

NETWORK NEWS

Commentary, News and Reports from Regional and International Correspondents

INTRODUCTION

Contributors to this issue include Akivra Bouris (akivra@aol.com.au) (NSW) Janet Roth (J.Roth@mailbox.gu.edu.au), (Queensland) with Ian Goldsmith, family therapist in private practice in Toowoomba, Maria McCarthy (mmarks@myriad.its.unimelb.edu.au) (Victoria) and guest Nick Carr (nickcarr@popa.melbpc.org.au).

JANE CHAPMAN

Fathers And Sons

Once there was a time when fathers were the good guys, the benign and analytically ignored parental presence that few bothered to dissect in detail. We fathers could bask in the afterglow of the matricentric angst experienced by our children, enjoy our role as occasional soothers of the furrowed and fuming ‘why-is-Mum-such-a ...’ brow. Present but unaccountable. Mother-blaming ensured that Dads were the innocent bystanders in the job of parenting—to be considered tangentially during life and remembered fondly thereafter.

How times can change.

All of a sudden someone noticed that history had forgotten the Dads, and in a burst of *fin-de-siècle* revisionism we started trying to atone for thousands of years of father-blindness before Y2K wipes the corporate memory banks. However, whereas when women finally worked out that they were being oppressed and found a potent symbolic way (bra-burning) of marking the change, the best we men seem to be able to manage is to write about it. (Some might say this is typical of the flaccid, quiche-eating, cardigan-wearing man of the nineties ...) So, having stood in vain in windswept Swanston St trying to get the lighter to work on the polyester Daffy Duck boxers that my daughter gave me for Xmas last year, I too will put inkjet to paper ...

...and my first thought is, why fathers and *sons*? I have two daughters as well as a son, and if we’re trying to remind ourselves that Dads might have a role, let’s not restrict it to only 50% (strictly speaking, 49.8%) of our offspring. Maybe that’s being a bit picky, but there’s a lot of Biddulphian fixing-it-with-your-Dad going on for men at the moment, while somehow the daughter/father bit is relegated to the second league. I’ve no doubt that my role for my daughters is different from my role for my son, but I hope it is no less important.

Whether for son or daughter, there are lots of reasons why men approaching fatherhood for the first time find it a difficult, confusing and often excluding experience. The messages are often paradoxical:

- We (men) are told we’re integral to parenting, that we should be holding, caring for, changing and loving

our newborns, but all too often our own fathers provided a role-model of physical distance rather than closeness: ‘I’ll kick a ball or drive them to school, but don’t ask me to change a nappy?’

- We’re told we’re integral to parenting, so we dutifully accompany our partners to ante-natal classes (mostly held during working hours), only to find ourselves squatting stiff-limbed on leaking beanbags, learning how to rub someone’s back and tell them how to breathe. Labour and the delivery is everything; the purpose of the whole exercise—baby, parenting—seems irrelevant, another lifetime.
- We’re told we’re integral to parenting, but while we hear her friends asking, touching, preparing, our friends prepare us too—‘Sprog on the way? Woa, bad luck mate’—‘Can I have your footy tickets? You won’t be needing them’—‘Better (wink) get some now, you won’t be getting much in the future, ha ha ha!’
- We’re told we’re integral to parenting, but if we do take our baby for a check, we find ourselves at a *Maternal and Child Health Centre*. No place for us there.
- We’re told we’re integral to parenting, but the message from the world of psychotherapy has until recently been that *mother* is central, while father is more external, symbolic (Freud), only tangentially important (Bowlby) or important mainly as a container for the mother-child dyad (Winnicott). Even many family therapists admit to being a bit more comfortable if Dad can’t make it to the session. Only recently has the possibility of *nurturing* fathering been included in the therapeutic discourse.

