Working with the families of the poor:
Improving Services for Children and their Caretakers

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Advocacy Brief – June 2018

This brief proposes that:

- Services to children and their families need to take a holistic view of the child’s relationships with family, extended family, neighbors and government agencies
- Improved communication between child advocates, families and government agencies is necessary. The current sectors serving lower income communities operate in a disconnected and complex manner, creating conditions that could further disrupt the lives of children and their families.
- Families should be encouraged and supported to use the resources they already have within themselves in order to address trauma effectively
- It is crucial to build a more equal and just system of social services to empower families living in poverty and the practitioners who serve them. Inequality and inter-generational poverty disrupt families and leave them with limited resources to change course.
- See video summary of the event at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gc2CsYbp9UY

Overview

On April 12, 2018, Equity for Children, in partnership with the Center for Attachment Research and with the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, hosted an event entitled Working with Families of the Poor: Taking Forward the Legacy of Salvador Minuchin at The New School. Panelists ranging from family therapists to child advocates (see Appendix A), convened to discuss how Minuchin’s innovative work addressing trauma that affects lower income families remains relevant today. This brief builds on the work and advocacy of Salvador Minuchin, who revolutionized family therapy and challenged a disorganized and fragmented social services system meant to help children affected by trauma.

In the 1950s, Minuchin moved into a house with delinquent African-American and Latino boys from New York City ghettos to counsel them at a time when society did not consider these youths capable of receiving therapy. It was there that he learned first-hand about the discrimination and inequality that African-American and Latino families face. After this experience, Minuchin continuously questioned and challenged the accepted norms within government institutions and agencies working with children and families, highlighting disconnected and conflicting interventions that ultimately disempowered those they were meant to serve.

Today, Minuchin’s work and advocacy continue to be relevant and provide guidance to help resolve issues that children, families and care service providers face. The brief concludes with recommendations to improve care services and advocacy for multi-crisis families.
These include:

- Educate those working to deliver care services for children and their families about the importance of assessing all of the multifaceted relationships and identities of children to provide them with proper treatment and help them build agency for the future.
- Ensure all children have access to cohesive quality care, regardless of economic standing or identity politics. There is a need to “strengthen existing programs in all sectors that are available to and working with multi-crisis families.”
- Increase collaboration between family therapists, child advocates and government institutions such as the juvenile justice and mental health systems, foster homes and the welfare department.
- “Challenge the systems involved.” Minuchin advocated for years for the New York foster care system to stop separating families without first helping them to find solutions to the issues they were facing.
- Give voice to the voiceless and empower communities and children by creating platforms where all can be heard.

**Background**

Salvador Minuchin was a social justice activist and a revolutionary who developed the field of Structural Family Therapy at a time when prevailing practices sought to “save” children facing trauma by taking them away from their families. Minuchin’s work advocated interventions that considered family relationships holistically and looked at resources within families to help children and their caretakers overcome issues together, a practice that remains relevant today.

Equity for Children Executive Director Alberto Minujin notes, “Minuchin came to see the therapist’s job as creating rules for the family so healthy patterns could develop.” He highlighted the need to “challenge the official story of families, of societies, and of all agencies involved,” and sought to understand why relationships, organizations and programs functioned the way they did, whether or not they worked well, and if not, what could be done about it.

Minuchin found that the dynamics and conflicting requirements of the multiple systems that marginalized people are often subjected to could ultimately disempower them. Very early on, growing up in Argentina as a Russian Jewish immigrant, Minuchin was exposed to the ways in which families are part of larger, disconnected structures. The neighborhood where he grew up was interdependent and community members were protective of each other as they faced an anti-Semitic host country. His family’s experience, living through both abundance and poverty, helped him develop a level of empathy and understanding towards the plight of poor families that would be key to his future work. Minuchin was also influenced by his time in jail as a student activist protesting the military regime takeover of his college during the Argentine coup in the 1940’s. This experience helped turn him into a fighter for social justice later in life.

