

Virtualizing Intimacy: Information Communication Technologies and Transnational Families in Therapy

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Information communication technologies (ICTs) are a ubiquitous feature of immigrant family life. Affordable, widely accessible, and highly adaptable ICTs have transformed the immigrant experience into a transnational process with family networks redesigned but not lost. Being a transnational family is not a new phenomenon. Transnationalism, however, has historically been reserved for the wealthier professional and political immigrant class who were able to freely travel and use expensive forms of communication before the emergence of accessible technologies. This paper systematically reviews the research literature to investigate the potential impact of ICTs on the lives of transnational families and how these families utilize them. The wide penetration of ICTs also puts into question some of the ways in which scholars have conceptualized the immigrant experience. The appropriate use of technology in family therapy should strengthen culturally competent and equity-based approaches to address the needs of these families. A family therapy with a transnational family illuminates some of the potential that these technologies introduce in the practice of relational clinicians.

Keywords: Immigration; Families; Transnational; Information Communication Technologies

Fam Proc 50:12–26, 2011

An increasing number of recent immigrants maintain intense connections with their countries and extended families. (Falicov, 2007, p. 157)

In her seminal *Family Process* article, Celia Falicov draws on migration studies to formulate an ecosystemic and culturally affirmative therapeutic framework for use

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with immigrant families. Falicov briefly addresses the impact of information communication technologies (ICTs) in shaping immigrant family communications notwithstanding geographical and time barriers. However, this is not at the core of her thesis and requires further consideration. Owing to the advances and wide availability of ICTs in the last decade, these technologies have not only influenced families' relations but have changed families' identities as well. For instance, families make core life cycle as well as mundane decisions with members located in different countries.

In the recent past, only a minority of immigrant families were able to maintain continuous exchanges and communication with their relatives abroad. Unlike political refugees or economic immigrants, upper-level executives, diplomats, and other wealthy families could afford the cost of frequent travel as well as expensive phone calls. The mainstreaming of ICTs, which are tools available to most immigrants, has increasingly transformed these families into transnational entities that maintain uninterrupted social ties across national borders. Like Falicov and others in family therapy (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002; McGoldrick & Hardy, 2008), we concur with the principle that including community and sociopolitical contexts is essential to a sound ecosystemic assessment and intervention. Thus, an equity-based and ecosystemic framework informs our analysis of the impact of technologies on immigrant families. We propose that ICTs involve deep changes in immigrants' lives. Consequently, family psychology and family therapy concepts that have been used to characterize the psychological and relational make up of the immigrant experience may require revision in these new circumstances.

RECONCEPTUALIZING IMMIGRATION

Scholars within various fields are calling for a reconceptualization of immigration and acculturation constructs (Chirkov, 2009; Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Rudmin, 2009; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Acculturation is a complex and multidimensional process that characterizes how immigrants adopt or reject values, practices, and identifications of their home and host countries. In prioritizing the concept of acculturation to comprehend the immigrant experience, the assimilation process has often been taken for granted as the primary way to integrate into the host country. Further, assimilation has been viewed as the epitome of healthy psychological adaptation and requires that immigrants adjust unilaterally to the host society. As a consequence, researchers have attended more to the process of assimilation and its connection with healthy adaptation than other forms of acculturation (Chun, Organista, & Marin, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2010). In addition, immigration scholars have argued that upward economic mobility among immigrants *requires* assimilation (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Defining and measuring acculturation is, however, a contested subject (Thomson & Hoffman-Goetz, 2009).

Immigration must be examined from a transnational perspective that considers how persistent ties to homeland countries and social networks impact immigrants' experiences (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994; Bhatia & Ram, 2009). Because migrating to a new location and maintaining transnational ties are not mutually exclusive, scholars need to consider simultaneity or "... living lives that incorporate daily activities, routines, and institutions located both in a destination country and transnationally ..." (Levitt & Schiller, 2004, p. 2). Much of the previous research has emphasized social and economic outcomes, and very little attention has been paid to

mental or psychological health as a function of transnational ties despite their importance for the psychological well-being, social support, and ethnic identity of immigrants (Mahalingam, 2006; Murphy & Mahalingam, 2004).

