

Therapy

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re Family Therapy Conference

Geraldine Doogue - Sophie Holmes, Lyn Hoffman and Moshe Lang

Geraldine: introduction - looking at the future of family therapy, who uses it, what do they get from it and what does the profession itself see as its major challenges

Sophie Holmes, Lyn Hoffman and Moshe Lang (who is director of the Williams Road Family Therapy Centre in Melbourne and something of a pioneer of family therapy in Australia, the author of a terrific book which some of you may have seen called 'Family in Therapy' and other texts plus a collection of short stories called 'Corrupting the Young')

welcome etc...

(Sophie spoke first about family therapy and themes at the conference)

issue of power - Geraldine brought in Lynn and Moshe to speak

Geraldine: Moshe Lang - I wonder how you see this issue where the therapist possesses the knowledge and controls the direction the family therapy takes, what say does the family have in how that therapy is run.

Moshe: Well I guess it depends on the way he sees his role.

Speaking for myself and I hope other family therapists see it this same way. If I have more knowledge and experience as I guess I have than the families in the process of the consultation or therapy I would hope that I would use it to give them more power and more sense of control of their own life and help them to find their own voice and help them to explore what is constraining them from having greater autonomy, greater power to conduct their life the way they wish.

G: Now can you give me an example if you possibly can of an instance where that worked, you felt satisfied with the way you handled a family finding its own voice and an instance where you didn't.

M: I think I am never really satisfied. I have moments of satisfaction and then I keep wondering how things are. At one level it depends, if you think of therapy as part of the process of life itself you can never be totally satisfied that you have achieved success or what in fact constitute success but I'll answer the other part about failure it is much easier to talk about failure, at least for me. And it relates to what you raised earlier that's the question of power. Some years ago a woman rang me and asked to come and see me and she said that she was a patient of mine 10 or 15 years earlier. At that stage I saw her with her family and in the process, in the first meeting with the family, it came out that her husband sexually abused 3 or 4 of her daughters who were present at the interview. They were the first to actually. Maybe I should tell you the story in some more detail. What actually happened was that the family was referred because her

son attempted suicide and they all came, mother, father and the children. So after I was told that the son has attempted suicide I think one of the next questions that I asked was has any body else in the family ever attempted suicide, and one after another I think a number of the daughters acknowledged that they have attempted it. And then I asked a very simple question. Would you mind telling me why? And one of the first daughters was the first to say I haven't answered because.... and then she started telling me about how her father sexually abused her.

G: was he there?

M: He was present. And that was the first time that that was acknowledged to the others in the family. And to her total astonishment and surprise then one of the sisters told a very similar story. And it was in the presence of everybody else that it came out that a number of the daughters were sexually abused by rather without any one else in the family knowing about it. And we got talking about a number of issues.

To cut a very long story short I then for structural reasons in the life of that family stopped seeing them and years later when I already worked at the Williams Road Family Therapy Centre this mother rang again and then she came to see me again because there were other issues that she wanted to discuss with me. But in that process she also asked me a question she said "Why did you not ever consider the possibility to see me alone. Did it not occur to you that there are still things that I could not talk about in the presence of my husband." And I thought about it long and hard and

at the end I said to her because I was wrong, because like all of us I was also a child of my time and place and at that stage the idea did not occur to me that there are times when it is better to see the individual alone because of the issue of power, that she did not have the power, the distribution of power in the family was such that the husband was more powerful, in numerous ways. And as a result she was still intimidated and could not speak as freely as she could have if I saw her alone.

G: I wonder with a family like that for instance what you would see as an ideal end-point. I realise there must be several but I mean do you work on the basis that families have to understand, they may now be able to stay together, is that part of what you see as your role, the maintenance of the family, and is that what people come to you to seek help with maintaining the family or is it something more, something different.

M: Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't, and more often they are confused about it, whether the best outcome is the break-up of the family as it is called or the maintenance of the family. I certainly don't see it as my role to maintain the family or to help them separate. I see it as my role to help and explore what they wish to do, what are the costs and what are the benefits of one or the other and in that sense the ideal outcome is for them to achieve what they want. Maybe it is also important to say here to many people family therapy is identified with or it's assumed to be that family therapists somehow think that the family is a great and wonderful thing and our job is to maintain it. Family therapy was developed in a way out of concern with some very severe psychiatric

problems and family therapy saw the family as a social context in which perhaps some of these things develop. So family therapy, families are not necessarily a great wonderful thing. It is of course also a very good thing.

G: Thank you all very much I mean this is just the tip of the iceberg and I quite acknowledge this and realise that and I would love to go on longer. We'll have to have some or all of you back. My thanks to Sophie Holmes (convenor of the 2nd Australian and New Zealand Family Therapy conference which has just finished in Melbourne) Lynn Hoffman (consultant family therapist from the US) and Moshe Lang (Director of the Windsor Family Therapy Centre in Melbourne and the author of a terrific book which I can personally recommend a great, quick read called "A Family in Therapy" - Peter McCallum and Moshe Lang wrote it, it's a McPhee Gribble/Penguin book and I think it is \$14.99 and it has real, quick insight in to the way family therapy worked for one group).