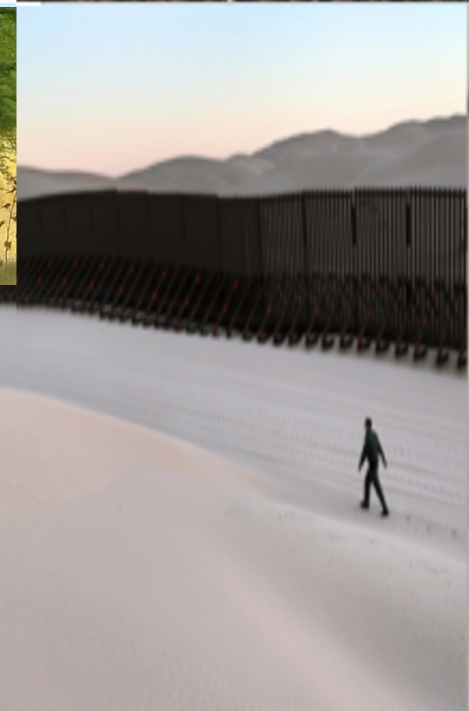


A Systemic Framework for Culturally Attuned and Socially Empowering Practices with Immigrants and Refugees


Celia Jaes Falicov, Ph.D.
Mental Health Services at Free Clinics
Family Medicine,
University of California, San Diego
Presentation at Wiesbaden
September 14, 2023

La Frontera-The Border: MEXICO-USA



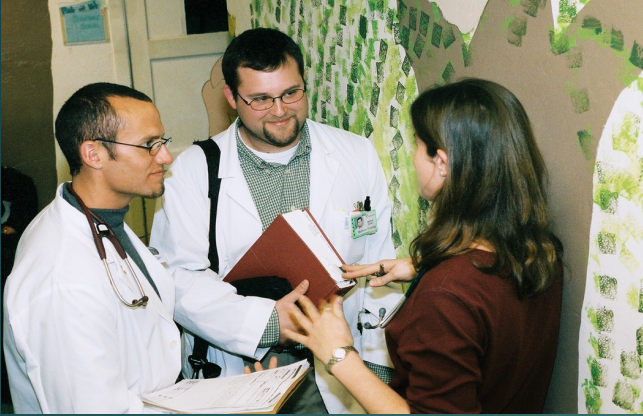
Our Location & Our Patients/Clients

- U.S.-Mexico border (San Diego/Tijuana)
- **Transnational families:** Family members in U.S. Mexico /Central America
- From very recent immigration to 25+ years
- **Undocumented**, mixed status, asylum



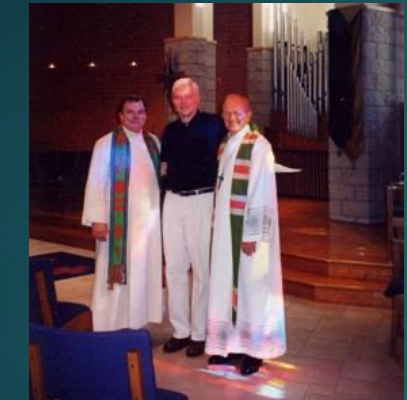
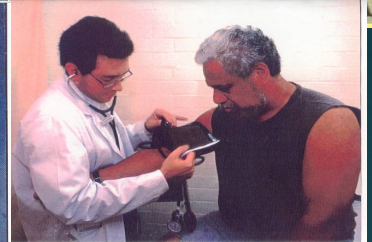
Pre-migration trauma posed psychological risks for Asian refugees and Latino immigrants. Deleterious effects of post-migration trauma were also notable for **both** sets of refugees and immigrants.

Cindy C. Sangalang et al. *Journal Immigration Minority Health* (2019)



A mental health program in student-run comprehensive free health clinics for immigrants

A partnership between the community and the Department of Family Medicine. University of California School of Medicine



Integrated health Services with Immigrant/Refugee families require attention to:

CULTURE

- TRADITIONAL HEALING RELIGION--FAITH, PRAYING
- THEORIES OF ILLNESS/CURE

SOCIOPOLITICAL

- INEQUALITY STRESSORS::
- Gender, Class, Race, Immigrant Status, Language, Housing, Employment, Health Access

FAMILY & COMMUNITY

SEPARATIONS AND REUNIFICATIONS; LOSS OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

