

# Creating harmony

Harmony is a powerful image. Creating harmony is a bold direction, not for the faint hearted. Harmony is not a uniform image or has single dimension, but only works well when it contains significant variation and difference that complements each other. It is a vision that is likely to divide. For some it will inspire change and direction and for others it conjures cynicism and idealism. It captures the current challenges for relationship and parenting education especially as strength based approaches are implemented with families who have chaotic and fractured lives. This presentation explores the essence of harmony, the direction of harmony and the challenge in creating harmony.

## **The essence of harmony**

Harmony involves the active expression of different notes that exist in common agreement in feeling or opinion. It involves a pleasing combination of elements in a whole: involving colour harmony; the order and harmony of the universe contained with chaos and rapid change. An analogy for harmony is the creation of a tapestry – not an ancient tapestry where the design or picture never changes but a modern one.

My original interest in the imagery of tapestries came from a talk by Jane Woodruff, the CEO of UnitingCare Children, Young People and Family Services Group in NSW. She told the following story...

*The third drawer was full of wool. It was stuffed to the top with brand new hanks of wool, still with their little circular bands around them. I reached in and touched them. Blue, red, yellow green; fat four ounce bundles in all colours. Eight of them. Lying on their sides in Martin's drawer. Wool.*

Martin is a lecturer in English literature who submits articles to academic journals. These articles are generally rejected so he decides to create a tapestry, using the wool, of the intertwining themes of Milton's *Paradise Lost* for presentation at a conference. Very satisfactorily, he immediately wins both a major literary and art award. He finds a way to illustrate complex themes and ideals – so we too are going to create a tapestry as we explore future paths for working with relationship and parenting education. This conference is going to contain Martin's eight colours.

Then there are a number of other characteristics of colours and of tapestries themselves to be considered. The tapestry and its design will necessarily be complex, the colours will cross over, sometimes merge, sometimes clash and compete. We will need to watch for fading, and fraying and maybe even holes. However if we are successful we will have something that will be beautiful, challenging and valued that will define and guide our future work.

The weave says a lot. It expresses individuality of the artist as they endeavour to create harmony of colour and design. It also relies on the basic elements they have gained from others (like the wool, or an initial pattern) and without them their work will be uncompleted.

Recently, New Zealand followed the lead of Western Australia and reviewed its child protection system. It concluded that most of their resources were aimed at the punitive end of crisis work after child abuse had occurred. Like WA, they attempted to shift the focus using a strengths emphasis to act early and reduce the likelihood of abuse. It was a cultural change across the whole of government and NGO sector, a visionary response where the jury is still out regarding the final outcome. They designed a child welfare practice framework using the analogy of the Pacific Islander woven bag – called a kete (*kee-teh*). The harmony of the entire cross weave created the strength. The weave represents the *phases of the work* crossed by the *principles and perspectives*. The phases include: engagement and assessment; seeking solutions and securing safety and belonging. The principles and perspectives include: child centred; family-led and culturally responsive; strengths and evidenced based (Connelly, 2006). The first colour in our tapestry reflects steadfastness as well as its willingness to challenge and change – a strong and vibrant colour.

To create a weave, six threads are not enough. It is vital that the many threads, the many organisations and types of programs work together to create safer and stronger families and communities. What colour would we give to the environment in which we work? Not black as black absorbs all light but a colour with a lot of black in it. Without even looking outside of Australia:

- We have one of the highest youth suicide rates in the world.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics show that the national youth unemployment rate is a staggering 25.6% compared to the adult rate of 5.9%

- Over 17% of dependent children in NSW live in poverty and a national rate of 14.1%.
- One in six families in Australia with a child under 15 has no family member in employment.

Add to this the behaviour of both the Federal Government and the Opposition united over policies about asylum seekers to this country and the 'war on terrorism' and we have an environment that has little in common with a respect for diversity, equity or opportunity.

The most important element of colour and design is balance. Having put our design together and chosen the colours, we must work together to maintain that balance. It is balance that ultimately creates harmony. For us is about many issues – the balance between organisations that focus on relationship support (like Family Relationship Centres) and those that focus on prevention; the new partnerships between programs that are always developing, between government funding and independence; location and program types; innovation and consistency, and independence and management.

### **The direction of harmony**

In defensive driving and learning to ride a motor bike courses, the key principle is: *if you are about to crash, you do not look at the tree or telegraph pole you are likely to hit, but you look at clear space to the side. It is more likely that this will be where you end up.*

Harmony provides a similar direction for relationship and parenting education. The direction that we want people to experience is towards stronger and more enriching relationships and connections. This is the hallmark of strengths based practice. Look to where you want people to move towards and then explore the tensions and challenges that exist around this position.