There are countless other examples of the difficulties men face in becoming closely involved at the early stages of parenting. The seeds of distance between fathers and their children may be sown in these early experiences of confusion and exclusion. The risk is that new fathers who struggle at this stage will not feel the same intimate connection with their small baby, boy or girl, and will tend to fall back on the more traditional, external masculine world of work, helping ‘around the house’ and doing anything rather than being with the baby. The seeds of distance sprout and grow, nourished on the one hand by every experience of not being able to manage (‘He just

won't settle with me, he probably needs a feed—you take him') and on the other hand by each time the external world is more rewarding ("That was great—Gavin—could you run the breakfast meeting next Wednesday?")

(Once Gavin has been sensitised this way, language in its many guises contributes to his exclusion. On the rare occasion he stays at home to look after the kid(s), his mates ask 'Are you babysitting tonight?' At an unconscious level, Gavin hears the word 'babysitting', a task that someone does for someone else's children, and knows that that *is* what he's doing—looking after 'someone else's' children. No one ever asks his partner if she's 'babysitting' when she's with the kids; it's what she does, it's called 'being a parent')

So where does this leave fathers and sons? If we're lucky and can talk to men *before* they have become parents for the first time, we can keep in mind how difficult the transition to fatherhood can be and not just assume they'll be OK. Getting men to think about their own experience of being fathered, what was good and what they'd like to do differently themselves, helps bring a perspective on some of the unconscious role-modelling they've absorbed. We should remain aware that, for all our modern sophistication in antenatal care, men (and many women) are still left very unprepared for being parents, and once they finally become fathers, men are relatively unsupported. These are important considerations for us, whether as friends, family members or therapists.

On a more positive note, there are many simple things that can help. Most of these apply to sons and daughters, but some particularly to the former:

- **Time and bathtime.** The first few days/weeks of parenting can be tough—a maelstrom of milk, nappies, tears, sleeplessness and fatigue. He hasn't had sex for a fair while, and she looks as though she won't be contemplating it again for at least a decade. When the baby's awake he's feeding or crying, otherwise he's asleep—so what's a Dad to do? The answer is fairly easy—do something. Dress him, cuddle him, take him for a walk, spend time with him, anything. Above all else, bath him. Babies don't care when they're bathed; before work, after work, whatever, but it's a special time most babies enjoy and gives Dad a role that's important and gives him a chance to really touch and feel his child. Babies being the expert communicators they are have little difficulty engaging even the most uncertain of Dads, given the chance.
- **The pedestal trap.** Most sons look up to their Dads, and not just physically, and that persistent admiration can be a trap. Dad can get to enjoy being put on a pedestal, and begins to encourage the view that that is where he belongs, elevating said pedestal ever higher. When he falls, and from the son's perspective he *will* fall, the bigger the drop the more it hurts them both. One way to prevent the pedestal getting unrealistically high is for Dad to give his son some access to his failings, his uncertainties and his weaknesses. A boy needs to see his Dad unable to manage things, but still be OK, hear his Dad admit to fears, and see him losing

gracefully. Dad needs to be able to hear 'Gee, Dad, you're the best/fastest/strongest ...' and do something a little more sophisticated than just bask in his son's adoration.

- **Stories.** Of course all kids love them, but some of the best that a son can hear are stories about his Dad's own childhood. This serves two purposes. First, it helps Dad reconnect with what it was like as a kid, and the more that he can empathise with his own child, the better able he will be to use appropriate words and responses in any given situation. If Dad can rekindle some of the memories of his childhood, he'll talk to his son with an appreciation of how his son truly feels, rather than just an adult projection of what he *should* feel.

The second purpose of stories relates back to the pedestal trap—if a boy can hear about his Dad as a child, Dad becomes a much more real and rounded person, with vulnerabilities that the boy can recognise (that is unless he has a Dad who's already dived headfirst into the pedestal trap and whose childhood stories are nothing but a litany of triumphs, boldness when confronted by bullies etc!). Boys can get immense reassurance from knowing that Dad also struggled over some of the same things.

