Collaboration as a Site of Personal and Institutional Transformation: Thoughts from Inside a Cross-National Alliance

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Tavi[1], a woman from an indigenous tribe in Ecuador, stood up in the auditorium amidst hundreds of people at a 4-day, intensive qualitative research seminar in Quito, and asked me [a white researcher/professor from the United States who was invited to facilitate the seminar]: "How do I create a systematic methodology to record and analyze what I receive in trance as I speak with my ancestors under the influence of ayahuasca [a ritually used hallucinogen]?" A significant number of the students (and professors) in the room snickered, looking to me to gauge my reaction. One student stood up and apologized for Tavi, commenting that her question "was not worthy of the professor's valuable time." I was deeply disturbed by the discomfort, judgment, and disrespect in the room, voiced by multiple non-indigenous participants who criticized this "unscientific" question and tried to silence and humiliate Tavi. I tried to use my stature in this context to legitimize the question – and in doing so make a strong statement about the importance of valuing indigenous ways of knowing as well as about the hegemony of white-dominated research paradigms and the systems that confer dominance upon them – by commenting on the problematic nature of the ethnocentrism and prejudice presented by several of the group members. I related this to concerns about their stance in working with indigenous clients and students given the intense prejudice displayed. I proceeded to try to engage Tavi and receptive members of the group in brainstorming approaches to her emerging research question. This felt like an important moment, but a troubling one on multiple levels including that I'm an outsider to this country and these sets of communities and thus am unaware of the layers of meaning in this moment. I worry about the implications of my stance in relation to cultures and contexts unfamiliar to me. (Fieldnotes, April 2008).

This vignette symbolizes the multiple, intersecting layers – cultural, contextual, positional, relational, political, historical, institutional – of complexity in cross-national alliance building and professional exchange. It brings to the forefront issues of culture, power, authority, and hegemony and is emblematic of how social location and positionality influence people's meaning-making processes, perspectives, behaviors, and interactions. Analysis of such a moment can help us to locate sets of concerns about aspects of our collaboration-building with partners in Quito, Ecuador. It can also help us to better understand the role of reflexivity in research and coalition building, of taking responsibility for one's biases and assumptions and how they play out institutionally and interpersonally, and for actively challenging these biases – and the social, intellectual, political, and institutional milieu in which they are shaped – in relation to those we engage with as collaborators. Further, it helps us to view the collaborative process as a site for reflective educational, political, and cultural work, personal and professional learning, and for the development of an inquiry stance on practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Our experiences developing ongoing collaboration with partners in Quito have helped us to cultivate a working sense of collaboration as a commitment to a process that engenders reciprocal transformation and dialectical growth (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). Framed and approached in this way, collaboration in an applied development context has the power to be transformative at the institutional, communal, interpersonal, and individual levels. This commentary seeks to share one story of collaboration-building as a way to explore the concept of reciprocal transformation in cross-national collaboration more broadly.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE COLLABORATION

The collaboration at the center of this article began with a brief encounter at a family therapy conference in 1996. There was no formal meeting or organizational structure that invited the relationship; no clear intention or direction. Helen Braun, the visionary founder of Central Integral de la Familia (CIF; in English, the Center for Integrated Family Services) in Quito, Ecuador and Cathi Tillman, a family therapist and community activist from Philadelphia, exchanged greetings. Braun asked Tillman to go to Quito to lead a workshop explaining that, after living in Ecuador for over 4 decades and retiring from years as a nurse for the Peace Corps there, she was on a mission to promote the value of family therapy in Ecuador and to invite professionals from around the country to think more systemically and relationally in their respective roles as teachers, social workers, faith-based workers, relief workers, doctors, nurses, and other applied development roles. Braun explained that the professional networks to insure family and community wellness were barely functional, under-resourced, and negatively impacted by the persistent political and social turmoil that is typical of economically under-resourced countries. For this reason she founded the Central Integral de

la Familia in 1994. CIF is a pioneer in counseling, crisis intervention, and systemic family therapy in South America. It focuses on providing quality therapy and related services to underserved communities in urban Quito and across Ecuador through the provision of cutting-edge family therapy and related services which include the education and development of competent, integrative mental health practitioners. In order to provide structured professional development opportunities for prospective therapists, CIF has developed and runs a master's program in Systemic Family Therapy in collaboration with La Universidad Cristiana Lationoamericana, a major university in Quito.

