Articles

Towards Developing a Family Therapy for Melanesia

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Our principal objective is to call the attention, primarily of Australian-New Zealand family therapists, to the relevance and the urgency of developing, promoting and providing family and/or couple therapy in the Melanesian context. We emphasise the need to take into consideration Melanesian worldviews, values and social systems. We discuss a traditional 'mediation-reconciliation ritual' model of solving family or couple conflicts, and also point to some of the immediate situations in which a family therapist could intervene. A few recommendations are also made for how the academic context could be utilised to develop Melanesian family therapy.

Families in today's Melanesia find themselves in a very rapidly changing society. Since independence (1975 in Papua New Guinea; and 1978 in the Solomon Islands), urbanisation and modernisation have increased tremendously. In the space of a lifetime, families have either been forced, or have chosen, to change their way of living, their occupation, their type of accommodation, their size and, sometimes, even their own concept of a 'family'. For some, the changes have brought benefits such as better health and employment services, transport, communication, and education. Many families, however, and especially young people, are no longer satisfied with the traditional way of living. While development has brought many benefits to the families and the nation at large, it has also brought its share of problems, such as urban migration, land and environmental problems, unemployment, alcoholism, drugs, laziness, loss of traditional competencies, prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS (Bishops of PNG and SI, 2000).

About 85% of families still inhabit rural or non-urban settings, living by subsistence farming in a more or less traditional way. Even here, we cannot speak of one type of family life, as PNG and SI comprise over 700 traditional cultures, with many rules and diverse rituals for marriage and family. Moreover, these rules exist within the context of traditional Melanesian worldviews and values, which permeate every aspect of life.

Melanesian Worldview and Values

Burridge (1969), Brown (1978), Feil (1984), Strathern (1971, 1972), Goldman (1998) and Wiener (1995) have attempted to understand and describe the Melanesian worldviews and value system from different perspectives. However, we draw mainly on Mantovani (1983), an Italian-born anthropologist and missionary who lived and worked in Melanesia for more than 30 years. According to him, the Melanesian worldview has two aspects: (1) *empirical*, which includes the natural environment, its economic resources, animals and human inhabitants, those things which one can touch and see and (2) *non-empirical*, which includes *spirit* beings, impersonal occult forces and sometimes totems. For Melanesians themselves, the distinction between the two is sometimes imprecise or ambiguous. They even consider that non-empirical realities, often referred to as spirits, may be more powerful than people. These non-empirical realities are *here* and *now*, intermin-

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gling with the empirical world of people and the natural environment. The Western view, on the other hand, tends to see them as functioning independently of each other.

This integration of the cosmos implies the integration of living and dead human beings, animals, plants, spirits, mountains, streams, the ocean, and so on. The distinction Melanesians make between the living and the dead is not very significant; both are 'alive', actively participating in the life of the community (Mantovani, 1984). This theme of 'inter-relatedness and inter-dependence of the cosmos' is repeatedly traced in many Melanesian myths and rituals by a number of anthropologists and linguists (cf. Goldman, 1979, 1983,1998; Frankel, 1986; Poole, 1986; Schieffelin, 1991; Stürzenhofecker, 1993; Ballard, 1995; Biersack, 1995).

Goldman and Ballard (1998), in a collection of essays on myths and rituals from Highland Papua New Guinea, propose the concept of 'Fluid Ontologies'— notions of life and being based on fluidity, on what water does. Craig San Roque draws on the same concept in describing the world-views of the indigenous people of Australia (Power, 2003: 210).

Professionals intending to practise therapy in Melanesia definitely need to consider this notion. For instance, a Melanesian 'community' consists of a web of relationships, principally relationships having to do with blood, marriage and land. Besides, relationship with relatives comprises both the living and the dead. In other words, a Melanesian 'community' consists of living relatives, dead ancestors, and land: garden, bush, river, and sea. Relationships mean much more than biological or legal links. They mean rights and duties, expectations and obligations. Dead ancestors are very much part of the living community or family, and have the power to interfere with the lives of the living. For example it is an often-encountered phenomenon that a living person becomes 'inhabited' by the spirit of a dead clansman. It is often feared that if the dead did not have a good relationship with a living person, the spirit of the dead is bound to interfere with the life of that particular person. Therefore, family or community rituals are also in place to appease the spirit of the dead.

