

Introduction

This book brings together two areas of psychotherapy that should converge neatly – but usually do not. The first is the practice of *constructive therapies*, my umbrella term for the brief, collaborative and competency-based approaches that are increasingly popular among helping professionals. For many, including myself, the appeal of these approaches lies partly in their refreshingly positive, optimistic and frankly challenging philosophy, and partly in the possibilities they offer for brief but effective work. The best known and most influential models within this general orientation are probably solution-focused therapy and narrative therapy. The second area is the practice of *family therapy*, involving the fascinating dilemmas of working with relationships. For many helping professionals in the fields of counselling, social work, psychology, education and health, family-based work is a major occupation and challenge. Many practitioners have an interest in constructive therapies. Many practitioners have an interest in working with families. This book is written for those who have an interest in both.

Constructive therapies would seem to be an appealing choice for working with families. However, though there is an abundant literature on constructive therapies and an abundant literature on family therapy, there is a surprising dearth of work that specifically links the two and provides a framework for *constructive family therapy*. My experience of trying to fill in the gaps and make the connections – for myself as much as for my students – produced the impetus for this book. I have tried to write the kind of book that I wish had been available when I most needed it.

How is it that these two areas of psychotherapy have not converged as smoothly as they might? Perhaps one factor is that though, historically, many of the ideas in constructive therapies had their origins in the field of systemic family therapy, the two groups have tended to diverge in recent years and to talk in different languages. The relationship between constructive therapists and family therapists remains distinctly ambivalent, with the two groups tending to develop their own networks, conferences, training programmes and publishing outlets. In constructive therapy circles, family therapy is likely to be viewed simply as one particular context for practice. Other practice contexts would include individual therapy, couple therapy, groupwork, organizational consulting, counselling supervision, etc.

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This means that training in constructive therapy typically emphasizes generic processes and skills which it is assumed can be generalized across *all* practice contexts. Less attention is paid to covering specific issues and dilemmas that arise when working with families or to the additional skills that may be required. This often leaves practitioners who specialize in family work with a sense of frustration: they have a broad sketch of an approach, but so much is missing in the way of colour, detail and depth. It is a suggestive starting point rather than a solid framework.

By contrast, in family therapy circles, constructive therapies are likely to be viewed simply as one group of *models* within the broad tradition of systemic theorizing. Other well known models would include structural therapy, strategic therapy, Milan therapy and intergenerational therapy. Family therapy training tends to be eclectic, covering a range of models, each with its own unique concepts and skills, but without providing comprehensive coverage of any. This is frustrating for those wishing to specialize in a constructive framework, particularly as many of the other approaches presented are inconsistent with this orientation. Here we can see the difficulty for those wishing to straddle the two fields selectively: neither group emphasizes constructive family therapy as a specialized approach and a major focus of their training.

In presenting this book as an attempt to bridge these areas, it is important that I declare my position. This is not an eclectic text that endorses any form of integration. My own primary identification is with constructive therapies rather than family therapy (though, like many, I am involved in both areas and value my professional relationships with both groups). Therefore, I will be viewing family work as a particular context for the practice of a generalized constructive orientation. However, I will be arguing that it is a specialized context that requires the incorporation of additional concepts and skills. In focusing on these, I will be trying to fill in the broad sketch, adding the colour, detail and depth that is missing. However, in order to encourage flexibility and creativity, I will also be suggesting ways in which therapists can selectively borrow from other frameworks, including the rich tradition of family therapy. My aim is to offer a framework that is conceptually consistent but also flexible, so that it can be adapted to the needs of the wide range of professionals who work with families.

Approach of the book

In order to highlight the central themes of the book, I introduce a number of analogies from another of my enthusiasms: travel. It has been suggested that family therapy can be compared with making a voyage through an unknown country, on a strange continent (Rober, 2002). It has

also been suggested that constructive therapists should ‘travel light’ and avoid the excess baggage of much conventional therapeutic expertise (Friedman, 1993). These motifs set up the challenge and the structure of the book: if constructive family therapists are going to travel light, what exactly should they ‘pack’ for their professional journeys? In order to respond creatively and flexibly to the unknown, what are the most important concepts and skills that they need to have at their disposal? What specialized or additional concepts are especially important for constructive *family* therapy? How light can you travel before your resources become over-stretched?