Months later, Tillman went to Quito to facilitate workshops on family therapy work with underserved communities. Expecting small groups of interested para-professionals who were new to this field to attend, she instead encountered 200+ people from a range of professional backgrounds. They had travelled from all over the country to hear this "expert" speak for 4 intensive days. Afterwards, the realization of the dire need for information and resources, as learned through discussions while there as well as by research on the vacuum of contextually relevant scholarly and practitioner-oriented resources on systemic family therapy and practitioner research in Ecuador, compelled Tillman to return the next year, and the next, eventually bringing other colleagues with her who had learned of the work being done by CIF. Even in the early years, it was clear that a relationship had developed through this organic, spontaneous and creative process, though early on the parameters were undefined and in a state of flux. Out of this ongoing work and connection with CIF, Tillman founded the Intercultural Coalition for Family Wellness (ICFamWell), a US-based non-profit organization that partners mental health practitioners with researchers and practitioners across international borders with a specific focus on Ecuador. As both systems evolved over the course of several years, what began as the core of this partnership – a relationship between two women who were passionate about family and community wellness – became a network of relationships between two complimentary systems between North and South America.

It is important to establish the broader context for this work and describe the environment that has been a constant consideration in the relationship between CIF and ICFamWell. Ecuador is nestled between Columbia and Peru. This topographically diverse country is made up of some 30 nationalities of indigenous groups who represent its deeply complicated history that is as much about sacred energy and custom as it is about modernization and political vibrancy. In recent years, there has been a transformation taking place, mostly through the CONAIE: La Confederacion de Nacinalidades del Ecuador, which has become the country's opportunity to construct a plurinational state that could shift Ecuador's colonial political structure. As the indigenous movement has gained momentum in Ecuador, the concern for exploitation of its victories by local and international governments has fueled the ever-present distrust and skepticism surrounding outsiders. Logging by multinational companies, control over Ecuadorian oil coming through neoliberal economic policy and the like have depleted the Amazon and endangered local indigenous groups while foreign businesses have capitalized on Ecuador's struggling economy. On a smaller scale, local grassroots organizations such as CIF are easily overshadowed by larger bureaucracies that are embedded in the political system and not necessarily aiming for outcomes that are in the best interest of its most vulnerable citizens.

The juxtaposition of these forces presented a particular set of challenges as the seeds of the partnership between these institutions began to sprout and take root. The experience in the early years of this evolving relationship demonstrated the power of working to co-construct trust and a profound respect for the richness of each other's contributions to the relationship, which includes the ongoing questioning and negotiation of power, the critical examination of sociopolitical contexts and their impact on goals and expectations, the promotion of an ethic of dialectical growth and mutual influence (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998), as well as taking and promoting an inquiry stance on practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). While this might sound overly simplistic and naïve, maintaining this vision and stance in the face of the next 14 years of coalition building has presented a formidable challenge. As Ecuador has struggled to overhaul its commitment to its citizenry through the improvement of services to underserved communities, CIF has been a model of grassroots activism through the promotion of relational health in all environments where families live, work, and play. But CIF's resources have been limited by the reality of Ecuador's constantly shifting economic and political landscape. Additionally, while opportunities for partnership became available through larger organizations – NGOs as well as governmental systems that had a vested interest in forging a relationship with CIF – the discernment required to choose wisely was complicated by the appeal of often empty promises of financial support by many of those same organizations. While CIF has grown in its ability to more carefully discern between helpful and potentially hurtful "partners" in their work, these various contextual challenges pose questions and issues for those of us trying to co-create meaningful cross-national engagement and exchange over time. By employing the most essential qualities of a healthy and balanced relationship including trust, care, and consideration of each other's perspectives, constraints, and commitments in this larger, more complicated partnership, ICFamWell's volunteers have been able to earn the trust of CIF's colleagues over the years, securing and sustaining a cooperative partnership. As will be discussed in this piece, we believe that building true collaboration relies upon multiple and intersecting beliefs, ideals, and actions including understanding collaboration as a 2-way, bilateral exchange; taking a deeply relational stance on coalition building; engaging in the systematic breaking down of

the "expert/learner" binary and addressing the larger sociopolitical forces that shape these power relationships; a view of collaboration as a reciprocal and dialogic process; the development of a growth and discovery orientation that is built upon the cultivation of a critical understanding of contexts and a receptive sensibility; engaging in the multi-layered, parallel process of developing and operationalizing an inquiry stance on practice; and a focus on sustainability in the ongoing development of our collaborative process.