Migration scholars widely embrace the “transnational optic to study first-generation immigrants” (Levitt, 2009, p. 1225). For example, Mexican immigrants in the United States, for whom being transnational has been typical, must consider ways to maintain communication between partners, renegotiate tasks, and decide which members will migrate. When viewed from a transnational perspective, migrant families can be seen as a “socioeconomic strategic unit” for whom familial connections are “worked and reworked over time and space” (Levitt & Schiller, 2004, p. 1015). As research has expanded into the lives of many other groups of immigrants, similar insights are corroborated. Also, transnational socialization of both migrant and nonmigrant children can occur even across geographical boundaries (Schwartz et al., 2010).

ICTS

ICTs allow families to connect virtually in lieu of geographical proximity. They include both hardware and software platforms that are highly adaptable and interoperable. ICT hardware includes phone technologies, computers, and highly affordable (Hamel, 2009), user-friendly, Internet-based tools, such as games consoles and digital cameras with geographical location capabilities. Contemporary ICTs have mainstreamed video chat, and international phone cards have made the cost and quality of local and international calls almost indistinguishable. In addition to this hardware, ICTs include social software or popular social media tools, such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *LinkedIn*, *U-Tube*, and *Flickr*. Web conferencing and audio communication tools like *Skype* are also widely utilized. Secondary data analysis, surveys, and qualitative studies unequivocally show increasing reliance on the Internet as a source of a wide array of information, such as health care information (Horgan & Sweeney, 2010) and peer-to-peer support, including support for mental health issues (Griffiths, Calear, Banfield, & Tam, 2009).

ICT utilization among immigrants is increasing at rates comparable to the age group with highest Internet connectivity among the general population (Ros, 2010). Despite the lack of resources among most economic immigrants, they become early adopters of ICTs. An explanation for this phenomenon is that ICTs enable the immigration process (Hamel, 2009). Adoption of cell phone technologies has been so rapid and extensive that it has overcome access barriers to other technologies and media including radio, television, newspapers, and traditional phone landlines.

Cell phone adoption has been so rapid that not having a cell phone has become a rarity rather than a luxury in only a few years, Horst and Miller (2006) found in their ethnographic study of cell phone use in Jamaica. The rapid adoption of this technology in Jamaica fulfilled a deep cultural need for maintaining and solidifying community bonds among family members, sustaining the social network, and increasing social capital. In different societies, the popularity of features is connected to the cultural needs that precede the technology. For instance, in communities where decisions are primarily made in a collective fashion, the availability of cell phones would enable individuals to make decisions using their collective value systems. Similarly, it is possible to hypothesize that the technologies fill a relational, emotional, and social void for families who have more than one country as their home.

ICTs: A NEW FAMILY MEMBER

Immigrant families embrace ICTs as a way of overcoming geographical distance and national boundaries, strengthening their connection, identity, and survival. The clinical and public tone of conversations about ICTs, however, is often alarmist and negative rather than focused on its potential to strengthen family connections. The dominant conception of family that is circumscribed to an upper middle class ideal, and not originated in the complex intersection of race, class, and gender struggles, may inform this narrative of fear surrounding emerging technologies. Social technologies are perceived as intrusions to the “normalcy,” or what is considered healthy, of the nuclear family. As a result, the emergent technologies are construed as a threat or the cause of pathology. In discussing the role of ICTs among transnational families, it is necessary to rethink those ideas. There may be lessons for all families and clinicians to learn from how these technologies aid transnational families in maintaining connection and negotiating the barriers posed by distance and time.

ICTs are integrated into the family process and dynamics. In that process, the family is confronted with pragmatic decisions about how to manage the use and make sense of social discourses about this new member. Parents are responsible for managing cell phone and Internet usage, but this responsibility may be hindered by the fact that children and adolescents often adopt ICTs faster and use them more frequently than their parents (Delmonico & Griffin, 2008). Occasions in which parents can manage ICT use are complex. For example, parents may provide their middle school children a cell phone with text-messaging capabilities so they can communicate their whereabouts via texting and not a phone call. However, the parents may doubt the safety of this form of communication after hearing news reports that some students use texting to bully. The parents may have initially been satisfied with the texting feature as a means to learn their children’s location and have a good sense of how their children are behaving at school. However, the doubts elicited by the media may foster a potential conflict that alienates their children, creates distrust, and may in turn reduce the ability to make decisions in collaboration. According to Lenhart and Madden (2005), about 65% of teenagers think that they engage in activities that they would not want their parents to know about.

