

## EDITORIAL

# Couples Therapy: From the Ashes to the Ballroom?

I still preserve a yellowing clipping from a 1970s *Woman's Day* article about marriage counselling. The article is dominated visually by a large posed photograph: a middle aged woman in 'librarian' type glasses sits behind a desk, facing a much younger 'couple' who are gesticulating their mutual incomprehension. I wonder how much such media images, along with the now quaint words 'marriage guidance', have influenced popular perceptions of couple therapy over the years? Surely relevant, too, is the fact that relationship counselling agencies and professional organisations held onto the word 'counsellor' years after others had begun referring to themselves as 'therapists', and that some agencies have only recently moved to 'professionalise' by appointing only psychology or social work graduates. Have these things, too, contributed to the perception—not just outside the profession, but inside it—that couple work is somehow of lesser status, mostly done by 'nice ladies' who only know one model (currently likely to be Emotionally Focused) and who are much better at 'doing it' than at presenting at conferences? As Jim Crawley observes, couple therapy has been marginalised within the wider family therapy community, and the balance is only now beginning to redress itself.

Many therapists and counsellors actually prefer to avoid the client's hints that the other might like to be involved. That way a close, comfortable alliance can develop. Trainers of counsellors warn darkly that it is 'inappropriate' to allow one's (individual) client to talk 'about third parties' and that such talk must be sternly focused back on the client to develop his/her self-responsibility. I wonder how many of these 'experts' actually shy away from the prospect of sitting with a not very insightful, not very articulate, but extremely disappointed and embittered couple, and struggling with them session after session? Even family therapy can sometimes be easier than couple work. Kids provide alternative focal points, and alternative sources of insight and leverage. Families can be testing and chaotic; they can also be fun. Couples, very often, are not much fun.

Your *Journal* is pleased to be able to take part in what appears to be an international revival of interest in couple work. As we completed work on this final *Journal* for 1998, we noticed that two overseas editors have just addressed comparable themes (Ross, 1998; Carpenter, 1998). In our own issue, Jim Crawley, long an advocate for the valuing of 'unfashionable' traditions within our profession, provides an expert summary of

'the strands of couple therapy'. Ray Hawkes foregrounds for us the usefulness of some gently strategic approaches which have particular value in dealing with issues like addiction. Anastasia Contos' case study of a young couple where one partner has been diagnosed with a psychiatric illness reminds us of the fundamental importance of understanding what the relationship actually means to each individual partner.

While such understandings were once part and parcel of training in couple and family therapy, they have dropped from view in favour of more recent and seemingly more glamorous approaches. The question 'Tell me, how did you two happen to choose each other as mates?' for example, was routinely asked thirty years ago by Virginia Satir (Satir, 1964: 118). But conscious reasons for marriage choice (rooted in perceptions of comforting similarity and stimulating difference) rarely acknowledge the deep roots of choice in infant attachment. Attachment theory is a point of reference for several of the contributions to this issue, and rightly so.

Perhaps the high point of the issue, for many readers, will be the paper by Nancy Cogan, in which she has the courage to talk about the kind of clients many of us dread, and confess her stuckness in dealing with them. Her openness is too little seen in today's family therapy world, and the responses from Nicholson (from a Narrative perspective), and from Rohan, Harris and Stiefel (from an Object Relations stance) are both respectful and practical. We need more such airing of the dilemmas and impasses of the therapy room, more willingness to say what doesn't work, and to ask why. A similar integrity in thinking through a personal position marks Michelle Webster's paper on the 'realness' of the therapist.

It may be significant that several of the papers in this issue originated in relationship counselling agencies. Now these testimonies to good and honest clinical practice have emerged from the shadows by the hearth. Perhaps there's a lesson in that too; marriage counselling preceded family therapy, and maybe it still has a lot to teach us.

**Hugh Crago**

## References

- Carpenter, J. 1998. Editorial: Forgiveness in Families and Family Therapy, *Journal of Family Therapy* 20,1: 1-2.  
 Ross, J. L., 1998. From the Editor's Desk, *AFTA Newsletter*, 71: 5.  
 Satir, V., 1964. *Conjoint Family Therapy*, Palo Alto, CA, Science and Behavior Books.