- **The myth of quality time.** The 'quality time' myth was an invention to soothe the guilt ridden 1980s parent. If 30 minutes of intensive interaction twice a week could make up for all those hours and days when you barely saw your child, then it was OK to focus on work/income/self-pursuits of various kinds. Unfortunately it was never true. The only real quality time is quantity time. Steve Biddulph has said it again and again, but it bears repeating—if you spend 55 hours a week at work, you won't cut it as a Dad. No teenager ever turned around and said 'Gee Dad, thanks for spending all that time at the office'. Kids need ordinary time with their parents, doing ordinary things, and sons particularly need to be with their fathers doing ordinary things like shopping, getting haircuts, cooking etc. Most of the moments of best conversation arise during long episodes of doing nothing very special, *not* during the weekly 'family meeting'.

Interestingly, all the above suggestions require one thing in common—time.

NICK CARR

Nick is a GP who occasionally writes and talks about fathering. He is married to a family therapist.

NEW SOUTH WALES

The 1999 Sydney Conference was variously described by delegates as inclusive, friendly, cohesive and connected. It was said that the 'metaphors' returned to the family, that there was a welcome lack of grandstanding, and that the conference had begun to struggle with making a public space for others (principally for the Narrative model but

to some extent for clients as well). Delegates were unanimous that the venue, overlooking North Steyne beach, was a treat. On the negative side, some felt they would have liked to have heard more research papers (that old chestnut!) Delegates from New Zealand felt that the cultural perspective had not been presented as well as had been promised and that while there had been some warmth they had also found non-warmth. These last two points were voiced publicly on their behalf after their actual departure, a situation that would have made it difficult for the NSW Committee to respond, one would imagine. A bit unfair I think. Another NZ delegate disputed the point about warmth.

Personally I agreed with most of these comments, including the point about research, and as any who knows me (as a failed 'token ethnic') is aware, I agree that you can never have enough cultural perspective.

What *really* disturbed me was the rather dispassionate keynote address by Louise Newman on the prevention of childhood problems in the new Millennium. I always find the medical model, especially when it's gussied up in positive terms like 'prevention', rather disturbing. (The title of her paper implied that prevention did not include therapy, an idea that some delegates contested). The medical model, in the context of child and family problems, seems hell bent on discovering new and increasingly more compelling ways by which parents might feel entirely blamed for everything concerning their children (goodness knows, it works on me!).

The latest research, apparently, is that neglect up until the age of three results in neurological damage to children, leading to all manner of 'psychiatric' conditions. Cheery thought. The other thing about the medical model is of course that it *never* has any solutions. Never. Or at least none that don't involve surveillance. The solution, we were told, was to screen all mothers attending Ante-Natal Clinics (presumably you wouldn't need to screen the privately insured or men), and to ask them in the 'right way' whether they had a past history of abuse which would interfere with their ability to mother. Who would ask? And how might one respond to such questioning, I thought, having been in the 'with child' situation myself? And which one of us is going to ring DOCS after the disclosure is made? Think about the collateral damage. Another thing the medical model does not attend to is the social and political context of their ideas and practices.

I liked Bruce Hart's comment in an earlier workshop (on Uncertainty). He said that the medical model acts as a type of defence, 'as a buffer against uncertainty'. And I liked this quote: 'Mental illnesses are indeed mental, in that they are at least 90% made up of blame, or causal attributions that are felt as blame' (Lyn Hoffman, 1993 as quoted in Dallos and Urry, 21, 2, *Journal of Family Therapy*, May 1999).

Laurie MacKinnon gave a polished performance as she tracked the history of family therapy and argued that the 'interactional perspective' (i.e. the family) was dropped from the MRI derived Solution focused and Narrative models when, in an attempt to develop greater aesthetic

credentials (as a response to the narcissistic wound felt by these therapists in relation to Milan), they began to reference their practice to French philosophy and gave up their examination of 'problem' in favour of an exclusive focus on 'solution'. She argued that the Narrative model enjoys the best of both worlds. In giving up the systemic lens and declining to offer a model of family functioning (thereby avoiding the scrutiny of the feminist critique), the model remains aesthetic, pragmatic, easily taught and thus widely appealing to therapists. She argued simply that the Narrative model is outside the bounds of family therapy. With this Laurie certainly invited a dialogue to ensue. It seemed to me that the onus was now on Narrative therapists (and I include myself as a 'fellow traveller' here) to articulate their approach to working within a family context.

