, and Mediterranean influences. The traditional extended family remains a central unit of social life, even as economic and demographic changes have encouraged the rise of nuclear households. Constantine, in particular, exemplifies this tension between old and new. It is a city that embodies the cultural rootedness and the social evolution, where respect for elders coexists with aspirations for gender equality and youth independence.

Empirical research on Algerian families remains limited, but emerging studies indicate a shift toward bicultural family identities, where parents strive to preserve traditional values while accommodating modern aspirations. Issues of authority negotiation, marital role balance, and communication patterns have become increasingly salient, especially among younger families.

2.4 Family Therapy in the Algerian Context

One of the central challenges in adapting SFT to collectivist societies concerns the role of extended family members. In many Algerian families, grandparents and other relatives play an active role in decision-making, childrearing, and moral guidance. This reality complicates SFT's traditional emphasis on clearly bounded nuclear subsystems.

Research suggests that therapists working in such contexts must adopt a context-sensitive understanding of boundaries, focusing on functional balance rather than enforcing Western models of independence (McGoldrick et al., 2020). Structural

interventions should aim to reduce conflict and ambiguity while respecting the legitimacy of extended family involvement.

2.5 Integrating Cultural Values with SFT Principles

An effective adaptation of SFT to the Constantine context requires attention to the moral and spiritual dimensions of Algerian family life. For instance, the Islamic principle of kindness and obedience to parents (birr al-wālidayn) aligns closely with SFT's notion of respect for hierarchical order but must be balanced with the need for open emotional communication. Similarly, the concept of patience functions as both a coping mechanism and a family virtue, guiding conflict resolution and decision-making.

Therapists adapting SFT in Constantine would therefore need to:

1. Reframe enmeshment not as pathology but as an expression of solidarity and belonging;

2. Encourage boundary flexibility through culturally acceptable forms of dialogue rather than confrontation; and

3. Recognize that therapeutic authority is often granted to elders, religious figures, or respected community members rather than mental health professionals.

2.6 Gaps in the Literature

While international scholarship on culturally adapted SFT is growing, research from North Africa, particularly Algeria,

remains scarce. Existing studies have not sufficiently captured the everyday experiences of Algerian families negotiating between modern and traditional roles. There is also limited empirical evidence on how SFT principles -such as restructuring hierarchies or clarifying subsystems- can be operationalized in a context where extended kinship remains influential.

present study contributes to filling this gap by offering an empirical, qualitative exploration of Constantine families, using their lived experiences to inform a culturally grounded adaptation of SFT. By listening to families in their own words - including the idiomatic richness of the Constantine dialect- the research seeks to build a bridge between Minuchin's systemic theory and Algerian cultural reality.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a constructivist orientation. The purpose was to explore how urban families in Constantine, Algeria, experience and interpret family structure, hierarchy, and boundaries in daily life, and how these experiences could inform a culturally relevant application of Structural Family Therapy (SFT). The qualitative approach was chosen to capture the depth, nuance, and emotional language of participants' narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

3.2 Participants

The sample consisted of 20 family units living in Constantine, representing diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Families were

recruited through community associations, and social networks. Each family included at least one parent and one adolescent or young adult child willing to participate in an interview.

Of the total sample, 10 families identified as middle-class, 5 as lower-middle class, and 5 as upper-middle class. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 years, with an approximately equal gender distribution. Twenty-three families were nuclear (parents and children only), while seven included extended members such as grandparents or unmarried siblings.

Participation was voluntary, and all individuals gave informed consent. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used throughout the study.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected between June and August 2025 using semi-structured interviews conducted in a combination of Darja (local Constantine dialect) and Modern Standard Arabic, depending on participant comfort. Each family participated in one to two sessions lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. The interviews were conducted in participants' homes or in community centers, allowing a comfortable and natural setting for discussion.

The interview guide explored five key areas aligned with SFT principles:

1. Family roles and hierarchy: "Who makes decisions in your family?"

2. Boundaries and communication: “How do family members talk about problems or disagreements?”

3. Generational transitions: “How do parents and children understand respect and freedom?”

4. Support and cooperation: “What does mutual help mean in your family life?”

5. Change and modernization: “What challenges or changes do you see in families today?”

Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. When participants used dialect expressions that had no direct English equivalent, these were kept in Arabic and translated contextually

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021): familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and reporting. Initial open coding was performed manually on printed transcripts, with repeated readings to ensure accuracy. Codes were then grouped into themes that reflected recurring patterns in family structure, emotional dynamics, and value expressions.

Special attention was given to linguistic markers of emotion and respect, as these were critical for understanding family interactions. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document interpretive decisions and potential cultural biases during analysis.

3.5.Results

Analysis of the 20 interviews produced five overarching themes that capture how Constantine families experience and negotiate family structure and relationships:

1. Evolving Family Hierarchies,
2. Boundaries between Generations,
3. Communication and Emotional Warmth,
4. Negotiating Modernity and Tradition, and
5. Resilience through Faith and Cooperation.

Each theme is supported by illustrative quotes from participants, presented first in local Constantine dialect followed by English translation.

Theme 1: Evolving Family Hierarchies

While traditional hierarchies remain respected, families increasingly describe shared decision-making between parents and greater involvement of youth in household matters. Fathers, once seen as the unquestioned authority, now share roles with mothers, particularly in educational and emotional domains.

