

Sunday, November 20, 2015

Good Things Are Happening in Australia and New Zealand

David Prescott, LICSW

ATSA has long enjoyed a friendship with the Australia and New Zealand Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abuse (ANZATSA). I had the honor of attending their biannual conference this month, and wanted to share some impressions in the event that it is useful.

There is a saying among historians that “Happy is the nation that has no history.” In other words, it can be painful to reflect on the history of one’s country, and this couldn’t be more true in the case of Australia and New Zealand (and elsewhere). At a time when so much of the world is grappling with problems related to human migration, the ANZATSA conference began with traditional greetings from an Elder of the Wurundjeri people (caretakers of the land on which the conference took place) and a Maori delegate from New Zealand. It is one thing to hear about this kind of opening and another to experience it. It was an important way to open the conference, as in many places in Australia, aboriginal people made up 2-3% of the general population and 70-80% of incarcerated people. Addressing abuse in this context cannot be meaningful without explicit discussion of the systematic racism that occurs in these and other countries, including the USA and Canada. One ANZATSA attendee related to me that she could only become an Australian citizen at the age of seven because, as an Aboriginal, she had “fallen under the Plants and Animals Act.”

The first keynote addressed more immediate problems facing aboriginal people in that part of the world, before the conference turned to practice matters such as research and practice related to therapeutic engagement. Nicola Gavey, a Professor of Psychology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, spoke on the topic of rape culture, focusing on the incidents and subsequent media coverage in Steubenville, Ohio, and the Roast Busters scandal of 2013 in New Zealand. The conference program noted that her 2005 book *Just Sex? The cultural scaffolding of rape* received a Distinguished Publication Award from the Association for Women in Psychology.



SAJRT Bloggers' Profile

Chief Blogger Kieran McCartan, Ph.D. and Associate Bloggers David S. Prescott, LICSW and Jon Brandt, MSW, LICSW are longtime members of ATSA. We are dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

The views expressed on this blog are of the bloggers and are not necessarily those of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment, or Sage Journals.

Her current project 'Pornography in the Public Eye', raises questions about the gender and sexual politics of mainstream pornography.

Arguably, the most stunning presentation was by Louise Nicholas, who has established herself as a national treasure in New Zealand. She is a National Sexual Violence Survivor Advocate in New Zealand. She is a survivor of child and adult rape, perpetrated against her by rogue members of the New Zealand Police. While there are many people who have survived sexual abuse and gone on to tell their stories via books and lectures, Mrs. Nicholas stands out. Her presentation was passionately heartfelt and authentic. It was clear that she had come to tell the truth from her first words: "Some names have been changed due to suppression orders by the court." Mrs. Nicholas' persistence in seeking justice for herself and others is remarkable. There is now a wing of the New Zealand police named after her. In April 2015 she was awarded the Governor General's Anzac award and later same year (June) she was made an Officer of the NZ Order of Merit in the Queens Birthday Honours. Louise co-wrote the bestselling book Louise Nicholas – My Story, which was later made into a film.

Tony Ward followed with an exceptional keynote derived from a special issue of Psychology, Crime, and Law that he is editing with Clare-Ann Fortune. In essence, he argued that the current state of our understanding of dynamic risk factors (and by extension, protective factors) risks bring our field to a dead end unless research can better separate correlation and causation, and develop more explanatory models. He illustrated his point using the risk factor of emotional congruence with children, and outlining different ways it could result in sexual abuse. Without a keener eye turned to the nature of explanatory forces, he argued, our understanding of risk factors is less helpful than we are capable of, and the factors themselves reified constructs without explanatory power. As one might expect, Tony was passionate in his style. The special issue certainly promises to be as provocative as it is thoughtful.

The ANZATSA workshops were also very worthwhile. Caroline Burrowes presented on a 10-week trauma-focused curriculum using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, while Fernanda Mottin gave an engaging talk on how she anchors her practice in Dan Siegel's interpersonal neurobiology. All in all, the conference was an excellent experience, and the setting of Melbourne made it a great time for all. Good things are happening in Australia and New Zealand!