

Review

Resilience: Stories of a Family Therapist.

Moshe Lang and Tesse Lang. Resilience: Stories of a Family Therapist. Mandarin, Reed Books, Australia, 1996, 258pp., Paperback. A\$14.95

As the title indicates, this is a book of stories. The stories come from the clinical experience of Moshe Lang, an eminent family therapist in Melbourne. It seems fitting that the writing is a collaborative effort between husband and wife. The stories appear, to a large extent, to be moulded from the discourse between Moshe and Tesse Lang, an important part of the development and writing of this collection.

There are 52 stories. These are in the form of clinical vignettes which relate to Moshe Lang's work since 1965. The cases are arranged in four parts, i.e. "Children", "Couples", "Relations", and "Generation to Generation". In "Children", the focus is on understanding things from the child's point of view. The vignettes cover individual and family work with the child as the central person. In "Couples" the stories relate largely to dyadic relationships and the field is then widened in "Relations" to include children and other family members in the work with the family. "Generation to Generation" presents stories which relate to transgenerational dynamics. The effects of the spoken and unspoken issues from holocaust experiences in families run through this part. Each part is followed by a "Reflection" chapter which raises one or two themes which are felt to be central to the section. Thus the "Reflection" following the Couples section raises issues to do with communication and roles.

The book is written with the general public in mind. Through it the reader gains access to the work of a family therapist. It involves the therapist's capacity to understand the meaning of problems to the individual and to the broader family system. It also involves the capacity of Moshe Lang to know who he is within the therapeutic system and to find a language to which the individual or family can respond. This might mean wondering how he can help a family, or recognizing that he might not now work as he had in the past, or the use of football metaphors in the discourse with a competitive father.

As the title suggests, the writers are respectful of the resilient aspects of individual and families. There is sometimes a contrast between medicalised treatments which have, in the past, been prescribed to families and therapy which accepts the autonomy and role of the family.

The writing also covers Moshe Lang's development as a therapist from his individual work with children through his developing ideas as a family therapist. Thus he moves from the notion of having to see only the whole family to the notion of seeing individuals or subgroups while keeping the family system in mind. There are times when he uses strategic interventions, when he focuses on

reframing and positive connotations and times when he prescribes the symptom or utilizes paradoxical interventions. There is also a considerable amount written which describes his use of his own response to patients and families in formulating his interventions. Throughout, the writing keeps the general public in mind as it is accessible and interesting to read and covers a multiplicity of situations. But above all, the therapist's love of narrative comes through in the clinical descriptions. Perhaps this reflects something of his own background together with the increasing importance of narrative in the work of family therapists.

At first reading this might not seem to be a book which is relevant to the work of those involved in psychoanalytic psychotherapy or to their patients. The understanding of material comes largely from systemic and interpersonal thinking and the focus tends to be on what is said or done with less description of the therapist's process of reflection and understanding during the therapy process. There are also few clues as to the therapist' theoretical framework. There is a little discussion of the theoretical underpinnings relevant to the work of the therapist.

The book illustrates well that change occurs in the therapeutic situation, that the relationship between patient and therapist is complex and that the attributes of the therapist are important in the work. There is vivid reference to the effects of early life experience on people and that aspects of this experience may impinge upon others in a family. The last section also illustrates how the experience of previous generations may be central to current problems issues. In this section, the therapist uses his experience with families who survived the holocaust to demonstrate this in several graphic stories . Things which have been felt to be too terrible to talk of, and which involve previous generations, emerge in various ways in the current family. The book demonstrates the value of working with the family in addressing such issues.

This is a readable and accessible book which respects the capacity of families to address their problems. The therapist's interest in people, his capacity to reflect on his own part in the therapeutic process and his humanity come through in the narrative. In bringing to life the work of an experienced psychotherapist, the book would be quite reassuring for those who might be concerned about the likely effects of therapy. It is thus considered to be a timely addition to the burgeoning popular writings about psychotherapy.

David Mushin. 765 High Street, Kew, Victoria, 3101

Publication Reference:

Mushin, D. (1998). Resilience: Stories of a Family Therapist. Australian Journal of Psychotherapy, 17(1&2), 238-241.