

VIEWPOINTS

Reflections on a "Black and White" Model of Teaching Family Therapy to First Nations Students

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In this transcribed interview, facilitated by the paper's third author, Stephen Andrew, Robyne (Robbie) Latham and Banu Moloney discuss La Trobe University's Graduate Certificate in Family Therapy: First Nations, the development of its pedagogy, its importance to Indigenous and non-Indigenous therapists, the complex relationships between teaching, learning, and listening, and the deep, cross-cultural significance and power of words such as "family" and "therapy".

The Graduate Certificate in Family Therapy¹ is a postgraduate course that has been run by the Bouverie Centre and La Trobe University for over 20 years. Its reach extends beyond metropolitan Melbourne to communities in rural Victoria and far north Queensland. More than 170 students have graduated from the course, the majority of these identifying as First Nations people. In 2023, this pedagogy was recognised by an independent course review committee, which consisted of academics from RMIT, Monash, and Victoria

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^b Banu Moloney is a family therapist, social worker, and psychologist. She is an adjunct senior lecturer at the Bouverie Family Centre at La Trobe University. Banu held key responsibility for La Trobe University's Graduate Certificate in Family Therapy: First Nations. This course has been successfully delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander child and family workers for the last 15 years, resulting in over 170 graduates to date. She continues to work as a consultant to the First Nations team especially in the delivery of the family therapy pedagogy. Prior to that, Banu was a member of the HIV and AIDS team from 1990 to 2000, working with HIV-affected and -infected people and their families. It was a significant period, not only because being HIV-infected was often a death sentence but also because, at that time, many gay men were coming out to their families for the first time. Banu has an ongoing interest in supervision training and practice. She has taught supervision in Australia and overseas over many years and developed the curriculum for the six-day supervision training at the Bouverie Centre. Banu has a small private practice where she works as a family therapist and supervisor for individuals and groups. She also supervises professionals who are in leadership roles and not necessarily in the helping professions. She is from a multicultural family spread across four continents. She and her partner have two grown-up sons and two teenage granddaughters.

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1 For more information about the course, see Moloney (2014).

Universities as well as Professor Larrissa Behrendt (a Eualeyai/Kamillaroi woman) and Professor Kerry Arabeena, a descendent of the Merriam people of the Torres Strait Islands. The course was relaunched in 2022 as the Graduate Certificate in Family Therapy: First Nations.

The First Nations team, of which two of this paper’s authors—Robyne (Robbie) Latham and Banu Moloney—were members, has expanded its work beyond delivering a postgraduate course in family therapy to providing secondary consultation and professional development programs, including family therapy services for First Nations families who wish to visit a non-First Nations service for family work. Robyne and Banu remain connected to the course as consultants.

Before we began exploring questions about the history and content of the course, Robyne offered an Acknowledgement of Country. This led Banu to reflect on the personal impact such acknowledgements have had on her.

ROBYNE: I would very much like to acknowledge the traditional custodians and owners of the lands we’re meeting on today. We’re on Boonwurrung Country in the land of the great Kulin Nation, and I’d like to acknowledge Elders who are past, present, and those who are emerging, and to say the lands have never been ceded.

BANU: It was about 17 years ago when I was first asked by Colin Riess, who was the director at Bouverie [the Bouverie Centre] at the time, whether I would participate in a training program with Aboriginal people in Shepparton, and I remember coming across for the first time the idea of acknowledging country. It was new to me. I was a little bit clumsy about it, and I was still engaging with it at a cerebral level—as in, almost like I was arriving at a passport office and “this is what you have to do”. But, not long after that, after meeting Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people in various places, it went from being a polite, respectful thing to do, to an important step towards me grounding myself on this land and feeling safe.

Bouverie had won this tender to do some training with Aboriginal people. It was very, very vexed at that time because Aboriginal organisations had also tendered for the money and we, a non-Aboriginal organisation, won the tender. We weren’t very popular at the time. So there was a lot of struggle in the early days in establishing legitimacy to do this, which I didn’t fully understand at the time. In my ignorance, I just assumed we were going to be talking about family therapy skills, and surely that’s universal: all families are universal. So it took some time, and it failed. It didn’t get off the ground for almost two years until Shaun Coade [Wiradjuri man and cultural consultant] came on board. He helped us to clarify our aims and with his help we were able to launch the first cohort of training at Shepparton.