Thinking culturally

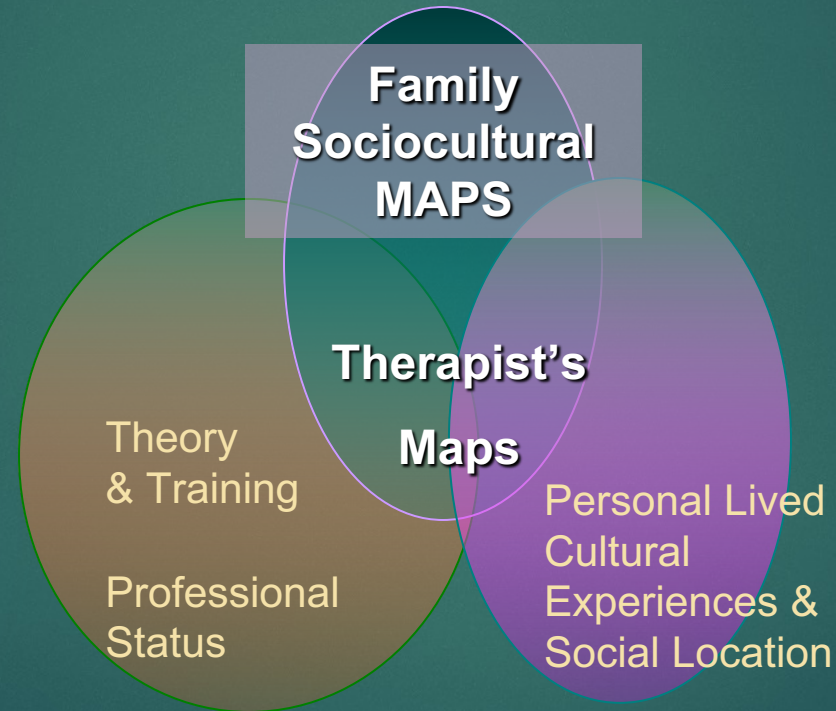
Clients are the experts about how their cultures of origin affect their values or beliefs---"Our Patients are our teachers"

Social, gender, racial and economic inequalities must be sociocultural considerations

The therapist must recognize having non-neutral cultural views and a powerful sociopolitical position

(Falicov, 1995, 1998, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2019)

The Practice Encounter is Culturally Diverse and Socio politically Unequal

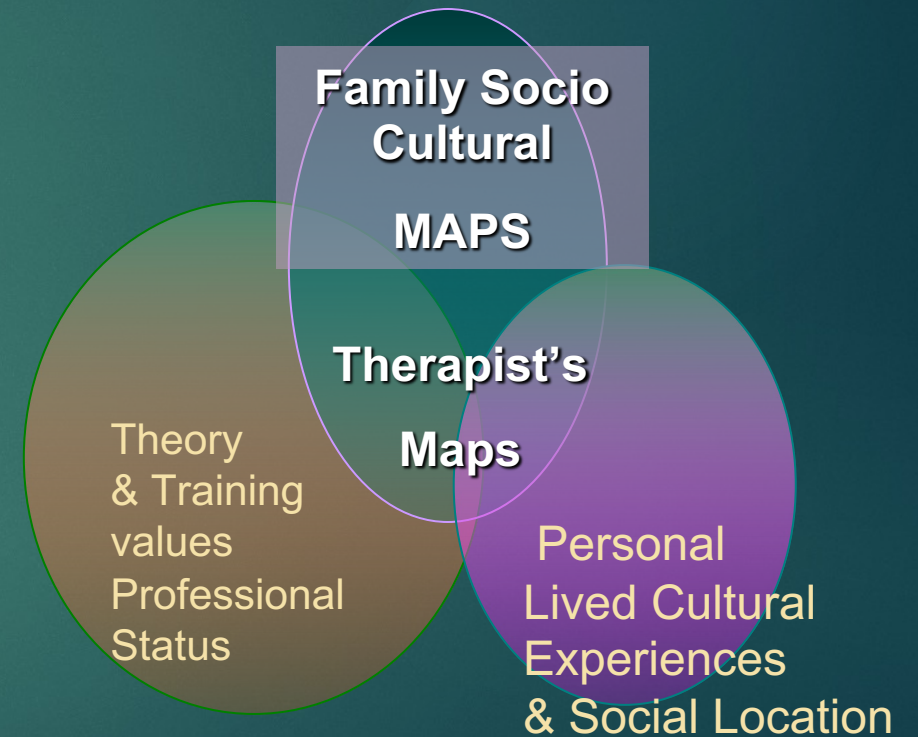


CULTURAL HUMILITY

How do we meet the challenge of

A. CLIENTS as THEIR OWN CULTURAL EXPERTS

B. Becoming SELF-REFLEXIVE about our Own Sociocultural Locations



M
E
C
A

MULTIDIMENSIONAL:

