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The School-Based Family Counseling Symposium: A happy union and the 7-year itch

Keynote speech for the 2010 Oxford Symposium

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Welcome to Oxford.

Seven years ago, I came to the first annual Oxford Symposium in School-Based Family Counseling after a long journey with little sleep. When I arrived on that Sunday, I was exhausted and anxious. I didn't know many of the people there and wondered what the week would bring. As we sat down to dinner together in the great hall of Keble College, I felt the same kind of mystical atmosphere that I had felt as a child in a Gothic cathedral. Then the keynote speaker, Sr. Mary Peter Traviss, began to talk.

She welcomed us with the words of Matthew Arnold, calling Oxford the “sweet city of the dreaming spires”. She spoke of the beginnings of Oxford as the oldest English-speaking University in the world dating back to 1096, beginning as houses of study for the great religious orders. She described the development of Oxford as different schools of thought with common devotees long before the existence of buildings or administrations. Then, the first physical colleges began as halls of residence under the supervision of a Master. As Sr. Mary Peter said, “The system was one of communal living and the tutorial, later combined with classes and the conferring of degrees after a very strenuous exam.”

In essence, Sr. Mary Peter described how students lived, ate and drank with their professors as they developed their academic disciplines. Rather than lecturing, the learning process was interactive and communal, dependent on the human relationship between teacher and student. This intimate process led to, in her words, “Oxford becoming known as the greatest seat of learning in

the world, and won praise from popes, kings, and sages by virtue of its famous tutorial method, its curriculum and its invaluable contribution to learning. Its graduates have been among the famous, distinguished for scholarship and service.”

As Sr. Mary Peter went on, I had a vision of what Oxford might have been like so long ago. I also began to think of what it might be like during the coming week. I had never been in a conference that specifically focused on my area of study, school-based family counseling (SBFC), and I began to feel energized with a great sense of optimism and hope for a common purpose in where I was, and the diverse group of people whom I was with. That week was an amazing experience for all of us. We had the time and space to get to know Oxford and each other, and learn more about the great works that each of the participants was engaged with:

- Mike and Ann Carns described the evolution of a School-Based Family Counseling Center in Central Texas.
- Brian Gerrard discussed the development of the University of San Francisco’s Mission Possible program providing family counseling to over 50 elementary schools in San Francisco, and the work of his collaborator, Marcel Soriano, in the public schools of East Los Angeles.
- Hans Everts informed us of the New Zealand project for migrant families from China, which used a systemic approach to enhance immigrant families’ resilience.
- Heng Keng Chiam described the use of School-based Family Counseling to combat social ills in poor children in Malaysia.
- Maria Marchetti, Ronel Ferriera and Carien Lube discussed their work with children and parents in South Africa in the areas of special education and school violence.
- And the esteemed John Friesen gave a brilliant lecture on the need for a re-conceptualization of school counseling that acknowledges the critical importance of the family system in the development of the child, and the need to intervene systemically in order to help children succeed.

Just as important, we had a chance to learn about the specific culture and surroundings that each of us worked in across the world; to see our global counterparts who were just as passionate about their work with children and families. We saw pictures of the natural beauty of South Africa and Ilze van der Merwe’s work with homeless street children and orphanages there. We were witness to deep conversations about the views of native and non-native South Africans regarding apartheid and the struggle for reconciliation. We talked and ate with each other and spent time alone in the ageless atmosphere of Oxford. We were happy to have found one and other.

So began the happy union each year of scholars who shared a common bond in what we called SBFC. Over the years, many experienced the joy and camaraderie of the Oxford Symposium, though not always at Oxford (the symposium was held in Hong Kong and Barcelona as well). The symposia have always balanced a central focus on SBFC with the individual interests of the participants. This resulted in presentations that range far beyond the scope of SBFC including topics in individual counseling, the use of school-based education regarding cancer, AIDS and other hazards, gambling behavior in youth, adventure based counseling, and peer consultation groups, to name just a few. Despite the diversity of topics and presenters at the Oxford Symposia, there has been a consistent experience of connecting with others in an intimate setting where all can be heard.

There also seems to be a mutual focus among participants in their service to marginalized populations, especially children and the poor.

This has indeed been a happy marriage with a great honeymoon that formed a potent structure for scholarly and personal growth on an international level. But, like most marriages, it will be difficult for this union to endure unless we have *a clear idea of what brings us together and what the common goals are that unify our academic pursuits*. Without these, we are vulnerable to the “7-year itch”, which is a common term for the tendency for a marriage to become stagnant, resulting in the partners looking elsewhere for fulfillment.

In the first article of the International Journal for SBFC, Brian Gerrard gives an excellent overview of the history of School-Based Family Counseling from Adler to Friesen to Fine and Woody. He also provides a definition of SBFC as an approach that:

“... integrates school counseling and family counseling models within a broad based systems meta-model that is used to conceptualize the child's problems in the context of all his or her interpersonal networks: family, peer group, classroom, school (teacher, principal, other students), and community.” (Gerrard, 2008).

