

Review

A Family in Therapy

A Family in Therapy. Peter McCallum and Moshe Lang. (1989). Melbourne: McPhee Gribble/Penguin. 291. \$14.99.

Peter McCallum and Moshe Lang are distinguished family therapists, and Williams Road is a centre in Melbourne for learning and practice in family therapy. It is from this centre that Moshe Lang has recorded *A Family Therapy*. In the words of the authors, they have tried to illustrate family therapy for the general public and “to write in plain English to make our work available to the ordinary reader rather than restrict our audience to those who have the time to master the language games of a closed and elite community.” In so doing they “hope to promote serious debate in an wide an audience as possible.”

They put the family therapy in context – two presenting females, a mother and daughter who have made individual suicide attempts. The treating psychiatrist thought that a family system approach was warranted and hence sought out a family therapist. The book records the process of therapy verbatim. This approach is not entirely novel in clinical teaching (e.g., Virginia Axline: *Dibs in Search of Self*) but is very useful. What is different here is that the four sessions of therapy are liberally interspersed with explanatory, evaluative, and critical commentary.

The question as to why family therapy is appropriate in this case is addressed. The difference between family therapy and a family conference is dealt with. Comments such as who sits where, what goes through the therapist’s head and how he checks things out makes this a useful tool for the practitioner.

Each of the four sessions has a focus and makes what can be seen as rapid progress. On presentation the family, Jack and Lorraine, the parents, along with their children Donna and Ernie, are “preoccupied with the pathology of their lives.” During the first session the therapist gives the family the choice between giving up and facing the difficult task of changing. They choose to go on.

The therapy makes rapid progress. By the second session even the relationship with the video, the instrument used for recording the session, shifts from one of distrust to seeing it by the end of the second sessions as “cool and trendy.” At the conclusion of the session the therapist comments that the family is at home with “Struggles about power but is all at sea with feelings of love and caring.” To turn this around in a small number of sessions is some achievement. The second session draws distinctions between the generations and the third session is seen as “softening the distinctions between the sexes.” By the fourth sessions the therapist explains that it is the therapist’s job to make himself redundant. He is able to comment to the family “It is amazing what a little therapy can do.”

Issues critical in family therapy – such as engaging the family, taking control, and what to ask when are discussed post-event and dealt with unabashedly. For example, questions such as “Do you hate your brother?” are presented and commented upon. The authors’ openness is reflected in their comment that some manoeuvres are by instinct and “any clever explanations are thought up afterwards.”

At the conclusion of the therapy the authors open their work to a wide section of the professional community for comment from “different vantage points.” These Other Views, from colleagues Eva Learner, Alan Rosen, Norma Grieve, Bruce Tonge, and Max Cornwall provide additional perspectives, some of which are outside the family therapy framework. Each of these commentaries makes interesting reading.

A Family in Therapy is a good human story. It makes for entertaining reading. It demystifies therapy to the general reader and as such can be valuable to the community at large. It presents as an inspiration to the beginning therapist and provides important insights for the experienced therapist. The rich and honest commentary, along with the text of the therapy, gives this book a unique place in clinical teaching.

Erica Frydenberg, Institute of Education, University of Melbourne.

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