

Chapter 6 "Structure" — *Systems Theory in Action* (2011) Summary

In *Systems Theory in Action* (2011), Shelly Smith-Acuña's Chapter 6: Structure focuses on how the **organization, hierarchy, roles, and boundaries** of a system shape its functioning and interactions [Perlego+1](#). The chapter builds on earlier concepts (context, causality, communication, change) to show how understanding structure is essential for applying systems theory in individual, couple, and family therapy.

Core themes in Chapter 6

- **Definition of structure:** A system's structure refers to the arrangement of its parts, the relationships between them, and the rules or patterns that govern interactions. This includes **structural hierarchy** (who holds authority or influence), **roles** (expected functions of members), and **boundaries** (what is included or excluded from the system)
- **Parts-whole relationship:** Smith-Acuña emphasizes that the relationship between components and the whole is both simple and profound — changes in one part can affect the entire system, and the whole influences how each part functions [Perlego](#).
- **Systemic boundaries:** Boundaries define what is inside and outside the system, influencing communication, control, and change. Clear, flexible, or rigid boundaries have different therapeutic implications [Perlego](#).

- **Role clarity and hierarchy:** Understanding who holds decision-making power, who is responsible for specific functions, and how roles interact helps therapists identify patterns of conflict, power imbalance, or dysfunction [Perlego+1](#).
- **Application to therapy:** The chapter uses **realistic clinical stories** to illustrate how assessing and working with structure can reveal hidden dynamics, improve communication, and guide interventions in family and couple contexts [Perlego+1](#).

Practical takeaways for clinicians

- **Assessment:** Map the system's hierarchy, roles, and boundaries to identify where problems are embedded.
- **Intervention:** Adjust structure (e.g., clarify roles, re-define boundaries) to facilitate change.
- **Perspective:** View problems not just as individual issues but as products of the system's organization and rules.

In short, Chapter 6 provides a **framework for seeing the "big picture" of a client's system** — how its internal organization and external boundaries shape behavior — and shows how therapists can use that insight to guide effective, systemic interventions [Perlego+1](#).