

Review of Melbourne AAGP Conference 29th and 30th November 2019 Featuring

John Schlapobersky.

“From the Couch to the Circle”

The Australian Association of Group Psychotherapists held its significant conference “From the Couch to the Circle” on Friday 29th and Saturday 30th November this year. John Schlapobersky also kindly made himself available to the training committee on Sunday afternoon 1st December for consultation. Approximately 55 registrants attended and many were non AAGP members which enriched the experience for all.

John is a member of the IGA in London and training analyst with that institute. During the weekend he explained that his Jewish family emigrated from Lithuania to South Africa and that after education there he settled in London. A part of his background is to have been arrested, imprisoned and deported from Apartheid South Africa.

The Friday evening began with a lecture by John entitled:

“FINDING A VOICE, BEARING WITNESS, COMING OUT OF THE SHADOWS; DYNAMIC PRINCIPLES IN GROUP ANALYTIC PSYCHOTHERAPY; APPLICATIONS IN THE CLINIC AND IN SOCIETY.”

He utilised and expanded upon a tripartite structure beginning with the “Relational” or “Relating” aspect of groups moving onto the importance of “Reflection” and finally to “Repair”. The idea here seemed to be that to enter a group one is drawn into a relating function or a setting of experiences by virtue of being in the presence of others. This then can lead onto reflection which I take to be a reference to finding meaning and developing understanding of the relating experience. Finally, of course, repair is a reference to making use of the forgoing relating and reflection toward the goal and function of repair which is after all the purpose of the group. Repair can occur via involvement with others and the opportunity to re-experience old and traumatic patterns of experience in the here and now in a secure context. This can offer new opportunities to develop more helpful and constructive ways of relating with others and with oneself. I found this very useful and that I was able to apply it to my work. The latter part of the evening required us to move from the traditional lecture setting to the circle in which he continued to present and develop these ideas in a more relational setting. There were clinical anecdotes and an encouragement of the audience to participate which readily followed. As I said during the forum it seemed to me that what ordinarily passes as clinical experience and judgement was unpacked with his model of relating, reflection and repair. It is deceptively simple when in fact one must draw upon and develop a complex clinical and psychotherapeutic set of resources over many years. But the model makes accessible to the newcomer and the “old hand” what is in fact very complex. In the preliminary brochure mention is made of the possibility of us moving more from a position of “longing” to “belonging”. I think this a wonderful concept and from my experience over many years rings true.

The Saturday one day workshop was entitled:

“GROUP STRUCTURE, PROCESS AND CONTENT. KEY CONSTRUCTS IN THE THERAPEUTIC APPLICATION OF GROUP ANALYSIS.”

This part of the weekend was conducted over the full day and initially involved a lecture but as with the previous evening he spoke largely without reference to notes and is very familiar with the area. It was prefaced in the advertising and on the day with mention of the wide applicability of the workshop to a variety of settings including mental health work in general, private practice and custodial settings. In fact, it seemed roughly equally split amongst these categories of participants. His commentary also included reference to psychoanalysis and its foundational role in our work.

The invitation was made for people to volunteer to be members of three different small groups to be observed by the wider and outer group, like a fish-bowl effect as this has been called in European working conferences. The idea was that members of the demonstration group were invited to explore difficult aspects of their own work. Boundary issues were protected as well as confidentiality and an announcement made that senior AAGP members were available for personal discussion if strain developed. In fact, the latter was not a problem nor needed as far as I am aware as John skilfully helped participants give up their role in the role-play and respectfully attended to each person's role and the interactions. This was achieved by encouraging each participant to take back their persona in daily life at the conclusion of the group. Participants were invited to say something about themselves in their normal professional role and it seemed to work very well.

The weekend was psychoanalytically informed through and through and we were given numerous examples of how a psychoanalytically informed background is used in what he chose to name as the "Group Analytic" approach. The difference of course is the relational form with which members will be familiar in the group context that John was demonstrating and expanding upon. He did share a joke about psychoanalysis at one point in the forum and I had the opportunity to explore this with him during a break and it is clear he highly values the psychoanalytic model and practise.

I think what he demonstrated was "Foulkesian" and "Group Analytic" in terms of his comfortably and smoothly being able to move between working at times with the individual and at other times the whole group. At the heart of the weekend he demonstrated his masterful story-telling skill and respect for the person and persons whom constitute a group whether it is small or large. This was all done with humility: not an easy task and in my experience uncommon.

He presented a copy of his recently published book to the AAGP as a mark of gratitude for the invitation to come to Australia. It is entitled: "From the Couch to the Circle" which is an inspired and literary means of drawing our attention to the value of the group as well as the analytic dyad in helping others live more freely. From my perusal of this book I think it would be an excellent companion for student and experienced practitioner alike.

Finally, I want to say two things. First, the weekend can be considered to have opened up and made more accessible the ways of working sensitively and respectfully with groups from a psychoanalytic perspective and in particular the group analytic perspective. Secondly, I want to thank those who organised this conference particularly Else Gingold and of course John Schlapobersky.

Paul Coombe