TAKING A RELATIONAL STANCE: REFLEXIVITY AND RECIPROCITY IN CROSS-NATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

This growing, ever-evolving collaboration is built upon the understanding that healthy, enduring partnership requires a deeply reflective process and ongoing, complex negotiations on everyone's part. It requires the systematic questioning of what it means to do this kind of research- and inquiry-based work, to partner across countries with a shared goal and yet quite different experiences and everyday realities that frame and challenge those goals. All of this has pointed us to working from a relational stance that is built on an explicit standpoint of reciprocal transformation (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998), that is, an understanding that true collaboration means that everyone involved must be willing to be changed in meaningful ways. This stance requires building a shared mindset about relational integrity and the nature of collaboration. As Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) assert,

> Most of us in the broader counseling and development field view ourselves as caregivers, not as recipients of or participants in a change process. As such, we find that using a multidirectional lens with one part facing inward—revealing, in part, the influences of our clients—is often uncomfortable, particularly in cases where the lens begins to focus on concealments, those hidden parts of ourselves that have become isolated barriers to genuine growth. Unidirectional caregiving, conversely, is pseudo-self-comforting because it creates the illusion of placing and keeping us in charge. Mutual transformation requires letting go and becoming vulnerable (p. 86).

This notion of understanding the need to allow oneself to become vulnerable in counseling work gets at the heart of the nature of the work of collaboration building more broadly: that everyone needs to engage with a receptive sensibility, that we must not only see and acknowledge our differences, but that we must see them as valuable, generative, and as reflective of the impact of local, national, and international contexts and tensions as they shape our different funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). It also speaks to the need to allow ourselves to become openly vulnerable, to become inwardly reflexive and consciously collaborative in ways that necessitate that we raise our thresholds for discomfort as we engage in and transform our praxis (Ravitch, 1998). As Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) state,

> [T]he potential for symbiotic development depends, in part, on the acceptance of and interaction with difference, and on the welcoming of misunderstanding and discomfort as part of the practitioner's raison d'etre. Difference is at the heart of dialectical growth. Differences of opinion, worldview, cultural background, and life experience all serve as fuel for the dialogical process. But to recognize and engage with difference requires the willingness to acknowledge misunderstanding and to be misunderstood... Genuine empathy, however, cannot be achieved without an authentic willingness to misunderstand, to strive to connect only to miss the point, and as such to feel disengaged. All too frequently, false connections are maintained in order to salve the discomfort of disconnection. A productive synthesis of differences requires a grappling with discomfort, a clear recognition of disjunctions. Willingness to reach toward understanding in the midst of such discomforting misconnections is... a healthy prognosis for mutual growth (p. 87).

This attention to the need to engage, in constructively critical ways, with challenges and breakdowns, to reframe misunderstanding and disjunctures as possibilities for increasing self-knowledge and authentic connection, has become an important piece of the story of the CIF-ICFamWell alliance. We have needed to, at times, overcome deep disagreements, missed communication and miscommunications, fissures in our typically smooth relationships that cause hurt feelings, anger, and at times deep frustration and confusion. An example of this occurred as we embarked upon a formalization of CIF's master's research curriculum – focused on practitioner research – developed collaboratively by Ravitch and CIF. While ICFamWell's project director agreed to provide translated texts to accompany the courses offered by Ravitch during her work with the students through CIF, several local colleagues were unable to follow through on the administrative logistics necessary to meet deadlines that corresponded with ICFamWell's work. This created a backlash of additional work and frustration on both ends which ultimately required a series of urgent international calls and multiple rounds of intense email correspondences to reconcile the matters at hand. At the heart of this at-times heated process was a firmly maintained stance of respect and openness to each person's perspective as expectations and mutual goals were renegotiated in a manner similar to core therapuetic practices in systemic work. As Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) assert:

> According to Gadamer ([1962] 1976), openings for transformation are revealed through every meaningful interaction. From his perspective, self-understanding is always *on the way*; it is never complete, only modified, with every modification merely a preparation for further development through the next meaningful encounter. Within Gadamer's schema, the more critically reflective one is, the more self-understanding and awareness of others become possible. Gadamer's definition of self-understanding is

> a natural extension of the Heideggerian notion that every meaningful action uncovers expanded ways of seeing the world, particularly one's participation in it (p. 89).

