

# DAILY VARIETY

Reed Business Information (RBI)

Psychological precautions prevent ABC's unscripted program from launching the wrong kind of fireworks

By BETSY BOYD

So many families clamor to air their dirty laundry on "Wife Swap." But in order to avoid washing out, they must first make it past a consultation with licensed therapist Xavier Amador, Ph.D., who aims to help producers discover human drama that won't descend into hokey or hurtful melodrama.

"We may say to producers, 'Hey, we spoke with this person. Don't bring up the history, you know, of the eating disorder when she was 14,'" Amador comments. "Or, 'We talked to the person's therapist, and there's no reason you can't put somebody on TV who has bipolar

disorder.'"

Amador is an author, adjunct professor of clinical psychology at Columbia U. and a high-profile independent consultant boasting a list of TV credits including "Project Runway," "Nanny 911" and "Make Me a Supermodel." He and one of his own staff of 12 consultants assess each family-member applicant.

Their analyses help producers cast safe, sane participants, and their written reports also become a big part of the producers' bible for building an emotionally intense episode.

"Our psychological consultants are able to fast-forward the process so we can give people a complete experience in a reasonable amount of time," says "Wife Swap" exec producer Julie

Cooper. "Without the knowledge Dr. Amador and his team bring to the table and the insight they have into the family, we could never do the show."

Amador reviews the results of each parent's MMPI-2 (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, second edition), which can reveal depression, anxiety, addiction, marital discord and more, and their children's strengths-and-weaknesses questionnaires. Next he travels to meet each family.

"We really want to make sure the kids want to be on the show," Amador says. "If it's the first time a mother has been away for more than a day, we want to know that the kids have

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## PIECING TOGETHER A FAMILY:

In a recent episode of "Wife Swap," the Edwardses, an unconventional family of performers drowning in costumes and unpaid bills, temporarily traded wife Jackie for Myra Chi, whose strict martial arts clan operated like a business.

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V PLUS ■ 'WIFE SWAP' 100TH EPISO

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the inner resources to handle that. We may coach Dad to be extra maternal. Or we may recommend that Johnny have phone calls with Mom (an exception)."

At the family's home, Amador or one of his consulting psychologists interviews each person one-on-one. He conducts "play therapy" with smaller kids. He may stay for dinner.

If either parent's personality test raises a red flag, Amador investigates extensively.

"If someone has a big problem with anger, we don't ask just that single person about it," Amador explains. "If it's the husband, we ask the wife, 'Any problems with anger or violence?' We ask the children, 'Hey, does Daddy ever lose his temper?' Without assessing people, you could end up with participants who are volatile. A visiting mother who is aggressive and verbally abusive to the children is not something we'd ever want to see."

Applicant families who reach this late phase of deep psychological assessment generally make the cut. Then, back in New York, Amador and a second consultant co-author their report for producers, noting emotional issues the family members are open to disclosing, as well as

those they are not.

"One of the things I always say and have my consultants say is, 'I really want you to think very, very carefully about what you might regret revealing on national television,'" Amador comments.

During taping, producers consult Amador by phone roughly 10% of the time, and he rarely visits the set — unless a crisis arises.

In season three, production hit a wall when one father turned reticent. After verifying that the

man was not clinically depressed, Amador helped producers nudge the episode forward.

"I was sitting down with four producers who were like 'We're really stuck,'" Amador says. "In the course of the evaluation, we'd learned that this man really wanted to feel closer to his children. He was never close to his own father, and this

was his main motivation for doing the show.

"So, my suggestion was to get him talking about his father, which I felt was fair game. When he told me things he would not want to be revealed, he was specifically asked, 'Would you be OK if it was revealed you weren't close to your father?' He said, 'That would be fine.'"

With that, the redirected arc proceeded successfully.

"It sounds like scripting, but it's not," Amador says. "It's a lot like family therapy: 'You said you wanted to talk about this — well, how about it?'"



Xavier Amador, Ph.D.