

In Appreciation of Mara Selvini Palazzoli: 15.8.1916–21.6.1999.*

Mara Selvini Palazzoli died in June last year. With her colleagues Luigi Boscolo, Gianfranco Cecchin and Guiliana Prata, she has had a profound influence on the development of family therapy worldwide. When I think of Mara, I hear a rich, loud voice and laugh and see a straight-backed though tiny woman, whose feet dangled endearingly from chairs. She always had with her a very large handbag, which metaphorically represented for me her capacious intellect, energy and verve and her enormous confidence in herself and her ideas, as well as some willingness to bash others over the head at times in defence of them.

Mara was the youngest of four children, born in 1916 to parents who were poorly educated but successful in food manufacturing and wholesale trade. She saw her father 'as a force of nature'¹ and herself as the only one of his children who would challenge him: she enjoyed the battle and grew up unafraid of dissent. One battle she won was to be allowed to go to university. There she studied medicine and eventually her curiosity was sparked by the riddle of anorexia nervosa, just coming to light in post-war food-abundant Italy, a curiosity which diverted her into psychiatry and psychoanalysis. In 1967, dissatisfied with her psychoanalytic understanding of anorexia, Mara established the Centre for Family Study. As she described it, she had no difficulty in finding families to treat; in the early years the problem was rather in finding a team to unite around a systemic treatment model.

In 1971 a new team was formed of Mara, Luigi, Gianfranco and Guiliana, 'all psychiatrists with a psychoanalytic background but all disenchanted ... in search of something new'¹ and willing to dedicate themselves to all things systemic, a radically dissenting position at the time. The four remained together until 1979, seeing families (both a clinical and research endeavour) and writing the many papers and books which are so familiar to us.

From the inception of this, the original Milan Team, Mara was always part of a team and was highly appreciative of the companionship, the energy and creativity of such collective minds. Maybe such teams were reminiscent of her biological sibling group, though in these work groups she was far from being the 'baby'. Colleagues were equally appreciative of her: Guiliana described her as 'brilliant, creative with great ambition and will power'² and held her in great admiration and affection, as did Luigi and Gianfranco³. One can imagine being in a team with Mara, feeling drawn to her as a powerful and charismatic force commanding dedication and loyalty, but someone from whom one needed to establish some personal space.

In 1979 the Milan Team amicably separated with the men increasingly developing training programs at home

and abroad and the women continuing their research program. According to Guiliana, she and Mara had always opposed establishing a training school: 'as too often it meant the death of research'². It was ironic that the team disbanded just as some of their key publications, written as a team and about their team, were coming to wider attention. Mara and Guiliana continued working together for some years, with Maurizio Viaro as research associate. They went on to develop the invariant prescription which became a strategy to provoke change and a source of information about family processes for their research. This work gave rise to their model of pathogenic family processes and their links with seriously disturbed children.

A further team of Mara, her son Matteo Selvini, Anna Maria Sorrentino and Stefano Cirillo was formed in 1984 and continued the work on the invariant prescription. In 1986 Mara's report on the research, 'Towards a general



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model of psychotic family games' was published in the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, followed three years later by the book, *Family Games: General Models of Psychotic Processes in Families*. The ideas they contained were received critically by many family therapists as inappropriately negative and blaming of parents. In 1992, Mara commented on this period revealingly and with humility:

Because the members of our team were not yet mature enough for the tremendously difficult task of working with families with schizophrenic or psychotic children, because to be able to perform that task, a primary transformation must have taken place in the therapist ... he/she must have got rid of arrogance, of the spirit of contest, of the tendency to become indignant and moralistic especially when faced with what seems to be a lie or dishonesty, he must be patient, be ready to get deeply involved in what he feels as the tremendous suffering of the parents preceding the child's crisis ... Instead of forcing the parents to face up to their responsibility for their child's suffering, we must join each of them in their personal suffering he/she underwent in his/her family of origin. And we need to understand in what way this early suffering influenced his/her way of being a spouse and parent.¹

But it wasn't only the negative connotation of family members that was ill-received at the time: the team's certainty as to the reality of psychotic family processes was unwelcome to a family therapy community increasingly in love with relativism, social constructionism and the narrative turn. Luigi and Gianfranco's greater partiality for social constructionism was much more in tune with this shift and Mara's belief that there was something there, however complex, to be understood came to seem more and more past its epistemological sell-by date.

Mara's work continued a tradition, begun by Bateson, Wynne, Haley, Weakland, Bowen, Laing and many other inspired researcher-clinicians, of exploring what she saw to be a fundamental question: 'What interactive processes, organized and shared through time by all members of the family, have induced in this particular member the emergent quality we call psychotic symptoms?'² Mara believed in the existence of family and the emergent social processes, albeit highly complex and open to different constructions, according to the prejudice of the therapist. However illuminating and valuable the postmodern position has been to family therapists, Mara's work forcefully champions a more realist position, drawn on by many of us in our daily practice.

Whatever our epistemological stance, we owe a generous tribute to Mara and her colleagues for the myriad techniques and ideas they developed for working with families: they are a fundamental part of our clinical heritage. What is also fundamental is the excitement and interest their work generated which was so much part of the establishment of our profession's belief in itself and its capacity to help families.

Something which moved Mara to dedicate so much of her life to trying to help those families most incapacitated by unhappiness was her personal experience of loving family relationships. An entry in her diary from 1954, two days after the birth of her daughter Anna, movingly illustrates this: 'I have taken Holy Communion for the first time ever in bed. This has made me think about how it will be when I will be taking my last Holy Communion. But today I am in the fullness of life and death seems far away. Though we shouldn't forget about it ... We need to love—only if we love will we live and then fall asleep in peace.'⁴

Mara, sleep in peace.

BEBE SPEED

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Notes

1. Notes written in response to questions from William Docherty in 1992, published as *Il dissenso e la curiosità—intervista con Mara Selvini Palazzoli*, by William Docherty, *Terapia Familiare*, 61, 1999: 11–24.
2. Personal communication from Guiliana Prata.
3. See In Memoriam (1999) *Family Process*, 38: 4, 392–394.
4. I am indebted to Matteo Selvini for sending me this and other material concerning his mother.