



Did we get it all wrong?¹

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I would like to talk today about what the idea of mental illness does to young children, their families and their communities.

About 10 years ago, I met Alicia and her daughter Sophia. Alicia was a minority, immigrant, single mother and Sophia, a 4 year-old in pre-school. (I have changed both of their names and other information that would identify them in order to protect their rights to privacy). I was assigned to be their therapist. At the time, I had just graduated from a master's in counseling and was starting to practice under my newly provisional license as an intern. Alicia and Sophia were among the first families I worked with—so you can imagine my excitement! The agency that I worked for back then provided in-home counseling to children and their families that consisted of weekly, two hour sessions that were to take place at the family's home. It was 10 years ago, but I still remember that while driving to their home I felt thrilled by the prospect of serving as some kind of a facilitator of change. I was eager to get started and felt confident about my training.

So, there I was. I knocked at their door and Alicia welcomed me in. While we shook hands, I realized that I was so excited about this moment that I had forgotten one thing some of my professors had taught me: Read the clinical history beforehand. Clearly a novice therapist! I now had Sophia's clinical history under my arm and it was obviously too late—I didn't want to reveal how inexperienced I was by excusing myself to go back to my car to read their file. So, I came in and the only two things I knew about them were their names and their address, of course. We had a lovely two hour conversation, which we spent mostly talking about Sophia's life by talking, playing and drawing.

After I introduced myself to Sophia, she introduced me to her toys--mostly dolls and stuffed animals. We talked with great detail about the kind of lives that

¹ This story was prepared for and delivered at the San Antonio, TX Tedex Talk sponsored by the Clarity Child Guidance Center on 2014.



Sophia and her toy-companions had shared over the days and months that they had lived together, and about the incredible worlds in which these lives had taken place, some of which were documented in her colorful and creative drawings hung in every single wall of their apartment. Sophia seemed to experience what it was like to fly like a bird as she jumped from chair to chair; and also to turn invisible in order to trick her toys when they could not, from her point of view, see her under the table. It was hard not to be amazed by Sophia's imagination as well as her care and consideration toward her toy-companions. Sophia's mother, Alicia, told me that she was well acquainted with Sophia's companions. From time to time she had even served them breakfast, lunch or dinner at the table per Sophia's request.

Sophia was certain that her toys were urgently required to keep her company at night and Alicia wholeheartedly agreed with her. Sophia explained to me that they helped protect her at night when the bad kids at her preschool managed to get into her dreams to continue tormenting her like they did during the day. According to her, they were relentless. They would make fun of her and humiliate her for her accented English and her dark skin color. Most recently they were calling her "crazy" after her classmates found out that therapists were coming to the preschool to see Sophia for therapy, and would pull her out from their activities. My heart dropped to my stomach. At 4 years old, Sophia's peer relationships had become a window to the world of racism.

At night, Sophia would dream about her dolls and stuffed animals helping her fly away from those who would hurt her or, at other times, they would help her fight off her classmates with their animal powers. During the day, since she was not allowed to bring her toy-companions to the preschool, Sophia resorted to her fists and pencils to fight them off. She knew she had to defend herself. After all, that was how her mother, Alicia, defended herself from Sophia's father when he would hurt both of them with his fists.

Our time came to an end. I thanked Sophia and Alicia for their openness in welcoming me into their home and lives, and shared my impressions and appreciation for what I had learned from Sophia that day as a talented artist, who shared kindness and special care with her toy-companions, I appreciated the kind



of relationships that she had established with her dolls and stuffed animals to the extent that they would take care of one another. I also expressed how disconcerted I was for how painful it had been for her to have to defend herself from others whom attempted to hurt her, but at the same time I was reassured that Sophia had so many friends and allies to look out after her.

Alicia thanked me for my visit and, in desperation, told me that they were going to need all the help I could give them. She explained her comment by telling me that Sophia had child-onset schizophrenia, ADHD, a learning disorder and a post-traumatic stress disorder, as she had been informed by different doctors and therapists. This had been devastating and isolating for the family. As a result of this, Sophia's cousins and neighbors stopped coming to visit to play with her. Once again, my heart dropped to my stomach. Four psychiatric diagnosis for a 4-year old experiencing the pain and humiliations of racism and domestic violence?

As you may suspect, as soon as I got into my car, what did I do? I read the file only to confirm Alicia's descriptions. A list of symptoms under the four diagnoses taken from the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders was all I found about who Sophia was. This did not introduced me in any way, shape or form to the Sophia I had just met minutes before.

Have I read Sophia's file prior to our meeting, would I have missed the opportunity to learn about her incredible artistic imagination, kindness, care and abilities to develop meaningful relationships? Would I have thought about her in terms of a dysfunctional person who had a disordered or ill mind? Would I have made no reference to the undignified experience that is living under racism and violence? Did you change your impressions about Sophia after you learned about her psychiatric diagnosis? I wonder.

Perhaps I was shaken a bit as a very new professional practitioner but I knew for a fact that there was so much more to Sophia and Alicia than the diagnostic psychiatric manual would have had me known about them and the circumstances of their lives.

Agreeing with Arthur Kleinman (1998), American physician and anthropologist, professor of psychiatry at Harvard, the professionalization of human problems as



psychiatric disorders causes people to lose a world, to lose a local context and everyday cultural stories to understand what life means and what is at stake in living. The professionalization of human problems as psychiatric disorders, inauthenticates us by making illegitimate our own representations about our experiences. It infringes the rights that young people, their families and their communities have to tell their own stories in their own terms. It robs people from meaningful relationships that dignify them; and deletes relationships that cause suffering and pain, making them unavailable for accountability.

The mental health professions may have been initially conceived as an alternative for our communities to better understand and address social suffering. And to develop means to work along communities for the care of humanity (Bhabha, 1994). The boom of psychiatric diagnosis in the U.S. in recent decades, and its (very unfortunate) export worldwide, however, tells me that we got it all wrong. Our adoption and constant replication of these American psychiatric categories to understand suffering has impoverished our moral responsibility. It has been put forward mostly to the benefit of a pharmaceutical economy at expense of the isolating and humiliating effects of human suffering. As professionals, we have a long road ahead of ourselves to undo the damage. But this may be possible by reengaging in moral practices from a place of solidarity and humanity, where there is room for the imagination, like Sophia's; and room for families like Alicia and Sophia, like yours, like mine, to take back our worlds, our relatives, our neighbors, our allies by exercising our rights to our own stories, so that we can face our own cultural versions of suffering.

References

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