The use of strengths-based approaches such as solution focused, constructivist and narrative approaches, seek to work within a 'solution building' rather than the traditional 'problem solving' paradigm. They have arisen in response to a growing commitment to human rights and empowerment in social welfare, disability, and mental health work. In strengths-based approaches it is argued that traditional problem solving approaches are based upon the medical model, involving an initial

diagnosis or assessment, followed by professional treatment of an illness (De Jong and Berg, 1998).

Therapists following a strengths-based model believe it is more appropriate to actively focus to identify and build upon client strengths. The focus in counselling or groups is therefore on the identification of these strengths, in collaboration with the client, rather than an extensive focus on the problem or the abuse.

Saleebey (1992) identified the following assumptions as underlying strengths-based work:

- client strengths are respected
- clients have many strengths
- client motivation is based on fostering client strengths
- the worker is collaborator with the client
- victim mindset is avoided
- any environment is full of resources

Saleebey (1992) argues that the use of strength-based approaches 'requires a deep belief in the necessity of democracy and the contingent capacity of people to participate in the decisions and actions that define their world' (Saleebey, 1992, p.8). A strength-based approach therefore supports social action and the addressing of inequalities in society, and the language of resilience should not be over-ridden by a focus on client deficits. Saleebey firmly places strengths-based work as a political statement as much as a therapeutic approach.

Narrative, constructionist, and solution-focused approaches seek to enhance the competence of the client. A wide range of therapeutic techniques may be used which endeavour to rewrite the victim's 'life script', for example, from that of victim, to that of courageous survivor who is working to overcome the effects of child sexual abuse (White and Epston, 1989).

In these approaches, the worker encourages the service user to see that they are not the problem. Notions of pathology, dysfunction, purposiveness, functionality or diagnostic labels suggest that problems are part of people. This leaves them unable to experience themselves as having any personal agency in finding the solution (De Jong and Berg, 1998). Therapists utilizing strengths-based approaches tend to

advocate practices that are actively respectful of the wishes, feelings and identified needs of children. Butler and Williamson argue that, “children should always be consulted, as part of the negotiation and review of work, to identify any preference they may have regarding the gender, race and culture of their worker’ and. ‘working agreements with young people should ensure that they retain a maximum possible choice/autonomy within the working relationship, while having easy access to advice and support outside of it” (Butler and Williamson, 1994, p.122).

The challenge is to work from a position where harmony is a reality that’s possible. The Dala Lama in his recent visit to Australia spoke about this position. His message has great value:

1. Take into account that great love and great achievements involve great risk
2. When you lose, don’t lose the lesson
3. Follow the three Rs:
  - Respect for self
  - Respect for others
  - Responsibility for all our actions
4. Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck
5. Don’t let a little dispute injure a great relationship
6. When you realize you’ve made a mistake, take immediate steps to correct it
7. Spend some time alone every day
8. Open arms to change, but don’t let go of your values
9. Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.

A tension for practice is between having a primary focus on family violence or family safety. When the violence is the primary focus, the perpetrators often justify the situation and blame others. It demands a legal response. When family safety is the focus, violence can still be challenged and legally sanctioned against but it is easier to advocate for the victim to remain in the family home with the children. When family safety is the focus it is easier to address these issues at earlier stages in the family relationship cycle and it provides a stronger direction for the desired behaviour. This can be particularly useful in working with men, as it provides an opportunity to discuss the consequences of possible actions. Regardless, all violence is a legal issue that requires swift and effective responses.

The direction we face is vital in working with family relationships. Using a strengths based approach to work with people in all sorts of situations demands:

- change is always possible
- a belief in the capacity of people and organisations to change is essential
- if we look hard enough, you can assist people to find exceptions to problems even if they are in the realms of hopes and dreams
- outcomes are not predictable
- language creates meaning therefore the language we use is critically important
- adopting a strengths approach requires more than thinking positively
- discovering and uncovering strengths for yourself is much more powerful than having others name your strengths
- using a strengths based approach allows us to harness strengths to tackle difficult issues

The key elements of creating harmony using strengths based practice:

- can be used in many ways of working with people and in many contexts
- is a philosophy for practice rather than a model
- is primarily dependent on the attitudes and beliefs of the worker
- is primarily dependent on positive attitudes about people's dignity, capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities
- uses a range of frameworks in a flexible and responsive way to assist empowerment and change

