

FAMILY THERAPY BEYOND 2000

Australian Family Therapy: Annual Conference 2000

As in every year I looked forward to this conference and the nourishing sense of community and challenge I have always found. However, this year I also brought with me a preoccupation with difficult times at home. I knew that this conference was going to have to 'speak' to me directly to 'get through' to me. And, in the end, it did.

A smallish band (160 people registered) of hardy souls gathered for three days of reflection, challenge and regeneration. Grey July Canberra weather did little to lighten the mood. Still, it was good to reconnect with some familiar faces, chat, check that the pen and ear were both engaged, and focus on the here and now.

Small conferences have their upsides. We heard contributions from people who might have felt daunted in a larger group. Even some people attending their first family therapy conference spoke out in plenary sessions, and someone else from the audience often responded as well as the plenary speaker. Conversations, enlightening for people newly visiting the field, and for those who have been around a long while, happened. And these conversations continued into the breaks. This was a 'working' conference with little controversy.

After a generous welcome to Nggunawal country by Matilda House, Lawrie Maloney gave a rich presentation entitled 'Coming out of the shed: men's changing family roles'. With inspiration from Leonard Cohen and Judith Wright, he gave a personal and scholarly account of how men have been seen as external or irrelevant to family life. Lawrie asked us to believe in and do therapy on the premise that most men want to be more involved in their families' lives in non-exploitative ways.

All the other plenary sessions, directly or indirectly, challenged us to reclaim our confidence that family therapy is different in significant and useful ways from other therapies. Our preparedness to respectfully do the hard miles, journeying with families often put in the too hard basket, was also called upon. There were times during the conference when this seemed too daunting. Yet by the end I felt that, even though times might be tough politically and economically for our field, and individually we

might not know how to make things better, it somehow seemed hopeful that we were in this together.

Day two began with Hugh and Maureen Crago giving us a fascinating 'tag-team' look at 'Twenty years of the *ANZJFT*' with 'editorial asides'. They tracked its history from 1979 when a group of men ('radicals' in their professions of origin) put together a 'journal for the workplace' that aimed to combine academic rigour and clinical practice. Reflecting upon their own time since 1997, Hugh and Maureen outlined their early ambitions and their struggles and restated their commitment to the early ideals of the Journal. We gained a real sense of the magnitude of their task and the need for a culture that supports it by writing, networking and subscribing. They also observed that, globally, there are fewer 'card-carrying' family therapists and that over the past decade, contributions from South Australia, New Zealand and overseas have reduced.

At lunch on Thursday, Jeff Young engaged us in a celebration of this journal's twenty-first birthday. Before the cake was cut, just about everyone present found himself or herself on a time line. There were letters from absent founding members (Michael White, Moshe Lang and Brian Stagoll) and somehow they stood on the line, placed by others like Max Cornwell, Malcolm Robinson and Carolyn Quadrio. In honouring all contributions (even just subscribing) Jeff gave us each a sense of belonging and the conference cohesiveness.

Later Jeff presented another twenty-one year old with the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy Award. The Victorian Family Therapy Association was honoured for its committed and enduring contribution to family therapy. Moshe Lang (on video) seconded this award. VAFT's energy and relevance shows in its increasing membership.

Passion, respect and openness, combined with a willingness to get in there and do the work. Lois Achimovich showed all of these and more when she tackled 'Schizophrenia in the new millennium'. She challenged the pessimism engendered by belief in biogenetic determinism and the expectation of degeneration. Arguing that the evidence for these accepted 'tenets' is at best equivocal, she encouraged us to approach work with families who

have a psychotic member with openness and optimism. She turned to family therapy's pioneers like Haley: 'If hallucinations or delusions are present, the therapist should assume that the patient has more interpersonal skills than the therapist'.

Carolyn Quadrio asked us, 'Whatever happened to family therapy?' 'Why have we become so afraid of blaming families that we avoid working with them?' This avoidance leads us to believe that education or behaviour management are the only option. A kind of synergy seemed to be operating. In all the workshops I attended, I found myself hearing these same affirming themes of valuing our particular approach, attending to our work with care while honouring other dimensions (including spiritual) of our work.

Sophie Holmes' workshop, 'Living beyond our emotional means' validated the notion that work with whole families has a potential for healing not to be found in individual therapies. Sophie involved us in demonstrations and role-play to bring alive ideas from the biology and neurology of emotion and trauma (i.e. that we, as biological entities, are pre-primed for loss and emotional connection and that our emotional resources are built in our moments of emotional 'touching').

Catherine Sanders and Malcolm Robinson called for us to honour family therapy's rich traditions and to not 'throw the baby out with the bath water'. Beginning with a close examination of the context and ethics of therapy and its necessarily constrained, contractual, socially situated nature, they examined how this framework underpins all of the therapist's interventions—as a creative 'wordsmith' in conversation.

David Bailey and Lyndell Power visited self-psychology and attachment theories as they relate to adolescence. This was thoughtfully integrated into work with all significant family members, using reframing, circular questioning, scaling and more. Again, great teachers, helping us feel more confident in our 'real' work with 'real' families.

I enjoyed Glenn Lerner's abstract excursion into critical psychology and 'Critical practice in family therapy'. It seemed others also enjoyed the lively discussion of what these ideas mean in working with critical tension and creative uncertainty in contexts which value evidence-based practice. Fascinating how we revisit the same terri-

tory from new perspectives and enrich our understanding as we do.

Thinking systemically and reflexively can be as subtle and slippery as it can be illuminating and enriching. Banu Maloney, Kathy Lacey, Jo Howard and Karen Pilcher visited this territory in their account of 'Supervision of supervision'. I envied them the opportunity to examine their supervisory practices and came away with a few challenges and ideas for mine.

We were treated to a glimpse into the nitty-gritty of family life when Jose Marques presented a rehearsed reading of Act 2 of his play, *Dead-beat Dad*. He courageously asked us to respond as family therapists to his painfully engaging and thought provoking depiction of a father and his adolescent son getting together after a long period apart. We did, and we exposed our own biases. Jeff Young proposed that we could repeat the experience in 2001, if some (brave) people were prepared to do family therapy with the actors in their roles. My first reaction was to protect the 'family' from 'us'. We could, in our zeal to help, easily violate. Still, I will 'star' that event as a 'must attend'.

As a closing, the plenary speakers (with Catherine Sanders and Malcolm Robinson standing in for Carolyn Quadrio and Lawrie Maloney) gave us their impressions of the conference. Each addressed the atmosphere of struggle, even gloom, and found value in facing this. All mentioned family therapy's maturing and reclaiming its roots. Jeff Young's infectious enthusiasm for the Inaugural Pan Pacific Family Therapy Congress in Melbourne next September took us beyond 2000.

Canberra in July 2000: this was a conference where we faced difficult realities and finally reclaimed an energising belief in our field. There were gritty reflections on tough political and economical times and family therapy's struggle for space. But, for balance, there was also a reclaiming of our traditions. I returned home. The conference showed me that energy and hope could be found in holding onto past learning. Things are still difficult, but there is value and honour in facing tough realities and continuing to learn.

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