

MSc in Systemic Psychotherapy (Family Therapy) year 2 Report

A personal Narrative of my journey through an MSc in Systemic Psychotherapy

I would like to thank FPSA for their generous contribution towards funding my MSc in Systemic Family Therapy. The past two years have been a mix of emotion and at times has felt like a rollercoaster ride. One of my ways of managing the stress of undertaking an MSc in systemic psychotherapy was to listen to podcasts of Radio 4's Desert Island Discs while walking. This programme, in which guests are invited to share their soundtracks to their lives by selecting tracks to take to a desert island, seems compatible with systemic therapy. In its guests use music as a vehicle to communicate the narratives of their lives. They story significant moments in their lives, important and shaping relationships, cultural influences and identity, and their experience of living within society. As a way of tracking my personal and professional development I've created my own Desert Island Discs as a meaningful way of narrating my journey through the course.

Disc 1 – 19th Nervous Breakdown (Rolling Stones)

If I were to select an emotion which characterises what I felt for much of my time on the training it would be anxiety. Family therapy uses a reflecting team approach. On my training this consisted of a supervisor and three other trainees, observing through a one-way mirror from the reflecting team room. Putting myself into a situation in which I would be observed by peers and assessed by a supervisor felt tantamount to an invitation to swim in shark infested waters. This situation evoked in me feelings of not being good enough, having to prove my worth and needing to get it right. The method of assessment and learning on the course, live supervision and reflecting teams, I feared only served to expose my lack of ability.

Disc 2 – “Under Pressure” (Queen & David Bowie, 1981)

My first clinical placement was at a mental health inpatient hospital, where I worked with very unwell young people. A large part of our work as Family Therapists is about helping young people and their parents/carers to communicate difficult emotions in order that families may support their child with their distress. Young people in the inpatient hospital will often received other therapies as part of their treatment. Although I wasn't familiar with some of these myself it was felt that it may be useful for parents to become familiar with these skills in order that they could help their child to use them when distressed. I found it very difficult trying to help a parent use a technique which I didn't feel I had any skill or experience in using. During these moments' anxiety raged and I felt under increasing pressure to get it right. The benefit of Family Therapy to the therapist is that the reflecting team is a source of support. At first, however, rather than experiencing this as helpful I saw it as evidence that I didn't know what I was doing.

Disc 3 – “This is a Low” (Blur)

I entered the second year feeling more confident. In my agency during the summer break I had felt freer to practice what I had learned during the first year without the pressure to use my skills in the “proper” systemic way. As the session progressed, however, as a situation arose which I felt unsure how to deal with and my confidence started to diminish. Within my own agency context, I would have responded in the way I saw appropriate but the familiar pressure to get it right in front of my team and supervisor resurfaced. When asked for my reflections on the session I was barely able to speak and could not suppress my tears. If you allow a little mind reading here, I will surmise that my fellow trainees were wondering what had happened to me over the summer, this wasn't the smiley Jo from last year. As for my supervisor; I imagine she may have taken a deep breath and thought “Ok, this one may be a challenge”. I wept silently on the train home,

wondering why I was putting myself through this. My partner, on greeting me at the station wondered what kind of course I was on to induce such distress.

Disc 4 – “New Rules” (Dua Lipa)

If I was to become an effective systemic therapist I had to find a way to manage my anxiety. Having reflected upon this in my agency supervision I recognised that I felt more confident and less anxious when I worked within my expertise. In order to move towards a position of safe uncertainty (Mason, 1993) I needed to own my expertise and work within this. Action methods were something I felt more familiar and comfortable with and I decided to use this in one of the following sessions. In the post-session reflections, the team commented on my pacing of the session and that I'd seemed less anxious. Introducing an action method felt more within my comfort zone and brought a welcome difference. This method seemed to connect with the family and they reflected in the following session how influential the sculpt had been in helping them to appreciate the detrimental effect that arguments were having on their relationships.

Disc 5 – “Rescue Me” (Fonella Bass)

Another theme for me during my training in terms of my personal and professional development was my relationship with rescue, both as rescuer and rescuee. I was aware that I had a predilection for rescuing clients and colleagues whom I felt were experiencing emotional discomfort. Resisting the urge to rescue in favour of “usefully and sensitively” exploring the emotional language with the client in the approach of Relational Reflexivity (Burnham, 2005, pp 13) was something that I was working on. What I had not considered, however, was my relationship with being rescued. This was until I was asked by a supervisor if I like to be rescued. As is the intention of a reflexive question (Tomm, 1987) this prompted thought and cultivated my interest; do I want to be rescued? Reflecting on my experience of post-session discussions I recognised that I often found these uncomfortable, especially when questioned by my supervisor about theories or ideas for future sessions. I also became conscious of the welcoming relief when a fellow trainee, or said supervisor intervened (rescued me). Recognising my own relationship with being rescued has been extremely useful in being able to support families explore their difficulties.

Disc 7 – “A Change Would Do You Good” (Cheryl Crow, 1997)

Using the method of “Turning the mirror inwards” (Wangberg, 1991, p18) to reflect on my feelings of anxiety, induced by a sense of not feeling good enough, as well as my relationship with rescue has been influential in my practice. Self-reflexivity (see Burnham, 1993) enabled me to notice the familiar urge to rescue that can be evoked in my work with clients. Now, instead of conveying a rescuing response I choose to be irreverent (Cecchin, 1993) to this predictable pattern and explored how past experiences may have influenced the client's approach to the current difficulties. Using Reflexive Questioning (Tomm, 1987) in this way with families has brought fourth values about relationships to help (Reder & Fredman, 1996) and stories of corrective and replicative scripts (Byng-Hall, 1985) in a way that rescuing can shut down.

Disc 8 –You Can “Go Your Own Way” (Fleetwood Mac)

As I was nearing the end of my second year of the MSc I felt that I was beginning to inhabit the role of family therapist, rather than trainee family therapist. During this final phase of my training I had to consolidate my theoretical learning and my personal development into the Family Therapist that I wished to become. During the first 18 months of training I was trying to imitate those therapists whom I admired, however, as I reached the dawn of becoming a family therapist I

had to find my own way of doing it. Instead of trying to become like those therapists I admired I had to become my own therapist. This meant fitting what I had learned in to my style, using the approach, methods and techniques (Burnham, 1992) that I had acquired into a way that fitted with me.

Conclusion

In the story of the Wizard of OZ the characters discover what they are looking for within, rather than this being bestowed on them by the wizard. This is true of my family therapy journey. Being willing to question and challenge myself, to feel exposed and to feel ok with getting things wrong, has contributed to my becoming a Family Therapist. I have been aided in this by the support of my team of fellow trainees and supervisors throughout the training. However, without the financial support offered by the FPSA it would have been difficult for me to embark on this training and, as such I would like to wholeheartedly thank the FPSA for this. When families come to see Family Therapists it is usually at a point of great stress, in my case when their child/young person is suffering mental health difficulties. They feel vulnerable and put their trust in us to help them find a way through the challenges that mental health problems bring into their lives. It is a privilege and a responsibility to be in the position to do this, and as such I have embraced my training and valued the learning, with an awareness that will pay it forward.

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