In Minuchin’s work, systems include families spanning multiple generations, peer relationships, inter-related communities and social service agencies. “A functioning system has predictable
outcomes based on repetitive patterns and has periods of stability and change." For example, a father might need surgery in order to continue to go to work and to meet the demands of the probation system but might not be able to afford it. As a result, he breaks probation and is no longer able to see his children. This leads to the trauma-inflicted mother not being able to make ends meet and to the children being put into the foster system. The example illustrates patterns of disconnections within and between social service agencies, the criminal justice system and additional layers of sub-systems that result in family break ups. For International Consultant and Trainer in Systems and Family Therapy Ema Genijovich, a long time Minuchin collaborator, “Families create problems but they have solutions, love each other and will change for one another." When treating children affected by trauma it is crucial to look at the patterns and relationships within their family and among their caretakers to better understand the root causes of their behaviors. This in-depth examination can also lead to unexpected resources.

**Framing the Issue**

When it comes to social services provided to low income children, families and their caretakers, a holistic vision of the family remains elusive. Today, family therapy is frequently conducted by treating the child as an individual with his own set of problems without looking at the child’s greater network of relationships, systems and sub-systems -- such as communities, friends, immediate and extended families -- within which he lives.

African-American and Latino families are disproportionately institutionalized and are facing multiple layers of intergenerational poverty and dire life circumstances. The larger social context an individual resides in ultimately determines her identity and can be overwhelmingly traumatic in disadvantaged populations. “We can’t think about the structural challenges on the shoulders of the family without thinking about the setting in which the family is trying to survive.” Cyclical inequality and societal biases towards marginalized families only serve to exacerbate issues linked to poverty.

Currently, there is a lack of effective discussion about solutions to improve situations for the most disadvantaged. Those supporting underserved children and their families still face entrenched problems, such as the lack of equal access to therapy and quality care provided by government agencies. In particular, there is a dearth of effective platforms for poor children to have their voices heard or space to express their ideas and experiences.

**An Incohesive System**

Angie, her homeless companion and her extended family are all intertwined in cyclical poverty, a broken neighborhood, drug influences and health issues. She is a loving mother with three young children in foster care. Through the ins and outs of her bad habits and homelessness, she is trying to change her ways and get two of her children back. This requires navigating the multiple systems that she and her family are being jostled through: courts, hospitals, shelters, housing programs, drug centers, rehab clinics, day care centers, three foster families, foster agencies, lawyers, investigators, parole officers, doctors, social workers, drug counselors and therapists. These services work
independently of one another and often have contradicting requirements.

Angie, her two children, and her on-again/off-again and severely handicapped companion are at the heart of the issues affecting the family. All four are involved in multifaceted situations. Angie has a strong bond with her special needs child but a weaker one with the older child who was taken from her at birth due to her drug habit. Her companion would like to keep the family together, however, there is no simple solution or even a proper plan of action to make this happen. A scenario such as this is not unique among impoverished families.

Various government agencies have been quite helpful to the family at times, while leading at other times to further fragmentation of the family and preventing Angie, her two children and companion from living together. Angie sees a counselor but due to a high turnover at the facility, she has seen six different ones in a short period of time. The homeless shelter personnel tell her that she cannot keep her children with her, but she cannot have custody of them unless she has a home. Her children are in different foster homes that are geographically difficult for her to get to. At one point, Angie stayed in a drug rehab center where she was told to “forget about her children” and to focus on herself. As a result, she quit going. And the story continues.

Minuchin shared this client's complex story to illustrate how interventions by social services agencies can lack a holistic understanding of a client’s situation and complex involvement in multidimensional relationships. The absence of coordination among the different organizations Angie dealt with ultimately left her feeling helpless and dependent on the social services system.

A Systemic Understanding of Family and Care Services

Panelists at the April 12, 2018 event, Working with Families of the Poor: Taking Forward the Legacy of Salvador Minuchin, stressed ways in which lessons learned from Minuchin’s practice can be used by advocates and professionals working with children to collaborate in improving services for lower income families. Three key concepts came out of the evening’s conversation:

- **To effectively help families, the system of relationships in a child's life and of services provided should be considered holistically.** Mary Watson, Executive Dean of The New School’s Schools of Public Engagement, highlighted that, “the struggles of a child are also a reflection of the struggles of the family and that of the community.” Panelist Mindy Fullilove, Professor of Urban Policy and Health at The New School, spoke about her work in city policies and the broken systems of services that have harmed public health over the past decades. “While counseling gay men during the AIDS epidemic I discovered that the virus was spreading so fast due to horrific urban policies directed specifically at poor families.” In her research on systems, she realized that city services were failing to support those who needed them most. As a result, families in poverty are structurally isolated and have continued to disintegrate. Seeking to reconnect different city agencies, Fullilove began to map who makes decisions about how the city operates, who benefits the most and how the system can become more coherent. Veronica
Barenstein, Director of the Family and Couples Therapy Program at the David Geffen School of Medicine, UCLA, explained that thanks to Minuchin’s clear and holistic view of mental illness, “I learned [...] to look at how the individual fits within the family, community and society and [to focus on] changing those relations and advocating for social justice.”

- **It is crucial to challenge the system of which a child is a part when he or she is affected by trauma.** This mindset of always disputing long-held truths of the social justice field is what set Minuchin apart. It helped him and his team define the basic objective for all their work: “To change [government] agencies’ own attitudes; to help them see the families they were working with as resources, as healers, and not just as problems to be solved,” underscored Genijovich. He questioned the system of therapy as it was and also the systemic poverty of minorities, thereby eliminating restrictive labels and opening up a new approach. Minujin advocated looking at the multidimensional aspects of a narrative and how they relate to one another. Those dealing with trauma should not be marginalized or institutionalized away from society. Minuchin questioned whether institutions that provide care, “maximize strengths, increase possibilities, or do [they] create a hothouse for pathology?” Carol Shapiro, Founder of Family Justice and La Bodega de la Familia, discussed her work with prisoners at Rikers Island in New York, pointing out that, “a dysfunctional system brings about dysfunctional families.”

- **Families should be encouraged and supported to look for and use resources they already have within themselves.** Rita Abadi, Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC), Mount Sinai Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention (SAVI) Program, works with families and peers of sexual violence and trafficking of survivors to mobilize their strengths and advocate on their behalf. She challenges societal ideology and looks further into their usual support systems such as peers and family friends. Families should be directed on how to find their own solutions to problems and strengthen relationships. According to Minuchin, “when intervention occurs, there might be a period of confusion until patterns form to once again create stability.” Government agencies often seem to see this period as failure rather than as families showing flexibility and building on resources they already have or that exist within their communities. In the US, one in 28 children currently have a parent behind bars, which breaks down into one in nine African-Americans, one in 28 Hispanics, and one in 57 Caucasians. Shapiro uses Minuchin’s influence to bridge relationships between prisoners, families, law enforcement and neighborhoods to discover their strengths and resources together.

**Recommendations**

Moving forward, it is crucial for those involved in delivering family therapy, advocating on behalf of children, designing policies or programs for poor families and providing services to children suffering from trauma to develop a more holistic approach. Below are ways to more effectively empower multi-crisis families, and particularly their youngest members, to move beyond trauma and live fulfilling lives:
Educate those working to provide care services for children and their families about the importance of assessing all of the multifaceted relationships and identities of a child to provide her with proper treatment and help her build agency for the future.

Ensure all children have access to cohesive quality care, regardless of economic standing or identity politics. There is a need to “strengthen existing programs in all sectors that are available to and working with multi-crisis families.”

Increase collaboration between family therapists, child advocates and government institutions, such as the juvenile justice and mental health systems, foster homes, and the welfare department.

“Challenge the systems involved.” Minuchin advocated for years for the New York foster care system to stop separating families without first helping them to find solutions to the issues they were facing.

Give voice to the voiceless and empower communities and children by creating platforms where all can be heard.

Encourage government agencies to see the transition periods around their interventions in families’ lives not as failure but rather as families showing flexibility and building on resources they already have or that exist within their communities.

Going forward, Equity for Children will reinforce the dialogue among the network of organizations and people working with families of the poor so as to develop and expand actions to include the voices of extended families and communities in all child protection programs and in large institutions working with children. Equity for Children is committed to including and promoting this holistic approach and to making interventions more effective, in order to give opportunities to the most disadvantaged children.