Multiple Identities

ECOLOGICAL

Sociopolitical
Locations/contexts

COMPARATIVE

Uses same
dimensions to
compare clients
and practitioners

APPROACH

A framework to
integrate culture
and context in
training & practice

Not a school of
therapy

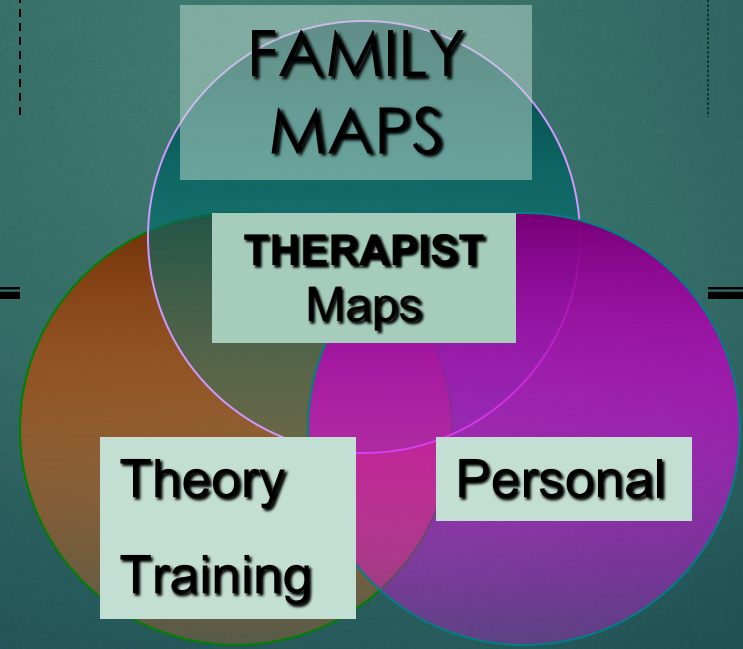
**ECOLOGICAL
CONTEXT (EC)**

**The 4 MECA
Relational
DOMAINS of
Difference**

**FAMILY
LIFE
CYCLE (FLC)**

**MIGRATION (M)
/DISLOCATION**

**FAMILY
ORGANIZATION
(FO)**



**Theory
Training**

Personal

**ECOLOGICAL
CONTEXT**

- Community/
Neighborhood
 - Work
 - School
 - Religion
- MIGRATION/
ACCULTURATION**

- Separations &
Reunifications
- Trauma/
Undocumented
- Losses and
Gains
- Cultural
Identities

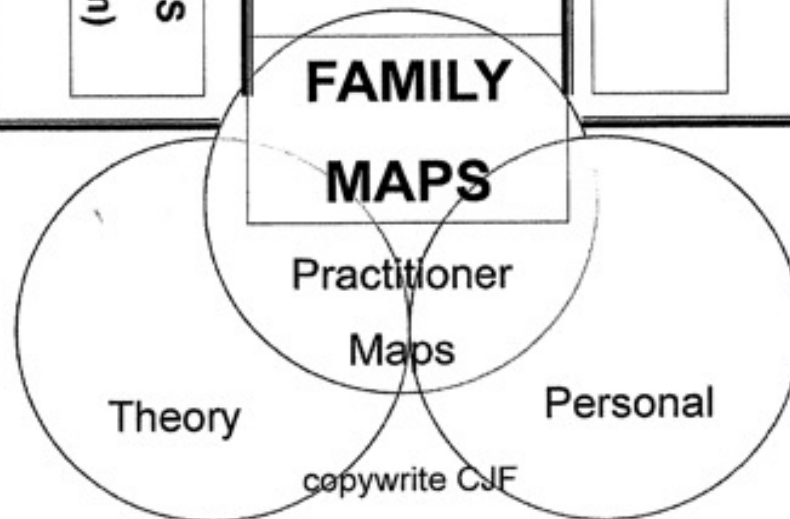
POWER DIFFERENCES
(discrimination, racism)

**FAMILY
LIFE CYCLE**

- Ideals
- Meanings
- Timings
- Transitions

**FAMILY
ORGANIZATION**

- Nuclear/
Extended
Family
- Connectedness
- Hierarchies
- Communication
Styles



Falicov, 1995



CLINICAL PRACTICE APPLICATIONS

The Therapy Office as Cultural Context

- ▶ A WORLD MAP can help parents and children talk about where they were born, where they lived, where they are now, where are they going next—
- ▶ a Geographic Genogram



A name is a Sociocultural Narrative:

First and last names are strong markers of identity—

Doors to a cultural family history and
to a sociopolitical location—



Jenny Erpenbeck

Her novel

“Go, Went, Gone”

A professor of classics becomes interested in a group of African refugees sitting in Alexander Platz in Berlin undergoing a silent hunger strike.

He uses names like Tristan, Hermes or Apollo to identify them. These are names that are familiar to him- he is finding their real names difficult

Sharing Origins and Names:

Celia....:I was born and raised in Argentina & migrated to U.S. as an adult. What I know about my name is that it's a Spanish translation of my great grandmother's name, which was Tsia or Cipra in Romanian.

