



Book Reviewed: Peter McCallum and Moshe Lang, *A Family In Therapy*

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For me, one of the best ways to learn about therapy is to see and hear what happens between the therapist and family (or individual), discuss the process, read, see and hear, discuss and so on... The book "A Family In Therapy" allows the reader to do just that. It does not just describe therapy with the Black family and therapist Moshe Lang, but is written in such a way that invites the reader into the therapy room of an experienced and sensitive clinician, working successfully with a family in great distress. This is one of the strengths and values of the book.

The family who live in Bendigo, consists of mother, Lorraine, a physiotherapist, father, Jack, Managing Director of a small trucking firm, Donna, aged 15 years and Ernie, aged 12 years. Lorraine had not been working for 18 months since having an accident and it appears that Donna assumed extra domestic responsibilities. The family were referred to Moshe Lang in August 1976 by Lorraine's psychiatrist. Lorraine had attempted suicide three months before the referral, and when she told her doctor that Donna had taken an overdose three weeks earlier, he decided to refer the whole family for assistance. Lorraine called Moshe Lang for an urgent appointment. The book contains transcripts of five sessions with the Black family interspersed with commentary about the therapy by Peter McCallum and Moshe Lang. In the last section, there is discussion by different professionals (not all therapists) offering alternative perspectives on the dilemmas facing the family and the work of the therapist. Chapter 1 provides a neat introduction to the clinical material and the reader is able to connect with the family and therapeutic context. Some initial thoughts about the family, their presentation and the meaning of the symptom of suicide form the beginning threads of a hypothesis about why the family faces these problems at this stage of its life cycle. Already one senses the urgency and seriousness of the problems without getting overwhelmed, a feeling of containment that is maintained throughout the book. We are also reminded that the way family relationships and symptoms are viewed depends very much on the therapist's *framework and the ideas floating around* in the professional system at any

given time. There are a number of ways of viewing problems and intervening and one way is not necessarily better than another. Therapists need to be aware of the values, ideas and prejudices they hold that affect their work.

In a review such as this, one needs to be selective about the issues that are discussed. I will comment very briefly on the process of each session and describe what for me were the highlights of the book. Other impressions could have been included.

The first session entitled: "Blackmail is against the Law" occurs three days after the initial call. *Each member is invited to give their view of the problem, and the family's distress becomes clear. There are problems between all family members, and between the parents and the children who are triangulated in their struggles; particularly Donna, who occupies the position of "go-between".* The Black family do not listen to each other. They interrupt others with accusations, statements of blame and counter-blame with the result that no-one feels understood. The family alliances and coalitions are mapped and there are splits along gender lines and problems of communication. *The therapist joins with them in a skilful and sensitive manner.* He encourages family members to talk and for others to listen, without interruption. This is a subtle and significant intervention and thus therapy has begun. At the end of the session, three tasks are set, based on the moves initiated in the session. I found the commentary very helpful, particularly in examining the levels of complexity of issues within the family. Coming together, talking and listening is a new experience for the family. It is very sad to read about their pain and sense of isolation, and their struggle to *get close to each other.*

Session 2 entitled: "Do you want us back?" takes place three days later. This is an active session, and the therapist intervenes more directly. He engages the children in discussion, leaving the space clear for the parents to talk to each other. This structural move helps us to understand more about family relationships in a powerful and dramatic way. We see more clearly the problems Jack and Lorraine have in being united as parents and their lack of

connectedness as a marital pair. The pull for Donna and Ernie to help their parents is strong. At the end of the session, the task set to the parents to go out to dinner, without the children, is considered by McCallum and Lang to be problematic. It seems poorly timed and Jack and Lorraine do not seem ready for this move. It may have been better to continue to focus on the parenting issues for longer. Again, the commentary is excellent at elucidating family dynamics and the reasons for therapeutic manoeuvres.

Session 3 entitled: "Ernie will kick up a fuss" occurs six days later. It seems that changes in family relationships have occurred and are evident in the room. The family strengths are clearer. The therapist gives his opinion on what has occurred, and reframes certain moves. He also restrains the family, stressing that change is difficult and should not occur too quickly. This is an effective way of reinforcing the changes that have already occurred.