The scant research and clinical literature on ICTs, has for the most part studied their potential negative impact on individual and family functioning. Internet use has been associated with various problematic behaviors (Byun et al., 2009; Morrison & Gore, 2010; Park, Kim, & Cho, 2008; Pies, 2009; Tao et al., 2010). Cybersex addictions, infidelity through online relations, and adolescent Internet use for sexual exploration have also been the subject of the clinical literature (Delmonico & Griffin, 2008; Goldberg, Peterson, Rosen, & Sara, 2008; Gonyea, 2004; Hertlein, 2008; Hertlein & Webster, 2008; Landau, Garrett, & Webb, 2008; Schneider, 2003; Whitty & Quigley, 2008). Literature addressing children’s safety has been prolific (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2010; Delmonico & Griffin, 2008; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Moreno, Parks, Zimmerman, Brito, & Christakis, 2009; Oravec, 2000; Palfrey, Boyd, & Sacco, 2010; Rosenblatt & Li, 2010; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005). Clinical and media concerns about the impact of cell phones on family time have also found a niche in the literature (Lanigan, 2009; Mesch, 2006). Findings from this research, however, are often contradictory, and some suggest a positive and others a negative effect on family time.

In his writing on the relationship between technology and relational issues among upper middle class families, Fraenkel (2001a, 2001b) acknowledges the benefits of ICTs within families, such as connecting remote family members. He primarily focuses, however, on ways that technology can cause temporal issues that families might introduce in therapy. These issues can include parents who spend excessive amounts of time telecommuting or members arguing over the amount of time each individual spends on shared electronic devices (Fraenkel, 2001b). Further, technology can complicate how families view time by creating the false impression that these devices, coupled with effective time management, can generate infinite amounts of time. This misconception of “infinite possibility” (Fraenkel, 2001a, p. 26) leads to overscheduling activities, less time to decompress, and higher levels of stress that impact family relations. Fraenkel proposes that electronic devices can create rifts in conversation, even when they are not fully attended to (e.g., a cell phone ring is silenced): “Consciousness splits momentarily between the ‘here’ and the ‘there.’ Unseen others join us in potential form, requiring only the press of our thumb to become players in whatever life story happens to be unfolding at that moment” (p. 26). He states that families must “step back and take stock of who they are, what they wish to become and how technology can help or hinder those goals” (p. 65) and suggests that therapists can help families work through these issues. When considered in the context of transnational families, however, ICTs can be viewed not as a rift between “here” and “there,” but as a means for therapists to help connect the two.

TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES AND ICTs

Transnational families “live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood,’ even across national borders” (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). By definition, transnational families are less bound by the prevalent discourse of the nuclear isolated unit and have been more permeable to the influences of the social environment. Immigration involves memory about a variety of aspects of one’s country of origin not only related to abstract notions of culture or concrete objects and costumes. Memories are attached to relationships (Falicov, 2007) that have historically been maintained by infrequent contact. In the context of the emerging ICTs, clinicians must reconsider who the family is and consider the notion of “virtual families.”

ICTs are tools that transnational family members utilize before immigration to plan and prepare for the trip, during it to ensure safety, and after to inform the family about the resettlement process. Strengthening an immigrant’s capacity to maintain connection with his extended family and larger community in the country of origin becomes core as a new home is established. The easier connection also serves as a bridge with the community to which the immigrant used to belong and is, therefore, a source of social capital. ICTs can provide a source of emotional sustenance, although not free of potentially negative consequences. In some cases, family members may have immigrated to resolve family conflict or pursue ventures from which they were restricted in the context of their own family legacy. Similarly, remittances to the home country can also become a burden, and ease of communication could make the demands from the home country more frequent.