This kind of reflexive attention to the existential, relational, contextual, and ultimately dialogical nature of this work has been a central aspect of our individual and shared contributions to the collaboration. As in any relationship, those participating in mental healthwork across service delivery systems must understand how each person in the interaction contributes differently to the interaction, how what we bring to this collaboration – culturally, institutionally, professionally – influences the macro collaboration as well as each micro interaction. Understandably, the process requires negotiations between stakeholders who share a common vision but see the ways our at times different desires and expectations cause us to re-evaluate each other as we learn to critically reflect on and re-evaluate ourselves. The concept of multi-directed partiality, a central tenet in Contextual Family Therapy which translates into providing the space for everyone to fully voice their opinions and which supports a careful consideration of everyone's contributions in a relational system, illustrates a kind of reciprocity that aims for balance and equity. This multi-lateral stance requires ongoing transparency in an effort to promote trust and integrity in the relationships between individuals; it requires the ongoing negotiation of equity and continued trust as members in the relationship mutually invest in the process (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). For example, during one of CIF's international "congresos", an ICFamWell volunteer presenter who was African American challenged the racial stereotypes of some members of the audience. After the initial hours of presenting, it became clear that the material being presented began to stir strong negative reactions for many of the participants. Additionally, because of his gender, race, and lack of fluency in Spanish, the presenter began to feel uncomfortable and awkward in front of his Ecuadorian colleagues. A deliberate pause was provided during the course of the workshop to create an opportunity for both the presenter and participants (with structured facilitation) to more deeply and honestly engage in dialogue about their mutual experiences and discuss how this time of discomfort and uncertainty was an opportunity for mutual learning and growth. This situation was then used as an opening to consider issues of culture and race in the work and in the collaboration more broadly.

Taking this kind of relational stance on collaborative work requires actively appreciating and accounting for the myriad – individual, social, institutional – complexities of this kind of work and their impact on our actions and interactions. As an example, the ICFamWell-CIF partnership was first negotiated through a series of meetings which explored the goals of information sharing, respective and mutual expectations, and ways to manage the "unknowns" in the process of this relationship-building including clarity about roles and responsibilities relating to the professional development of local therapists and the negotiation of expectations regarding CIF's need for practical assistance (such as financial and resource support). While ICFamWell's original mission was to offer financial support and resources to CIF, over time it became clear that the work is transformative, causing significant reverberations across institutions and communities, North and South, and that it is clearly a bi-lateral exchange. This realization shifted the collaborative model significantly. Such observations of the changing nature of the collaboration caused the organizations to realize that there must be strategic, periodic negotiations of the partnership in order to provide transparency, minimize misunderstandings, and maintain a spirit of cooperation and equity. One by-product of these meetings is that the two organizations have, over time, arrived at a mutual agreement that the nature of ICFamWell's "contributions" should be in the form of educational, clinical, and administrative support and not as a source of direct funding to CIF. This shift has helped clarify the nature of the collaboration as CIF manages its own challenges in a dynamic political and social landscape. It has also clarified the need to recast and reframe the collaboration and multi-directional. The latter means disrupting the US-dominant paradigm of approaching international development work as a benevolent dictator which, of course, serves to uphold hegemony and disrespectful asymmetries rather than to engender true collaboration.

Given the larger sociopolitical pushes and pulls on the collaboration, we have learned that this kind of cross-national capacity-building process requires flexibility within relationships as they are continuously being formed and re-formed along with a willingness to appreciate and value the shifting contexts and paradigms in our work with one another. We strive to become sufficiently comfortable with the uncertainties that arise from this process – uncertainty at times about roles and responsibilities as well as about vision and timeline – by allowing time and space for mutual evaluations and conversations that strive for balance and equity in reconciling what are sometimes divergent expectations or visions. A perennial issue has to do with how macro-sociopolitical influences are enacted at the micro-relational level. A primary example is that the initial encounters in this partnership were rooted in an "expert-learner" binary – that is, US-based "educated" clinicians and academics offering their "expert" presentations on topics such as relational healing and wellness and practitioner inquiry to students and practitioners who were viewed, and viewed themselves, as passive recipients of this information. The shift to a cooperative, transparent, mutually enriching, and equitable approach to shared learning requires an ongoing acknowledgement of what everyone brings to and gains from the alliance as well as an evaluation of how we are all managing the intricacies, and oftentimes challenges, of our plans and interactions. Further, it means that we must consciously and consistently work against the expert-learner binary, interrupting it intra-psychically and