Professor Leslie Swartz (University of Cape Town, Director, Child Guidance Clinic) inspired the audience to struggle with the concept of cultural relativism. He described in some detail work in South Africa with black families and the bind that therapists experience in being situated as cultural outsiders and thus having to rely on an insider to mediate their work. The problem here is that the dominant insider maintains power and that the outsider or therapist is reduced to a kind of naive (my expression) cultural relativism. The struggle here revolves around the fact that while we know that people live in different ways and that we must respect that, if we fail to question 'cultural norms', aren't we at times colluding with dominant insiders? Our response in the context of diversity, Leslie Swartz argued, is to vigorously find, explore and criticise in an active way, alternative voices.

A highlight for NSW people was the awarding of the Journal's award for Distinguished Contribution to Australian and New Zealand Family Therapy to Kerrie James. Kerrie has been an enormously influential and much loved teacher, mentor, and theoretician to so many family therapists. Despite perhaps the excellence of her contribution, and her status, Kerrie has never seemed to tire of the idea that the work is about families; she still gets excited about it. In her acceptance speech Kerrie thanked a number of other people for supporting her in her work, the truth of course is the opposite—it is she who remains invaluable to us all. A legend, dare I say it.

The NSW Family therapy Association held a number of great meetings mid year. Thirty people heard David Bailey and Jeanette McGrory of Dalmar present on the topic of eclecticism in systemic practice. Jeanette and David saw eclecticism as both powerful and purposeful (despite its 'bad press') and argued that it lends a richness to our work. They developed four approaches to eclecticism. The first is integrationist, a kind of melding of theories, where one does not dominate (Goldner and her colleagues' approach to domestic violence was given as an example), the second approach is therapist-directed, where the therapist actively and consciously chooses to work in a particular way with a particular family. The third approach they termed social constructionist, where the therapist has adopted a primary model and adds to it aspects of other models that best fit with it. There is a

greater sense here that the therapist creates the kind of family (reality), with which they then proceed to work.

The last approach they termed 'a family model'—a kind of internalised working model which the family in a sense elicits: 'Each time we work with a family we develop the model' for them.

Lyndal Power reported on a presentation by Cathy O'Brien on the colourful topic of 'The Cat, the Stables, the Cakes', and other stories on smuggling 'community' into (work) 'life'. Cathy gave a moving and amusing presentation on her attempts to look for signs of community in a disrupted, relocated working class area in England. Cathy proceeded to speak of her effort to build 'cultures of collaboration' with other services in the community. Cathy described how she brought food to an initial meeting with child protection services and described the perplexed reaction of these workers to this gesture. Cathy reminded the audience that 'relationships' are essential for work. Lyndal Power reported that the members of Cathy's audience were inspired to describe to each other ways that they felt they had brought community to their own workplaces.

Ron Perry has been selected by the NSWFT Association Committee as their representative on PACFA. The Committee report that this is going to be *the* issue for 2000, and that a great deal of work will be required on the establishment of criteria for Clinical and Associate memberships. The Committee was pleased to report that an administrative person has been appointed for twenty hours per week to assist them with their work. This will make a big difference in terms of managing the requirements of the membership and in producing the newsletter.

Finally this NSW Committee should be congratulated on their hard work in conducting the Conference—they made it look easy!

AKIVRA BOURIS
State Correspondent

QUEENSLAND

Not Wrong—Just Different

Ian Goldsmith presented 'Not Wrong—Just Different' at the QAFT Clinical Meeting in September, relating his experiences with international exchange students through AFS, an organisation which offers Intercultural Programs. He was accompanied by his daughter, Jessie, who went to Portugal as an exchange student with the AFS in 1996, and a current exchange student from Malaysia, Mathan Thavasimuthu, both of whom spoke of some of their experiences in different cultures. In Ian's volunteer role as Orientation Coordinator for AFS in South Queensland over the last four years, he has had close contact with over 200 other exchange students from 30 different countries as they struggled to adapt to life in Australian families.

