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## INTERVENING IN LARGER SYSTEMS: WHEN TRADITIONAL THERAPY IS NOT ENOUGH

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*The field of family therapy is undergoing a transformation, one in which therapists intervene not only with families, but also with the outside systems that affect them. This article describes a program, in which faculty and doctoral students in a family therapy program partner with a large urban school district, that is designed to intervene at the school district level, providing a direct family therapy intervention into a larger system. However, the therapists' ability to succeed in this work has recently been challenged by larger system changes in immigration policy, beyond the level of the school district. This experience has highlighted the importance of family therapists' involvement in larger social and political systems.*

The field of family therapy is undergoing a transformation, one in which therapists not only intervene with families, but also with the outside systems that affect them (Gosnell, McKergow, Moore, Mudry, & Tomm, 2017). For several years, as faculty and doctoral students in a family therapy program partnering with a large urban school district, we have been working with a program designed to intervene at the school district level, providing a direct family therapy intervention into a larger system. Results have been positive beyond our expectations. Our ability to succeed in this work has recently been challenged, however, by larger system changes in immigration policy, beyond the level of the school district. This experience has highlighted for our program the importance of family therapists' involvement in larger social and political systems and caused us to shift to increased advocacy. Two cases will be described here, which illustrate both the value of our solution-focused,

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often single-session, therapy (Hoyt & Talmon, 2014; Kim, Kelly, & Franklin, 2017) and our decision to advocate for our clients within the larger system as well. With the first case, our advocacy was at the larger system level of the school system, a step often recommended to family therapists (Kim et al., 2017). But with the second case, we branched out further into the legal and political arena.

### **PROMISE: A SCHOOL DISTRICT-LEVEL INTERVENTION**

Since the 1990s, youth attending public schools within the United States have experienced increased rates of suspensions, expulsions, and arrests for nonviolent offenses (Alvarez, 2013). Increased rates of suspensions and arrests tend to lead to academic failure, and ultimately to arrest and prison as an adult (Alvarez, 2013). Students of color are disproportionately likely to be suspended and to be arrested, making this a diversity issue (Alvarez, 2013; Collins-Ricketts & Rambo, 2015). In 2014, the school district in Broward County, Florida was experiencing what was considered by the state and national chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and by school district officials themselves, to be an unacceptably high rate of suspensions and arrests (Broward County Public Schools, 2014; Collins-Ricketts & Rambo, 2015). Broward County is the sixth largest school district in the United States (<https://www.browardschools.com>).

In an innovative agreement between the Broward county school district, the state and national chapters of NAACP, the state attorney's office, the public defender's office, and local law enforcement, Broward County Schools created the Preventing Recidivism through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support, and Education (PROMISE) program (<https://www.browardprevention.org>). Through this program, students who would previously have been arrested are instead removed from their home schools for 1 to 10 days, taught behavior strategies, and offered a second chance to improve their behavior. Discipline is strict and students who fail to follow rules are sent back into the juvenile justice system (<https://www.browardprevention.org>).

Rambo, faculty in the Nova Southeastern University Department of Family Therapy program and a long-time supervisor of graduate family therapy interns in the public schools, was then approached to add a counseling component to the PROMISE program. Aware of the demonstrated success of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) in the schools (Kim et al., 2017), she chose to add a solution-focused assessment and at least a single therapy session for all suspended students, to be provided by a family therapy graduate intern with live faculty supervision. The assessment focuses on the student's own goals for the future, and we help identify what positive steps the student is already making towards that future. This assessment is shared with the parent in a conference call, and with the home school in the form of a written report. The report sent to the home school also includes

recommendations for how school officials can build on positives, for example by offering a student more time with a favorite coach or teacher who may be an important mentor (Collins-Ricketts & Rambo, 2015).

Given the large numbers of suspended students, we are most often only able to see each student one time, and then for follow up. So our work is brief, solution oriented, and focused on the initial session (Hoyt & Talman, 2014). We work to build an alliance; strive to create an expectation of change and a sense of hope; and remind ourselves and our clients that “big problems do not always require big solutions” (p. 4), but instead small steps can create significant exceptions (Hoyt & Talman, 2014). Most of the time, we are the first to listen to the suspended student’s point of view in detail, and the first to offer an alliance.