interpersonally at every turn. Specifically, the use of language, in communication of thoughts and ideas as well as as a tool in social transformation, continues to play a major part in this collaborative process. For example, the commitment to learning the language, culture, and ways of our partners in Ecuador helps mitigate against the asymmetrical "monologue" of US-dominated international work and promotes, instead, a co-constructed dialogue necessary for a deepening of mutual understanding and commitment. Furthermore, immersion into the culture and diversity of thought, lifestyle, and spiritual practices in Quito lays the foundation for true reciprocity as each participant in this process is stretched to contribute more fully. For example, as we seek to integrate the insights gained from this kind of applied development work into the process of professional development, our collaboration building has become increasingly reflective of a deepened understanding of the systems of care in Ecuador. Specifically, the inventiveness and creative use of limited resources by CIF as well as their approach to engaging with issues related to urban poverty and cultural hierarchies in Ecuador have became mutual points of discovery and appreciation which have opened the eyes and minds of ICFamWell's volunteers. Within and across institutions, openly recognizing and valuing our colleagues' contributions to this cross-national work inspires continued reciprocal transformation and deepens the trust and cooperation between colleagues across the Americas. It gets us beyond the rhetoric of "expert and learner" and the arrogant, ethnocentric, colonialist mentality that allows that false dichotomy to be maintained.

As mentioned above, as is more unique to international collaboration, a major practical consideration emerging from this partnership includes language, the core of our communication. More specifically, there is an ongoing need to translate materials, lectures, and conversations to and from Spanish and English as well as to consider the numerous indigenous nuances of cultural, social, and communication patterns. More deeply into the process, it was clear that relationships with our Ecuadorian partners were being affected by these "barriers" of cultural understanding. For example, there was a sense of "withholding" in the deepening reciprocity that more typically characterizes an evolving, maturing relationship. It required a shift from the assumed comfort of collegiality to a stance of inquiry to explore together what was occurring and agree upon strategies to alleviate anxieties and frustrations that were, at times, becoming a by product, or unintended consequence, of the partnership. One such strategy is to have CIF volunteers be or actively work to become fluent in Spanish. Another is to engage in conscious, structured, and ongoing learning about intra-group variability and individual microcultures within various demographic groups in and beyond Ecuador (Erickson, 2004).

Our colleagues in Ecuador represent numerous indigenous communities that bring to the table considerable variations in practice, philosophy, and social custom. Initially, ICFamWell's requests to more openly discuss cultural differences and their impact on the work at the systemic, curricular, and classroom levels was met with apprehension and concern on CIF's part that respectful boundaries would be violated. Our partners asserted that this was in part due to a shared cultural norm in Ecuador about taking directives from "higher authorities" without question. Hence, it was difficult for many of our Ecuadorian colleagues to manage this new landscape of reciprocal sharing and growth and we wondered if we should back off and not agitate for a paradigm shift in this regard (after all, is that not a colonialist imposition?). However, as this shift from unilateral, hierarchical decision-making to collaborative, data-based decision-making and a shared inquiry stance was incorporated into the master's research curriculum, a more substantive context emerged that has effectively allowed all of the stakeholders in this process to appreciate the individual and collective transformation that occurs when comfort zones about open communication are stretched and uncertainty is managed in a spirit of trust, cooperation, and equity. Part of how we have tried to construct this process is by engaging in the development of an inquiry stance on practice at multiple, intersecting levels.