VIRTUAL COPRESENCE IN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

Various researchers suggest that ICTs can connect loved ones in ways that facilitate closeness (Baldassar, 2008; Castro & Gonzalez, 2009; Vertovec, 2004). These findings call into question assumptions about the nature, length, and form of communication required for family members to feel connected. More specifically, research on communication technologies suggests that these forms of communication can help create the sense that loved ones are present, despite geographic distances (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Estevez, 2009). Messaging via cell phones can create an ambient virtual copresence in which people have an ongoing awareness of others. The *keitai*, the Japanese concept for a personal device (e.g., cell phone), facilitates communication and is a constant presence in daily life (Ito & Okabe, 2005). Ito and Okabe found that those who engage in frequent text messaging generally wrote to a small subset (two to five) of their contact list. Text messaging allows for communication of insignificant or nonurgent updates, such as “Just bought a pair of shoes.” Text messages are:

predicated on the sense of ambient accessibility, a shared virtual space that is generally available between a few friends or with a loved one. They do not require a deliberate opening of a channel of communication but are based on the expectation that someone is within “earshot.” (Ito & Okabe, 2005, p. 264)

The texts create a space between direct interaction and noninteraction. Transnational migrants can use social technologies to cultivate this “ambient copresence” among family members who are in other countries and share information that would typically be inaccessible across geographic distances.

Understanding this possibility for copresence, however, requires us to reconsider the notion that face-to-face relationships are the only or ideal means to maintain or build relationships. Licoppe’s (2004) review of the literature on communication technologies and social bonds argues that:

communication technologies, instead of being used (however unsuccessfully) to compensate for the absence of our close ones, are exploited to provide a continuous pattern of mediated interactions that combine into “connected relationships,” in which the boundaries between absence and presence eventually get blurred. (pp. 135–136)

Technology is used first to maintain preexisting relationships (e.g., children moving away from their parents, who remain in the home region) and then to build the existing relationship despite the lack of a common place. This ability to build a relationship from a distance challenges assumptions about sociability, which Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) define as having three components: (1) social networks, (2) exchanges, and (3) available technical means that mediate interactions. Cell phones, for example, do not replace face-to-face interactions; instead, they provide new opportunities for constructing a “copresence” in spite of distance (Horst & Miller, 2006; Panagakos & Horst, 2006). The real and virtual, therefore, are not dichotomous in the lives of these families.

TRANSNATIONAL CAREGIVING: WHERE ICTs THRIVE

Forms of Caregiving

Working parents worldwide are under tremendous stress to support their families (Heymann, 2006). A solution to this strain is often the migration of one of the parents

or adult relative to help support the family (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Literature on transnational immigrants and ICTs focuses largely on transnational caregiving (Bohr & Tse, 2009; Horst, 2006; Horton, 2009; Parrenas, 2005). It is often assumed that transnational caregiving cannot take place due to large geographic distances. For example, one aspect of family life is interactions that involve daily, ritualized activities, such as bedtime rituals and habits of personal hygiene. However, Baldassar (2007a) states that transnational families engage in the same five forms of caregiving (Finch, 1989) as proximal families: financial (e.g., remittances), practical (e.g., sharing expertise), personal (hand-on care, including nursing the sick), accommodation (having a place to stay), and emotional or moral support. Transnational migrants engage in all forms of caregiving, and financial, personal, and emotional or moral support can easily be facilitated through communication technology.

However, personal and accommodation support can only be provided during in-person visits. Personal caregiving may be particularly difficult to provide because, as Baldassar (2007b, 2008) suggests, even with ICTs, parents hide illnesses and the aging process from their adult children. One of her interviewees, in her ethnographic research on family caregiving processes with an emphasis on aging with 80 families in Australia and Italy, summarizes it: “there was nothing you could do anyway living so far away” (Baldassar, 2007b, p. 403). So, devirtualized interactions (i.e., physical visits) still matter to check on the well-being of family members and maintain the relationships.