ROBYNE: I was later invited by Kerry Proctor to consider doing a research project on the first three cohorts of the training. So that’s when I started working for the First Nations team—that would have been 14 years ago. We used a participatory action research methodology for that, so that we were always going back to community and saying, “This is what we understand you

said. Is that correct? Do we need to tweak it?" Because research doesn't have a great name in First Nations' cultures because research results have been used *against* the communities. That also took a bit to get people to be accepting of the research.

BANU: So just to put things in context, one of the things that I discovered early in the piece was that Aboriginal child and family workers had accessed many short courses and workshops, and not many of those were culturally sensitive in the way they were delivered. It was like, here's a piece of western research, and this is what we're going to teach. So, thanks to my Indigenous colleague, Shaun Coade, he facilitated my presence in Shepparton, because not being an Indigenous person myself, he had to vouch for me and also to make it safe for me. He needed to facilitate me being able to have a voice in an Indigenous space and for that voice to be heard. So he was my guide, in other words.

In addition, when in my ignorance, I said, "We've been doing family therapy training for a long time, and what we can offer is a 5-day course", First Nations people kept telling us, "We've done courses 'til we're bored to tears ... We've got more certificates from organisations than we've got toilet paper, so we don't need it". So I said to them, "What if it was a university course?"² and they said, "Well, now you're talking!"

As an aside, being neither white Australian nor Aboriginal but being a migrant to this country and not being white, I have put pressure on myself to be better than white in my academic excellence. I don't want anyone giving me a free pass anyway, just because I'm a migrant, just because English is my second language. I also didn't want to be delivering a course that people are going to say about, "This is the Mickey Mouse course". Very quickly I realised that these people deserve to be recognised for their skills, and whatever help a tertiary education can give for people to be able to articulate their thinking and their knowledge, that's what we have to do. And that's where it started.

ROBYNE: I'm just fascinated by your comment when you said their response was "now you're talking" when you said, "What if it's a university degree course?" Actually, what they were saying was "*now you're listening*". I think therein lies what's been integral to your approach the whole way through. You listen and respond to what people are asking for, and that's what has happened all the way through as much as we possibly could. And I do think that you have great people skills anyway on top of being a family therapist. By nature of being a family therapist you have highly developed listening skills, so reading between and beneath the subtext comes as second nature to you, and maybe that's been pivotal in getting this course going.

² Professor Amaryll Perlesz pioneered a pathway for First Nations students without an undergraduate degree to enter this university course via "recognition of prior learning".

BANU: Most of the time I’d be revved up with excitement about what *I* was learning! I don’t want to make it sound like it was a walk in the park because I got tested—like it was a baptism of fire for me too. I needed to find creative ways to engage people in the learning process when so much of family therapy learning touches on what distresses families. So, inevitably, there’s the parallel process of what’s touching the student as they’re learning about their family. One thing that is really significant is that no one would refer to the people they’re working with as “clients”: They are “families”.

Amongst all my excitement was the question, “How do I manage all the ways in which the students are triggered by talking about family, family challenges, family trauma, and to hold them and at the same time facilitate them to engage with the family therapy theories and practices?” I remember Robbie saying to me, “You can’t do this unless you’re also a therapist”, and I hadn’t factored that in. I realised from the very first there was a language discrepancy. It was full of jargon, family therapy jargon. So when the students would say, for example, “What does *systemic* mean?” then I said, “Well, let’s rephrase the word”. So I unpacked the words. “What does *chronic* mean?” “It means it’s happening all the time”, and they said, “Why didn’t you say that?” [laughter]

ROBYNE: It’s so obvious [in hindsight], but to actually put yourself in that position to do it in real time in front of people who are pretty smart people, but they’re not gonna have the wool pulled at all, and so it takes courage to do that.

STEPHEN: I’ve got some jargon here. Talk to me about any important differences the words “family” and “therapy” might have between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures.

ROBYNE: That’s a big question. The word “family” from a mainstream perspective means something very different from a First Nations’ perspective. [From a mainstream perspective] you are basically talking about an individualistic culture where the “me” and the “my” and the “I” are the dominant ways of thinking and living, whereas in a First Nations culture the “we” and the “us” are dominant. So “we as a family” will be extensive, where a mother’s sister is actually considered another mother. Or a father’s brother, [a child’s] uncle in a mainstream context, becomes another father. Or your child is actually referred to as the grandparent or uncle because they’re the reincarnation of another family member. So it’s a very, very different construct. It doesn’t work on linear time, and so you’ve got this other construct of time going on as well.