As outsiders, these teenagers give an interesting perspective on the way families in Australia operate at a

micro level. What intrigued Ian is that all these students come with their own assumptions about family life and relationships and, through their struggles, highlight the assumptions that we make not only about our own families but also about those families that we work with as therapists. Ian comments:

As I sit and work with my clients I am always wondering what assumptions they and I make about their circumstances which we share but do not question. I am always on the look out for what I am missing; with what assumptions do my clients and I collude about the 'reality' of their experience? It seems to me that when we accept a particular 'reality' without question, we collude in the assumption that it is unchangeable.

Borrowing from the work of another volunteer, Lorna Clayton¹, Ian related the story of a Japanese host daughter posing the question 'What is this?' as she closed her left eye. 'This is a wink', her host mother said. Her student asked, 'When do you give a wink?'. The explanation was not easy, but after several attempts her Japanese host daughter then asked, 'When do you bow in Australia?' Ian comments:

When we sit and work with families we are 'outsiders' to them. This gives us a perspective which can help them in being observers of themselves. The students who come on exchange are also 'outsiders'. They can therefore help us observe ourselves, and in the process help us examine how we behave, and what meanings we give to our behaviours. As I have the belief that we 'should not expect our clients to do what we are not prepared to do ourselves', it behooves us, as therapists, to examine ourselves and be examined, in much the same way that we examine our clients' worlds.

Ian was able to report on some general reflections that exchange students make about the Australian families with whom they live. One often repeated comment from overseas students is that Australian families are more strict than in their home country. This strictness they see as particularly reflected in Australian parents' desire to know about their children's activities. Many foreign students are not used to this 'level of intrusion'. In similar fashion many students comment about how much Australian families 'do things together'. Australians may be sceptical about this comment. Yet, the validity of this is apparent when understood in the contrasting context of other cultures. For instance, foreign students will describe their own familial and cultural rules in terms such as 'sharing experiences isn't often', 'going places as a family is infrequent', or 'most families (in my country) go their own way'. This tells us something valuable about the cultural context of family life in Australia. Some foreign students note with surprise that Australians do not lock doors within their own homes, that there is fairly widespread involvement in household tasks, and that 'They usually turn on the TV but don't have anyone watching at that time'.

Ian explained that unwritten family rules become evident only when they are violated. Simple things like who can access food in the fridge (e.g. 'That's Dad's Coke, don't touch it'), the way we negotiate and use our bathrooms (e.g. Asians splash water everywhere, Aussies keep

it relatively dry), or regulate our meals (e.g. from what and when we eat), are rules that people unconsciously live by. Furthermore, how we express our anger, enthusiasm and appreciation all come sharply into relief when students do not know these 'rules' and operate from their own frame of reference. Ian comments:

Overseas students can also highlight the language we use regularly without appreciating its literal meaning. For instance, when a parent says to a student, 'Would you like to help wash up?', the real meaning is 'I want you to help wash up'. It is hardly surprising that a host parent may be a little offended when their student reacts to the literal meaning of this question and simply answers 'No'. (After all, who wants to help with the washing up?) Many students from overseas countries will simply say 'Pass the salt', an expression which can sound rude or demanding in a family which has grown up with the expectation that you add 'please' or 'thank you' at the end of requests. Likewise, students reflect on how much Australians say 'sorry'. To them we are apologetic about things that hardly matter (whereas big issues like our treatment of our Aboriginal people are different—we seemingly don't apologise for those!)

The Australian sense of humour can also puzzle overseas students. They cannot comprehend that it is endearing for us to refer to a friend as a 'silly bugger'. The level of sarcasm and personal denigration Australians (affectionately) dish out to each other has led some to ask whether we say anything nice to each other at all! Ian wonders if this reflects, in a small way, the 'cultural cringe' characteristic of Australians.

There are many nuances in body language. South American students lament that Australians do not touch each other. Boys from South America may be regarded by our homophobic adolescent males with high suspicion, and, with respect to females, can find themselves being rumoured to be 'going with' half the girls in their class. On the other hand many Asian students work hard to get used to being 'touched all the time' in Australia. One Japanese girl announced that when she returned home she was going to 'hug all her family' and they were going to get a 'big shock'. Ian comments:

Having my own host daughters has highlighted what previously had been out of awareness yet influential in my life. Appreciating this diversity is all part of being an aware therapist. While being a host parent might not be for everyone I recommend it as a personally and professionally rewarding experience.

