

Responses to Barbara Fraser: Excerpts

Julie Burgess-Manning (Moderator)

Pam Rycroft: I welcome Barbara's initiative in proposing her list of Common Factors in Family Therapy as a starting point ... It is really useful to define what is unique to family therapy practice for training purposes. A student reflecting on sitting for the first time, trying to engage both a reluctant adolescent and his angry, critical parents, reminds me poignantly of the tensions we hold in the room and the complexity of the therapeutic 'dance' with families. The field of family therapy has been characterised by a richness of ideas and approaches that is confusingly wonderful and perhaps this is the 'contextual common factor' that we need to preserve.

Benjamin Hansen: On first reading it seemed to me that empathy and rapport were conspicuously absent, but perhaps these are covered by point 6 — 'Privileging clients' experiences'? Otherwise this is a comprehensive list of what to do in family therapy.

I am not sure that the common factors offer a coherent framework. For example, in point 3, 'Encouraging behavioural regulation', we have a combination of structuralist and post structuralist ideas that involve very different philosophies, therapist positions (centred vs. decentred) and goals. There is a degree of conflict in the content that may make this a very unwieldy paradigm.

When I read about common factors in psychotherapy, I am reminded of John Ralston Saul, who attributes many of the problems of the modern West to a fixation on structure. Structure without balance can create amoral, self-perpetuating systems that are devoid of memory. Could a fixation on structure transform client-focused services into service-focused services? Could the prescription of therapeutic maps impair flexibility and the ability of therapists to learn from mistakes?

Rick Whiteside: In her article, Barbara Fraser has been able to weave the family therapy beliefs and philosophies from the past into present day family therapy. Few would disagree that the six headings listed (Relational Conception, Expanding Direct Treatment, Encouraging Behavioural Regulation, Promoting Cognitive Mastery, Supporting Emotional Experiencing, and Privileging Clients' Experiences) are fundamental to family therapy. However, halfway through the article, beginning with Promoting Cognitive Mastery (point 4), Facilitating Understanding, and Thoughtfulness About Relationship Issues, through to the end, I began to feel on foreign ground. The factors towards the end of the list seem to be less 'common' to all systems of family therapy and more appropriate to collaborative/narrative approaches.

Carlos J. Sanchez: There are times that our 'love affairs' gets us in trouble. To assume that a model is atemporal is like looking at the notes, but not listening to the music. Not long ago a researcher from Buffalo NY told me that many Minuchin and Haley followers took the blood out of the models. The failure to integrate the new advances in child and developmental psychology, the reluctance to accept changes at the macro-political level, the myopia about the vulnerability of the family to powerful external systems, the orthodoxy that rejects the new discoveries about how the brain functions and so on, discredit models that were very popular 25 years ago. The Structural/Strategic models are useful if you move beyond what Minuchin and Haley wrote 25 years ago.

Olga Rochkovski: I don't know if we have so much in common!!! In family therapy, 'positive connotation' (Mara Selvini), de-pathologising, and emphasising process seem to be common ground.

Kumar Venkat: ... and we are using tools to help the client and not getting clients to sharpen our tools; any self-respecting therapist knows that. Even the most disrespectful 'Walking Tall' therapist is collaborative in a manner, as still the collaboration is to achieve the client's goal of getting rid of a problem. I would be amazed [if] about 50 years' worth of Family Therapy efforts are thrown away as a mere bag of tricks.

Bruce McNatty: As a trainer, I was curious about Barbara's rationale and the context of her paper. I was intrigued to know what was drawn together in 'The Common Factors'. For trainees at least, it transcends any particular theoretical orientation, and looks instead to some of the core aspects of therapy, including those that are concerned with connecting and validating families.

If a trainee can be mindful of many of the qualities and tasks that are mentioned, they will do OK professionally, and their need to learn the theory of the mainstream models will be almost secondary in comparison. Thanks Barbara — I have already used your paper with a couple of training groups.

