

# **Focused Issues in Family Therapy**

## **Series editor**

D. Russell Crane  
School of Family Life  
Brigham Young University  
Provo, Utah, USA

More information about this series at <http://www.springer.com/series/13372>

Valentín Escudero • Myrna L. Friedlander

# Therapeutic Alliances with Families

Empowering Clients in Challenging Cases

 Springer

Valentín Escudero  
University of A Coruña  
A Coruña, Spain

Myrna L. Friedlander  
University at Albany/SUNY  
Albany, New York, USA

ISSN 2520-1190

ISSN 2520-1204 (electronic)

Focused Issues in Family Therapy

ISBN 978-3-319-59368-5

ISBN 978-3-319-59369-2 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-59369-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017944920

© Springer International Publishing AG 2017

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are reserved by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by Springer Nature

The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*To our own families, with whom we have shared some  
challenging situations but, above all, much  
unconditional love*

# Foreword

This book should come with a warning: *Be careful when you pick it up, because you won't be able to put it down.*

Escudero and Friedlander have succeeded royally in tackling a difficult genre of books for mental health professionals: highly readable *and* informed by clinical experience *and* research-based and constructed and written in a manner that seamlessly stitches these elements together and engages the reader from the start. The focus of the book is on challenging family cases (not challenging *families*). The cases are highly challenging indeed, e.g., multi-problem families with multi-agency involvements, clients who are therapy “hostages” (including couples in which one partner is initially passively or actively resistant to treatment and families with reluctant adolescents), cases of abuse and neglect in the family system, and “parenting in isolation,” i.e., in situations in which one of the parents is absent physically or psychologically and/or obstructing the other’s parenting efforts.

These are the most daunting kinds of cases for experienced therapists as well as therapists in training. To be honest, treating families of *any* kind is often daunting for experienced therapists and therapists in training. Most training programs in psychotherapy focus on individual treatment, and many therapists have not been trained to think systemically or to work conjointly with families, let alone those in very difficult circumstances. Thus, despite the fact that family therapy has been shown to be efficacious and even preferable to individual therapy for a wide range of problems (Heatherington, Friedlander, Escudero, Diamond, & Pinosof, 2015), there is an unfortunate dearth of family therapy providers in the USA and internationally.

This work has the potential to make significant progress on that front by informing, empowering, and encouraging readers at all levels in their work with families. It addresses the reader directly, with engaging chapter titles that are packed richly with case material and thorough, practical answers to the complex question: *What do I do now!?* Their answers are informed by a combined 60+ years of experience in treating families themselves, training and supervising others, and consulting, as well as by a well-established and ongoing program of research on creating

therapeutic alliances in family therapy. This book represents the integration of clinical wisdom and clinical science at its best and in service of those who need it the most: families in great need and the therapists who are courageously helping them.

## Reference

Heatherington, L., Friedlander, M. L., Escudero, V., Diamond, G., & Pinsof, W. M. (2015). 25 years of family therapy research: Progress and promise. *Psychotherapy Research (25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Issue)*, 25, 348–364.

Williams College  
Williamstown, MA, USA

Laurie Heatherington,

## About the Authors

**Valentín Escudero**, PhD, is a professor of psychology at the University of A Coruña, Spain, and director of the Family Intervention and Care Research Unit (UIICF). The UIICF is a family therapy center, where four prestigious programs of family therapy research and family therapy training have taken place from 1999. A psychotherapist and family therapist widely recognized by European institutions, Escudero is also an adjunct clinical professor at the University at Albany, State University of New York, USA. He was a visiting professor for 3 years at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (2007–2011) and a visiting researcher at the Centre for Family Policy and Child Welfare at the University of Bristol, UK (2006–2007). Escudero is co-author with M. Friedlander and L. Heatherington of the *SOFTA (System for Observing Family Therapy Alliances)*. An associate editor of the *Journal of Family Therapy*, he has published in the *Journal of Family Therapy*, the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *Psychotherapy*, *Psychotherapy Research*, and the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. Aside from his respected profile as researcher, Escudero is the director of the Therapy Program for Vulnerable Children and Families, which is the primary program of psychotherapy for the Child Protective Services of the Xunta de Galicia in Spain (a program that includes seven therapy centers).

**Myrna L. Friedlander**, PhD, is a professor in the counseling psychology PhD program at the University at Albany, State University of New York, where she served as training director from 1999 to 2016. She has supervised master's and doctoral students for over 35 years and published more than 140 book chapters and journal articles, including several self-report instruments and observational coding systems, primarily related to the processes of psychotherapy and supervision. She has co-authored three books published by the American Psychological Association: *Therapeutic Alliances in Couples and Families: An Empirically Informed Guide to Practice* (Friedlander, Escudero, & Heatherington, 2016), *Critical Events in Psychotherapy Supervision: An Interpersonal Approach* (Ladany, Friedlander, & Nelson, 2005), and *Supervision Essentials for the Critical Events Model of Psychotherapy Supervision* (Ladany, Friedlander, & Nelson, 2016). A Fellow of the

American Psychological Association, she has served on the editorial boards of six journals and received awards for her lifetime contribution to research by the University at Albany, the Society of Counseling Psychology (within the American Psychological Association), and the American Family Therapy Academy. A licensed psychologist in New York State, she has been in independent practice for over 30 years.



