

Therapeutic alliances in family therapy

It has now been soundly demonstrated that strong therapeutic alliances “matter,” i.e., they are associated with better outcomes, in family therapies as well as individual therapies. Our program of process-outcome research with couples and families began with the question, How is the working alliance in conjoint treatment unique? Assuming that the complexity of working with multiple clients requires therapists to monitor several layers of behavior simultaneously, we began by developing a conceptual model, the System for Observing Family Therapy Alliances (SOFTA). Within the model and its accompanying set of measures, there are two features common to the alliance in all treatment modalities (*Engagement in the Therapeutic Process* and *Emotional Connection to the Therapist*) and two aspects that are unique to conjoint couple and family therapy (*Safety Within the Therapeutic System* and *Shared Sense of Purpose Within the Family*). The observational rating system (SOFTA-o) allows researchers and clinicians to rate client behaviors *reflective of* and therapist behaviors that *contribute to* strong versus problematic therapeutic alliances. (A software program, e-SOFTA, allows users to upload their own a videotaped sessions, rate the alliance-related behaviors of client and therapist, and add qualitative comments in the stream of interaction; available in English and Spanish, without cost, from www.softa-soatif.net). Two brief self-report measures, SOFTA-s, for both clients and therapists are also available on our website, with versions in English, Spanish, French, and Swedish). Our book, *Therapeutic Alliances with Couples and Families: An Empirically-Informed Guide to Practice* (Friedlander, Escudero, & Heatherington, 2006), is replete with clinical examples about how to facilitate strong alliances and correct misalliances. Specific challenges highlighted in the book include multicultural diversity and problematic alliances (split alliances, unwilling clients, therapist countertransference), within the family itself (zero/sum presenting problems), and among professional helpers working with the family. To date, several empirical articles supporting the SOFTA’s validity and clinical utility have been published in the *Journal of Family Therapy*, the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *Psychotherapy Research*, and *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*.

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Book link: <http://books.apa.org/books.cfm?id=4317093>