BANU: An example: When I’m teaching in a mainstream situation and I say to a student, “Would you mind putting the family that you’re working with on the board?”, they will usually put mum and dad, or dad separated, and then there’s the stepdad, and the children. *That’s* the family. Very occasionally there may be a grandparent, but rarely would a grandparent be part of it. When I

say to the Indigenous students, “Can we have the family on the board?”, it is uncles, aunties, grandmothers ... sometimes not even blood-related, but there are community aunties who are really important.

Recently there was a program on *Australian Story*³ on Megan Davis, the Aboriginal lawyer who was instrumental in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.⁴ Her sister was interviewed about Megan. Megan’s got no children, and her sister said, “Megan’s the second mother to my children”. She didn’t say, “Megan’s my children’s auntie”; she said she’s a “second mother”. So in that way, the concept of family is far more inclusive and broader.

ROBYNE: And then there’s the dogs and cats! Family is everybody. And the other thing I think children miss out on is that grandparents bring a different kind of energy. People at grandparent age have achieved what they want to do, and now they’ve got time to sit and watch little Harry play in the mud and laugh and giggle. Grandparents [are] a very important part of a child’s life, and if that’s not there, a huge part of their learning is missed.

BANU: Alongside that, the child would just as easily go and sleep at Auntie’s house one day or Grandma’s house the next day, not because the parent is negligent; it’s because those homes are equally homes.

STEPHEN: Can we come to “therapy” now? Is that a word that we need to look at through different eyes?

BANU: In the beginning I would use the word “therapy” very hesitantly. The word “healing” is often the more meaningful and acceptable word. But as the course goes on, my experience of the students is, “We know the words that make sense to us, we know the concepts that make meaning to us, but we also want to learn the mainstream words. We want to be bilingual”. But when they’re working with their own communities, they wouldn’t be using jargon words. My experience of going into the communities is to talk and check with them: “What does this word mean?” They often would say we prefer healing and healing conversations, having a yarn about healing rather than “going to therapy”.

ROBYNE: I think a lot of people understand therapy as being a one-on-one sort of dynamic rather than a family type dynamic. So you put “family” and “therapy” together. So, to talk about healing a family just says what it is. It doesn’t confuse the issue. I think the word “therapy” implies something is seriously wrong, like, “you really need help”; whereas to heal a family, it mightn’t be a huge thing, or it might be, so there’s that flexibility.

STEPHEN: Banu, in the brief you sent me you spoke about First Nations students bringing wisdom to the classroom. Can you put into words what that wisdom has been?

³ Season 28, episode 18 by Rousset et al. (2023).

⁴ Created by the First Nations National Constitutional Convention and the Central Land Council (2017).

BANU: It's a really difficult question to quantify and be specific about that, Stephen. My first experience of teaching at Rumbalara in Shepparton was when I told the group I was meeting with who I was, where I had come from, and that I was a migrant to this country, one of the Elders in the group said to me (and I can never do this without getting emotional), "You are very welcome in my country" [tears]. I had already been a citizen of Australia for quite some years before that, but it was *that* moment that I felt like I could be on this land. I don't know how to explain that Stephen, other than it was a very visceral feeling.

ROBYNE: I think there is an explanation for that, and I think you named it earlier. When you first started hearing a Welcome to Country or an Acknowledgement of Country it was cerebral and now it's shifted to visceral. And that's a very different understanding. When you understand at a cellular level what it means to belong and to be welcomed to country, it's an enormous reconfiguration of you as a person.

BANU: I'm amazed how even the very young people in the student groups are so grounded in culture. A student said to me once that he'd decided to take his young daughters fishing one day, and it wasn't his land and it wasn't his country. He went into a lot of depth about teaching them about the land that they were walking on—how they had to be very mindful of this land because it wasn't their land but it was somebody else's land. He taught them when they got to the river that they needed to get permission from the spirits that had gone there before and the people who had fished there before, permission to be able to fish in that river. He said he taught them when they caught their first fish that they needed to put it back because it's a way of saying thank you and to have gratitude to the spirits that were there. It wasn't like he was teaching me; it was like he was saying, last week we went on a picnic, and this is what we did. It's an example of all my interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as to how *strongly* connected people are to the whole land—the sea, the waterways, the language, the artwork. It's holistic. The contrast that comes to mind is someone driving their four-wheel drive through the country because *they can*.

STEPHEN: "I've got a licence!" Like, that's all it takes.

BANU: It's very different. As they begin to engage with family therapy theories and concepts, they look at the parallels from their own cultural ways of how to resolve conflict or what you need to put in place before you resolve a conflict. In the beginning they would frame it in terms of, "These are 'traditional' ways", and I would say, "This is also 'traditional' or mainstream family therapy, it's just a different tradition". When people know that you are genuinely curious and genuinely open to learning, you can become the beneficiary of this wisdom. One of the real highlights for me was when the first group about halfway through the course said to me, "You're a good learner".