1. From Lorna Clayton's 1984 book, *When do you Bow in Australia?* published by AFS Intercultural Programs, 418A Elizabeth Street, Surrey Hills, Sydney.

**JANET ROTH
IAN GOLDSMITH**

VICTORIA

At the time of writing I have just returned from the 1999 Australian Family Therapy Conference in Sydney held September 29 to October 1. My informal surveying of some of the Victorian contingent suggested a positive response to the conference, the venue and, not the least, the novelty of awakening to bright sunshine and rolling

surf that make Melbourne's bayside beaches appear somewhat docile and 'river-like' in comparison! The keynote presentations proved a highlight, with a combination of international and local speakers providing a diverse array of viewpoints. Barry Mason, Director of The Institute of Family Therapy in London, provided an opening address in which he developed his ideas on the therapist's position of authoritative doubt and included some gems in reflecting on his own clinical practice and questions he has developed in working with families.

Sustained applause greeted the conclusion of an extraordinary paper presented by Professor Leslie Swartz, Professor of Psychology at the University of Cape Town and Director of the Child Guidance Clinic. His observation that we all carry something of the brutality of our country was sobering. His suggestion that his paper may have more relevance to us in view of the recent events in East Timor made me wonder about our individual and agency responses to this crisis and what our responsibilities as mental health clinicians may be. One of Leslie's final comments at the conference was an observation that we have an embarrassment of resources in Australia, reflecting the relativity of assessing what constitutes adequate mental health resources expected in political and agency contexts.

Other keynote presentations were given by Carmel Flaskas, Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Work at the University of NSW, Dr. Louise Newman, Director of the NSW Institute of Psychiatry and Dr Laurie McKinnon, Director of Insite Therapy and Consulting, Sydney. Whilst it is not possible to do justice to these papers in this brief space, each presenter echoed Carmel's reflections on the rapidity of paradigm shifts in the field of family therapy and our history of oppositionality as a dominant narrative. Her reflections on the lived experiences of our clients and ourselves as therapists revealed the depth of her intellectual and empathic responses to her work.

Highlighted by Laurie MacKinnon's keynote address, the so-called split between family and narrative therapies was a recurring theme throughout the conference: whether it was real or constructed, what it meant in terms of clinical practices, and whether real dialogue could occur around this controversial subject. The concurrent sessions offered a range of topics and, as to be expected, proved to be more or less satisfying, depending on one's subjective responses.

On a local level, a couple of significant interest groups have emerged this year. The Peer Support Group for Professionals who are Survivors of Client Suicide has now met on four occasions. The proposal for this group originally came from Pam Rycroft and received immediate support from Nada Miocevic. The first meeting in January consisted of just Pam and Nada but has grown over the year as interested therapists have joined the group. The group meets approximately six weekly. It is envisaged as open (members can move in and out) and ongoing. One of the aims is to develop a network of therapists who are able to support other therapists in the event of a client suicide. Whilst Pam and Nada facilitate

the group, Pam reported that it really has developed its own momentum. Interested participants can contact Pam at The Bouverie Centre on 9376 9844. The Supervision Forum, designed for therapists to share their experiences of supervision and to examine how supervision can be evaluated, has now met on two occasions. This meeting is held bi-monthly and interested people can contact Carol Hughes at Relationships Australia.

At the risk of writing about myself, something I feel reluctant to do, it would nevertheless be remiss of me not to acknowledge that I am the recipient of the 1999 Anita Morewetz Award for research. This award is granted by the VAFT Research Committee for a significant piece of family therapy research. The award provides the recipient with \$1,000, which is intended to assist in preparing the research for publication. My research was conducted as a major thesis for a Masters of Applied Science (Family Therapy), La Trobe University and was a qualitative study entitled *Children Who Stutter and Their Families: An Exploratory Study of The Experience and Impact of Childhood Stuttering*. I am honored, and I hope my publications will be worthy of the generosity of the Award.