We can’t take all the credit for the success of the program, as the removal from the home school itself, the time served in the disciplinary context, and the behavior strategies taught in the classrooms, may also have a positive effect. The solution-focused assessments we offer, however, are an entirely new intervention the school district is trying, and we do think they help to create the positive outcomes. The effect of the PROMISE program on the recidivism rate has been dramatic and positive. The recidivism rate in the 2012–2013 school year, just prior to the implementation of the PROMISE program, was 38%, not including the 1,052 students arrested during that school year, who mostly dropped out. Consistently over the 4 years the PROMISE program has been in existence, the recidivism rate has fallen dramatically, to 9% at the high school level (Mendel, 2018). During this same time period, the arrest rate has been cut by more than half (<https://www.browardprevention.org>). Overall suspensions per year have also fallen, indicating some staying power of the interventions provided, as students seem less likely to reoffend even in subsequent years (Mendel, 2018).

### CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN OUR WORK

Our work at the PROMISE Program is based on SFBT and general guidelines for single-session therapy (Hoyt & Talmon, 2014; Kim et al., 2017). In addition, though, we have needed increased attention to culture and diversity issues. Broward County School District has students from 204 different countries, speaking 191 different languages (<https://www.browardschools.com>). We have been informed by the idea of culturally informed SFBT (McDowell, Knudson-Martin, & Bermudez, 2017). In this model, therapists invite clients to examine their societal context and its relationship to the presenting problems, as well as the ways in which these systems impact their lives (McDowell et al., 2017). This allows clients to give new meaning to their situation, and to expand the search for solutions to the wider societal context (McDowell et al., 2017). At the PROMISE Program, therapists take on the role of cultural brokers in order to include the wider societal context. Kelly (2016) describes this role as a sort of negotiator, who bridges cultural gaps between worldviews and values, experiences and contexts, power differences, and perceived distance. They do this by connecting

students and their families to school district resources and information; assisting them in finding allies while learning how to advocate for themselves; helping parents navigate the larger system of the school district; and building relationships between the students, their families, and school officials.

### **BEYOND THE LEVEL OF THE SCHOOL DISTRICT: MIGRATION CRISIS**

Recently, the PROMISE Program, located as it is in diverse, multicultural South Florida, has been affected by a surge in migration from Central America. Over the past 2 years, the number of unaccompanied children and families migrating to the United States has risen dramatically (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). In 2015, it was reported that there were approximately 3.4 million Central Americans living in the United States, and 85% of those were from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, a region known as the Northern Triangle (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). In the 2016 fiscal year alone, U.S. Customs and Border Protection intercepted more than 70,400 family units from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). The rise in migration largely due to poor political and socioeconomic conditions, economic desperation, and most of all the widespread influence of criminal gangs in Northern Triangle countries, which causes a real threat to the safety of children and families (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). This migration is reflected in the PROMISE Program as we have begun to see an increasing number of suspended students who recently migrated from these countries. The school district does not track these numbers at present, so our experience is anecdotal only, but compelling for us. We now see three to four cases per week involving this migration. These students bring in concerns about the uncertainty of their future in this country, the safety of their families in their country of origin, their legal status, the possibility of being deported, and what would happen if they were to go back to their country of origin. The graduate interns attempt to help suspended students and their families navigate these legal and political concerns as well. Thus, we have now learned to include an even larger system focus in some instances. Two recent case examples will illustrate.

#### **CASE EXAMPLE ONE**

The following case example features Miguel,<sup>1</sup> a 16-year-old high school student who migrated to the United States from Honduras in 2017. He was referred to the PROMISE Program for fighting. Alfaro was the therapist, and the therapy took place in both English and Spanish.

<sup>1</sup>Clients' names have been changed for confidentiality.