Melanesian values are closely bound up with their worldviews. According to Mantovani 'the most fundamental value, central to Melanesian cultures and religion is the continuation, protection, maintenance and celebration of Life'. He says:

> Sickness, crop failure, accidents, etc., are signs of lack of 'life'. If somebody gets sick, people will try to cure him or her. If the cure does not work then people will check the relationships. If a child is in hospital, for instance, the parents will say that they must go home to 'straighten out things' ... The community will check not only the relationship to the living but to the dead and to the land as well. If one discovers any broken relationship one must mend it through an 'exchange'. One usually prepares a meal (Mantovani, 1993: 9).

Since Melanesian worldviews and values differ significantly from those in the West, it is therefore not surprising that both these cultures will offer distinctive solutions to similar human dilemmas. Both have specific conceptions of what constitutes the 'healthy' family and how social relations should be organised to achieve this ideal. A Pidgin term for 'healthy' is *Gutpela Sindaun* and it encompasses security, health, wealth, growth, prestige, good relationships, meaning, etc. Community over thousands of years was experienced as the only safe way to this 'Gutpela Sindaun'. Therefore, the choice or the decision of the community had priority over one's personal choice and decision. For instance, we come across a number of men and women confiding that though they had someone in mind for marriage, the community chose someone else for him or her. Strange as it may for a Western mind, in such cases refusal of a community or clan's choice would have long-lasting repercussions both for this particular individual and for the tribe or the clan, even to the extent of a tribal fight (Mantovani, 1993: 6). Every society has its own system and mechanism of coping with and solving their problems. Do the Melanesians too have means of their own to resolve family issues and concerns?

Traditional Ways to Solve Conflict

The First Author's Personal Experience in PNG

My experience in Papua New Guinea is limited to eight years; six years as a counsellor, chaplain and university lecturer, and two years in one of the remote villages of the Sepik Province, mainly learning the local language and culture. Within this period of time, I came across a number of couples who were looking for help to resolve some of their marital conflicts. But I also know there were many more couples who suffered silently, especially the women. Since readers of this journal are familiar with the techniques of Western family or couple therapy, I will focus on some of the Melanesian approaches that I have observed and heard about. First of all, I will attempt to show the social and cultural nuances and complexities in a marital

relationship in the Melanesian context, by recalling two of my experiences.

Theresa, from the Chimbu Province of Papua New Guinea, who was married with two children, once told me she wanted to divorce or separate from her husband John because he had another woman in his life. She felt her husband was abusing her both financially and emotionally: financially, because she is a teacher and she earns, while he did not have a job; emotionally, because until recently polygamy was considered to be sign of prestige, or a matter of honour for a 'big man' or the chief of the village. In some of the clans even today, polygamy is still prevalent. Therefore, for John, a second or a third girl as his wife was normal and not considered as a wrongdoing. Furthermore, according to the customs of Theresa's clan, once the man or his clan has paid the bride price, the woman becomes the 'property' of the man. Now along with fulfilling many other customary legalities and formalities, it is only after she has paid back the bride price to his clan that she can separate from her husband or divorce. Theresa explained that she or her clan would never be able to pay back the bride price that was paid by his clan, and the very idea of separation or divorce does not even occur in the mind of her family members or close relatives. She said that she was really suffering insult, and frequent physical assault as well. Theresa admitted that my intervention had helped at least in alleviating the beatings.

My second experience was while I was with the *Wosera* people of East Sepik Province. Early one morning, I noticed an unusual crowd in our neighbouring village; the atmosphere was tense and it looked as if the men were preparing themselves for a fight or tribal war. Though no fight took place, later I learned that a husband had approached his wife to have sex in the first month after her delivery. (In their custom, it is taboo to approach a woman until a period of 90 days, or three months, is over). Therefore, the husband's action was seen as an insult and a serious offence. It was reported that the girl took off to her family with the child, resulting in a major conflict not only between the two families, but also between the two clans. To make a long story short, the conflict was resolved only (and luckily) through the mediation of elders who listened to the stories of both sides and passed a final judgement. The boy's clan had to give a pig and a ritual meal (according to their custom) to the woman's clan, bringing about reconciliation and apparent normalcy in their relationship.