The discussion following this issue will focus on Maria Marchetti-Mercer and Lize Strauss's paper 'Flying with Dragons'. Dates: 5-19 September. Please join in at www.anzjft.com!

Eddie Gallagher's 'Parents Victimised by their Children' and 'Youth who Victimise Their Parents'

Julie Burgess-Manning and Benjamin Hansen (Moderators)

Benjamin Hansen (Benjamin_Hansen@health.qld.gov.au): I enjoyed both papers. I found them relevant, informative and entertaining. I am currently employed by Queensland Health as the Team Leader of the Mackay Child & Youth Mental Health Service ... We certainly have a number of cases on our books here in Mackay ... I share a number of influences with Eddie and have tried to work along similar lines though without the clarity that Eddie has developed ... I think that Eddie makes a good point about 'unconditional positive regard' being taken too far in some instances.

Bruce Robinson: I have worked with many families experiencing similar problems to those mentioned in case studies in these papers. An initial reading left me wanting to respond strongly to the many unsupported categorical statements about the problem ... For example: Does the replacement of formal pathologising language such as conduct disorder with informal pathologising language such as victimiser really change the totalising effect (in terms of identity) such labels invite? ... Many/most of the things which grated on a first read ... continue to do so. However, in approaching these papers a second time I also sat with a wondering about what sort of conversation might evolve around this issue ... Thanks to Eddie Gallagher for opening up this opportunity by putting himself on the line online.

Jerome Price (japma@att.net): I'd like to introduce myself and comment on Eddie Gallagher's article and this topic. I wrote *Power and Compassion: Working with Difficult Adolescents and Abused Parents* in 1996 (Guilford), focusing on the frequency then of aggressive adolescents controlling and even abusing their parents. If anything, the problem is greater now here in the States. It's great to see a worldwide discussion of this topic. Clearly, the need to empower and help parents, even poor parents, to take charge of their families is great.

... I'll be presenting workshops in four cities in New Zealand next March on working with difficult and aggressive teens and their families ... You may note that Eddie quoted an excerpt from my book ... If you'd like to check out one way of thinking about these cases there is an online article on my website at www.mifamilytherapy.com called 'The Four Most Common Mistakes in Treating Teens'. I find Eddie's

article intriguing and am enjoying some of the ways he's choosing to break down various aspects of the problem.

Olga Rochkovski (obidart@adinet.com.uy): It is a very interesting subject: children who victimise their parents. I think they are part of the 'chain' of victimisers ... or part of the abuse circuit. And it is very interesting to read how useful it is that a male therapist works with these children. I have worked sometimes with families with these problems, but I felt and I think that it is different if the therapist is a woman.

Eddie Gallagher (gallachat@datacodsl.com): Thanks to Bruce for an honest opening foray. I'm not sure what the etiquette is for an author whose work is being discussed on such a forum. Regardless of the etiquette, I can't resist replying to a couple of Bruce's points and would like more details of the 'unsubstantiated points' he objects too. There are a few points in the papers that are unsubstantiated in my opinion but I think I tried to make this quite clear.

Although informal labels in families and the schoolyard can have a profound effect on children, this hardly justifies adding a formal, 'expert'-endorsed, pathological label when this has no real scientific validity or treatment value! There are occasions when an 'expert' label can be preferable to the informal one (e.g. 'Asperger's' can be a relief both to family and to the young person themselves). However, I have yet to meet a young person who welcomes labels such as CD or ODD (no better than being seen as just 'odd'). These seem to benefit schools and professionals first, parents second and children not at all. As to children being labelled 'victimisers', I can honestly say I have not known a family pick up on this label and I have never felt the need to use the term in discussion with a young person. I emphasise that the behaviour of 'abuser' or 'victimiser' is a role that can be taken up or dropped, not an enduring trait.

Another comment from Bruce that puzzled me was: 'I was interested in how a young (or older) person might begin to take full responsibility for his/her actions when personal agency seems to have been left out of the prescription for change.' I thought I emphasised that neither disability nor past experience should be seen as limiting personal agency.