

EDITORIAL

Definitions

In drawing up its Draft Code of Ethics, the indefatigable Ethics Committee of the Victorian Association of Family Therapists recently defined family therapy as: 'Therapy in which the family is the unit of treatment and more than one member of the family is normally seen conjointly during the course of the therapy and which centres on interpersonal relationships'. (In this issue's Network News, Sarah Jones poses some of the problems that may emerge as VAFT puts its new ethical code into place.)

The Queensland Association for Family Therapy asked its membership to name issues of concern about the future of family therapy in Queensland. One respondent in particular stated: 'Association needs definition of family therapy (this is related to accreditation issue)' (Hunt, 1997: 22)

Recently, NSW subscriber Victoria Worledge asked us for a definition. We gave her the VAFT definition, as a sample of the current thinking of an important representative body. Victoria was finding that in her workplace, 'family therapy' is equated solely with the Falloon model. This had set her thinking about how to explain herself to her work environment.

Back in 1967, Virginia Satir defined her approach to family therapy by distinguishing it from methods in which therapists see individual family members separately, or see them 'for the sake of' the patient. However different the context in which Satir was working then from that of Victoria Worledge in contemporary Australia, Satir was just as conscious that the term 'family therapy' might refer to radically different approaches.

A decade later, in his respected text *The Treatment of Emotional Disorders*, Seymour Halleck placed family therapy in the category of 'intervention[s] dealing with the patient's natural environment'

I consider family therapy quite broadly, as conjoint therapy with any significant figure in the patient's life; spouse, lover, parent, child, friend, employer, or co-worker ... the therapist can restructure small social systems so that they are less stressful to the patient. The intervention of stress alleviation can also be applied to social systems larger than the family ... (Halleck, 1978: 60-61).

Many family therapists today would still agree that 'family' therapy is a restrictive misnomer when what is in question is *any* work informed by systemic ideas. This broader way of seeing our field is not obviously

reflected within the VAFT definition of 'family therapy' but is acknowledged elsewhere among the definitions in VAFT's Code. As Jurgen Hargens notes in this issue, 'systemic therapy' and 'family therapy' now have separate professional bodies in Germany.

Eight years after Halleck, Mark Karpel acknowledges that with the passage of time, the field's 'use of the term 'family therapy' has both expanded and contracted' (Karpel, 1986: 189). Karpel, like Halleck, is clear that the goal is change, and that the boundaries of the therapy extend to those non-family members who are part of the presenting problem, or part of its solution. How acceptable would such defining criteria be in today's world of 'co-evolving conversations', in which therapists no longer 'intervene', and 'change' might be an outcome but not an intention?

Within the family therapy movement (and in the VAFT Code), we promulgate broad and inclusive definitions of 'family' itself. Outside the movement, this inclusiveness is not understood, as Christina Lee shows in her review of *Journal of Family Studies*.

At a time when the phrase *family values* is used as a shorthand for policies which inflict economic hardship on women and children ... and when the word *family* is increasingly being hijacked by the repressive Right, it is reasonable to be wary about a journal that specialises in studies of the family (1997: 211).

Perhaps reaching consensus on how we define our own work will be an important step towards dispelling the misconceptions others entertain about us?

References

- Halleck, S., 1978. *The Treatment of Emotional Disorders*. NY, Aronson.
- Hunt, C., 1997. Membership Responses to the QAFT Questionnaire 1996/7. *QAFT Newsletter*, 4: 21-23.
- Karpel, M. A., 1986. Testing, Promoting and Preserving Family Resources: Beyond Pathology and Power. In M. A. Karpel (Ed.), *Family Resources: The Hidden Partner in Family Therapy*. NY, Guilford.
- Lee, C., 1997. *Journal of Family Studies* [Review], *Australian Psychologist*, 32, 3: 211.
- Satir, V., 1967. *Conjoint Family Therapy*. Rev. ed. Palo Alto, Science and Behavior Books.
- Victorian Association of Family Therapists Inc., 1997. Code of Ethics. *Draft Only, Version 5. VAFT News*, 4: 5.

Maureen Crago