He also indicates that this approach:

“... may be used by any mental health professional (e.g., counselor, family therapist, psychologist, social worker, psychiatrist, nurse, or physician) or educator (e.g., principal or teacher)... to help a child by working with the child's two most important systems: home and school.” (Ibid, 2008).

This seems like a good starting point from which to develop a common view of what brings us together as clinicians and academics, while also incorporating the diverse international models of helping children. For example, the definition of a “home system” might include nontraditional child environments such as foster homes, orphanages, children raised by extended family members, and other situations in addition to the traditional “nuclear family” definition of home.

In the coming week, we will experience a wide range of topics presented by a host of international scholars. These will include specific aspects of SBFC ranging from working with infants, children, adolescents, and parents to the training and experience of SBF counselors and school counselors. We will also hear about refugee empowerment, specific interventions for common problems of children, teachers' views of children and families, and parents' experiences with Autism Spectrum Disorder. All of these seem to be important aspects of what we call SBFC.

In 20 years of providing SBFC and training pertinent counselors, I have been impressed at how difficult this area of work is. It takes the skills of a family therapist, which are so difficult to learn without actually doing it. You have to experience the intensity of family conflict first-hand and be able to tolerate a wide range of emotions on so many fronts. I had worked in intense situations before, including juvenile incarceration centers, group homes for adolescents, treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Vietnam veterans and victims of family violence, but nothing compared with SBFC.

When I first began, I used Karpel & Strauss' multidimensional model of family evaluation (1983) to try to make sense of what I was seeing in family therapy (many thanks to Brian Gerrard and Raymond Hillis for this reference). This evaluation of the Factual, Individual, Systemic, and Ethical dimensions allowed me to view family functioning from many sides and led to the development of more effective treatment plans. Although I am surely biased because of my work, I feel that once you know how to do family therapy, you are less intimidated by new experiences involving interpersonal conflict.

Skill in family therapy requires knowledge of individual cognitive and emotional development, and what these look like in natural settings. It also requires familiarity with the stages of the family life cycle, and with normal and abnormal responses to transitions for each member of the family from infant to grandparent. Family therapy involves the willingness to bring out conflict, and the skills to resolve it, in ways that help each member develop greater awareness and compassion for one another. These skills enable a person to feel prepared to handle a lot of what happens in helping parents to help their children develop, especially in the emotional and behavioral areas.

Working in schools, however, is a whole different arena. No matter what you do, children have to learn or you are not successful. The end of every school year provides a clear and concrete evaluation of your work; with academic, emotional, and behavioral benchmarks. And kids do not learn if they do not learn to manage their emotions effectively and don't learn how to follow directions. Families have to be the main teachers of these critical skills, but schools can help empower them to be effective. Schools are responsible for directly dealing with behavior and the emotions underlying them, but families must be the main protagonists in teaching appropriate behavioral and emotional self-control. This is very difficult because, even as adults, parents and school personnel frequently have problems in these areas. So I see SBFC as dealing with families and schools in much the same way, but with different responsibility for outcomes. And all of this must incorporate deep understanding of cultural background and individual history, both in families and in schools.

Brian Gerrard concludes his article with recommendations for future research, which includes "a preliminary SBFC research agenda to address the need for greater documentation of the effectiveness of SBFC using rigorous research designs. Outcome research is needed using traditional between-groups and within-groups experimental designs (as well as mixed designs) evaluating the effectiveness of SBFC in its various forms in comparison with traditional forms of school counseling." (Gerrard, 2008). He also advocates for qualitative and quantitative research on the various forms of SBFC practiced internationally, on how best to train practitioners in the SBFC model, on different SBFC assessment models, and on the nature of administrative and organizational obstacles to implementing SBFC.

The accomplishment of the two tasks outlined above (mutual definition and more rigorous research) is, of course, an ongoing process that will require much discussion among us. We need strategies to enable us to be able to talk with each other in greater depth beyond our annual symposium. These might include the development of on-line forums, a pre-conference meeting next year in Rome, or even an Association of School-Based Family Counselors. In addition, we now have the refereed International Journal of School-Based Family Counseling, thanks to Hans Everts

and the hardworking editors. The rigorousness of this publication process is impressive and provides another outlet for scholarly research. We need to expand our discourse. Regardless, these tasks seem to be crucial in validating the benefits of what we do and in securing more funding and opportunities to institutionalize our interventions in the future. To continue the analogy, this is a marriage worth saving because of the precious children that we have birthed over the past seven years. And, with continued dedication and growth in our international SBFC family, perhaps one day we will have an Oxford University of SBFC - or some other name if that becomes more accurate.

In 2003, I had to leave the conference after four days and I left feeling and knowing that I was going to miss something important. And I did not know if I would ever be back. Who knew if it would last one year, much less seven. This year, I have to leave the conference early again because my daughter begins school later this week in Los Angeles. And I feel confident that I will have the same feeling of missing something very important as the week ensues. This time, however, I have more assurance that this union is something special that will endure long after the 7-year itch. It feels a little like a second honeymoon before the first kid is born. Happy Anniversary, Oxford Symposium on School-Based Family Counseling and, as is said in Spain, Mexico, and parts of East Los Angeles, viva la familia!!

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