MARIA MCCARTHY
State Correspondent

A Jazz Reflection on the Manly Conference

On the weekend following our Australian Family Therapy conference came the Manly jazz festival. Because of the bad weather, the ballroom in the Manly Pacific Parkroyal became the venue for jazz music instead of family therapy talk. The generous celebration of past and contemporary musical expressions struck a vastly different chord to critical debates about model relevance, though I do recall a joyous interplay of rhythm and dialogue at the conference as well. My experience of both events in the same setting prompted a 'jazz reflection' on the conference.

The conference gig was all it promised to be, the star players executed their solos with finesse and a cutting edge. The hypnotic theme—the millennium and family therapy's role in it—was stated with tenacious sincerity by the various soloists, starting with Barry Mason, the UK saxophonist who began his career in the pop world of London in the 1960s and, for this select audience, threw in the odd lyric. Barry surprised us all with his quirky yet authoritative elaborations on well known tunes of the passing age. An outstanding performance as usual from Carmel Flaskas on jazz violin, who demonstrated her well known ability to lay it down and improvise with systemic passion. Her solo on the standard 'What is this Thing called Family Therapy?', was a highlight. Professor Leslie Swartz, guesting from South Africa on trombone, played with a cool, rhythmic and infectious humour, evoking the deep sociopolitical roots of the music we call family therapy. Later the stride piano of Dr Louise Newman had us all jumping in the aisles with enthusiasm for the end of therapy. In the last session, Laurie MacKinnon's trumpet finale resurrected the forgotten theme

of relationship while presaging a soundscape of things millennial.

An experienced rhythm section made up the house-band. From the first count-in, drummer-convener David Horner set a cracking pace and new possibilities for the music, with the always effervescent Brian Stagoll in the piano chair and yours truly on acoustic bass. The other players are too numerous to mention, but a strong appearance from Max Cornwell on vibes and the rap-vocals of Colleen Brown on her signature tune 'Politics and Lunatics' raised all our spirits.

Let's not forget the Crago collective and their selections of pure Journal groove, or Kerrie James who took out the award for best original music. Then again there's nothing quite like the fringe conference, the jams in the corridors between unlikely partners from far and wide, delectable expressions of spontaneity and improvisation that spilled over into the main performance venue. One can only look forward to the next meeting and hope the music will be just as memorable.

GLENN LARNER

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Alternative Voices—Family Therapy, The Child and The New Millennium: the 1999 Australian Family Therapy Conference

When I agreed to write a report of the conference, I had no idea that this would change my experience of the whole event. For a start, I felt obliged to attend most things (an unusual event for me at a conference—I am prone to get 'conferenced out' fairly early in the piece). Second, I took a much broader (or narrower, depending on your point of view) look at the whole affair, e.g. what does this event say about the family of family therapists? Finally, the invitation encouraged me to play around with metaphor, along the lines of 'conference as ...' More on this later.

The Manly Pacific Parkroyal was a great location, as the beach was just over the road when conference goers needed a break from the air-conditioning (or lack thereof, which was sometimes the case). Unfortunately, substantial building works detracted from the quality of the venue.

The program reflected the title with a range of papers focusing on the current practice debates (or should that be 'discourses') regarding systemic and postmodern approaches; work with children and adolescents; and 'alternative voices' which included astrological, Eastern healing and wilderness experience perspectives, voices of clients, and therapists' own stories. It was a well balanced program and choosing which session to go to was difficult. This conference seemed to provide for a bit more of an emotional experience than others—and no, I'm not talking about the cocktail party or conference dinner and their aftermath! There appeared to be more papers on the impact that therapy has on the therapist and more emphasis on the therapist as a human being

with a story of his/her own. By the very nature of our work, we don't often get a chance to talk about this; a family therapy conference seems to be a good place if one feels safe enough. It was one of these papers (David Horner's Reflections on a Life Journey) that impacted on me most and it was a privilege to be there to witness his story.