Developing and Promoting an Inquiry Stance on Practice

As stated above, over the years of the partnership between CIF and ICFamWell, one critical point of negotiation has been the clarification of ICFamWell's contributions to CIF's growth as a community clinic, training hub for grassroots programs around Ecuador, and a university-affiliated graduate program in family therapy. Initially, it was evident that the majority of resources and knowledge base that was available to clinical professionals (particularly in the field of family therapy) were inadequate or unavailable in Ecuador. Through annual reviews of this partnership, ICFamWell and CIF have agreed that the long-term goal of the support and educational resources provided through this partnership was to help strengthen CIF's foundation of clinical excellence for the local community while providing sources of training, supervision, and education for the next generation of family therapists in this region of Latin America. In more recent years, CIF has requested that a central piece of this exchange focus on professional development and mentoring in practitioner inquiry. There is a mutual belief that this new dimension of the partnership has provided more sustainable outcomes for CIF's work and has helped to increase its visibility and overall independence and legitimacy in the larger international networks of family therapy programs and services. Developing a focus on reflective, practice-based inquiry has helped to create and sustain a more sophisticated feedback loop that enables practitioners to evaluate and, as necessary, improve their approaches and implementation of therapeutic services as well as to share and challenge their findings in inquiry groups. Over the course of this model-building process, CIF's staff and ICFamWell's volunteers have noted that the staff and students

at CIF have moved from requests for "training" to a desire to engage in and contribute actively to professional development experiences that advance their skills and knowledge while simultaneously cultivating their sense of purpose within an overarching goal of working towards the "bien comun," the common good. The CIF staff and the ICFamWell volunteers have also noted the reciprocal nature of learning about what practitioner research looks like and means within and across national and community contexts.

In 2005, Tillman brought Ravitch, then a faculty member at Arcadia University whose work focused on multicultural teacher and counselor education, participatory research methodologies including action and practitioner research, to Quito to work with the staff and students at CIF. During Ravitch's communications and development work with CIF over two years prior to her teaching of CIF's master's students in Quito, she and the staff at CIF developed a series of research-based professional development initiatives for the staff and students at CIF that focused on exploring qualitative research broadly and practitioner research specifically. These initiatives, which continue to be collaboratively developed and refined, focus on working with the staff, students, and local university professors to conceptualize and develop an inquiry stance on practice through learning about and engaging in practitioner research. Together, we explore what aspects of practitioner research can support therapists as they learn to engage in systematic inquiry that responds to questions that emerge from their practice with clients and members of their communities and that investigates these questions utilizing systematic, rigorous research practices. The student-therapists work largely in urban communities that are economically and educationally marginalized, including indigenous populations that have high rates of poverty, violence and substance abuse. The students, even once they are therapists, are often engaged in practice without the benefit of access to research that helps them to conceptualize issues of cross-cultural communication, cultural norms, evidence-based therapeutic intervention as well as many other central areas of relevance to their service provision. Related to this, the students, without exception, have not had prior exposure to qualitative research as it has not historically been viewed in Ecuador as a credible form of research in their field. Together with the Director and senior staff at CIF, Ravitch has been developing a research agenda and sequence of courses, curricular materials, and interactive seminars for their master's program, traveling to Quito annually to work directly with staff and students on developing their research skills broadly and their master's theses specifically and to work with CIF members to iteratively develop the model based on seeing its promises and challenges across community contexts.

This multilayered inquiry work is grounded in a shared, evolving perspective that becoming a reflective, evidence-based practitioner does not simply require occasional self-reflection or exposure to outside research, it requires that family therapists systematically investigate their own practice, that they adopt and cultivate an inquiry stance on their practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). As Lytle (2006) states,

> The notion of *inquiry as stance* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) foregrounds the role that practitioners can play, both individually and collectively, in generating local knowledge, re-envisioning and theorizing practice, as well as interpreting and interrogating the theory and research of others. The work of inquiry in/on practice involves making problematic current arrangements of practice, the ways knowledge is constructed, evaluated, and used in various educational settings, and the roles practitioners play in facilitating change in their own work contexts. (p. 2)