As you work towards what is possible in working with men, you are aware of the many tensions. It is valuable to develop a clear picture of who you are working with and what is possible. It is often useful to create a charter that states, until proven otherwise I believe all men want to:

- Commit - The physical and ongoing support that a father provides and his awareness and involvement with the child throughout their lifetime
- Choose - The capacity to make day to day decisions for the children that meet the child's needs
- Care - the ability to attend to the important transitions in a child's life and provide the optimal conditions that maximise their growth
- Change - the ability to adapt as children grow older and the father matures in his relationship with the children

- Create - the creation of resources for material comfort and the resolution of problems that allow opportunities for the development of emotional well being
- Connect - the ability to form lasting and healthy attachments with their children. These attachments will change over time to meet the child's evolving needs
- Communicate - the capacity to relate with children by sharing meaningfully with them, both verbally and non-verbally (King, 2000)

Strengths based practice and harmony is not about idealised optimism. They work from a place of adequacy that allows people to recognise how they can better respond to challenges and tension within their life. The language of harmony, allows practitioners to talk more directly about conflict, violence and other issues that destroy relationship connection, because the strengths focus provides a better container of safety and trust.

### **The challenge of harmony**

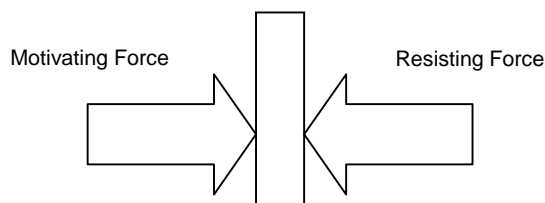
Surrounding the vision for harmony exists within a variety of tensions. The challenge of harmony can be understood using the Focal Conflict Model (King, 2007). This model has a strong relevance for individuals and relationships as educators work towards creating harmony. In 1989, Dorothy Whittaker renamed the model – the Group Focal Conflict Model as she saw the relevance in understanding group dynamics and what is shared across communities.

The Group Focal Conflict Model (King, 2007) is a useful model to:

- allow a better understanding of the connection between processes (solutions) and dynamics in a group
- allow a better understand individual and group needs and possible interventions
- focus on client's and group members' strengths rather than using a static classification system for understanding change
- link inner world feelings and experiences with outer expressions of people's behaviour (solutions)
- simplify the large amount of information that leaders receive from groups
- name central emotional group themes that are tracked through a variety of sessions
- enable educators to tune into more significant emotional issues in participants rather than staying at a surface level of expression, change and learning

Creating greater harmony in service user's lives using group work is full of complexity. An educator needs to make regular checks about how sufficiently the group is achieving its educational goals or attending to its directed purpose. They also need to monitor the needs of the individuals and if the whole group is maintaining cohesion and functioning in the best possible way. Any one leader cannot attend to all these dimensions all the time, so they select and focus on a smaller number of factors.

Forces are energy flows and most group situations will display **Motivating Forces** and **Resisting Forces**. In groups or organisations, these forces find an equilibrium that maintains the forces' status quo (equilibrium). This became the basis for Kurt Lewin's concept of Force Field Analysis.



### **An example**

*When 2 people argue they both express their dissatisfaction towards each other (Motivating Force because they desire to be heard). A resisting force (a fear of losing control) restrains them from letting the argument go too far. Sometimes these arguments can escalate and the anger can turn to violence.*

*During the argument, both people are being influenced either consciously or unconsciously by the interaction between their motivating force (wanting to be heard) and the resisting force that arises (they may fear that either person could lose control).*

The Focal Conflict Model (King, 2007) is not restricted to understanding disagreements and overt conflict. The model is based on the motivational approach that all people maintain in themselves, a balance between the **Motivating Forces** (driving forces) and resultant **fears or anxieties** that occur (**Restraining Forces**). The interaction between the forces underlies much of our decision making and struggle to



experience in harmony within ourselves and our relationships. The balance of these forces is shown in our actions and decisions. These are called **solutions**.

The first solution is where people choose to over focus on their fears and anxieties. This restricts a person from achieving what they hoped. A second solution is where a person is over focused on their motivating force and they ignore or do not learn from their fears and anxieties. This can sometimes result in reckless actions. The third solution is where a person acts on achieving their motivating force (hopes/dreams and what they want to gain) and well as learn from what their fears or anxieties tell them.