The structure of the book reflects my attempts to address these questions. Each chapter corresponds to one item of essential luggage, one essential element of the framework. Chapter 1 sets out the theoretical foundations of the approach and highlights the distinguishing features and vision of constructive family therapy. Chapters 2–5 set out the central practice skills of the approach, the three processes of *hosting* family members, *negotiating* concerns and requests, and *evoking* possibilities. The focus is on how to adapt these skills to the context of family therapy. Chapter 6 focuses on the dilemmas of working constructively over time. Moving beyond a distinction between ‘brief’ and ‘long-term’ therapy, I examine the ways in which family therapy meetings can progress, evolve or re-form as developments occur. In Chapter 7, I address the use of the therapist’s ‘inner’ conversation as a way of overcoming impasses and obstacles. This complements the usual emphasis on the ‘outer’ conversation of techniques. In Chapter 8, I introduce some important concepts that allow us to ‘borrow’ knowledge from other frameworks while retaining a constructive orientation. Specifically, I discuss the distinction between *primary*, *secondary* and *rejected pictures*, and the identification of constraints. This allows us, for example, to use concepts and skills from other family therapy traditions without becoming lost or slipping into a nondescript eclecticism. Finally, in Chapter 9, I outline some constructive responses to potentially challenging scenarios. This complements the earlier focus on generic processes by considering how therapists might approach specific kinds of situations that might prove challenging to a constructive framework (for example, situations involving the need for medication, the use of psycho-educational material, or where collaboration may not be possible). These selective scenarios can help us to prepare for a range of situations that we might encounter in our travels.

Voice, style and audience

One of the difficulties readers encounter in approaching the constructive therapy literature concerns the often dizzying and disconcerting mixture

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of styles: abstract theoretical discussion (for example, about the differences between constructivism, social constructionism and postmodernism) can sit side by side with the minutiae of technical discussion (when using scaling questions, should the scale go from 0–10 or 1–10?). There can be a similar experience of alienation when encountering the family therapy literature. Reflecting on the field's 'troubled legacy' of systems theory, and its recent 'affair with postmodernism', Rivett and Street (2003) remark on family therapy's penchant for selecting the most arcane and complicated ideas with which to justify its practice. In trying to achieve a practical focus and a consistency of voice and style, I have attempted to write at a 'middle' level of abstraction, avoiding the extremes of either abstruse theoretical discourse or a manual of techniques. I have tried to imagine an audience of therapists who are certainly interested in theoretical ideas and debates but *who are primarily concerned with the everyday issues of practice*.

I am also writing for an audience of therapists who are interested in combining ideas and skills from a number of constructive therapies, rather than identifying with particular models such as solution-focused therapy or narrative therapy. As I indicate in Chapter 1, the degree of 'family resemblance' between these models is a moot point. I will be taking the position that the specific models can be considered as differing 'styles' of constructive therapy (Omer, 1996). I recognize that, in adopting such a stance, I may invite summary dismissal as a dilettante who doesn't grasp the intricacies of any of the models! Yet this is a risk worth taking. At various times in my professional life I have identified with particular models of constructive therapy. I have had the opportunity to attend workshops and training courses with exemplary practitioners of solution-focused and narrative therapies in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Great Britain. Their influence will be apparent in the book. However, in recent times I have been more influenced by therapists such as Bill O'Hanlon, Bob Bertolino, Steven Friedman and Michael Hoyt who write in more inclusive ways about constructive therapies. Of course, any individual's attempt to integrate different approaches represents a personal and idiosyncratic choice. That is why I am offering *a* constructive framework, not *the* constructive framework.

Some clarifications

To achieve consistency I use the word 'therapist' to refer to a potentially broad group of helping professionals who may find the material relevant to their needs. Similarly, I refer to users of therapeutic services as 'clients' or 'family members'. The case examples that I draw upon throughout the book are fictional in the sense that they do not represent any actual clients with whom I or other therapists have worked. They are realistic composite

cases developed from many sources and experiences (including role-play scenarios used in workshops and classes).

A walk in the world of constructive therapy

I would like to make one more comment about my approach to the book and about the way I hope you will respond to it. In his influential book, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983), Donald Schön pointed to some of the problems that exist in the contemporary training of professionals. Among other things, he suggested that when different models are presented, it is often done in a polemical way that produces an either/or contest with rival models. He argues persuasively that such tendencies act to encourage a narrow, technically oriented practitioner rather than a reflective and engaged practitioner.

Schön offers a number of broad ideas for encouraging reflective practice in the training of professionals. In particular, I have used his concept of *frame analysis* for my overall perspective. By this, I mean that the framework I present is intended for your reflections and for comparative analysis with other frameworks. I am not arguing its merits as a definitive model that you should unhesitatingly adopt. Though I am obviously enthused about the ideas in the book, I hope to offer them in a reflective and collegial manner, rather than in a polemical or proselytizing one.

Adapting some of Schön's evocative descriptions, I hope that the book will allow you the opportunity to 'walk in the world' of constructive family therapy, and to experience this world from the point of view of a particular therapist. As you walk in this world, and share in the therapist's enterprises and methods, you will be able to see how you would frame the practice role, how you would construe specific situations, what particular competencies you would require, and what assumptions and values you would need to embrace, if you chose to inhabit it. My aim is to encourage you to 'try on' this framework and get a feel for it, to see what kind of world you would create for yourself, and, indeed, what kind of person you would become if you decided to make it your own. The rest is up to you.