Taking an inquiry stance on practice requires that family therapists develop and refine their understanding of the role of systematic reflection in their practice and that they view practice-based inquiry as an ethic of their everyday practice as well as a fundamental aspect of their vision of themselves as family therapists; it means that family therapists must be committed to their own process of self-reflection and the continual investigation into, and systematic, data-based critique of, their practices. An inquiry stance on therapeutic practice translates into more person-centered, systematic and proactive approach to empowering and advocating for youth and their families and communities (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). Such practice seeks to resist the current confines and challenges of therapeutic practice – and the contexts in which such practice is carried out – in a number of ways. As McLeod (1999) states: "The practitioner researcher develops a relationship with the research literature and research methodologies which…transfers effectively into the counseling setting itself. He or she is no longer defined and controlled by dominant cultural narratives or knowledges, but is more able to resist them and find alternative voices" (p.1). In an Ecuadorian context this stance is one that requires considerable courage, energy, and focus, since it most often means pushing against firmly established hierarchies, norms that are harmful to indigenous clients (and therapists), and committing to a methodological process that has not been valued or seen as valid historically (and in most contexts, still, since the university system in Ecuador almost exclusively supports a positivist research orientation). The systematic finding and examination of silent or unheard voices, as a part of a larger inquiry, can help therapists to make service provision and advocacy arguments that are based in evidence. This sharply contrasts how mental health service typically happens in this context, that is, from a top-down approach that lacks data to drive or support decisions and interventions. Multiple, local data sources tell us that when the student-therapists are engaged in systematic inquiry that is anchored by their own research agendas, they find their own voices strengthened as their awareness about and investment in their practice grows. Because of our shared sense of the need for such

learning and development, we have found ways to centralize this stance in the CIF program as well as in the continual development of our partnership. Framing this as a parallel process has been a valuable centralizing approach to our work. Working across the divides of time, language, culture, and context has proven challenging in ways that have forced us to clarify our individual and shared stances in relation to practitioner inquiry broadly and research in systemic family therapy specifically. This has proven challenging, and generative, to all involved in the endeavor.

EMERGING LEARNINGS: BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE COLLABORATION ACROSS THE AMERICAS

Throughout this collaboration-building process we have learned that developing a substantive understanding of each other's process, goals, values, and contexts is a precursor to a successful and sustainable collaboration. When collaboration is developed between systems that share similarities in culture, language, and philosophy, cooperation between these systems to achieve shared and individual objectives is potentially more easily negotiated since core dynamics are often similar enough to employ and maintain a dialogic process essential for balance and cooperation between the interested parties. In international work, multiple layers of challenges emerge that must be carefully considered such as culture, language, as well as philosophy of and approach to practice based on the economic, cultural, social, and institutional structures of the partners invested in the collaboration.

As we have explored, several issues that are central to this ongoing collaboration are accountability, the understanding of what reciprocal development and exchange means, and taking a systemic approach to cross-national collaboration. From the beginning of the relationships that began 14 years ago, we have strived to develop and maintain a cooperative system that is internally accountable – not only in terms of our individual accomplishments but also by outcomes that are measurable and sustainable and that ultimately benefit a shared sense of "bien comun" (a common good). As the collaboration between CIF and IC-FamWell has evolved, ongoing care has been taken in making decisions about the process and key decision-makers are routinely identified that represent the ultimate stakeholders in the collaboration: the client families and the therapists who work with them.

As we have discussed throughout this commentary, we believe that building authentic collaboration relies upon the development and ongoing refinement of multiple, intersecting core values and approaches, which include conceptualizing and approaching the collaborative process as a bilateral exchange; adopting a relational stance on collaboration; engaging in the systematic deconstruction and interruption of the "expert/learner" dichotomy and addressing asymmetrical power relationships that sustain this harmful binary; adopting a view of collaboration as a reciprocal and dialogic process; developing a growth and discovery orientation that is built upon the cultivation of a critical understanding of contexts; engaging in the multi-layered, parallel process of developing and operationalizing an inquiry stance on practice; and focusing on sustainability in the ongoing development of our collaborative process.

Within and across institutions, our ongoing learning and growth center on authentic dialogue and exchange. As we have noted, this requires paradigm shifts on both sides, a willingness to be and continually become vulnerable, uncomfortable, and self-critical, to take risks by changing our approaches and leaving our comfort zones. It means understanding and accepting the dynamic, mercurial, nature of true collaborative engagement, the nurturing of a relational environment that supports and promotes a culture of asking questions and a commitment to a growth and discovery orientation. This work, these relationships, are deeply meaningful to all of us. And, imperfect, complicated, and at times personally and professionally challenging as it is, the collaboration continues to be deeply transformative, motivating each and all of us to see the interconnectedness of local, national, and international efforts to help heal the world.

ENDNOTE

1 All names and identifying information of students have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

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