### **Miguel's Story**

When first sitting down with Alfaro, Miguel appeared nervous and frightened. He stated that he did not understand where exactly he was or what was going to happen next, no surprise since much of the conversation around his suspension had been in English only. Alfaro was able to quickly join with him just by using his preferred language, and offering reassurance that she was there to hear his side of the story. Miguel went on to explain the circumstances surrounding his suspension. Another boy in his class had been making comments to him about his mother and family throughout the week, but Miguel did not respond or tell administration about what was happening. Eventually, Miguel did respond, and a fight ensued.

Miguel was very worried about his mother and felt protective of her. His older brother had been killed in the crossfire of a shooting back in the family's native Honduras, and the family then fled Honduras for the United States. Miguel was suspended on the one-year anniversary of his brother's death.

When the family arrived in the United States, all they had was each other. Miguel stated that he helped his parents in any way that he could, in order to make the transition as smooth as possible. He started at his public high school and was surprised to find he actually enjoyed it. He found that in school, he could focus on doing his work and temporarily forget about the emotional turmoil at home. His father was able to find work and Miguel felt like things were starting to come together. However, when the anniversary of his brother's death came, Miguel's mother was struck with grief. She did not leave the couch for days, completely overcome with sadness. Miguel explained that this feeling seemed to rub off on him, leading him to feel a certain heaviness at school. This was about the same time when Miguel's classmate began making comments to him. He admitted that although he did not react at first, he felt an angry fist clenching inside of him. He said that this is what ultimately led him to snap.

### **Solution-Focused Single-Session Therapy**

Alfaro asked about exceptions, times in the past Miguel had felt a similar clenching, but had been able to resolve the situation without fighting. Miguel remembered talking about his grief over his brother's death right after it happened, with trusted adults back in Honduras, and how that had helped him move on peacefully, abandoning any plans for revenge. Alfaro helped him identify trusted adults at his home school with whom he could speak about the problem, including a teacher who spoke Spanish. Miguel talked about his dream, in which his family obtained citizenship and he was able to build his own business and provide for them. Staying in school, staying out of fights, and exploring business education options were all ways he could begin to work towards his dream. By the time he left, Miguel felt he was at a 7 on a scale of 1 to 10 in terms of making his dream come true.

### **Larger System Intervention**

Miguel and his mother were concerned that his suspensions would cause their immigration status to be discovered. They both feared they would then be deported, before their application for asylum could be processed. Alfaro was able to advise the family that the school district does not report on immigration status, and that as law enforcement was not involved, the asylum process could proceed. This was a huge relief to the family. Alfaro was also able to locate allies for the family within Miguel's home school, who could communicate with the family in Spanish. Alfaro referred the family to a Spanish-speaking school district family counselor, for ongoing grief work, but also so the family would have an ally within the system.

### **Follow Up**

Now, a year later, Miguel has not been suspended again. His family continues to make progress through the asylum process. Miguel's school reports he is doing well.

### **Alfaro's Reflections**

When I first sat down with Miguel, his fear and apprehension were visible in his body language, tone of voice, and lack of eye contact. I sought to establish a safe space for him to feel comfortable sharing his story by validating his concerns and taking time to explain our program. As he told his story, I felt his fears, devotion to his family and devastation at the loss of his brother. While I have heard many different experiences of friends and family who have migrated to the United States, I had never sat across from someone so young who had experienced so much adversity. I thought about my father's journey fleeing Cuba as a young boy and how scared he must have been to leave his father behind. Reflecting on this reminded me of his strength and perseverance, as he was the first of his family to learn English and get a job to provide for the family. He began by working on cars out of a small shop within a gas station because it was walking distance from his house. As soon as he turned 15, he got a job at the information desk at a local hospital. He worked his way up different ladders within the hospital to eventually become chief financial officer.