Two keynote presentations were held each day. These were very thought provoking, which perhaps was just as well, because by the time 4.00 p.m. rolled along, the afternoon presenters had their work cut out for them to engage an audience until 5.30. They rose to the challenge admirably. What struck me about the keynotes that I attended (Barry Mason, Carmel Flaskas, Leslie Swartz and Laurie MacKinnon) was their willingness to—now what do I say here—take risks? be honest? (in the sense of saying exactly what they thought) voice the politically incorrect? be personal?—in fact, all of these things.

Leslie Swartz (Political Oppression, Social Change and The Family: A View from South Africa) spoke about, among other things, the issue of diversity, and noted that the safe, liberal view of multiculturalism doesn't allow challenging of practices (for example, violence) because those practices are defined as 'cultural' or 'alternative'. He suggested that the challenge is how to engage with and interrogate alternative realities and noted that respect for diversity is not the same as valorisation of difference.

Barry Mason asked how you place expertise in post-modern positions without going too far, and he provided a challenge to the dominant stories of 'not knowing' (noting he was querying the dominant stories around the *meaning* of 'not knowing', not the practices). He, along with Carmel Flaskas and Laurie MacKinnon, noted the tendency of family therapists to denigrate the past and to be 'oppositional', rather like adolescents—do we still need to fight so hard to establish our identity? Carmel commented that one can easily start to feel like a dinosaur working in family therapy, as the field uses an 'always new' metaphor for theory development compared to the idea of context and relationship across time and models, and that often it is a case of being 'more right line than what those other dodos are doing'. Laurie MacKinnon noted that many lessons had been learnt over the last twenty years and it was possible to take these on board without throwing out the basic interactional lens of systemic work. Laurie also suggested that the therapeutic relationship and family relationships get put back on the agenda and that we look at practice and commence (or recommence) dialogue about that and not just ideas. Laurie's paper provoked quite a reaction: the question time afterwards ran into the tea break and the discussion had the momentum to continue into the next part of the program. It was a shame it didn't, as seeds for some sort of dialogue between narrative and systemic based practitioners were being sown. Energy like this needs to be harnessed when it appears, as it is a bit hard to 'program'.

Of course the conference wasn't all papers and keynotes, there was work to be done for those on the Journal Board, and the annual State Associations' meeting was held. This meeting (over a delicious dinner (thank you, NSWFTA) and a subsequent one on the Friday looked at, among other things, the impact of the formation of the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) on the Associations. Many family therapists are heavily involved in this umbrella body and three state associations have applied to be members. Regulation seems to be the order of the day and self regulation rather than regulation imposed from without (for example, by governments) seems to be preferable. Arrangements were made for keeping in touch about these developments, as talking only once a year in the present situation is woefully inadequate. Once again, the idea of a national Association was broached.

Then there was the social side; the bar downstairs was heavily patronised (well, it did have a great view of the ocean) and the cocktail party and conference dinner were well attended. Both social events were highly appreciated 'time out' from a stimulating and very full program.

You may recall from the opening paragraph of this report that I found myself encouraged to play with metaphor as a result of knowing I was to write this article. The two metaphors that emerged from my experience of the conference were:

- *Conference as family reunion*—you know, where the old-timers catch up; where 'elders' are revered (this year's Journal award going to Kerrie James); where newcomers sometimes appear left out and look dazed when family political or polemical undercurrents surface; where business is done (it's usually the only time the state associations get together) and we catch up on what we've been up to and what we've found out (the official version as reflected in the papers and meetings and the unofficial version which takes place when 'the goss' is aired at tea breaks).
- *Conference as family therapy*—time out for reflection on our experience (this year's conference included a number of papers that were quite personal in nature as well as numerous professional reflections); where ideas are challenged and validated; where the 'unsayable' is said and things that are outside the politically correct line (or dominant stories) are discussed. Just like therapy, our conferences can help us as a community of practitioners broaden the context and acknowledge our connectedness (not just in the here and now but to our past) as well as providing opportunities to gain new knowledge and insights and to explore more useful ways of working, not only with our clients, but with each other.

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