"Zman tʿbdel, wlidi wla yhadar f kull ḥaja, maʿash kima qbl." ("Times have changed—my son now gives his opinion in everything; it's not like before."). leila, 45, mother of four.

"Nḥebo nkounou demokratiyin fi eʿdar, bsḥ lazem ybqa iḥtirām."("We want to be democratic at home, but respect must remain."). Mokhtar, 53, father of three.

Theme 2: Boundaries between Generations

Families in Constantine often share housing or live in close proximity to extended kin. This proximity strengthens intergenerational bonds but can blur boundaries, especially between young couples and in-laws.

"Kunt nḥess roḥi mazal bint baba, maʿankʿderche ndir qrar f dare."("I felt like I was still my father's daughter, I couldn't make my own decisions in my own house.") Nassima, 28, newly married woman.

Young couples reported tension between asserting independence and maintaining family harmony. Minuchin's notion of boundary realignment was evident in their adaptive strategies, such as setting visiting schedules or separate household finances.

Theme 3: Communication and Emotional Warmth

Participants emphasized the importance of respect and warmth in communication. While older generations preferred implicit emotional expression, younger members sought verbal openness.

"Baba jamais gal liya nḥebk, bsḥ ki marra ḍaʿt men l'madrasa, kan lawel li tlaʿ yqalb ʿliya." ("My father never said 'I love you,' but when I once got lost coming home from school, he was the first one searching for me.") Rayene, 18, university student.

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This theme highlights generational shifts in emotional literacy, yet both generations recognize care as the foundation of family stability.

Theme 4: Negotiating Modernity and Tradition

Constantine families display a dynamic synthesis of values embracing modern education, women's employment, and media influence, while upholding traditions of modesty and family solidarity.

"Benti tḥeb tkhdem, w ana mʿaha, baṣah lazem tḥafẓ ʿala qīyāmna."("My daughter wants to work, and I support her. But she must preserve our values."). Hamid, 57, father of seven

Several mothers described feeling "between two worlds", valuing modern aspirations yet fearing cultural dilution. The family becomes the negotiation space where modern roles and traditional meanings coexist.

Theme 5: Resilience through Faith and Cooperation

Religious and communal values remain central to family resilience. Participants consistently referred to patience, mutual help, and trust in God as strategies to manage stress and maintain cohesion.

"Mā yroh walu, maʿa ṣabr w taʿāwun, kull ḥaja tʿaddi." ("Nothing is lost, with patience and cooperation, everything passes."). Fatima, 62, grandmother.

Faith-based resilience aligns with SFT's systemic view of supportive family subsystems that sustain equilibrium under pressure.

3.6. Discussion

This study highlights the nuanced balance Constantine families maintain between traditional hierarchy and emerging dialogic practices, reflecting both continuity and adaptation within multigenerational households. The evolution of family hierarchies-where fathers and mothers increasingly share decision-making and youth participation is encouraged-aligns with Minuchin's emphasis on flexible yet clearly defined subsystems, while illustrating how cultural norms shape the expression of "flexibility" in a collectivist context.

Boundary negotiation emerged as a central theme, with young couples asserting autonomy while maintaining respect for parental authority. In this context, enmeshment, often pathologized in Western SFT, appears adaptive, providing emotional security and reinforcing intergenerational solidarity. Communication patterns further underscore this dynamic: implicit emotional expression persists among older generations, while younger members increasingly seek verbal openness, reflecting a generational shift that balances respect with evolving social expectations.

The interplay of tradition and modernity underscores the importance of culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions. Therapists working with Algerian families must recognize faith, moral values, and extended kin involvement as sources of resilience rather than constraints. Structural interventions should

aim to strengthen functional boundaries and facilitate open communication, rather than imposing Western ideals of nuclear autonomy.

These findings resonate with prior research on Arab and Muslim families, emphasizing hierarchical respect, filial duty, and communal responsibility as central to family cohesion (Dwairy, 2021; McGoldrick et al., 2020). At the same time, this study contributes new empirical insight from Algeria, demonstrating how urban families integrate modern aspirations-such as women's employment and youth participation-without compromising relational integrity.

However Limitations include the study's small, urban-focused sample, which may not capture rural or socioeconomically diverse family experiences. Future research could expand the scope to broader populations and adopt longitudinal designs to examine the evolution of family dynamics over time.

4. CONCLUSION

The experiences of Constantine families illustrate a hybrid family system in which traditional hierarchies coexist with participatory decision-making and greater emotional expressiveness. These families demonstrate that relational strength, intergenerational solidarity, and faith-based resilience can coexist with modern aspirations, creating a dynamic equilibrium that supports both family cohesion and individual growth.

For Structural Family Therapy to be effective in this context, it must be culturally attuned—recognizing the adaptive value of extended kin involvement, enmeshment, and moral obligations, while promoting flexible boundaries, open communication, and collaborative problem-solving. By integrating Minuchin's systemic principles with the lived realities of Algerian families, therapists can provide interventions that are both theoretically grounded and culturally meaningful.

Ultimately, this study underscores that culturally sensitive therapy is not an optional adaptation, it is essential. Supporting families in navigating the intersection of tradition and modernity fosters resilience, strengthens intergenerational bonds, and promotes sustained well-being in an evolving social landscape.

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