

INTERNATIONAL ISSUES IN COUPLES AND FAMILY THERAPY

John K. Miller, Ph.D.
Nova Southeastern University
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Dra. Margarita Tarragona
Psicología Positiva
Mexico City

“May you live in interesting times”

Confucius, 350 BC

Introduction

In John Miller’s practice, he travels back and forth between the United States, China, and Cambodia, taking doctoral students with him and participating in training activities in all 3 countries (Miller & Fang, in press). In Margarita Tarragona’s practice, she participates in international family therapy in a different way: she participates in research at the Universidad Iberoamericana having to do with Mexican migrants in the US and their family members in Mexico. In her therapy practice, she often sees families in which one member is temporarily, or maybe permanently, living in a different country. Both these experiences speak to our shrinking world, in which we are all becoming members of one global community.

Gonzalo Bacigalupe (2011) discusses how information communication technologies (ICT’s) are a fundamental feature of life today, and have permanently altered the connectedness of international communities. Cheap and accessible means of communication, such as cellular phones, e-mail, Skype and social media websites allow people to stay in contact with the families they left behind and maintain those relationships. Such technologies also increase the interest in

collaboration worldwide, and the ability to collaborate on training and psychotherapy across distances.

Given our increasing interconnectedness, “cultural competence” has become the new catch-word and skill set to learn in the practice of couples and family therapy, or any kind of therapy for that matter. Cultural competence in this sense demands that we always consider the culture when we intervene with individuals and families. How will our interventions fit with the culture when we intervene with individuals and families. How will our interventions fit with the culture? How will we honor and recognize as we address clients from cultures that are different from our own? And, how can our knowledge of cultures different from our own enhance and better the work we do with clients from our cultures?

In many situations we have benefitted from collaborative efforts to develop treatments for the families we work with. At times this has involved importing ways of doing and thinking from other countries. This has advantages to both as we do not have a need to “reinvent the wheel” each time for each culture. There is some transferable knowledge and we can build upon our mistakes and discoveries. Yet as we progress it becomes clear that we need to make sure this interaction is a two-way street, going both ways. The world will soon enjoy new treatments and therapists that have their roots in their country of origin. Each culture has its own unique perspective and valuable contribution to global understanding in psychotherapy.

It is important to consider also the ongoing blending of cultures. In this regard, we (especially Tarragona) have found the work of Celia Falicov particularly useful. Falicov talks about “transnational families” when she refers to the economic new Latino, Afro-Caribbean and Asian immigrants that have arrived to the US since 1965 (Falicov, 2007).¹ Their experience is

¹ Even though Falicov talks primarily about immigrants to the US, we believe that most of her ideas are applicable to any migration in the world today.

different from the previous generations of European immigrants, because of globalization.

Earlier immigrants often practically severed their contact with their countries of origin and their loved ones there; while immigrants today are able to keep their ties with their families, thanks to modern communication technologies. These active family relationships that take over geographical distance are complex and they may constitute a “virtual family” that keeps a sense of identity even if they do not have the “redundancy” of every day interactions that generally constitutes the repetitive patterns of family interactions. Falicov (2007) puts it beautifully when she says that in the past, immigrants lived with a broken heart, while today they live with two hearts.

Falicov encourages therapists who work with transnational families to include issues of cultural diversity in their conversations, to honor cultural differences, to have curiosity and respect, question normative theories and find cultural solutions. She also takes a social justice approach in therapy, in which clients may resist oppression in relationships and cultural identities and therapists support clients’ accountability and empowerment.(2007).

This is echoed in the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró, the social psychologist and scholar who studied in the US and devoted much of his work to helping the people of Central America. Dr. Baro has been a particular inspiration to Dr. Miller. Dr. Baró insisted that psychology should be developed in relation to the contextual social and historical aspirations and needs of the people it addressed (Aron & Corne, 1996). He advocated that psychology students should view human behavior in the particular contexts where it happened. In his writings and lectures he rejected the comfortable yet false idea of impartial psychology. Instead, our psychology is greatly influenced by our biases and values, and likewise what we call “normal” and “abnormal” has a great impact on society. As we continue to engage in a more global practice of couples and

family therapy prejudice and bias, or at times simply misunderstandings, are likely to occur. It is the challenge of this next generation to continue to address these issues in a way that promotes healing change, raising awareness and promoting mutual understanding.

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