ROBYNE: I think one of the other things worth discussing is the black and white approach to working. It sounds a bit klutzy to say "black and white approach", but it was a very well thought out use of language.

BANU: It was Shaun Coade's expression. He said we need to be thinking in black *and* in white ways, not black and white as we often think about things; it's not dichotomous. I'll just digress for a moment. A female student drew a genogram. Her mob lived up near Swan Hill near the Murray, and so she drew the Murray River, and some of her mob were on the other side. I looked at it instantly, and I said, "There's a border, there's a boundary", and she said, "No, that's the river connecting us". And I thought, "Wow". So the black and white approach was Shaun saying, "Us mob have to live in a white world, and we have to learn the white man's language and we need to be fluent in it. We also need to contextualise it in our own learning, in our own culture". That was his reasoning.

The group would say to me, "We are grateful, and we're happy that our cultural knowledge and wisdom are being acknowledged and respected, but when we go to a team meeting at the department with child protection involved, we need to be able to understand the jargon words that *they're* using. We need to be confident to use the same jargon words to convince them. They're not going to be listening to our language and they're likely to be dismissive of our language so we want to be able to be fluent". That's where it makes perfect sense to me, as someone for whom English is a second language, to value my own language but also to want to be fluent in another language. So, yes, [they say,] "We want to be able to say that family therapy theories are for dealing with conflict, for dealing with trauma or dealing with grief. We want to be able to articulate that, but we also want it to be respected and recognised that we have our *own* ways of understanding trauma, we have our *own* ways of dealing with grief, and we have our *own* ways of what we need to do in order to feel safe, in order to feel connected, in order to feel grounded". So that's the "black and white" thinking.

STEPHEN: Robbie, you've undertaken two evaluative studies on the work of the team. What works, and how do you understand what works here?

ROBYNE: What stays with me in working with First Nations students is you raise the bar, and they leap over. The thing that stayed with me is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, when given the right environment for learning, learn at such a rapid rate and internalise and understand. Particularly with family therapy it's been such a hand-in-glove fit, so the systemic nature of family therapy and the construct of hearing everybody in the family is a very comfortable fit with First Nations cultures. So it's not like you're trying to fit a round peg in a square hole. It is a hand-in-glove fit. That's been one of the things that's resoundingly come through the research.

Another thing that was really important was we always had at least 70% of our student cohort being First Nations. The other 30% may or may not be First Nations but needed to be embedded in community, be working with First Nations families and okayed by the CEO of the organisation that was taking on the training. We decided the dominant culture would preferably always be First Nations, and that really mattered to the learning confidence of the students. A lot of students came to the training with very bad memories of what it was

like to go to school. They were shamed, they were blamed, they were told they were useless and told, "Why bother going to university, you're never going to pass". That was their internal dialogue or their internal critic. But once they started passing, the confidence that brought carried through to the next assignment and the next assignment. We acknowledge and are mindful that you may come in with a very traumatic history when it comes to education, but this is different. The dominant culture in the room is First Nations, so *that in and of itself* ameliorated people's anxiety.

BANU: So it's a non-intimidating, non-shaming environment. When you're 3% of the population, it's very rare that you are in the majority in the room, so to be in a class where you are the majority is a novel experience and such a powerful experience. To be in a class where they are in the majority provided some absolute kind of safety from shame. One of the students said to me that she would stop her children from going to school to stop them from being bullied. The school wouldn't take it seriously, and it was agony sending her children to school only to have them bullied. Her daughter did the course last year.

ROBYNE: You've just reminded me of one of the quotes from the research that I did. A grandmother had done the course, and her granddaughter was talking to her mother: "Well, if Nana can go to university and pass, *I* can go to university!" That is revolutionary. That is change.

BANU: I had a student saying she was doing her assessment at the kitchen table and her challenging teenage son said, "What are you doing, Mum?" She said, "I'm doing homework". Anyway, a couple of days later, he's sitting at the same table doing his homework.

ROBYNE: I have another great quote from the research. We had a young fellow who did the postgrad in family therapy, and he's quoted as saying, "There's nothing as dangerous as an educated black ... so look out, here comes trouble!"

