

FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR AWARD Project Statement

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Proposed Project: Trauma and Deliberate Self-Harm: a Family Approach to Treatment

Introduction, Experience and Rationale

Anyone that knows my family will tell you how important Brazil is in our life. I have a son adopted from Porto Alegre when he was 5 years old, he's now 18. Until 2016, I had a successful program of research within high-risk communities in Porto Alegre. Our work led to publications and informed mental health treatment in Porto Alegre up until my in-country colleague retired.

In recent years, I have worked to identify other collaborators and, as part of this, coordinated a working meeting in 2016 to develop collaborators between the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) and Brazilian researchers. This meeting brought together about 40 Brazilian academics and about 20 UNL faculty to develop collaborative projects. While preparing for that working meeting, I met people from the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP) and found that our philosophies, programs and research goals were an excellent match.

As time has passed it has become clear to me that in order to develop the depth and quality of work I'm seeking I need to spend time in São Paulo. One of the things I love about Brazil is the commitment to relationships. Everything, even professional work, starts with building relationships. Spending time in São Paulo would enable the development of depth and breadth in my professional relationships with UNIFESP and speed up the impact of our work on suicide and self-harm.

With my passion for and understanding of Brazil, the logical next step in my research and relationship building is an opportunity to spend time as a Fulbright Scholar at UNIFESP. I plan to take my family with me consisting of my wife and 3 children, including my son that was born in Porto Alegre and has not been back to Brazil since his adoption. They will be in 4th, 7th and 12th grades and while there and we plan to have them attend school in São Paulo.

Teaching

Undergraduate course in Portuguese. As a professor at UNL, I have taught numerous courses that have value for UNIFESP especially in the areas of Family Therapy, trauma, and applied clinical research. I served as the director of the Marriage and Family Therapy program, leading all training and competency evaluations of family therapists. One course I teach that meshes nicely with UNIFESP is about treatment of families and individuals who have experienced trauma. This course specifically focuses on the complex situations that are associated with trauma and suicide. I was asked by UNIFESP to teach this at the undergraduate level in Portuguese. Through early life experiences and my work in southern Brazil I am fluent in Portuguese and have taught and lectured many times in Portuguese. I see several differences in current teaching approach at UNL and UNIFESP that will

create a mutually beneficial partnership through this course. For example, UNL's family therapy program specializes in trauma informed interventions for individuals and families that are brief and resource effective. At the same time, I know the UNIFESP program is committed to rapid improvement of symptoms and I believe that the expertise of each will be mutually beneficial.

Graduate course in English. In addition to the undergraduate needs, UNIFESP colleagues have shared the need for more applied research in Family Therapy. The skill of collecting data in conjunction with treatment is something I teach every year in our family therapy program and I believe it will benefit the program at UNIFESP. To this end, I was asked to teach a course focusing on conducting applied research in clinical settings. UNIFESP has asked that this graduate research methods course be taught in English to help prepare researchers for international collaborations and future publication in English. UNIFESP has identified Graduate courses taught in English as a priority for their doctoral level education and that this would fill a current internationalization gap. Curriculum adjustments for English will be made in this course to enable content and process learning. Examples of these adjustments include increasing the thoroughness of written material like PowerPoints and fostering conversations about applicability of material to Brazilian cultural contexts. I will explain more adaptations below.

São Paulo joint public seminar. We also plan to conduct a joint public seminar for family therapists in São Paulo. This will be a public training given by myself and colleagues at UNIFESP and will focused on treatment of trauma to impact suicidality and self-harm. This collaborative public lecture will improve treatment provided by family therapists while at the same time highlighting the collaboration between UNIFESP and UNL.

Significance to UNFESP teaching. As a scholar and family therapist for many years, I would bring valuable expertise to enhance the strong program that already exists at UNIFESP. When in Brazil, I am fortunate to relate well with students and am often asked to give lectures about my personal experience as a first-generation college student and the resulting pathway to academia. Students frequently express appreciation because my experience is so similar to theirs and that they never considered academia. In those moments, I am fortunate enough to inspire students because they relate to me—not because I convey ivory tower brilliance and genius, but because I speak sincerely in an open and candid way about hopes they have but don't believe are possible. I am happy to be able to connect well with Brazilian students, academics and community leaders at a genuine level.

Pedagogy changes for Brazil. Prior to teaching content in Brazil, I will do research on best practice materials that have been developed with Brazilians in mind, especially materials in Portuguese. Because I am fluent, I will teach in Portuguese, which will greatly enhance the utility of my class. I have learned through experience that to be effective in Brazil and in Portuguese, I have to structure my content to be more interactive. I believe this helps students in Brazil talk through the concepts and allow them to make more sense of the content in their context. Enabling this application process through opportunities to interact is even more important when teaching internationally. I use a variety of teaching and learning methods and have taught online, blended and in person classes. These experiences will strengthen the utility of the content and my ability to teach in the Brazilian context.