### ***A simple example***

*On a very hot summer day in northern WA, a tourist wants to go for a swim to cool off. However the country is known for crocodiles. They come across a flowing river and they want to go for a swim, as they cannot see any crocodiles. The tourist is aware of both their desire and their fear. The **first solution** is not to go swimming because they are too afraid of the crocodiles.*

*The **second solution** is that the person takes off their clothes and dives in. They ignore their fears and cool off immediately but this solution is quite reckless as crocodiles may exist without being seen on the banks.*

*The **third solution** is that the person checks the area for signage that swimming is encouraged or asks someone else with a greater knowledge. They are being informed and learn from their fears but find out the best way to swim safely.*

### **History of the Focal Conflict Model**

Thomas French, in 1952, hypothesised that conflict exists in individuals as they grow through life. As individuals, we have *desires, hopes and dreams* that he called the *disturbing motive*. However, as life's disappointments occur, we learn not all our needs are met, a *fear or anxiety* arises that he called the *reactive fear*. As life is lived, individuals respond to these forces through their actions and decision making (these are called *solutions*).

There are two types of solutions. They are either **Restrictive Solutions** or **Enabling Solutions**. **Restrictive Solutions** occur when a person is over focused on their fears and anxieties so they ignore any information they can learn from their hopes and dreams because they over focus on reducing their fears and anxieties (*see solution one and two in the previous story about the tourist*).

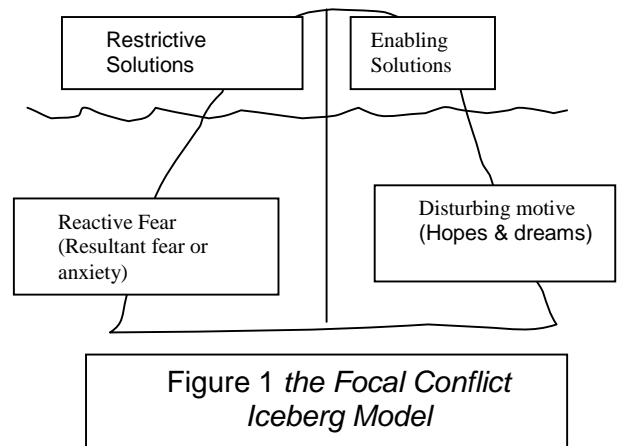
**Enabling Solutions** occur when a person acts to achieve their hope, dream or wish (motivating force) **and** they learn from their fear or anxiety. French called this the *Nuclear Focal Conflict Model* (see solution three in the previous story about the tourist). The creation of harmony is an enabling solution, where people are able to achieve valuable, loving and important relationships in their life while they learn from their fear of being rejected, judged or criticised. The result is a system of tensions that exist in harmony and also contain an expression of individuality, challenge and life story.

In 1964 and again in the late 1980's, Whitaker (1985) & Lieberman applied this model to group work and called it the *Group Focal Conflict Model*. They recognised that the Focal Conflict Model could not only be applied to individual situations, but also was relevant to understanding group situations. Groups have motivating forces that encourage people to create change in their lives. Reactive forces are based on the fear or anxiety that arises and opposes the motivating force when expressed. These opposing forces constitute a Group Focal Conflict that consists of *shared dreams/wishes* (the purpose of the group) between members of the group and *shared fears/anxieties*.

To resolve this conflict, one of two quite different kinds of solutions may be found. An *enabling solution* happens when a group of people achieves its dream/wish while recognising the significance of the underlying fear/anxiety. A *restrictive solution* occurs when the group of people fail to achieve their dream/wish because their fear/anxiety is too strong, and most of the group time is spent reducing its fears/anxiety. This is often detrimental to the group development since the wish usually relates to behaviour which is healthy, growth focused and constructive for the individual or for the group.

## A useful way to conceptualise the Focal Conflict Model

An iceberg that is divided into four quadrants is a useful way of mapping the focal conflict model (see Figure 1). The two sets of emotional forces are below the surface and are difficult to observe. The solutions or group actions are the expression of these forces and they are directly observable. They sit above the water at the top of the iceberg. Over the course of a group the leader learns more about the forces below the water by observing the solutions that group members choose.



Using a young parents group as an example, a **disturbing motive** for many of the young mums is to be recognised as a loving and caring parent. The **reactive fear** maybe that they will be judged and condemned as inadequate and unloving and too young to parent. **Restrictive solutions** may be shown as projecting their anger onto another mum as an inadequate parent or onto the overall health system as being uncaring, in order to reduce their own feelings of inadequacy and fear of negative judgement. The **enabling solution** occurs when the participants started to talk about their own adequacy and hopes as young parents while acknowledging and learning from their current challenges.

