

Cross Cultural Newsletter

2 April 2013

Dear Members

This is to report that once again, we had a good turn-out at our meeting 26 March. About 45 of our members attended.

The topic was on **“Family Therapy around the World: Challenges to practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand.”** The speaker was **Ms Liz Dodge**, family therapist.

Family therapy is a complicated topic to cover. I shall try to present, as clear as I can, a summary of what Liz said. Not being a family therapist, I must apologise for any misrepresentation that I might have made and wish to refer those astute persons to the DVD.

Since its start in the early 1940, family therapy has been blossoming. This is especially so in the past two decades, with practices varying from any forms of family interventions to elaborate models of therapies such as Strategic and structural Family therapies. The questions are whether there exist any commonalities between the models and, more importantly, whether such North Hemisphere based modalities can apply effectively across cultures such as in Asia and NZ.

Liz examined the first issue and reported on research findings to show that effective therapies share common ingredients such as client's strengths, presence of therapeutic alliance, and placebo effects (faith in the therapy). Different modalities differ in their specific techniques and premises. Strangely enough, the latter only accounts for 15 % of the therapeutic effect as compared to 55% for client factors and 30% on the strength of the alliance. Having thus given an overall understanding, Liz then proceeded to trace the development of family therapy, especially on the roots of family therapy and the major themes common to various schools over the years. Family therapy took root from social work, group and marriage guidance in the 40-50, and stemming from the need to find alternative forms of interventions because of the loss of faith in medical treatment for the major psychosis. Therapists gradually developed their theories from observations of families of those disorders such as schizophrenia. These theories such as

double-bind and general systems theory about family organisation and processes formed the foundation stones of the many different schools of therapy. It was from these foundation theories that various schools and techniques were developed in the 60-70s, the major ones include Structural Family therapy, Strategic Family therapy and the Milan group of strategic phase therapies. Despite the many forms of treatment, a theme seemed to pervade: viz centring on the eliciting of dysfunctions in families (i.e. fault finding vs strength building) and on emphasising the dominant role of the therapist in the application of treatment procedures. There is strangely an oversight on strengths and family empowerment in the restoration of health. Thus, in the 70-80, there was a shift of direction from the above to the building of strength as exemplified by the following quote that. Family therapy is not therapy **of** the family, but **with** the family. Having thus crystallised into the different schools and with the zest of “evangelic” exportation of the therapies to cultures outside Europe and US, a new but essential question arose: - Have Occidental family therapies universal applicability?

In attempts to answer the second question, thoughts are divided. There is the Universalist view that there are commonalities between families regardless of ethnic or cultural differences. Opposite to this view is those held by essentialists who regard culture and ethnicity as fixed determinants of family structure and functioning. Unfortunately, in their application of therapies to other cultures, both views are plagued by the existence of a plethora of cultures. Bi-culturalism and mono-culturalism are rarities in this jet-set world of fast cultural confluences. Families from the same ethnic group may have different orientations dependent on their unique exposure to the multi-ethnic environments they find themselves. Thus, there is an increasing need to find the middle way by allowing individual families to vary from their ethnic counterparts, taking into account the complexity of cultural and social circumstances. In order to be effective, individualised formulations basing on the consideration of various factors that Burnham (2008) called “GRRACCEESS (gender, race, religion, age, ability, culture, class, ethnicity, education, sexuality and spirituality)”

should form the basis on which family therapist (from various schools) should rest their interventions on.

Thus, from their humble origins, family therapies have evolved, shedding its early therapist dominant and dysfunction orientations to the more positive approach of discovering positive family assets and working with the family in the restoring of equilibrium. The fast confluence of cultures also behoves (another word) the therapist of whatever persuasion to take into consideration various factors unique to individual families, thus facilitating the effectiveness of their interventions.

The talk ended at 8.00pm with a lot of interesting issues being raised by the audience. They were strongly encouraged to attend the subsequent workshop on 25th June 2013 to share their experiences and bring up any issues they might have. The workshop would be presided by a panel of discussants. It is hoped that two eminent family therapists from Hong Kong will be invited to participate, via Skype if technically expedient.

Preview of next session

We shall be taking a break in April. For the one in May, depending on speaker availability, we are planning to either hold a session on the Challenges posed by the psychosocial management of disturbed youths from migrant families presenting with care and protection needs; or have a presentation and discussion on E F techniques. Please watch for this space.

Thank you again for your support. A DVD should be available in the next week. Please send for this via Tracey Bartlett <tbartlett@adhb.govt.nz>.

DIET I understand that some of you require gluten-free food. For this reason, one of you had to do without dinner last night. In the future, please indicate this in your registration. We shall try our best to accommodate.

S Wong

On behalf of the Cross Cultural Group