Transnational Mothering

Among the literature on transnational caregiving, transnational mothering is the most widely studied. Most generally, mothering entails caring for and educating children. This notion of mothering is tied to motherhood as a natural phenomenon in which mothers are considered to be their children’s primary caregivers. According to Erel (2002): “The separation of mothers and children runs counter to hegemonic discourses on the mother as the primary carer of her children, and the emotional, physical and thus geographic closeness that is claimed and naturalized by such discourses” (p. 132). Women with children, however, are often responsible not only for mothering but also providing income for their families. Labor demands within the United States, among other relatively affluent countries, create opportunities for women to migrate and secure work, particularly as domestic laborers, and financially support their families. ICTs play a critical role in the traditional women’s ability to participate in caregiving and retain familial bonds. However, ICTs have also allowed younger men to also participate in the “staying in touch” work (Baldassar, Wilding, & Baldock, 2007). As a result, the technologies are challenging traditional notions of mothering while also maintaining them.

Bidirectional Nature of Caregiving

Despite the psychosocial and relational impact of migration on those left behind, the scant literature that exists on transnational migrant families generally focuses on the members who have migrated and not those who remain. The lack of terminology for this latter group indicates the relative dearth of literature on this population (Baldassar, 2007a), as does the assumption that transnational caregiving for aging parents is impossible. It is critical to consider both migrants and nonmigrants to understand transnational family relations because the limited research that does exist

on this topic indicates that caregiving between migrants and nonmigrants is bidirectional (Carling, 2008; Wilding, 2006). Researchers must explore the types of caregiving that transnational migrants can provide for those who remained in their home country and how ICTs may facilitate this care.

ICTs AS THERAPEUTIC TOOLS

Family therapists have had a historical tradition of using letter writing and other forms of asynchronous communication to support clinical work. Moreover, the beginnings of family therapy are intricately linked to the use of audio and video technologies to provide live supervision, the basis of the relational family therapy models. Phone intake interviews became a clinical protocol in strategic- and communication-based family therapy. More specifically as it relates to our subject, Falicov (2007) has encouraged clinicians to use phone and email to support transnational families. We suggest that the virtualization of presence allowed by ICTs provides clinicians with even more powerful clinical possibilities than the phone and asynchronous tools.

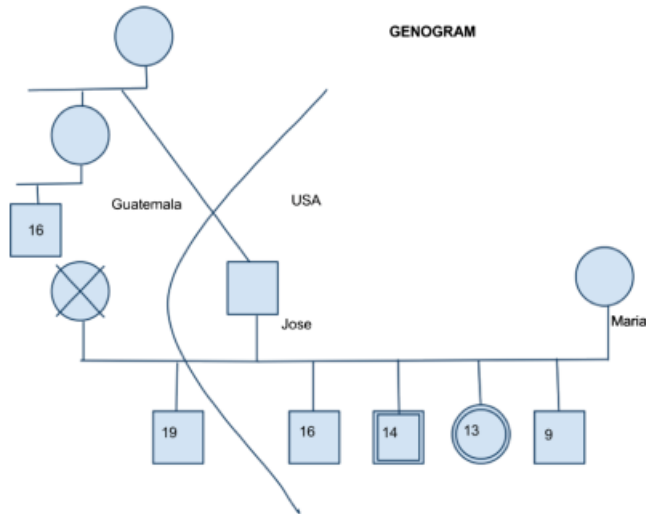
ICTs have the potential to address some of the inequities in health care quality and access in two ways. First, in allowing the inclusion of many stakeholders, ICTs aid in reducing access and quality barriers to therapy (Bacigalupe, 2010). For relational clinicians who intend to develop collaborative and transparent forms of clinical consultation and supervision, ICTs, therefore, have tremendous potential for strengthening participation and collaboration. Second, ICTs are an equalizer by enabling conversations that are not constrained by geography, expertise, and other factors that rigidly stratify us (Bacigalupe, in press).

Besides the specific use in therapy, ICTs can facilitate the development of self-help and support groups that are connected virtually (Bedgood, Sadurski, & Schade, 2007; Griffiths et al., 2009; Kummervold et al., 2002; Patsos, 2001; Uden-Kraan, Drossaert, Taal, Seydel, & van de Laar, 2010). If social technologies can be transformative in empowering patients and developing collaborative relationships, they could also be useful in our role as family therapists.

A TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY IN THERAPY

The first author's therapeutic work with an immigrant family living in a large city in the United States exemplifies ways that emergent social technologies could be used in family therapy. Jose¹ and his three children (see genogram), Guatemalan immigrants, attended a first family therapy session. A school counselor referred the family after unsuccessful efforts at helping their teenage children to overcome behavioral problems at school. According to the school counselor, the teachers were "annoyed" by the parents' lack of response to several requests for family meetings. The teachers believed that these parents were unresponsive to their advice. Because both parents worked full time, and took turns caring for their children, they could not attend family therapy sessions together. Maria worked at a hotel as a cleaner, and her schedule was tight and paid by the hour, so it was unrealistic to interrupt her work schedule. To include her in sessions, the solution discussed with the family seemed obvious. Like the majority of immigrants in the United States, Maria owned a cell phone.

¹All names and other identificatory information have been changed to protect the family's and professional's confidentiality.



At the first session, we connected with Maria via her cell phone, which was attached to an earpiece. The therapy room phone was connected to a speaker. While she continued to work, Maria participated for most of the session. Because both parents used cell phones to coordinate their parenting duties throughout the day, having an intimate family-related conversation virtually was not strange to either the parents or their children. The teenage daughter was amused by the simplicity of the solution and commented that this would have been a useful way to have her mother present during a pediatric visit. Similarly, when the therapist proposed that the family use a cell phone during therapy, he realized that the utility of this method could extend beyond the session and serve as a lesson for other clinicians.

To establish clearer therapeutic goals, the therapist called the school counselor, a member of the school interdisciplinary team that made the referral. The therapist spoke with the school counselor with the family present. After a few minutes, the therapist utilized a speakerphone to discuss the school's expectations, including the counselor's view of positive change and the teenager's strengths. The family found the school counselor's expectations reasonable. They insinuated, though, that besides the behavioral problems at school, there were other issues to address, including the longing for aspects of their home country.

In the second session, we discovered that two of the older children were raised most of their early preschool years by their grandmother and aunt, both still residing in Guatemala. We used a laptop to call Guatemala City via *Skype* after learning that their relatives had access to a computer through a neighbor. We first called their neighbor's cell phone to ask if she was willing to lend her computer to her neighbor. We soon were connected to both their aunt and grandmother. One of the most powerful features of using web conferencing is that the family members in the office are able to both hear *and* see their relatives. The visual ingredient in the web conferencing added to the emotional intensity of the session and enabled the therapist to pay attention to nonverbal and analogical information that could be lost during a phone conversation. While the session progressed, a cousin in Guatemala dropped by and exchanged some words with a child in the office.

The family abroad was grateful for the opportunity to participate in the session and provide advice to members in the office. According to the family, one of the most important aspects of this visual and audio exchange was the transmission of historical memories that the father did not know about. From a clinical perspective, joining with critical members of the extended family virtually early in the therapeutic work matched the family use of ICTs while also strengthening untapped support. The virtual therapeutic exchange may have served the same purpose ICTs fulfill for transnational families on a daily basis to maintain and create memories, reduce nostalgia, and gain support.

At the third session, the therapist introduced the family to the use of genogram software, which interested the teenage daughter, who shared intergenerational information to enter into the program. The teenager also showed photos of her relatives that she has accessed through her *Facebook* account. She revealed that a stepbrother was still in their country of origin and that the two older children missed him terribly. We decided to invite their stepbrother to the next session to participate via *Skype*.

The conversation in the fourth session was mediated by the use of web conferencing. The children were again protagonists of an animated conversation about adapting to a new school with different clothing styles, teacher-student relationships, and friendships of a different quality. Often these differences became the source of intergenerational conflict as the children attempted to adapt to the new mores, while the parents maintained the values of their country of origin. During the session, the therapist listened to this conversation and helped family members frame some of these issues as intercultural differences and accommodations rather than as intergenerational or family-school conflicts. The discussion among the children helped the parents to understand some of the intercultural differences related to expectations that the school had about them—the teachers wanted them to be more involved in the educational process while these parents believed that was solely the role of the teachers.