Then I ask:

“Is it okay for each one of you to tell me where you were born?...and what you know about YOUR NAME”?

A more personal encounter--

Introduces culture as a part of all of us.

I explore the 4 MECA domains after hearing

- ▶ The concerns that clients have
- ▶ Ask about the sources of stress and strength they perceive in their lives
- ▶ THEN we use MECA to explore culture and context issues (and how these may relate to the presenting complaint)

Using MECA-MAPS

Clients are the meaning experts in these domains:

Ecological Context

CLIENT/S

Family Life Cycle

CLIENT/S

TEMPLATE for a
MECA MAP

Migration/Uprootings

CLIENT/S

Family Organization

CLIENT/S

ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT

- Social Supports past/present
- Neighborhood safety
- Work/Income/Schools
- Faith community
- Health Care/Traditional care

MIGRATION/DISLOCATIONS

- Relational Stress--- Separations & Reunifications-
- Motivation for Migration
- Pre, During & Post Trauma
- Language proficiency
- Systemic Violence
- Cultural Identities

The 4 MECA DOMAINS of INQUIRY/ Conversation Tools

**SOCIOPOLITICAL
INEQUALITY (class, gender,
race, ethnicity, religion)
racism, sexism, discrimination)**

**CULTURAL DIVERSITY
(values, world views, beliefs)**

FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

- Age/Developmental tasks
- Meanings- Stages & Transitions
- Child-rearing
- Beliefs about Illness & Cures- Rituals-Religion/Spirituality, Magic beliefs

FAMILY ORGANIZATION

- Nuclear/ Extended Family/ Siblings
- Individualism/Collectivism: Intergenerational solidarity
- Connectedness-- Hierarchies- gender/generation
- Communication Styles

FAMILY

MAPS

THERAPIST

MAPS

Theory

Personal

MECA INTAKE SHEET

MIGRATION/when, how, why .
Adjustment, language immigration
status, trauma, separations

ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT/Living
conditions, SES, Education, Work,
Institutions/Discrimination/Communi-
ty/Agency Supports

FAMILY ORGANIZATION

Nuclear/Extended; Hierarchies,
Gender roles connectedness,
communication styles

FAMILY LIFE CYCLE Norms,
Transitions, values. Generational
differences

Beliefs about Illness/cure;

Options for developing a MECA map with clients


You fill out the MECA Map during session

Or in Notes after the family, couple or individual session

As information gathering, “getting to know you”

With family collaboration (children participate) In a large paper, or four large papers on a wall (for each domain)

or in blackboard, or by sharing the whiteboard in a zoom call



Practitioners' reflexivity or cultural humility
can be facilitated by using the same 4
MECA domains ---

The C in MECA stands for **COMPARISON**

Therapist practicing Reflexivity: finding cultural resonances or dissonances with family members

Ecological Context

CLIENT/S

THERAPIST

Family Life Cycle

CLIENT/S

THERAPIST

MECA MAP for THERAPIST SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Migration/Acculturation

CLIENT/S

THERAPIST

Family Organization

CLIENT/S

THERAPIST

ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT

- underemployment
- Father felt exploited by American employers

Therapist

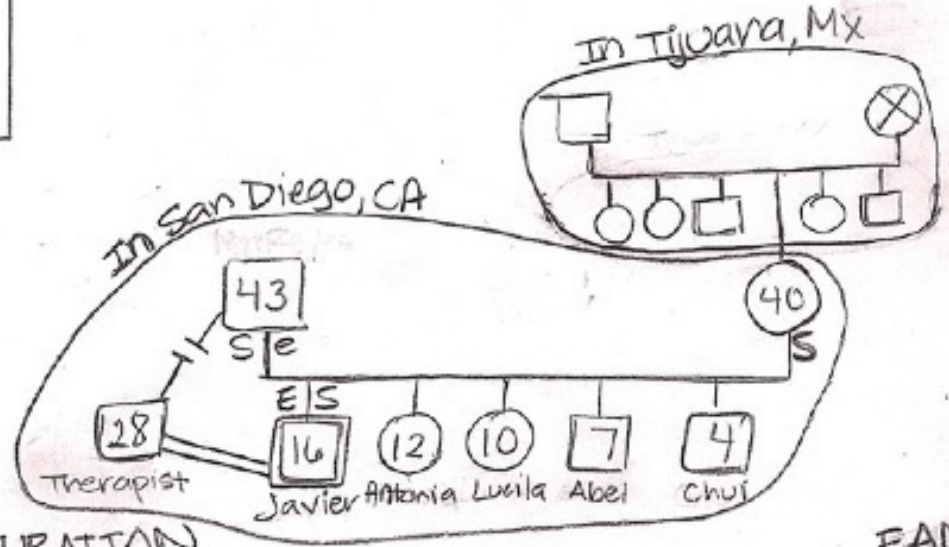
- Middle-class white
- Educated

FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

- 16 year old son wants to work as a man
- Son was truant from school

Therapist

- Identifies with Javier's wish for autonomy



MIGRATION/ACCULTURATION

- From Tijuana to San Diego 9 years ago
- Economic motive
- Pride in ethnic identity

