Masters and Apprentices

Rebecca Sng

University of Wollongong, rsng@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

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Commentary on “Transitions to Systemic Practice for a Clinical Psychology Intern” by Hamish Hill

Rebecca Sng

Department of Psychology, University of Wollongong

When you delve into the early history of Family Therapy, it could be said that there was something of a ‘master and apprentice’ model of learning. That is, therapists followed the great figures of the movement, whether it be Salvador Munuchin or Michael White, in a kind of discipleship. In some cases, it could be said that this created somewhat of a ‘cult of personality’, where the larger-than-life figures were afforded a sort of ‘guru’ status amongst the acolytes. This may well have suited the place Family Therapy occupied at the time as the questioning minority and kind of rebellious adolescent of the psychotherapy world. However, in recent times, I have noticed the invitation for Family Therapy to come in from the role of rebel to the mainstream. The value of systemic approaches has even been acknowledged by government departments and large non-government providers. Yet, the number of therapists trained purely as Family Therapists remains relatively small when compared to the numbers of clinicians registered as social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and so on.

How, then, does an inexperienced therapist, who is likely to have had training concentrated in much more linearly focused models, consider and perhaps embrace systemic thinking? This is a question I have been considering lately in my role as Deputy Director of Clinical Training at the School of Psychology, University of Wollongong. It could well be argued that the ‘master and apprentice’ model is not suited to training larger numbers of clinicians, particularly in this suspicious and evidence-based era. Therefore, this is one of the most important questions we as a community must answer at this time, if we are to accept the invitation to growth. If we are to see Family Therapy grow as a model of practice, I believe we need to take seriously the transition process for students who are trained and are perhaps submerged in individually focused ways of thinking.

I remember clearly that one of the things that struck me during my first encounters with Family Therapy was the way in which all members of the family were considered worthy of a voice. Even the youngest child was given time to share their experience and their opinion was considered of value. If we are to consider this process with any useful insight, we need to give the youngest children of the family the chance to share their experiences. In
this article, a therapist just at the beginning of his practice, shares with us his rich and insightful reflections on this process. During the Masters of Clinical Psychology program, I thoroughly enjoyed working with a student of Hamish Hill’s reflective capacity. I believe this article has something for everyone who is or has been that newly fledged therapist, just taking their first hesitant steps. Also, there is much for those of us who are supervisors, senior colleagues or teachers in anyway, considering how to continue to nourish and grow the practice of family therapy, moving it from the outskirts to the very core of child and adolescent therapy. In reading the article, I was reminded of why we take the time to listen to the least powerful members of our systems – not just because it is somehow “nice” or “right” but because it is useful, because they have such an incredible amount they can teach us.