# Acknowledgments

Many people have profoundly influenced our work in recent years, and we would like to acknowledge their influence. First, we must thank all the couples and families who trusted us with their hopes and dreams, sharing their difficulties and their suffering with us and giving us the opportunity to learn as professionals and to grow as people.

Additionally, we would like to express our appreciation to our graduate students and colleagues, particularly Laurie Heatherington and Marilyn Wheeler, who inspired our thinking about the alliance, our research, and our clinical work. In particular, Valentín Escudero wants to thank his team of therapists at the UIICF for their unwavering support: Alberto Abascal, Carlos de Francisco, Iria García, Raquel García, Naiara González, Belén López, Emma R. Maseda, Lucia Pérez, and Nuria Varela. Working with them is always stimulating, and each challenging case has provided us with the stimulus to learn and improve our skills along with helping clients change. Working with the UIICF team is a real privilege and an inexhaustible source of good humor. Valentín also wishes to thank all the coordinators and therapists in the Program of Therapeutic Treatment for Children at Risk and Foster Care, which he has been directing since 2012 for the Xunta de Galicia (Spain). The clients in that program are vulnerable children and families who cope every day with enormous difficulties. Working with them is a great honor. Similarly, Valentín wants to acknowledge 10 years of collaboration and learning with the Family and Children Care Program of the Junta de Castilla y León (Spain), which has been one of the most enjoyable and productive learning and research experiences of his professional life.

# Contents

<b>1 Using the Therapeutic Alliance to Empower Couples and Families</b> . . . . .	1
Alliances in Couple and Family Therapy . . . . .	5
The SOFTA Model and Measures . . . . .	7
Description of the SOFTA Dimensions and Behaviors . . . . .	9
Using the SOFTA-o and SOFTA-s in Practice and Training . . . . .	16
Alliance and Individual Differences . . . . .	19
Building Alliances in Not-so-Challenging Cases . . . . .	21
Alliance Rupture and Repair. . . . .	22
Poor Engagement in the Process: Safety First . . . . .	24
Problematic Within-Family Alliances . . . . .	26
Split Alliances: Emotional Bonds in Disarray . . . . .	30
Moving Forward . . . . .	32
References. . . . .	33
<b>2 Couples' Cross Complaints: "I Want... but She/He Doesn't Want to..."</b> . . . . .	37
Unique Challenges . . . . .	41
"I Will...But S/he Won't Come to Therapy" . . . . .	41
"I Feel Comfortable Here, but S/he Doesn't" . . . . .	42
"I Want <i>This</i> , but S/he Wants <i>That</i> " . . . . .	42
"I Think the Problem Is <i>This</i> , but S/he Thinks the Problem Is <i>That</i> " . . . . .	43
Recommendations from the Literature . . . . .	44
Not All Conflicts Are the Same. . . . .	44
Individual Differences Matter. . . . .	44
Conflict and the Within-Couple Alliance . . . . .	46
Alliance-Empowering Strategies . . . . .	47
Managing Cross Complaints. . . . .	47
Managing Zero-Sum Conflicts . . . . .	48
Case Example: The Singh-Whalens . . . . .	49

Final Thoughts ..... 53

References..... 53

**3 Engaging Reluctant Adolescents and Their Parents ..... 55**

  Unique Challenges ..... 57

    “Clearly, *He* Is the Problem” ..... 57

    “No, No ... I Don’t Have Any Problems”..... 57

    “If You Really Want to Help, Why Are You Forcing  
    Therapy on Me?” ..... 58

    “We Have Already Done Everything Possible, So Why Should  
    We Go to Therapy?” ..... 59

    “It’s Just What Kids Do Nowadays” ..... 60

  Rebellion Can Trap an Adolescent ..... 61

  Recommendations from the Literature ..... 62

    Engagement Is Key ..... 62

    A Different Kind of Therapeutic Relationship ..... 63

    Factors that Matter ..... 63

    Split Alliances..... 64

    Toward an Empirical Process Model of Engaging  
    Reluctant Adolescents..... 64

  Alliance-Empowering Strategies ..... 67

    Roll with Initial Resistance..... 67

    Foster Autonomy and Individuation ..... 68

    Validate the Adolescent’s Subjective Experience..... 69

    Reframe the Problem Systemically..... 70

    Empower the Parental System: Three Layers of the Onion ..... 70

  Case Example: What’s on Marta’s Smartphone? ..... 75

  Final Thoughts ..... 79

  References..... 80

**4 Parenting in Isolation, Without or With a Partner ..... 83**

  Unique Challenges ..... 84

  Recommendations from the Literature ..... 85

    One-Parent Families ..... 85

    Two-Parent Families ..... 87

  Alliance Empowering Strategies..... 88

    Flying Solo: Families with a Physically Absent Parent ..... 89

    Also Flying Solo: Families with a Psychologically Absent Parent. . . . 90

  Case Example: The Wong Family..... 92

  Final Thoughts ..... 96

  References..... 97

**5 Child Maltreatment: Creating Therapeutic Alliances  
with Survivors of Relational Trauma ..... 99**

  Unique Challenges ..... 100

    The Therapist Is Threatening to Love (*aka* Take Care of) Me ..... 100

The Vicious Cycle of Emotion Management Difficulties and Negative Identity . . . . . 101