In session 4 entitled: "We don't need it anymore" held 12 days later, the family have accomplished certain tasks, which continue to help disengage Donna from her role of "custodian" of her parents marriage. A lot of the work has begun in the sessions. Generational boundaries are clearer, Lorraine and Jack are more united as parents and the sibling subsystem seems stronger with Donna and Ernie having some fun together. The marital relationship is now addressed directly as it is felt that unless this occurs, some of the changes the family have made will not be sustained and the family may return to its old splits and ways of handling problems. In this context family of origin issues are explored, as Lorraine raises issues of Jack's background which she feels contribute to problems between them. After this session, Lang met with the couple for six sessions over three months and it seems appropriate that marital issues were explored in private, without recordings.

Session 6 entitled: "I have a Waiting List" is the last session with the family. They have made many changes. For me, the strength of the session was the way the therapist tracked these changes, asking every member their opinion about differences in

family relationships and family life. In this way, changes are secured and one has the impression that these will be lasting for the family.

For me, the therapy with the Black family is not "whiz-bang" therapy. The pace and tone of the sessions are gentle and steady and this seems very appropriate for the family. The therapist's persona seems very significant. He is gentle, compassionate and humorous. The changes in his voice and expression (as far as one can tell from the written text) work well in emphasizing certain ideas and showing the family that he is engaged with them in their struggle to change. What is clear and impressive about Lang's work is that there is no room for blaming the family as they are. Each piece of behaviour of family members is connected with the behaviour of others, and its meaning is understood within the context of family relationships. It is not about an individual's pathology. The therapist's empathy for the family is clear, as is his belief that they know what is right for them and can begin to evolve their own solutions. However, he is also clear that family members must accept responsibility for what is happening. As Peter McCallum's comments suggest: "Moshe must avoid the opposite error of absolving everyone of responsibility for the strife. If no one is responsible then no one can alter his or her behaviour and improve life in the family. This is a prescription for therapeutic nihilism" (p. 49). Throughout therapy there is a clear message that the therapist is in control and no matter how tough the going gets, the family are in safe hands.

A highlight of the sessions is the designing and setting of the tasks, which reflect the family's beliefs and lifestyle and yet will help the family move on to a new and different way of relating. This is based on a understanding of the family's struggles

and what may enhance their ability to change. It is also interesting to hear how the therapist deals with the issue of suicide and of responsibility. There is open discussion about this, but not in a way that dominates the session, making family and therapist feel anxious and immobile. While the therapist wants to understand and assess the seriousness of the risk for Donna, it is clear that the responsibility for the safety of family members lies with the family. They are considered the "best judges of the level of risk" for Donna. Some therapists may have problems with this idea, but I agree that it is most helpful to engage the family in protecting its members and not for the therapist to become caretaker or watcher. His/her role is to try to help improve relationships and problems that lead to family members seeking such desperate solutions. A last word about the therapy. I appreciated hearing about the mistakes that the therapist made, as well as therapeutic moves that were more successful. I appreciated Lang's honesty.

I found the structure of the book, with transcripts and discussion, most helpful. In particular, the fact that there was not too much transcript before some discussion helped to maintain my attention, focus and interest, without getting too bogged down in the interview. The discussion and commentary was clearly written and very informative. I liked the discussion by different professionals, particularly those raising notions of gender, the different issues facing rural and urban families and the discussion by Dr Stephen Alomes placing the Black family in a broader Australian cultural context. Broadening the framework to include cultural, social, political and gender issues is something that therapists may need to pay closer attention to.

There are several discussion points I would

have liked to have seen included. First, I agree with Max Cornwell that the text cannot fully convey the feelings of the family and the therapist and that perhaps some description of the therapist's feelings and more about the mood of the sessions may have been helpful. Secondly, I found the lack of discussion about theoretical frameworks and techniques used by the therapist frustrating.

Overall these comments should not distract from the value of the book in demonstrating the progress of therapy "in vivo" and how different moves in therapy are negotiated and interventions within and outside therapy designed. I would recommend the book to beginning therapists and trainees, and therapists who are more experienced. It is a useful book to include on the reading list of Family Therapy Training Programmes. The generosity, faith and trust of families like the Blacks needs recognition as they have contributed significantly to the professional development of many therapists, and thus to the assistance given to other families. This applies also to therapists Moshe Lang and David McCallum who have offered their work for examination and discussion and produced a book in such a unique style.

In closing, I would like to say a word about being asked to review both books at the same time. While "A Family in Therapy" is not a difficult book to read from the point of view of language and theoretical material, I found it a little heavy going because of the clinical material and the process recordings of the interviews. A sprinkling of stories from "Corrupting the Youth..." helped to break the intensity so that I could return to the Black family interviews with a fresh mind. Together these books are valuable reading and I recommend them both.