Evaluation of the Author's PNG Experience

These incidents, and the method employed to solve the second, may sound strange to a Western mind. But it is a Melanesian way — a traditional model that involves the presence of a mediating team of elders as the jury, with the couples in conflict being the litigants. Interestingly, this 'courtroom' model is very similar to an African model described by Nwoye:

> The key image in the traditional set-up originates in 'litigation', develops as litigation, and goes through the major phases of litigation. This view of resolving a conflict preserves certain qualities, not of the Western family systemic interaction model, but rather of the 'judicial courtroom' trial, encompassing in its structure the major phases of that process (Nwoye, 2000: 351).

This traditional practice involves the drama of claim and counter-claim and an eventual judgement by the mediating elders (Ben-David & Good, 1998). The elders are expected to listen to the arguments or complaints of the spouses in conflict, and to make an enactment of justice, by saying which of the two opposing parties is more at fault. They identify damages — usually items of material compensation differing in type from place to place — to be awarded to the injured party, as well as other costs to be imposed on the offending spouse as a way of returning to peace and harmony. As Nwoye (2000) observes, the elders take on the multiple roles of jury, mediator and mentor to the couples in conflict. However, it must be emphasised that this analogy should be taken with caution and never be extended too far, because quarrelling couples each have a different view about what is 'really' going on. Just as with a western couple in conflict, the Melanesian partners each have a different view of right and wrong:

> That means that they do not have a harmonised view to guide them as to what to expect from and owe each other and the marriage, which is contrary to their society's worldview (Nwoye, 2000: 351).

From the above example and the method employed to solve the conflict, one could think that the Melanesian approach is totally different from modern family therapy. However, one can tease out the following common elements:

a) conflicts in a family, be it traditional or modern, will always exist, though emotional expressions and behaviour patterns may vary considerably depending on the socio-cultural background
b) often the intervention of a third party, be it elders as jury, or therapists as helping professionals, or

religious leaders as mediators, plays a crucial role in resolving the conflicts more amicably

c) resolution of a conflict is often accompanied by the execution of justice, apology, payment of compensation etc; and

d) a 'reconciliation ritual' is seen as a part of the process — as in the above example, the payment of money or pigs followed by a meal. And in a modern setting, maybe the couple has a meal out, or arranges a family meal, or if it is more of a religious mediation, a priest officiates at a religious reconciliation service or some other ritual.

Some of these traditional approaches — the mediation of elders, exchanges of pigs, meal, etc. — are now fast becoming less relevant or rather, breaking down, due to massive social changes.

With these commonalities and differences in mind, is there a real scope for developing a Melanesian-oriented family or couple therapy? And if yes, where does one begin? What are the urgent needs and concerns that could be addressed by developing a Melanesian-oriented family/couple therapy approach? Though it is not within the scope of this article to propose and analyse psychotherapeutic solutions to each of the problems that we identify, we could look at some of the urgent problems that would require immediate attention.

Areas of Immediate Concern

The most extensive form of family and sexual violence in PNG is domestic violence. Domestic violence usually refers to violence between husband and wife, but can also include violence between other members of a domestic group. In practice, most domestic violence is wife-bashing. In PNG, wife-bashing is so common that it has even been used in court as proof of marriage: for example, a minister whose defence against charges of raping a young girl in his household was that he considered her to be one of his wives and 'this was confirmed by evidence that the girl was often beaten up by him' (*Post Courier*, 7th November, 1988; in Bradley, 2001: 6). According to a United Nations report (1989: 5), the research carried out by the Law Reform Commission (LRC) on domestic violence in PNG was the first systematic nationwide research on the subject by any developing country. The LRC found that on average, two-thirds of wives have been beaten by their husbands. The frequency and severity of violence is greater in the rural environment. There is considerable variation across the country, with figures close to 100% from some of the Highland villages surveyed, and half of that level in the provinces of Oro and New Ireland. The situation is clearly grave.

To a large extent, traditional ideologies continue to define the dynamics of gender relations, and customary practices are also invoked as the means to legitimise abusive behaviour in the face of growing public concern over the apparent increase in domestic violence. Generally, wife-beating is regarded as a private matter between marriage partners, and other people, including relatives, do not interfere unless the beatings are unusually frequent or severe (Kanawi, 1994: 68). As described earlier, in a number of communities, women are seen as property of men once the 'bride price' or the exchange ceremony is over. Surprisingly, there are also reports of women approving or even expecting their husbands to bash them up once in a while as a sign of their concern and love. Taking into consideration all these socio-cultural and historical underpinnings, the urgent need for counselling and support services for women and children affected by domestic violence has been recognised by various NGOs in PNG.

