

TRAINING:
The Professional Preparation of Family Therapists

Finding the Balance

Finding myself a family therapy trainer in Christchurch, New Zealand was certainly not something I envisaged when I commenced my own training in Melbourne in the early 1980s. Prior to moving to New Zealand in early 1992, I co-led introductory family therapy programs at Sandringham in Melbourne, so my experience as a trainer has been something of a trans-Tasman experience.

The needs and expectations of trainees in both countries are very similar. However, I was very aware, at least during my first two years in New Zealand, of the way in which the field of family therapy is viewed quite differently here. This was highlighted for me by the visit of Luigi Boscolo. I remember a training workshop given by Boscolo in Melbourne in 1991, received with mass enthusiasm by Victorian therapists. In stark contrast, his visit to Christchurch which our centre hosted in 1993 was very low key, with fewer than forty people present. Although it was disappointing that New Zealand therapists were seemingly unaware of Boscolo's contribution to the field of family therapy worldwide, the Christchurch workshop provided an excellent opportunity for informal interaction that would not have occurred, had he the profile that he experienced in Australia.

Very few people in this country define themselves in an occupational sense as family therapists, with those that do frequently being asked 'what are you *really*?' Such queries have been shaped by the fact that there is still very little offered in New Zealand in terms of comprehensive, broad-based family therapy training. Although aspects of family systems theory may now be included in courses such as Social Work, there are no post-graduate programs that prepare family therapists. For those who are determined, learning still occurs in small committed groups.

In Christchurch five years ago, I initially offered a basic introductory course of 24 hours, over a twelve week period, a course which is still available once each year. Admission criteria are minimal, the key requirement being that people are employed in a social service setting, so that the concepts introduced will have some relevance for them. From an introductory group of between fourteen and eighteen people, there will usually emerge a core who are keen to carry on, and develop a family therapy skill base. This number has been restricted to six, the optimum number to fit comfortably behind the one-way screen at the Victoria Therapy Centre. This small number usually ensures the emergence of a fairly cohesive team who can work col-

laboratively with families during the second year of the course. It is this group that I am now referring to.

One of the most frequently asked questions from group members over the past five years is '*Excuse me, but when will we be doing Narrative?*' Whilst it is important to include social construction theory and the therapeutic approaches that it has generated, it is also important to be aware of the wider historical context within which family systems theory has evolved. We examine key contributions, including those no longer considered fashionable, such as the cybernetic metaphor.

A seemingly perpetual balancing act is that between the examination of the self of the therapist, and the development of technique. For instance, I have long considered Bowen's family of origin theory to be one of the shaping forces of the field. Bowen (1978) considered that a paramount focus in training groups should be trainees' degree of differentiation from their family of origin and that this should take precedence over any practical skill development. Yet I have also been much influenced by the solution focused ideas of de Shazer (1991) who asserts that the self of the therapist is of minimal concern, in comparison with the development of technique. Whilst potentially at odds with one another, there are theorists such as these who seem vital to include in any training program.

Much of what will be included is unashamedly influenced by my own personal preferences—perhaps not a good basis for curriculum development! Ultimately, trainees will discard what they don't connect with, and pursue further what they do. Such personal preferences include both the earlier and more recent works of the Milan group and the valuable attention paid by Carter and McGoldrick (1988) to family life cycle transitions.

Evaluation of the two year group occurs formally at the end of each year, and less formally throughout, as members take turns at presenting their clinical work. Additional direction comes from those colleagues at the Victoria Therapy Centre who work from a family systems perspective. I have also needed to become an avid reader of all facets of family therapy literature. As a consequence of all of this, the groups hopefully remain interesting and relevant. At a personal level and in common with many trainers, my own knowledge has increased tenfold at least!

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