Relevant Professional Experience. I have experience teaching graduate and undergraduate courses related to treatment of individuals experiencing complex mental health concerns. I have taught courses focused on developing family professionals that work with trauma and high risk youth. I have also

taught short courses in Portuguese as well as courses taught in English in Brazil. I have experience and expertise to be able to meet UNIFESP's request of undergraduate courses in Portuguese and Graduate in English. Much of my work at UNL is teaching students how to best work with families, especially those from diverse backgrounds.

In addition, I am involved with graduate and undergraduate student training and professional advisement. I currently advise several PhD students and serve on numerous other doctoral committees. Over the years I have advised numerous theses and dissertations and have served as the outside member on a number PhD dissertation committees in Brazil with the Federal Universities in Rio Grande do Sul, Pernambuco and the University of São Paulo. I feel confident in my ability to support and mentor students and to be an ambassador for the Fulbright and UNL with students in Brazil.

Research

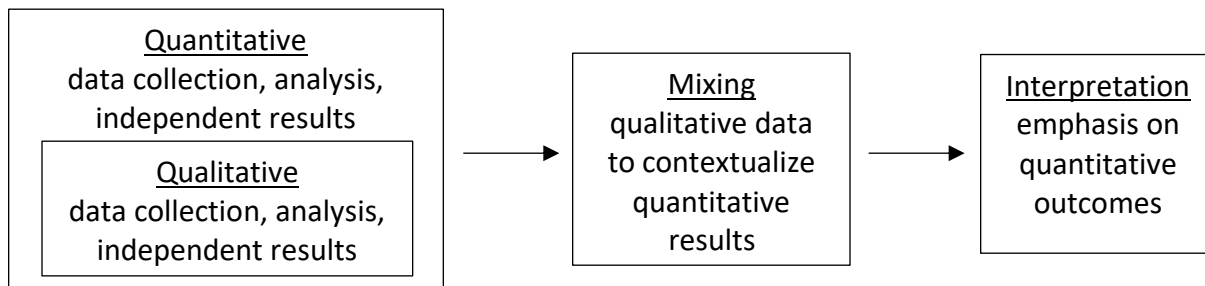
I plan to work with Dr. Ana Lucia Horta in the department of Nursing with the Family Therapy program. Dr. Horta works with treatment of mental health in families and is the department chair and family therapy program director. I hope to do the Fulbright between August and December of 2020 allowing me to be at their institution during the entire semester. The research we plan to conduct builds on the theme of family treatment of trauma in Brazil. The purpose of the project is to better understand risk factors of suicide and non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI).

Problem to be addressed. Deliberate self-harm or NSSI is an international public health problem. Regardless of whether the individual's intent is related to death, deliberate self-harm is preceded by significant emotional pain and the self-harm results in not only physical pain is compounded by additional emotional pain such as shame and remorse (Lauw, 2015). The reverberating impact of self-harming cannot be overstated. This cyclical struggle effects the individual as well as their support system, especially family. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15 to 29 year-olds worldwide (2014). The preventable nature of suicide makes this killer of adolescents and young adults particularly hard to accept. However, for every suicide there are at least 20 suicide attempts to say nothing about the number of non-suicidal self-injury. Not enough is known about the variables that link different types of deliberate self-harm to suicide.

While suicide has long been recognized as a public health issue, concern for NSSI has grown in the recent decades. NSSI, often referred to as "cutting" in pop culture, is ever present on social media platforms. Striking gender differences exist with NSSI and suicide. Males commit suicide between 1.5 and 5 times more than women (WHO, 2014). Inversely 1 in 10 teenage boys engage in NSSI compared to 1 in 4 teenage girls (Monto, McRee & Deryck, 2015). Beyond gender differences, there are significant increases in media reports of NSSI especially "cutting" that has made it difficult to empirically determine if there is increased prevalence or if it is just an increase in awareness. Understanding the relationship between risk factors like substance use, trauma and family functioning will inform effective interventions for preventing suicide and decreasing NSSI. additionally, while suicide rates are known in Brazil, we do not know the prevalence of NSSI and/or suicidal ideation among neither high school nor college aged young people. The project has two primary research objectives:

- *Objective 1.* The first objective is to establish a baseline of the prevalence of NSSI, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in Brazilian youth. This study will assess the pervasiveness of NSSI behavior and suicidal ideation and/or attempts in high schools and the Federal University of São Paulo. This data will be collected quantitatively and will include a range of demographic characteristics that are known to be risk factors of suicide to explore their association with NSSI.
- *Objective 2.* The project explore why Brazilian youth self-harm and/or engage in suicidal thoughts or behavior. The second objective is to understand the relationship between risk factors and the presence of NSSI and/or suicidal ideation/attempts. Research outside of Brazil has pointed to a need to pay particular attention to substance use/abuse, trauma and past self-harm experiences. Brazilian research has also pointed to the significant relationship between quality of family life and self-harm. Additionally, due to societal changes and the association between suicide and media, this study will also include exploratory data related to social and other digital mediums influence on NSSI and suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

Methodology. This project will use a simultaneous embedded experimental mixed methods design to guide data collection (Creswell, Plano-Clark, 2007). This methodology rigorously structures the qualitative depth of inquire to inform quantitative outcomes enabling robust depth of information to inform treatment development. The research procedures will appear as follows.



Professional experience for project. I have conducted several mixed methods studies in Brazil. These studies have resulted in numerous publications, presentations at national and international conferences and mental health treatment changes in Southern Brazil. I was involved successfully in a Brazilian research project for over 10 years and hope to be able to rebuild a collaborative team. I have published work from quantitative research including advanced statistical models and qualitative inquiry. Speaking Portuguese fluently also enables me to interact with community leaders, families, young people during the research and fully engage with the research team.

Project feasibility. I hope to be able to stay in Brazil with my family for 4 months in order to set up the project and collect the data with partners from UNIFESP. Developing the research protocols prior to the time in Brazil and then beginning data collection upon arrival will provide sufficient time for data collection and analysis; plus enable me to teach for a complete semester. UNIFESP faculty already have relationships with the high schools and their university where we will collect data. They are also involved with the UNIFESP program tasked with addressing issues of suicide and NSSI at the university.

Significance to UNIFESP. The Federal University of São Paulo has identified as one of its priorities to address deep concerns about increases in student suicides over the past several years. A primary aim of this project is to determine the prevalence of self-harming behavior and suicides among Brazilian teens and young adults in São Paulo. This baseline is needed to determine identifiable risk factors, points of intervention and mechanisms the university can leverage to address the issue. One week prior to the submission of this application, UNIFESP experienced another student suicide. They reached out to further express their commitment to and need for better interventions. This study will impact the ways they provide support for students and prevention of NSSI and suicide.

Significance to the field. While this study is focused on Brazilian youth and young adults the outcomes will provide context to help develop further understanding of the relationship between trauma, substance use and family functioning with the health concerns of NSSI and suicide. There are few issues within the mental health field that are of greater concern than that related to issues leading to self-harm. All other mental health concerns pale in mortality rate comparisons to that of suicide. Beyond suicide, rates of hospitalizations due to suicidal ideation, attempts and NSSI impact the medical system significantly. While many researchers are seeking to better understand these issues, we believe that international research gives critical understanding to mechanisms of NSSI and suicide prevention.

Significance to Brazil. This baseline understanding of NSSI and its association with suicide is necessary in order to recognize trends of self-harm across time within Brazil. This project will also lead to better understanding of the culturally driven context of these variables and enable the development of culturally appropriate interventions for Brazilian youth and young adults. Without a culturally rooted understanding of self-harm, interventions run the risk of being based on anecdotal evidence, personal experience, or empirical evidence from another country. The ability to provide evidence of the Brazilian context of NSSI and suicide can greatly aid Brazil's efforts at meeting the WHO's challenge of decreasing suicide by 10% (2014).

Dissemination of results. The results of the study will be published in research journals and presented at professional meetings and conferences. Results will also be provided in collaboration with UNIFESP's team seeking to decrease suicides at the university and with the public school system where data will be collect. Applications from the results will also be presented and published in public forums to educate the public on methods of preventing suicidal ideation and NSSI.

Fulbright impact on me and my family. I know my time in Brazil will deepen my understanding of working with families in different contexts and that this knowledge will significantly impact my research and teaching at UNL. The PhD program in my home department is called Global Family Health and Wellbeing, reflecting our commitment to international work with families. I am confident that the impact of time in Brazil with Fulbright will be tremendous in advising students, teaching courses, conducting research and training globally minded academics. Specifically, I will have time to learn with and from Brazilians who are committed to developing effective treatments for families. I know that I have a lot to learn about training therapists to work with Brazilians. I am certain I will be a much better instructor for my UNL students who are learning to work with Latino families. Teaching and doing research with the UNIFESP will give me incredible insight into other ways of treating trauma and suicide in young people. I know a Fulbright Scholar Award will propel my work in ways that are not possible without spending time side-by-side with colleagues.