As Rivett and Street (2003) observe, family therapy and domestic violence have had a problematical relationship. And feminists have profoundly criticised family therapists who engage in couple therapy work where domestic violence has occurred. Therapists have responded to these criticisms in a number of ways, such as by constructing different models. Almeida and Bograd (1991) have developed a community response to domestic violence that involves separate treatment for men and women. Similar services have been developed by family therapists in Australia (Shaw, Bouris & Pye, 1996). Again, these responses suggest that the family therapists are aware that their earlier handling of DV was not as appropriate as they had presumed. And undoubtedly, Melanesia needs to be seen as a place of emergency in this regard. As to what is the most relevant approach in PNG or in Melanesia, one cannot downplay the importance of a community education campaign; Melanesian life to a large extent even today revolves around their community. A person to person approach is needed just as much, as a great number of people who live in cities and towns consider wife beating to be a private matter to which they attach certain amount of shame and guilt.

The first AIDS case in PNG was identified in 1987 and. by the end of June 2001, the cumulative total of reported HIV positive cases had reached 3901. Four hundred and sixty-four new HIV cases

were reported during the first six months of 2001, this being a 48 percent increase on the number reported over the same period in 2000. The National Consensus Workshop estimated that the total number of HIV infected persons in PNG in 2000 was in the range 10,000–15,000. Estimates range from 5,500 to 22,000, depending on the lowest and prevalence rates used for estimates. From the available data, the predominant mode of transmission is through unprotected heterosexual intercourse (89.70%) and the second most common mode of transmission (9.39%) is prenatal (National AIDS Council Secretariat, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea).

> “In PNG, wife-bashing is so common that it has even been used in court as proof of marriage.”

About 85% of the PNG population still resides in rural or non-urban settings, living by subsistence farming in more or less traditional family and community life. Wealth distribution in Melanesia is still hugely skewed, wealth being mostly in the hands of a few politicians or/and some international companies. Urbanisation has resulted in a high rate of urban poverty, unemployment, indolence, alcoholism, drugs, and problems relating to land, environment, and law and order.

It is in this time of crisis and transition that the role of family therapist or couple therapist is most significant. This obviously brings us to the question, what approach is best suited to the Melanesian context we describe?

From Traditional to Modern

First of all, one needs to be careful what one means by the term *family* in a Melanesian context. The nuclear family — the parents and one or more children — is a rare phenomenon in the strict sense, without a *wantok*. (‘Wantok’ is a Tok Pisin word meaning ‘one who speaks the same language’. Regarded positively as a social safety net, the wantok system of relationships operates on mutual obligations for assistance, support, and favours.) But nuclear families are on the rise in the urban settings. In the rural areas, the social and family system is still complex, with extended family and kinship systems (patrilineal in PNG, with notable exceptions in coastal and islands regions, where matrilineal systems are found). With regard to the nature and the size of the family, rapid changes are taking place all over Melanesia, for example, a gradual transition from polygamous to monogamous marriages.

In this rapidly changing context, Melanesian family workers as well as expatriate professionals who venture into Melanesian countries need to be careful in importing Western family therapy developed in a culturally and socially different context.

Some family therapy literature supports the viewpoint that systemic thinking which deals with the pattern of relationship is valid for all families regardless of cultural difference (Tamura & Lau, 1992). At the same time as Nwoye (2000) cautions against too literal application of concepts like ‘boundaries’ and ‘enmeshment’ in an African context, he has admitted the use of techniques from Western family and marital therapy, specifying the influence of Minuchin (1974), Tomm (1985), Cecchin, (1987), Haley (1973), and White and Epston (1989).

> Finally, together with the authorities in the Vico Institute, Ireland (McCarthy, 1994), we share emphasis in our practice on the concept of systemic work using legend and folklore to draw metaphors for re-educating our clients (Nwoye, 2000: 352–3).

Therefore, one cannot ignore the insights of either traditional Melanesian approaches or the modern western techniques. Perhaps the two incidents that we narrated earlier bring out to some extent the cultural complexities and the social implications in a marital/couple relationship in the Melanesian context. They also indicate how important it is to solve a couple’s conflict with the right Melanesian perception, approach, and techniques. Therefore, the most important and challenging task is to develop a culturally relevant and socially acceptable approach.

Recommendations

Considering the relevance and urgency and at the same time the challenges involved, we make the following practical suggestions and recommendations. They are not to be seen as a sure way to regain ‘paradise lost’, but rather as a starting point for further research and development of a Melanesian oriented approach or model of family/couple therapy.

