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# Eliau: Projective Icon of Psychology

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Abstract. This article describes how the Elian Gonzalez story has served to expose shortfalls in clinical psychological practice.

While the story of Elian Gonzalez has exposed cleavages among Cuban-Americans, within the United States Republican and Democratic political parties, among members of the Clinton Administration, and among and between various political special interest groups, the story also has exposed some truisms within the clinical psychological community that border on magical thinking.

We are told that "Traumatized kids have glorious smiles." The intent of the telling is to suggest that what appears to be healthy may not be. Of course, sometimes this is the case. On the other hand, typing smiling as a possible indicator of masked trauma or even a direct expression of trauma certainly universalizes psychological trauma--a boon for those clinicians desiring validation of psychodynamics, support for paradoxical and/or asymmetrical functioning of psychological systems components, or merely a greater opportunity for economic rewards.

We are told that "any child who has gone through what Elian has gone through needs time to recover." Certainly, some children might need to recover, others the need plus the time to do so. However, mental health professionals harboring the initial hypothesis are creating demand expectations and the requirements for self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, there will be the need to recover and the time to do so or what needs to be done so that there is a need to recover and the time to do so will be done--even if what needs to be done will be a gross misfit of reality to ideology.

We are told that "the loss of [Elia's] mother, especially in such a traumatic fashion [drowning]...will have an impact that endures throughout his life...and may make him more vulnerable to depression, and overly sensitive to other losses." The trauma for a child of the drowning of a mother is dependent on--among many issues--the child-mother relationship, whether the drowning was observed, various interpretations and social perceptions of the drowning and of death by the child and by others in the child's social orbit, and, again, the theories of socially credentialed experts applied by these experts to the child. The vulnerability linkage is possible, but, interestingly, the possible nature of the vulnerability as stated by socially credentialed experts renders the linkage as highly likely if not ineluctable as understood by many recipients of expert knowledge..

We are told that "a series of abrupt separations [e.g., from his father, his mother, his great uncle, his cousin]...are added stresses." The implicit message here is that abrupt separations and stresses are necessarily bad. However, both the consequences of separations and abrupt separations are at least somewhat dependent on the nature of the various relationships. And stresses may have positive as well as--and at time, instead of--negative consequences. And, if abrupt separations and stresses are bad, why should one approve of establishing additional close relationships that are fated to end rather abruptly such as therapeutic relationships with mental health professionals?

## International Bulletin of Political Psychology

We are told that "the boy's face changed, [with] tension flickering across it for a moment before his smile returned" when a mental health professional misused the Spanish word for mother for the Spanish word for stepmother. We also are told that "Such a reaction...is typical of children who have endured traumatic experiences." Wouldn't such a reaction also occur merely because of the confusion engendered by the mental health professional's dysfluency or because of a nonpathological sadness for the memory of the child's mother?

We are told in the context of pathologizing trauma reactions that children may display mixtures of fantasy and reality in relation to their loss. In this regard, we also are told that Elian sometimes states that his mother had died, at other times that she has lost her memory, is in Miami, and will soon come and get him when her memory returns. Yet children and adults mix fantasy and reality in many situations--especially those involving close relationships. Moreover, there have been mass media intimations that adults in Elian's social orbit have been suggesting to others and to Elian that the mother may not be dead.

Although many analysts and pundits have reiterated that the most important aspect of the story is the boy, as important--if not more important--is the airing of Weltanschauung, ideology, false consciousness, and social praxis within the political world. How will all of this affect Elian? How will all of this affect all of us? Here psychology may have much to protect and much to project. (See Briere, J., & Elliott, D. M. (1997). Psychological assessment of interpersonal victimization effects in adults and children. *Psychotherapy*, 34, 353-364; Goode, E. (April 26, 2000). What a smile hides: Unknown effects of Cuban boy's ordeal. *The New York Times*, p. A14; Llabre, M. M., & Hadi, F. (1997). Social support and psychological distress in Kuwaiti boys and girls exposed to the Gulf crisis. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 26, 247-255; Pfefferbaum, B., & Allen, J. R. (1998). Stress in children exposed to violence: Reenactment and rage. *Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 7, 121-135; Winje, D., & Ulvik, A. (1998). Long-term outcome of trauma in children: The psychological consequences of a bus accident. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry & Allied Disciplines*, 39, 635-642.) (Keywords: Elian Gonzalez, Mental Health.)