## Application of the Focal Conflict Model

This model (King, 2007) is important in understanding harmony. Harmony is not a wishful belief in the future. It is instead an enabling solution that is the result of people working towards achieving their hopes and dreams but also learning from their fears and anxieties. While the Focal Conflict Model can be used to understand a variety of individual and group situations, it is especially useful for following the development of interactions in discussion based groups (i.e. emotional support groups and general discussion groups).

Participants are more likely to achieve harmony the more confidently they can deal with expressing important feelings and beliefs. When using the Model, use the iceberg diagram and always start by considering what are the hopes, dreams or wishes (disturbing motive). Then name the resultant fear/anxiety as the fear/anxiety rises in response to the hope. Finally, identify the different type of solutions observed.

When naming the above forces, focus on using strong descriptive words rather than weak generalisations. This will help to add life to the model. For example, in a parenting group, participants aim at **not just being good parents but loving** parents.

As parents own the importance of what it means to be loving parents with close and supportive relationships with their children, they start to acknowledge and explore the many tensions, concerns and fears that exist. Sometimes they are over focused on their fears of failure, anger or being ignored that they give up as it is too hard. Or they act in controlling their child too much to ensure their fears are not realised. These are restrictive solutions as they are unlikely to achieve their hopes and dreams. The enabling solution of creating harmony occurs when they work towards being loving and valuing but learn through their fears or anxieties. This results in actions and behaviours that have significant depth and power. Harmony moves from an idealised image to a realised action, a tension that is lived out in strength and challenge. It is more likely to be achieved as it balances the significant motivating forces in life. *In summary, harmony is created when we work towards our hopes and dreams for relationship and learn through our fears and anxieties.*

As practitioners, the Focal Conflict Model enables group leaders to monitor group member behaviours. In the early stages of a group, no firm pattern concerning the forces and the solutions may be apparent, but trends can initially be identified and held tentatively until a later confirmation can occur. Identify solutions (restrictive and enabling) that are occurring in the group and link them with what is hypothesised to exist below the iceberg.

Shifting a group from restrictive to enabling solutions is often the educators' challenge. Early in the life of a group (the first three sessions) restrictive solutions will predominate. A group leader is wise to observe these solutions without challenging them at this early stage, unless the chosen group solution is likely to threaten the existence of the group. Likewise as a group moves towards termination, more restrictive solutions (like premature leaving of the group) are likely to occur. The middle phase of a healthy group is likely to see more enabling solutions. Much of the movement between restrictive and enabling solutions will occur naturally between these points in the group's life.

A group leader needs to challenge restrictive solutions when they severely threaten the functioning of the group or when the leader has identified an ongoing unhelpful

pattern, usually in the working phase of the group. To create change, as in Lewin's concept of Force Field Analysis, an increase in the disturbing motive is likely to result in an equivalent rise in the resultant fear. For change to occur the fear/anxiety needs to be reduced by it being acknowledged, valued and used to inform a person or the group about how to achieve a better solution.

## **Conclusion**

Returning to the analogy of the tapestry, to be valued it has to be purchased or endorsed by those who own it. Using strengths based practice principles it needs to be owned and influenced by the service users, valued by the staff and professionals who support it and endorsed by the management structures of organisations that fund and support it.

I'd like to think for a moment about what tapestries are used for. Historically they had three main purposes – to tell a story or represent an event or set of events; to cover up crumbling walls and keep out drafts, and to make a statement about the owner. This conference is about creating a vision for harmony that will live and shine brighter than our individual contributions. What is discussed and started here will continue to live, longer and larger after the conclusion of this time together. We can't fix the whole world or even the whole of the human services system in Australia. However we are not there to cover up issues that need to be exposed and our active implementation of social justice principles, the link between our policy and practice and the involvement of our service users allow us to expose and challenge where this is both necessary and strategic.

If tapestries also make a statement about their owners, then our plan will most certainly make a statement about Marriage and Relationship Educators. That statement is encompassed in our vision and role in developing stronger and contemporary relationships, that many people appreciate from close up and afar. So this is my analogy completed. We have the colours, the commitment to passion and social action, stronger families and relationships and an understanding of the brief and its opportunities and constraints. This is our tapestry, our future – no-one else's, so its design and its execution is up to us.

Again, appreciation is given to Jane Woodruff who originally developed the image of this tapestry for me. Once I decided on this theme I started looking for words of

wisdom elsewhere. I can't explain why Walt Whitman chose to mix his metaphors but this is what I found:

*The threads that were spun are gathered, the weft crosses the warp, the pattern is systematic*

*The preparations have every one been justified*

*The orchestra have sufficiently tuned their instruments – the baton has given the signal.*

*Let harmony be valued*

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