

MSc in Systemic Psychotherapy:

I am a professionally qualified social worker, with 11 years practice experience. I have worked in the Philippines, Ireland and New York. The majority of my experience has been in child protection social work, where I became a Team Leader for my final three years. I am currently a senior social worker with a multi-disciplinary therapeutic team supporting children in special-care placements.

I have completed year 2 of a 4-year, part-time MSc in Systemic Psychotherapy. This masters is being provided by University College Dublin in Ireland.

Year one focused on the theoretical basis of systemic psychotherapy. We covered the pioneers of this branch of therapy. We looked at the core approaches (structural, strategic, Milan and Post-Milan, Narrative, Collaborative and Dialogical approaches), changes in approach that came with a shift from Modernism to Post-Modernism, and other key concepts such as cultural constructs, genograms, the family lifecycle. We also commenced an introduction to research topics and techniques.

Year two continued our learning on the theoretical basis of psychotherapy, and also covered research topics and techniques in more detail. We submitted our research proposal. 2nd year also saw us start clinical work, with Live Supervision every week in which we took on cases from CAMHS and started live therapy sessions with families.

The learning from the start of this year to the end has been very significant. We started 2nd year with no clinical experience and ended it with approximately 15 hours of clinical work under our belts. There has been lots of practical learning – how to plan a session, what questions to ask, how to start/finish a session. There has also been a lot of learning about the process of therapy – how to practice ethically, how to position oneself as a therapist (expert or not-knowing), how to pay attention to one's inner-dialogue, how to become aware of what one is bringing into session as our own baggage. As part of this year, we have also dug deeper into our own story, our own formulation, through further exploration of our own family Genogram.

This has been profoundly influential on me, both personally and professionally. Through exploration of the social construct of 'expectations of males' I have developed new insight into my make-up and my family's make up. This also motivated me to get in contact with family relatives I had not spoken to in a number of years, which was a very positive outcome. In developing as a therapist, I had to learn to let go of the expert positioning of a social worker and to develop the capacity to be not-knowing, collaborative and non-expert in my approach. I have had to develop my focus on listening, to ensure that I am listening to hear, not listening to question.

Professionally, this development has also had an impact. In my current role, our service practices an approach centred on systemic thinking and mentalisation based therapy approaches. This dovetails very well with my masters, and has provided me immediately with the opportunity to put my learning from my masters into practice. What is unique about our role is that we are an MDT ourselves, and a key part of our work is to focus on integration of the professional network around the child in special care. This has given me an opportunity to apply the learning from the masters at a new level than previously, thinking about the professional network as part of the wider system around the child. My current role also offers regular opportunities to work with the children and their families, using a systemic therapeutic approach to try to address relationship issues and help the child and family negotiate new paths forward with better outcomes.

My interest in systemic family therapy developed in my practice in New York, where the agency used a structural family therapy approach within their social work model. I have found systemic psychotherapy a new and positive way of working with families, acknowledging their strengths more, empowering them more and acknowledging that no problem happens in isolation. I have greatly enjoyed the two years so far and look forward to 3rd year. The past two years have been transformative for me as a professional and person, and I am extremely grateful to the Foundation for PSA for supporting my continued learning. I believe this learning is leading to better outcomes for the clients I work with, which ultimately is the best reason for completing this masters.