Therapist

- His father was an immigrant from Portugal, mother was white American

FAMILY ORGANIZATION

- Paternal authority challenged
- Father - son conflict
- Son is culture-language broker
- Mother is mediator

Therapist

- No empathy for father, sees him as authoritarian and paternalistic toward wife

SUPERVISION SESSION



There is a lot of Cultural and Sociopolitical Information in each MECA domain—

Obtained through research-based and practice-based information

MECA: MIGRATION, Uprootings, Dislocations, Acculturation

**Family
Fragmentation**
(incarceration,
detention, deportation)

Losses
(language; home)
Gains
(escape violence)

**Traumatic
experiences**
pre, during and post
migration

**Family
Separations
and
Reunifications**

**Migration-related
Relational
stresses**

**Immigrant Cultural
Adaptation**
Integration, isolation,
assimilation

Separation is at the core of migration

If we reduce migration to one word: it is **SEPARATION** (from country, language, community, family).

A form of psychological homelessness intensified by separations in the primary family



Separations and Reunifications

A critical factor in immigrant and refugee mental health



Transnational Families in a Globalized Context

Immigrants and refugees today can keep up economic, cultural, and emotional ties with their families through international communication technologies (ICT)

Living with a Broken Heart or Living with Two Hearts



CONNECTEDNESS



LOSSES AND
SOUL ACHE

Communication: a major source of emotional and mental well-being for immigrants and refugees

“Doing Family”

i.e. connecting with family via ICT :

Telephone cards and Cell phones

Emails

Remittances

WhatsApp, texts, voice & video chats

Watching the same TV series

ICT:

Information
Communication
Technologies

Early adoption by
immigrants

*(Portes et al 1999;
Baldazar, 2007)*

ICT and Immigrant Subjectivities: can heighten emotional strain or alleviate it

Truth Telling or Protective Lies to hide adversities

A Blessing

(decreases anxiety, maintains relationships)

A Burden

(time obligation, time differences, requests for money, crisis help from back home or it may be just emotionally difficult)