To this day, I notice how my father exudes perseverance and expects the same from the rest of the family. He often speaks about his success in both work and life in terms of fostering connections, taking advantage of opportunities, and most importantly, putting family above everything. Considering Miguel's journey and reflecting on that of my father, I sought to utilize my role as a cultural broker by first acknowledging his difficult experiences and losses. Not only were he and his parents grieving the loss of his brother, but also all of the family that they were forced to leave behind. I stressed how remarkable it was that after all of the trying times they had been through, they had already accomplished so much in the United States. I noticed that his family shares my family value of sustainability through

family togetherness. I found that his family's strength and perseverance had helped them through their journey thus far, although it was only the beginning. Furthermore, I provided Miguel with resources that he was unaware of, in hopes to foster connections and opportunities that may be beneficial for him and his family. By highlighting Miguel's strengths and pointing him toward useful resources, I tried to offer him a sense of empowerment to continue moving forward.

## CASE EXAMPLE TWO

Our second case example highlights the need for increased advocacy. Sebastian<sup>2</sup> was suspended from school due to his use of marijuana. This is considered a more serious offense than Miguel's, and Sebastian also had multiple prior suspensions. Jarquin was his therapist, and the therapy was conducted in Spanish.

### Sebastian's Story

Sebastian was recently arrived in the United States from El Salvador, and Jarquin's family also came to this country from Central America, providing an immediate bond. Jarquin was also aware of the dangerous situation now unfolding in El Salvador, which was a great relief to Sebastian, who had not felt believed or understood previously.

Sebastian moved to the United States after the death of his brother. As his family was walking home from church one day, a group of gang members killed his older brother and threatened to kill him as well. Because of this, his family made the decision that he and his father would leave El Salvador and migrate to the United States. His family then had to sell many of their belongings so that they would have enough money to travel. Just 10 days after the family's tragedy, Sebastian and his father were forced to leave everything behind—the rest of their family, their country, and their past lives.

Sebastian and his father sought services from coyotes, guides who take people into the United States via risky alternative routes (Hernandez, 2005). They traveled with the coyotes and a group of other people seeking to migrate to the United States. This method of migration is extremely arduous as it can take weeks or months and is usually undertaken under inhumane conditions that consists of heat, exhaustion, dehydration, hunger, and other life-threatening risks (Hernandez, 2005). Moreover, migration to the United States is not guaranteed as they can be caught and sent back at any point during their journey. Despite the risks, Sebastian and his father underwent this route. When they made it to Mexico, their group was caught and detained; Sebastian and his father were incarcerated for a month. After they were released, they were given the option of staying in Mexico, but decided to continue

<sup>2</sup>Clients' names have been changed for confidentiality.

on to the United States. At that point they were forced to start over and find a new coyote and were able to successfully complete their journey to the United States. Sebastian's mother, however, remains behind in El Salvador.

Sebastian wanted to speak to his father about what he went through in El Salvador and about what things are like in the United States but was afraid to burden his grieving father. At school, Sebastian felt isolated as he could not speak much English and was being bullied by a group of students who called him names relating to his immigration status. Overwhelmed by loneliness and stress, and wanting to make friends, he accepted the offer of marijuana from a classmate in the boys' bathroom and was then caught by a school official with the cigarette on him. This student had several prior instances of the same type of thing.

### **Solution-Focused Single-Session Therapy**

Jarquín was able to help Sebastian identify a key exception: he felt better when he could speak to someone close to his own age with similar experiences. Jarquín and Sebastian brainstormed options, including moving to another school with a larger Hispanic population, seeking out English as a Second Language resources, or finding a church youth group. Sebastian also felt better when he was able to speak with his mother, and Jarquín helped him set up a regular schedule of telephone calls back to El Salvador. Just having the calls planned in advance, even though they could only be a few times a month, helped Sebastian have hope. Playing soccer, listening to music, and writing about his experiences were also helpful to Sebastian and he decided to do those more often.

### **Larger System Intervention**

Jarquín was able to convince Sebastian's home school administrators to intervene to stop the bullying and to help him find friends in the school. The school also provided English as a second language instruction and help with classes. Jarquín also arranged for Sebastian to receive free breakfast and lunch (federally subsidized for low income students), ameliorating the financial stress on his father, and making sure Sebastian had enough to eat on a regular basis, for the first time since he arrived in the United States. Jarquín talked with Sebastian about his long term dreams, and gave him information on college scholarships for undocumented students. Sebastian and his father were referred to a Spanish speaking school district family counselor, for ongoing discussion of their grief, but also so that they would have an advocate in the system.