During the fifth session, we designed a ritual and ways of addressing some of the problematic issues. The ritual consisted in role playing the stakeholders involved in the definition of the problem. The session was recorded with a small digital video camera. Setting up the video recording served as a springboard for discussing issues of confidentiality and privacy including what information the family considered private. In response to their interest toward the videotaping, the therapists suggested having the family use the video to analyze what transpired in the session on their own at home. After watching the video recording and having learned the various roles that they and the school personnel played, they decided to create a brief conversation to address the school interdisciplinary team.

By the seventh session, the family and therapist had not only used technology but had seemingly made it part of their work—not in an add-on role but an intrinsic constituent of the conversation. The technology became a form of collaborative witnessing (Weingarten, 2004). It strengthened, in this case, the parallel work of reflecting about transnational issues and thinking relationally about the problematic behaviors at school. Moreover, they reported the use of ICTs at home to maintain safety and increase positive exchanges when they were together. Two examples were shared without prompting. First, the ability to text made everyone feel safer in a neighborhood in which violence was a continuous presence. And, rather than being

intrusions at the few times in which they shared meals together, the devices were often part of discussions about school and daily intercultural life challenges. The therapist learned from this family to be proactive in asking about the uses of the technology at home with all families. For the family, the integration of ICTs in the therapeutic process helped them navigate more effectively the challenges posed by the school referral and address the immigration challenges.

VIRTUALIZING INTIMACY IN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES: LESSONS FOR ALL

In the past, families who have relatives geographically distant, like that of Jose and Maria, would have communicated to deliver good and bad news in an abrupt and “disconnected” way. Today, they are able to maintain relationships despite national boundaries and geographical distance. In order to appreciate how ICTs can positively impact family relations and functioning, nostalgic discourses about what constitutes good communication in families require revision. Prevalent ideas about families may be limited in helping us evaluate the impact that ICTs have on families and how families themselves are adapting them to fit their needs. Transnational families’ embrace of the technologies defies stereotypes of what constitutes family communication, loss and nostalgia, caregiving, acculturation and assimilation, and other taken for granted concepts in the family psychology discourse.

ICTs connect millions for the purpose of sharing information and memories, exchanging wealth and products, organizing events, and much more. They are a splendid opportunity to maintain legacies, create new memories, and establish a coherent identity and continuity for family members. For example, a photo that shows a child receiving a diploma is shared immediately with a large network of family members and communities. Reactions to the photo do not wait for weeks or months to be delivered but are instantaneous and the source of further connections. When in therapy, the family may want to design a ritual that includes a grandmother, similar to the way they may go about planning a baptism; it is not just the planning that matters but also the connection that gets strengthened. These sorts of connections are also true for any family whose parents have to commute long hours to work and use the devices to connect with children while they work on their homework or before they are going to bed.

Therapeutic interventions should encourage connection and, as Falicov (2007) suggested, include the “traditional” technologies like email and letter writing as well as the emergent ones. Relational issues associated with migration (e.g., leaving kids behind) will certainly then become part of the discussions and what often is at the core of the problematic issues that bring the family to therapy. The emerging technologies offer relational therapists tools that further the ecosystemic and culturally competent frameworks that are needed to approach families. Introducing them in the clinical session, in the office, or on an outreach basis, expands the system we can include in the assessment and intervention. Connecting the family in the “real” session with those attending virtually has the potential of bringing forth new ideas. It facilitates the designing of ecosystemic interventions that otherwise would be constrained by the information provided by a small segment of the people involved in the problem situation.

Collaboration and transparency are good company for these technologies. How to learn and adapt to hardware and software requires a participatory stance in

which children and adults can participate equally rather than hierarchically. For all families, ICTs offer a vehicle for communication that requires continuous learning, flexibility, and adaptation. In this process, adults and children can bond in creating spaces for conversation rather than purely for control and management. The technological intricacies are nonetheless just a piece of the puzzle. The psychosocial and ethical dilemmas raised by the use of these technologies are probably the most complex aspects that families and clinicians have to address. Issues like confidentiality, control, privacy, and safety are not resolved with a few clicks. They require a thoughtful process that can balance the risks of creativity, imagination, and discovery with those of safety, stability, and predictability. This is a balancing act not so different from other dilemmas families and clinicians confront every day.

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