The Challenge of Betrayal and Abandonment . . . . . 104

Family Role Confusion . . . . . 105

Role Confusion with Other Professionals . . . . . 105

The Obstructive Non-Offending Parent or Caregiver . . . . . 106

Denial and Dissociation . . . . . 107

Recommendations from the Literature . . . . . 108

    Family Reattachment . . . . . 108

    Focus on Family Resilience . . . . . 109

    The Concept of “Both-And” . . . . . 109

    Sharing Control . . . . . 110

    Contain and Switch . . . . . 111

Alliance-Empowering Strategies . . . . . 111

    Four Threats to Safety . . . . . 111

    Emotional Connection Cannot Be Prescribed . . . . . 114

    Tread Lightly . . . . . 114

    Adapt to the Client’s Attachment Style . . . . . 115

    Avoid Amplifying Denial . . . . . 116

    Create Separate Spaces . . . . . 117

Case Example: The Colangelo Family . . . . . 117

Final Thoughts . . . . . 125

References . . . . . 126

**6 Disadvantaged, Multi-Stressed Families Adrift in a Sea of Professional Helpers . . . . . 127**

    Unique Challenges . . . . . 128

        Multiproblem or Multi-Treated Families? . . . . . 128

        Therapy or Social Control? . . . . . 131

        Chronic Stress . . . . . 132

        Disorganization in the Professional Network . . . . . 134

        Accommodation to Chaos . . . . . 135

        Intrafamilial Conflict Due to Acculturative Stress . . . . . 136

    Recommendations from the Literature . . . . . 137

        Family Subtypes . . . . . 137

        Collaborative Therapy . . . . . 138

        Home-Based Therapy . . . . . 138

        Focus on Resilience . . . . . 139

        Building Alliances with Mandated or Otherwise Involuntary Clients . . . . . 139

    Alliance-Empowering Strategies . . . . . 141

        Create an “Affected Community” . . . . . 141

        Clarify Who Is the “Real Client” . . . . . 143

        Visit the Family’s Home . . . . . 143

- Convey Optimism . . . . . 145
- Serve as a Bridge for Specialized Treatment . . . . . 146
- Case Example: The Difús Family . . . . . 147
- Final Thoughts . . . . . 155
- References. . . . . 155
- 7 Empowering Through the Alliance: A Practical Formulation . . . . . 157**
  - Step One: Safety to Connect . . . . . 159
    - A Schema to Address the Initial Challenge . . . . . 159
    - Understanding and Working with Denial . . . . . 165
    - Guidelines for Creating Safety in a Context of Denial . . . . . 167
    - Guidelines for Creating Safety When Clients
      - Are Drowning in Problems . . . . . 168
      - Guidelines for Creating Safety When Clients
        - Have a Traumatic Response to Therapy . . . . . 170
  - Step Two: Connect to Engage . . . . . 171
    - Feeling Emotionally Understood . . . . . 172
    - Enhancing Engagement . . . . . 172
  - Step Three: Nurturing the Expanded Alliance . . . . . 176
    - Guidelines for Expanding the Alliance. . . . . 177
  - A Schematic Understanding of Couple and Family Alliances . . . . . 178
  - Concluding Thoughts . . . . . 180
  - References. . . . . 180
- Appendix A: Operational Definitions of the SOFTA Indicators  
(Clients and Therapist). . . . . 181**
  - Client Item Descriptors . . . . . 181
    - Engagement in the Therapeutic Process . . . . . 181
    - Emotional Connection to the Therapist . . . . . 183
    - Safety Within the Therapeutic Context. . . . . 185
    - Shared Sense of Purpose Within the Family . . . . . 189
  - Therapist Item Descriptions . . . . . 191
    - Therapist Contributions to Engagement
      - in the Therapeutic Process . . . . . 191
    - Therapist Contributions to Emotional Connections . . . . . 196
    - Therapist Contributions to Safety Within
      - the Therapeutic System. . . . . 200
    - Therapist Contributions to Shared Sense of Purpose
      - Within the Family . . . . . 204
- Appendix B: SOFTA-s Self-Report Questionnaires. . . . . 209**
  - SOFTA-s (client). . . . . 209
  - SOFTA-s (therapist) . . . . . 210
  - Scoring Guide for the SOFTA-s . . . . . 211
  - SOFTA-s (Shortened Versions). . . . . 212

**Appendix C: Rating Guidelines and Rating Sheets**  
**for the SOFTA-o (Client and Therapist)**..... 213  
    SOFTA-o..... 213  
    SOFTA-o Rating Guidelines..... 224

**Index**..... 227