TRANSNATIONAL THERAPIES

RELATIONAL PRACTICES OF SEPARATION

RELATIONAL PRACTICES OF REUNIFICATION



Relational Practices during Separation

On Loving at Long-Distance

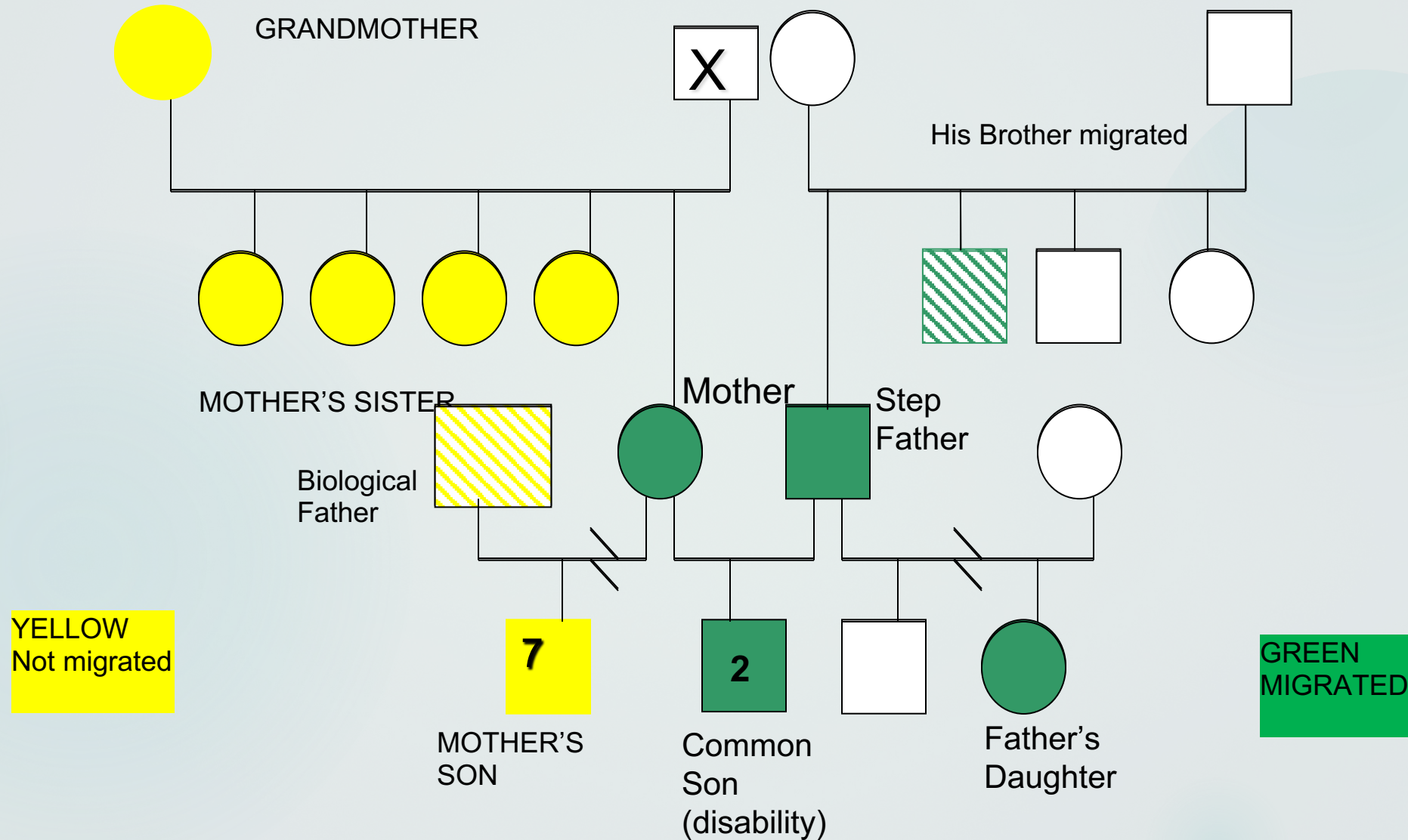



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A family undergoing Separation

Venezuelan Family





What would you do as a clinician?
Client is desperate to connect but
refuses to connect with her child
because it is too painful.

The challenge of the “Absent Presence”
(K. Gergen, 2002)

Dilemma for Clinicians

Should this mother's enduring in silence and avoiding communication be accepted?

Or should I insist on a normative model of the benefits of connection to maintain attachment bonds?

Recognizing my professional and personal biases on this matter?

Preliminary Questions to suggest Transnational Communication

- ▶ How often do you communicate and with which family members?
- ▶ Through what avenues?
- ▶ What do you talk about?
- ▶ How do you feel about these conversations?
- ▶ Who would you want to tell or consult about what is happening to you right now?

Transnational Relational Communication

Intervention: Explore suggesting
a **ritual**** of connection,
*** (Madinau & Miller, 2011)*

with mother's sister-
one of the child's aunts
(increase the density of the family system)

Client's choice: her sister talk to her child
directly? or her sister ask grandmother about
the child's well-being?

Relationally Sensitive Practices for Separations

- Inquire about those who stayed
- Maintain Connections (explore approval of migration)
- Promote Positive Transnational Relationships (with child, and caretaker)
- Increase Density of Family System (any family member)
- Use ICT to accomplish those goals

(Artico, 2005; Dreby, 2008; Falicov, 2007,2014), 2019)



Relational Practices during Reunification

*Re-connecting and Repairing Family
Bonds*



A family undergoing Reunification

Mexican family reunited with mother in San Diego after four years of separation

- ▶ Maria, mother, 31
- ▶ Carmen, grandmother, 58
- ▶ **Jesús** , 10 (a.k.a. Tommy)
- ▶ Carolina, 8

Jesús (Tommy) Diagnosed by the teacher and school counselor as ADHD-disobedient, defiant, does not finish homework

A Mexican immigrant Family A. MECA MAP

Ecological Context

WORK Mo & GM alternate shifts in hotel laundry
HOUSING: One bedroom apt.
NEIGHBORHOOD: Working class
COMMUNITY No support.
SCHOOL boy diagnosed as hyperactive, individual counseling and medication.

Migration

SEPARATION Children (7 & 5) 4 years from Mother. Minimal contact
REUNIFICATION this year
MOTIVATION: Escape gang violence, husband involvement. IPV?
ADAPTATION GM reunited but not adapting to changes in language-losses separation from sons in Mexico.

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Family Life Cycle

AGE/DEVELOPMENT Children 10 & 8-
Controlling Mother going out—
Distrust & fear for her-
CHILD REARING Mother wants to use physical discipline w boy. Grandmother disagrees & sides with boy.
RELIGIOUS/ MAGIC BELIEFS GM worries about a curse (on women) from the past (porosity)

Family Organization

NUCLEAR/EXTENDED Single mother, 3 generation arrangement.
HIERARCHIES Traditional Gender and Generation. Solidarity.
Lack of Parental Role Clarity

Mexican Family A. and Therapist MECA Map Comparison

Ecological Context

WORK M & GM alternate shifts in hotel laundry.

