

CONFERENCE REPORT

1998 AAMFT Conference

This year's American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) conference took place in Dallas, Texas, home of cowboys, John F. Kennedy's assassination, and endless shopping centres and restaurants. The conference attracted over 2000 family therapists at the opulent Wyndham Anatole. The theme of this year's conference was 'Preventive Family Therapy'. Presenters offered creative ideas ranging from premarital counselling to working with social systems. In addition to the workshops focusing on this theme, there were also programs on traditional family therapy topics.

The pre-conference sessions were intensive, full day meetings. I attended the workshop entitled 'Uh? We Don't Do that Any More'. Presenters came from various family therapy schools—strategic, structural, solution-focused—as well as some hybrid systems. The narrative therapy participants sent apologies as both presenters were ill. The focus of the day was to have each model talk about how traditional systems had changed in modern times. The thrust of most of the presentations was that family therapy founders (Minuchin, Haley, de Shazer and Berg) were less sensitive to their clients' needs than their disciples. The most controversial presenters were Scott Miller and Barry Duncan, authors of a number of books on solution-focused therapy, who stated that research indicated that all models of therapy were roughly the same and accounted for only 15% of the success of therapy. Client resources (40%), therapeutic relationship (30%), and hope (15%) contributed much more substantially. As a result, they prescribed a therapy that utilised the client's expectations and strengths and devalued the role of the therapist. This upset much of the audience; they hoped that they would eventually have the data to support their opposing view.

The evening program was 'Intimacy and Depression, the Silent Epidemic'. AAMFT and the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association (National DMDA) have begun a campaign to distribute educational literature on depression, illustrating how family therapy and medication can work together. Some members of the AAMFT expressed concern that family therapy had been relegated to a secondary place and that the pharmaceutical company, Glaxo-Wellcome, was using AAMFT to sell more drugs. Objectors campaigned at the conference, encouraging concerned members to wear blue ribbons in protest.

The conference formally began with Rosalynn Carter, wife of former President Jimmy Carter, speaking on 'Caregivers of the Mentally Ill'. She stressed that 'mental illness is a family affair', supporting her views with stories from her own experience while caring for her elderly mother. The audience loved her forthrightness, honesty, and deep sense of compassion. After the

session, she spent some time promoting and signing her book, *Helping Someone with Mental Illness: A Compassionate Guide for Family, Friends and Caregivers*.

Each morning and afternoon session offered over 25 choices for participants. I attended Wendel Ray and George Greenberg's 'Understanding Don Jackson's Conception of Family Process'. While offering little new information, it did illuminate Don Jackson's contribution to the field of family therapy in the mid 1950s. Jackson was the psychiatric consultant on the 'double bind' project and was supervised by Harry Stack Sullivan. In the 1960s, he joined the MRI group and exercised his influence through his 'Interactional Theory', a radical idea for the psychiatry and family therapy of his day. Sadly, Don Jackson drowned at the age of 46.

One of the most interesting parts of the conference was the number of booths set up in the Exhibition Hall. There was a chance to view new books and audio-visual materials. The receptions held in the hall provided a chance to chat with old colleagues and make new acquaintances. It was interesting to get the view from America on the stress that therapists are under with managed care and its resulting professional and business pressures.

There was also an opportunity to watch Matthew Selekman use a Multi-System Multi-Focused consultation with a large group made up of parents, grandparents, foster parents, a Youth Justice worker, and the identified patient, a fifteen year old acting out girl. Live interviews are an ongoing feature of AAMFT conferences. The audience watches therapy on a large screen with the therapist and family in another room. There is a preliminary discussion of the family, and questions from the audience after the session is completed. The therapy focused on reuniting the teenager with her parents. The therapy session went smoothly, and the reintegration into the biological family took place. Selekman developed good rapport with the family and professionals. Unfortunately, as this was a consultation, there was not sufficient time to develop a future plan for the treating therapist.

Frances Steinberg and I presented a workshop on 'Successfully Resolving a Relationship Termination' based on our book, *When your Lover Leaves You*, due out this October. The material was well received, with participants expressing an interest in using the material with their clients and in their own personal lives. Unfortunately, we were the only 'Down Under' presenters in a very Americanised conference. We look forward to more antipodean perspectives when attending the Australian and New Zealand Family Therapy Conference in Sydney this spring.

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