

Systems-Centered Training Conference. San Francisco. April 9th -15th “016.

So, I will start with a big thank you to Foundation PSA. I have been training and studying within the Systems- Centred studying theory, methods and applications now for 5 years and have never been able to afford to attend the annual conference before. Being able to participate in this international conference has deeply enhanced my understanding of the theory as well as my ability to practice some of the methods within my work place.

I work as part of a multi-disciplinary service for young people and their families, who have experienced multiple traumas, neglect and abuse. We see this through the lens of “Developmental Trauma” (as per the work of Bessel van der Kolk amongst others). It could also be conceptualised as disorganised attachment, complex trauma or reactive attachment.

To explain some of Systems-Centered® Theory (“SCT” for short) which was developed by Yvonne Agazarian I will quote some of the description from the conference documentation for first time attendees:

“Systems-Centered Methods are a practical approach to change by:

- a) Managing conflict- SCT offers a flexible and effective conflict resolution method:*
- b) Leading or living with change – SCT provides methods and tools to make change more efficient:*
- c) Improving communication and creativity on multiple levels in therapy, in learning and working environments, and in one self.*

Systems-centered theory explains how living human systems contain their energy within functional boundaries and direct that energy towards systems’ goals: the primary goals of survival and development and the secondary goals of environment mastery (transformation). Systems-centred theory can be applied clinically to individual, groups, couples and family therapy.”

Where I have found this method particularly useful is in informing my running support groups for staff and foster carers. The adults in our service are daily faced with; the behavioural challenges presented by these young people, witnessing the pain and distress enacted by traumatised young people and of course have to hear and bear the stories of abuse and neglect.

We recognise that successful treatment for traumatised children is primarily about the strength of relationships they form with consistent, attuned, nurturing adults. Therefore placing emphasis on supporting our staff and carers and working with vicarious trauma is an essential foundation to all the work we do.

SCT provides a framework for running groups that allow our carers and staff to explore and become curious about their emotional experiences as they take on the role of carers.

As a group leader I find the structure and protocols that SCT brings to group work helps me further create an environment which is both safe and containing for this exploration.

It is important for me to say that I am not a licenced SCT practitioner so at this stage I do not claim to be “doing SCT” but using some of the principles in my practice and much of the theory to enhance my understanding of the processes of the groups I work with. I have found that the theory and skills compliment and build on without contradiction my training as both a CBT therapist and a systemic practitioner.

At this year’s conference I attended two day training on SAVI (System for Analysing Verbal Interactions developed by Yvonne Agazarian and Anita Simon). Again it is probably best if I use the words from the conference handout...

“SAVI provides a way of thinking about and describing communications that enables you to:

- *Understand and explain what’s happening in any given conversation.*
- *Predict what is likely to happen next.*
- *Try to change the course of those events, if you wish.”*

In my context at work SAVI is an extremely helpful tool in thinking about what is happening within the team in which I work, the networks around a child, families and in individual interactions.

For the next five days I attended each morning sessions on analysing the phases of development of groups.

I chose different workshops for three afternoons. Of these, the most helpful to work with traumatised children and their families was the workshop on “Using SCT in Clinical Work with long term Difficulties”. This explored the emerging theory of Yvonne Agazarian and further developed by Ray Haddock in application to working with patients in clinical settings who would typically be labelled as having personality disorders.

Whilst my work is with children and young people many of those that I work with have parents who have diagnoses of borderline personality. An sadly expected trajectory for many our young people without intervention is a progression from labels such as “attachment disorder” to “conduct/ oppositional defiance disorder” possibly being labelled as “Emerging Personality Disorder” to an adult diagnosis of some form of personality disorder (most commonly “borderline” or “anti-social”).

I found the emerging theory about the person system for traumatised individuals being so dominantly about survival with no room for curiosity a helpful way of thinking about how to attune to get alongside young people. This new emerging theory was further explored on the Friday afternoon closing seminar.

Each day ends with a large group session in which all conference participants work together joining and reflecting each other building a systems centred group, exploring experiences as they emerge.

I hope I have been able to give a flavour of the conference and a little of SCT. There is so much more I could say about this theory and practice; however it much more coherently put on the web site www.systemscentred.com. The theory has relevance for all areas of clinical and organisational work.

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