From a psychological point of view, Papua New Guinea and other Melanesian nations still largely remain an anthropological museum for many outsiders. Up to the present day, psychology, psychotherapy, counselling, and psychiatry are very much alien concepts, even in academic circles. One hardly comes across a professional psychotherapist or

psychiatrist and if they exist, they are usually confined to the major cities or towns. It is unrealistic to think of Melanesians as free from the problems and difficulties requiring such services as these professionals could offer. Instead it should be seen that the families and the couples in these young nations in transition would need much attention, such as any other developing countries in the world. And undoubtedly, professionals from Australia and New Zealand should take the first stride in extending a helping hand in this task, for the simple reasons of geographical closeness as well as their experiences and reflections with indigenous people who have some things in common with Melanesians. In order to create a climate of cross-cultural enquiry and exchange of ideas on potential therapeutic models, much could be done in:

"We cannot blindly accept or completely disregard the existing Western aproaches."

- developing and promoting a university curriculum with necessary human resources in some of the Melanesian universities with an emphasis on indigenous psychology
- recruiting interested Melanesian young graduates, for research and scholarly work in the field of psychology and psychotherapy
- sponsoring exchange programs between Melanesian and Australian and New Zealand Universities for university students who are interested in Melanesian family or couple therapy
- boosting international exchange of ideas and interventions. For example, while international psychology might offer Melanesia significant help in tackling domestic violence and AIDS, Melanesia contributes to international psychology with its insight into human development from traditional perspectives.

Summary and Conclusion

The main aim of this article has been to show the urgency of promoting Melanesian-oriented family or couple therapy in a Melanesian context. We cannot blindly accept or completely disregard the existing Western approaches as culturally unfit. We are best advised to exercise caution while adopting any particular approach. We have briefly indicated some of the possible immediate issues with which the professionals could engage themselves.

Melanesian society, though it still remains very much traditional in many respects, is a society caught up in the modern realities of life. Therefore, undoubtedly, working therapeutically within it is a daunting task for anyone, all the more for the expatriates who are alien to the culture and customs of Melanesia. But not an impossible one: as San Roque says, we have to use

> … therapeutic methods to deal with impossible situations, where the practitioner develops the capacity not to depend on obedience to fixed systems (Power, 2003: 210).

Finally, it was not the intention of the author to propose or promote a specific family therapy model for Melanesia. Therapists who intend to develop a suitable model of family therapy for Melanesia would do well to bear in mind Narrative Therapy's[1] geographical connections with the Pacific, and the relevance of its core principles. The Melanesian's great emphasis on justice, compensation, etc., in resolving family or couple conflict would also suggest that it would be worth considering some of the elements of Just Therapy[2]; or Communication Therapy[3] (to mention two other approaches).

Endnotes

1 There are many different themes that make up what has come to be known as 'narrative therapy' and every therapist engages with these ideas somewhat differently. When you hear someone refer to 'narrative therapy' they might be referring to particular ways of understanding people's identities. Alternatively, they might be referring to certain ways of understanding problems and their effects on people's lives. They might also be speaking about particular ways of talking with people about their lives and problems they may be experiencing, or particular ways of understanding therapeutic relationships and the ethics or politics of therapy (Morgan, 2000: 1–2). Narrative ideas constitute a wide and complex corpus, involving different disciplines from anthropology to psychoanalysis (Bruner, 1989; Geertz, 1973; Gergen, 1982; Mitchell, 1981; Spence, 1982). Morgan (2000) summarises it saying that the Narrative therapy seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counselling and community work, which centres people as the experts in their own lives. It views problems as separate from people and assumes that people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives.

2 'Just Therapy' is one that takes into account the cultural, gender and socio-economic contexts of the persons seeking help. Therapists and counsellors who follow this

approach take the responsibility of finding appropriate ways of addressing these issues and developing approaches that are centrally concerned with the often forgotten issues of fairness and equity. Such therapy reflects themes of liberation that lead to self determining outcomes of resolution and hope.

3 Communication Therapy, assisting the couples to express (communicate) as well as to understand to each other, their needs and expectations and thereby trying to minimise misunderstanding and conflicts. It is based on the communication-systems approach (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967) and is effectively used in Belgium by Dr. A. Vansteenwegen, and other family therapists.

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