HOUSING: One bedroom apartment.

NEIGHBORHOOD: Working class

COMMUNITY No support.

SCHOOL diagnosed boy as hyperactive and unruly, individual counseling and meds.

**Understands social isolation
class/education/language
differences in family and school,**

THERAPIST

Migration

SEPARATION 4 years from Mother. Minimal contact

REUNIFICATION this year

MOTIVATION Escape violence
GM caretaker also reunited
not adapting to changes in language many losses-
separation from sons

**Migrated young to the U.S.
with husband . New culture
and language.**

FAMILY and
THERAPIST
COMPARISON

Family Life Cycle

Children 10 & 8 power with GM.
Control, distrust and fear for
Mother wants to discipline son
GM disagrees and sides with
boy. GM worries about a curse

**Professional & personal
experience with immigration.
Bilingual/bicultural**

THERAPIST

Family Organization

Single mother, 3 generation family
Traditional gender and
generation hierarchies.
Lack of Parental Role Clarity and
Conflict

**Single mother with young
children by widowhood.
Collectivistic values/ Moved
from traditional gender and
generation roles to modernity**

Relationally Sensitive Practices at Reunification

- Meaning making out of the Separation, why and how
- A Strength based Family Story
- Restore Parental Role Clarity
- Explore Trauma (*pre-, during or post-migration*)
- Acknowledge Fears of future separation
- Increase Community support

Relationally Sensitive Techniques for Reunifications



- “Catching-Up Life Narrative”: a shared story (written as a book, theatre play or a video)
- Narrative “Certificate of Legitimization” of the mother or father’s right to parent

Certificate of Legitimization

“In San Diego, the 27th of July of in the presence of Dr F and Dr B (or other elders) and Mrs. Carmen A. the grandmother, **we are gathered to recognize the maternal rights and responsibilities of Maria A. being the mother of Tommy, age 10 and Carolina, age 8,** having always wanted to be close to her children, love them, help them grow up, protect them from dangers, comfort them when in pain; correct their mistakes and teach them to take care of themselves and others; and **having up to now heroically fulfilled her obligations at long distance and not on everyday functions, because stressful social circumstances beyond her control prevented her to do so.**

We also hereby **recognize and honor the immense value of the care and, concern provided by Carmen, the grandmother,** to her daughter and her grandchildren, and the advice that she will continue to provide to ensure her daughter’s success in this fundamental endeavor.”

▶ Witnesses Signatures


Certificate of legitimization functions

- ▶ - a reference to the period of parental absence as socio-politically forced. Not implying absence of love
- ▶ -an “as-if” legal aspect that legitimizes the presence of separated members in the reunified family
- ▶ -clarifies rights & responsibilities that have become confused during separation



A confusing picture

The interaction between migration family stress, trauma and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactive disorder)



He introduces himself
“I am Tommy”
but his mother tells him with irritation:
“Tu nombre es Jesús!”

Therapist : “Is your name Jesús? But you prefer Tommy? May I ask you why?”

Tommy: “Because that (Jesús) is a DUMB name”

The most common insult and prejudice is to call Mexicans “dumb Mex”

MECA Ecological Context: SCHOOLS



What is the hardest thing about being an immigrant or refugee child?

The most common answer:

The prejudice, discrimination and racism of teachers and other students

(Suarez Orozco et al. 2012)