### **An Even Larger System Intervention**

Sebastian's situation highlights the experience we are having of needing to advocate for our student clients, more than is perhaps usual for family therapists.

Sebastian spoke often about his lack of legal status, the uncertainty of his future in this country, and the very real possibility of being deported. The gang that killed his brother sent threats north to the family, making it very clear Sebastian would also be killed if he were to be returned. Sebastian's multiple marijuana offenses increased the chance of his being deported. Jarquin helped the family find legal resources, advocating for them in the community to locate free and low cost services. She also came in person to a school district hearing to explain that turning the case over to law enforcement could lead to deportation and to fatal consequences for Sebastian.

### **Follow Up**

Now, 6 months later, Sebastian has not been suspended again, nor has he been deported. He continues to be separated from his mother, and the family continues to work through the asylum process, but with resources they did not have before. More recently, Jarquin spoke with the school social worker and was told Sebastian has been attending school, has not gotten into any more trouble, and seems well adjusted.

### **Jarquin's Reflections**

I was born in Miami, Florida to Central American immigrants. Both of my parents migrated to the United States from Nicaragua around the late 80s and early 90s. Both of my parents came to the United States through the services of coyotes. My father was fortunate enough to make it during his first trip, but my mother was sent back twice and finally made it during her third trip. When my parents made it to the United States, they were completely alone—they were away from all of their family and friends and were left to navigate a new country and culture on their own. A few years after being in this country, my parents met each other through mutual friends. They then began to date and married soon after.

About a year or two after my parents married, they had me, and then had my sister a year later. Although my sister and I were born and raised in the United States, we were brought up in a different culture, one that was comprised of my parent's culture of origin. In our household we always spoke Spanish. In fact, my first language is Spanish—I did not learn English until I entered school at the age of four. Growing up, my sister and I often heard stories about our family who lived in Nicaragua, what life is like there, and my parents' experiences.

My personal and familial experiences have led me to develop a passion for working with cases such as Sebastian's. I am drawn to these cases because I relate to them; these children's stories and experiences are so similar to those of my parents. My whole life I have been immersed in the Nicaraguan culture, so I've learned about sociopolitical issues. Because of this, I am aware of the issues that have been

in Central American countries for years—and that are still there today—yet are even worse now because of the widespread control of gangs and rampant violence. I know how dangerous it is to live in Central America, and the extreme conditions that propel families to flee.

In this particular case, I feared for my client's life. Through conversations with Sebastian and knowing what it is like in those countries, I know that if Sebastian were to be sent back, he would be killed. The gangs have already killed his brother and they have threatened him. They have even asked about when he is going back, as if they are waiting for him to get back. If he gets sent back, I have no doubt he will be killed. We could provide the best possible therapy and services to Sebastian and he could still be returned and killed.

### CONCLUSION—OR NEW BEGINNING

These are the clients we see, and we see that they are in need; therefore as family therapists, we have opted to advocate for them at every level. As Jarquin notes, this provides no guarantee our clients will be safe, but as our case examples demonstrate, it does help. Here are some suggestions for other therapists willing to get involved at the larger system level:

- Donate to organizations that advocate for immigrants, including local and national immigrant rights groups, refugee resettlement agencies, and legal services providers.
- Educate yourself about current pending legislative issues affecting immigrant families and call your elected officials frequently.
- Become familiar with immigrant and refugee rights and talk about them with your clients, providing referrals where needed.
- Educate yourself about resources for immigrants and the undocumented, and compile a list that you have readily available in case a client has needs.
- Network with other professionals (lawyers, social workers, advocates, community organizers) who work with similar populations as they can provide you with resources and additional support.
- Volunteer your time to an organization which serves refugees and asylum seekers.
- Support practical, humane immigration policies that consider the needs of immigrants and asylum seekers.

We concur with the authors of “A Galveston Declaration” that “while there may be many ways of looking and seeing, some are preferable in relation to the ultimate human goal of creating a sustainable ecology for human growth and development” (Gosnell et al., 2017, p. 24).

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