BANU: I was just thinking about how tough it is. A lot of students doing the course are parents or grandparents. As part of learning family therapy, the students were required to reflect on how they got to be doing the work that they're doing, what has been the influence of their family, their ancestors, and their parents. Naively, I thought they would just approach it like an intellectual exercise, but very quickly I realised that in order to do that they actually need to engage with who is in their family, who their family members are, what's happened to them, how they've impacted them, and all of that. Inevitably, it is an extremely painful exercise.

So, one mother was pretty furious with me, and she said, "How can I do this [complete an assignment] when I've got one son who's committed suicide, another one who's sitting in jail? This is just not acceptable. I can't do this". She was pretty angry. And I said, "Let's think about how we might get to where we need to get to in some way that is okay". Well, she wasn't buying that. She said, "You're making me an exception. You say you're going to set a lesser assignment for me from the rest? Do you think I can't do it?" So, here I am in a vice.

Anyway, when it came to the day, she came with this amazing painting, and she said, "I didn't do this. I have been talking to my son who's in jail, and he did this drawing". And what he had done was a painting of the first fleet arrival and what has happened to the community in a circular way, as to where he's ended up and where he hopes to be, which is not in jail. And she said, "When I saw that, I realised this is why I have to do this exercise".

STEPHEN: What would you do differently if you had your time again? Any issues or regrets about how this training has unfolded?

BANU: The first thing that comes to my mind is we have to go looking for the funding every year. It's not a given. It's not considered a priority in terms of putting aside education money for child and family workers. It's not a simple case of students incurring a HECS [Higher Education Contribution Scheme] debt. Students are working to support not just their family but often the community, you know, the bigger family, so they can't afford to do the course without them being supported financially. It's the difference between equality and equity, and there isn't equity for older Aboriginal workers to be able to access good, recognised educational qualifications. The reason the university qualification is important is people take notice of it, and that's been a huge stepping stone for quite a few people who've done the course. If all their life they wanted to do law or do architecture, having a university qualification has meant that they can then go and do their life's dream. Part of me can say, "Hey, but I wanted you to be a family therapist", but a bigger part of me says, "I'm really pleased that you are doing what you want to do".

ROBYNE: The thing that disturbs me is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to pay a HECS debt for their tertiary education. When we're only 3% of the population, and the percentage of people that go and do an undergraduate degree, let alone a Master's or a PhD, is a pretty small percentage, couldn't that whole HECS just be waived? You know, it's not a lot of money. There are a lot of scholarships, but to just waive all tertiary education HECS debts for First Nations people I think would be a good step in the right direction. We all know that when you have an education at a tertiary level it does help move you out of poverty.

My mother would always say to me, "Get an education, honey child, no one can take it away from you". That's it. You can hold your head high in meetings and discuss your families, and you are now entitled to go to meetings you were previously excluded from because you didn't have a degree, let alone a postgraduate degree. I would like to see that kind of fiscal gesture from the Federal Government. It ain't rocket science.

STEPHEN: People reading this interview will be, overwhelmingly, white, middle-class, educated people. Why should they care about the work that you have been doing?

ROBYNE: Their life will be richer if they do! [laughter]

BANU: I think we all feel better when our neighbourhood, our town, our country can be proud that we look after each other, that we look out for each other. Whenever we can give someone a hand up, we're willing to do that. I

would rather live in a land where I feel connected and safe with everyone than live in a gated community where I have to be worried about who might be angry or might want to harm me because of the disparity.

ROBYNE: I think that if someone is a white, middle-class therapist then should that person ever work with a First Nations client or family, it would be hugely important for their own comfort in knowing they're going down the right path with this family, if they understand some of these fundamental senses of what is family, what is land, what is culture, what is belonging, and the systemic nature of shame. The shame, if you're in a collectivist community, is different from an individualist community. If someone who's Aboriginal gets into a fight, everybody kind of feels it, but if someone who's not Aboriginal gets into a fight, it's like, it's just a fight. So, to understand those subtleties would improve your work with that family.

BANU: We're a very small country in many ways. If you happen to have a migrant background or a refugee background, in most cases you already know that there are hoops that you had to go through, steps that you had to do in order to feel you fitted in and belonged. If you are two or three or four generations in Australia, it would be very unusual if somewhere you didn't have some Aboriginal family members. Not everyone identifies quickly and easily if they are blonde and blue eyed, because sometimes it is easier to slip in without identifying because the country makes it very unsafe for you. But when people feel that it's safe to share their heritage with you, I have been bowled over the number of times people have talked to me, people in shops, people in supermarkets, and they've said "I've got an Aboriginal grandparent". So I think people reading this interview need to keep that in mind because we are connected whether we like it or not.

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