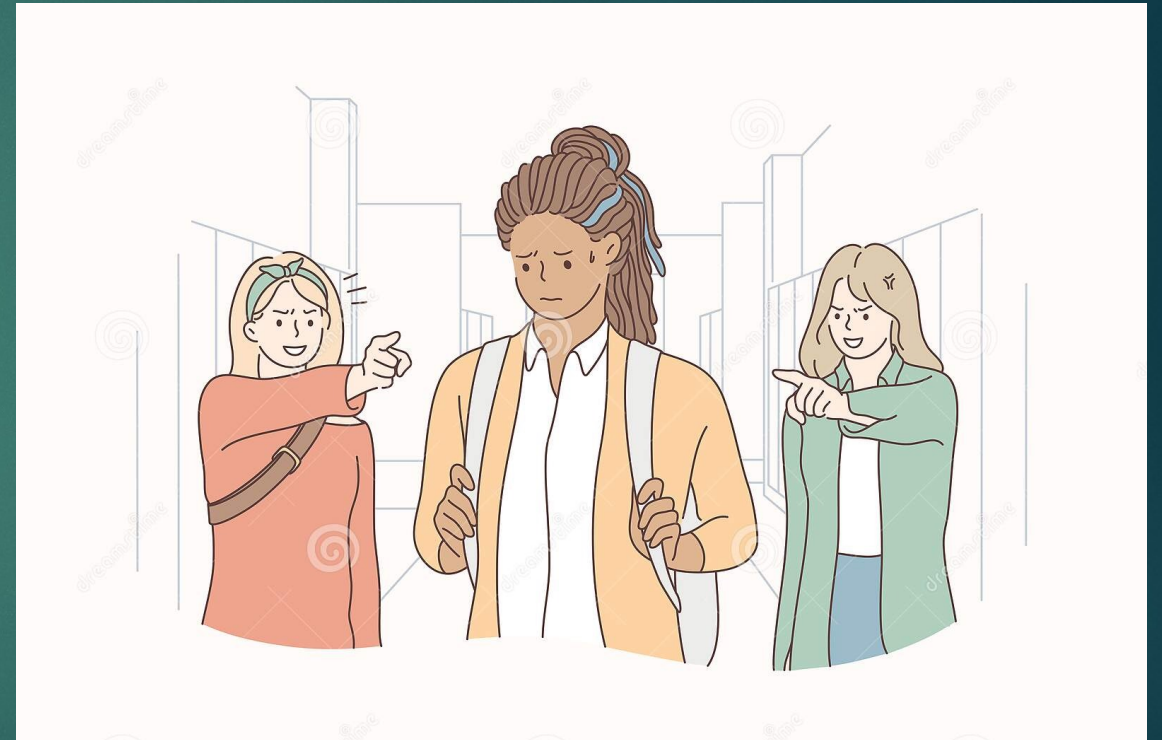
Jesús (a.k.a Tommy) according to his teacher when I interviewed her

- ✓ Does not accept my authority
- ✓ Does not finish homework
- ✓ Makes “bad decisions”, has “poor judgment” (“like speaking in Spanish to other kids when he knows how to speak English”)
- ✓ I have told him he is “too bossy”
- ✓ “ If he is not stopped, he could become a typical Mexican macho” (she tells me)

(she never inquired about family separation or about child recent migration)

The construct of Social Mirroring

If the image that peers and teachers have of oneself is negative or contemptuous, the student self-esteem suffers, feeling devaluated



(Suarez-Orozco, 2001, 2008, 2016)

Reactions to Negative Social Mirroring

Resigned Hopeless, Self-Critical, Insecure	Depressed	Resistant Hopeless Overly Confident	Violent
<u>Behavior</u> <i>Self-Destructive</i>	<i>Internalizing</i>	<u>Behavior</u> <i>Aggressive</i>	<i>Externalizing</i>

TEACHERS NEED TRAINING IN
SOCIOCULTURAL ATTUNEMENT

MECA for TRAINING SCHOOL TEACHERS

Cynthia Reyes, Ph.D. Professor
of Education

*Practicing "Unsettled Listening"
to the trauma migration
Narratives of young adolescent
refugees.*

Middle School Journal, 2019

Transformations: Continuity and Change

Migration &
Acculturation

- As a developmental process
- As ambiguous losses and gains
- Trauma, pre-, during, post-migration
- Type of migration (e.g., undocumented)
- Composition of migration (e.g., father alone)
- Lack of transitional ritual
- Transnationalism & techniques of communication
- Psychological or virtual family

Ecological Context

- Linguistic and cultural dissonance
- Poverty
- Host country anti-immigration reception
- Racism and double consciousness
- Community insertions
- Isolation
- Neighborhood dangers (drugs, violence, gangs)
- Contextual protections (language, social network)

Family Organization

- Relational stresses
- Generational Tensions
- Culture, ecological fears, and separation anxiety
- Separations and reunifications
- Long-distance connections

Family Life Cycle

- Socially-constructed: cultural ideals, meanings, timings vary with age, stage, gender
- Rites and rituals
- Pileup of stressful transitions

Social Justice

Classroom Response: Listening that transforms and Building Critical Awareness of the Outside World

Cultural Diversity

Other MECA applications

- ▶ Professional training-- health, mental health and social services
- ▶ School teachers' training
- ▶ Intercultural couples---often between an immigrant and a national
- ▶ Premarital counseling/pastoral for interfaith couples
- ▶ Interpreters

The Limits of Empathy in situations of Alterity (otherness)

(Kirmayer, 2008)

Mattering

(Einfühlsam, Wichtig, Auchmachen , eiternd?)

After participating in MECA, clients report feeling that they matter to us
FEELING VALUED as a relational stance

(Isaac Prilleltensky, 2019, Madsen, Root and Jorring, 2021))



Thank you so much for listening

for Q&A, please come back to this room at 3pm today. I look forward to talking with you

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