“Services for poor families are widely available and almost always well intentioned, but they are frequently flawed as well. Because services are often fragmented and uncoordinated, they are less effective than they might be; and because services are focused on individual people and problems, they do not tap the healing possibilities that reside within families and communities.” – Salvador Minuchin

Contributors

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APPENDICES

A. “Working with Families of the Poor: Taking Forward the Legacy of Salvador Minuchin” Event – 12 April, 2018, The New School

Speaker Biographies

**Rita Abadi**, LMHC, Mount Sinai Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention (SAVI) Program. Abadi is the Operations Manager and Clinician for the SAVI Program at the Queens District Attorney’s Office and at the New York City Family Justice Center, Queens. She provides client-centered, trauma-related psychotherapy, advocacy and referrals to survivors of sexual and domestic violence, with a special focus on sex trafficking. She is fluent in 4 languages and has over 25 years of experience working with immigrants and culturally specific groups in the US and in Latin America.

**Veronica Barenstein**, Director, Family and Couples Therapy Program, David Geffen School of Medicine, UCLA. Dr. Barenstein is the Founder and Director of the Family and Couples Therapy Clinic and Training Program at the David Geffen School of Medicine, UCLA, where she has taught family and couples therapy to psychiatrists and psychologists for the last 20 years. She is an expert family therapist and trainer who works and trains both nationally and internationally. She received her early training in family therapy at the New York University Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program and her advanced training at the Minuchin Center for the Family in New York. She was subsequently visiting faculty at the Minuchin Center.

**Mindy Fullilove**, Professor of Urban Policy and Health, The New School. Fullilove is a board-certified psychiatrist who explores the ties between environment and mental health. She received her bachelor’s degree from Bryn Mawr College and her MS and MD degrees from Columbia University. Dedicated to the psychology of place, Mindy’s research started in 1986 when she linked the AIDS epidemic with place of residence and she continues to focus on the health problems caused by inequality. For the past 30 years, Mindy has been investigating how broken connections between different sections of cities harm public health and explores ways to reconnect them.

**Ema Genijovich**, International Consultant and Trainer in Systems and Family Therapy. Genijovich is a renowned lecturer, supervisor and visiting faculty at many institutions within the US and internationally. She has presented her work all over the Americas, Europe and Asia. She was a longtime collaborator of Dr. Salvador Minuchin, with whom she worked for over 25 years. She is a founding member of The Minuchin Center in NY and was its Director of Training for many years. Genijovich has extensive experience in providing supervision, training and consultation to institutions serving low income, culturally diverse and “difficult to engage” populations and has collaborated in the development of a variety of programs.
Alberto Minujin, Executive Director, Equity for Children. Minujin is a professor at the Studley Graduate Program in International Affairs at The New School, with a special focus on topics related to social policy and children’s rights. He is the founder of Equity for Children and a member of the Observatory on Latin America at The New School. Minujin was awarded the Argentina Bicentennial Medal in recognition of his contributions to the fields of child rights and social policy. Professor Minujin is the author of many books, articles and papers about child rights, social policy and the middle class.

Carol Shapiro, Founder and President of Family Justice and La Bodega de la Familia. Shapiro is an innovator in the field of criminal and social justice, the focus of her work for over 40 years. While currently serving on the New York State Board of Parole, she is known largely for her integration of asset and family tools for community and correctional system use, which evolved from her experiences working within jails, prisons, and government. Family Justice, a national nonprofit, tapped the strengths of families and their social networks to break cycles of victimization and justice system involvement, in partnership with law enforcement and other mandated systems, such as child welfare and public housing. Shapiro has devised and collaborated on numerous governmental initiatives to more effectively address crime prevention, addiction, mental illness, pre-release, reentry, and a broad range of related issues.

Mary Watson, Executive Dean of Public Engagement, The New School
Mary R. Watson was appointed Executive Dean of Public Engagement in July 2014 and leads the founding division of The New School with the aim of advancing its innovative approaches to action oriented, engaged learning in the world. Watson is a worldwide leader in university networks advancing higher education change, including the 50+20 Management Education Initiative and the Ashoka Changemaker initiative.

B. End Notes

1 Alberto Minujin, Executive Director, Equity for Children, at a conference entitled Working with Families of the Poor: Taking Forward the Legacy of Salvador Minuchin, The New School, April 12, 2018.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.