

Report for FPSA – September 2022

I received part funding from the FPSA for the MSc in Family and Systemic Psychotherapy at the Institute of Family Therapy. This is a qualifying training course which is 4 years in total and I completed the first two years as part of my social work training in 2016. The MSc course comprises of year 3 and 4 of the qualifying training and I have now completed Year 3. The course involved weekly clinical supervision groups, monthly training days and a number of theory, research and practice assignments over the course of the year. I completed Year 3 in July 2022 and passed this year and am now embarking on Year 4.

I have been working as a Practice Manager in a Looked After Children's Team in a London Borough, prior to this I was a senior social worker and social worker. I completed my initial training with The Institute of Family Therapy between 2014 and 2016 in another London Borough and it has been great to return to IFT to complete my systemic training. IFT is the only standalone provider of systemic family psychotherapy training in the UK and it was established as a charity in 1977 with the aim of promoting systemic practice. The MSc is well-established but is also updated regularly to ensure that it keeps up with developments in the systemic field and leading systemic therapists and practitioners gave lectures, led seminars and provided tutoring and supervision.

The course comprised of a number of different elements, all of which are designed to develop knowledge and understanding of systemic theories and to support the use of theory in practice. There were monthly online plenaries which involved leading systemic thinkers and practitioner presenting on a wide range of different topics including working with couples, power and diversity, systemic approaches to emotions, working with families on the edge of care and adult mental health as well as exploring specific systemic theories and models such as narrative or dialogical approaches. In parallel to the plenaries, were monthly training days at the IFT head office which comprised of a reflective reading group in which participants delivered presentations and reflections on the plenary content and the papers that accompanied it. There was also a workplace consultation group in which we took turns to share dilemmas from our work contexts and used systemic approaches to creatively explore different approaches which we could take back to our workplaces. People came from a range of disciplines such as social work, charities, adult mental health and CAMHS settings.

The practice-focused part of the training involved a weekly clinical supervision group comprising of a systemic supervisor and four students on the course. We worked together with one student delivering family therapy sessions and the other students acting as a reflecting team before, during and after the sessions, overseen by the supervisor. The clinic I worked in was online and involved families who had approached the organisation seeking private family therapy for a range of issues including couples and wider family networks experiencing relationship difficulties as well as parents who had concerns about their children's behaviour.

This training has really enriched my thinking and practice in the past year. It has reconnected me with systemic ideas that I trained with in social work with several years ago, refreshed my systemic knowledge and skills and provided me with new and emerging approaches to practice which I have been able to use creatively in my day to day work. It has also connected me to a supportive community of systemic practitioners. As a manager, it has enabled me to use systemic ideas in supervision and when supporting social workers with practice dilemmas, challenging professional networks or in meetings and sessions with children and families. The Borough I was working in does not use a systemic practice model so I was able to share some of these ideas in forums like group

supervision and explore how they complemented existing approaches such as motivational interviewing and trauma-informed practice in social work.

In addition, I used my practice hours to provide family therapy sessions through a new project being set up in the Borough called the Return Home project. This provided a robust framework of assessment and support around families where children were in care but the plan was for them to return home. The project drew on evidence-based research into outcomes for children returning home from care and used a combination of social work assessment, family therapy interventions and practical family support. In this work, I was able to deliver family therapy sessions to families where an adolescent family member was looked after by the local authority and where there were complex histories of trauma. Supervised by a qualified systemic psychotherapist, I was able to deliver sessions on my own and jointly which built relationships with families and provided a safe space for them to work on and explore difficult family relationships. This was an extremely valuable experience as it enabled me to bring my social work and therapy training together in my agency context. The feedback received from families was also positive and it made me reflect on the different ways families experience therapy and social work interventions.

This training has confirmed the route I wish to take in furthering my therapy training and experience in a social work context. I have a particular interest in working with families where the parents have complex trauma histories and mental health diagnoses and am pursuing this interest through a dissertation in Year 4. I would encourage anyone interested in systemic training to go for it but to be mindful of the time and work commitments involved and how it will fit in with your current role. The past year involved a lot of extra work but it has been worth it and I am very grateful to the support of the FPSA as would not have been able to undertake this course as a self-funder without the financial support received.