PACFA History Interview: Hugh Crago

Interview recorded: May 2024
Interviewer: Nigel Polak
Interviewee: Hugh Crago

Introduction

Nigel Polak: Hello Hugh. Great to see you here. Thank you for joining me for a conversation about the history of PACFA in Australia. It's May 2024 and today we'll be talking about the beginnings of the national organisation for psychotherapy and counselling in Australia. It's really great to have you here. I appreciate you giving your time and I'm looking forward to our conversation today.

Hugh Crago: Thanks.

Early Career and Entry into Counselling

Nigel Polak: I'm interested in your early life story and how your journey brought you into counselling. What led to your interest in counselling?

Hugh Crago: I graduated from the University of New England in 1968, the year that Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated, although I'm ashamed to say I took very little notice of those events at the time.

I graduated in English language and literature, so I was training to become, I suppose, a literature academic or literary critic. I then went on to Oxford in the UK for another two and a half years and completed another degree in English.

After returning to Australia, I started teaching at what was then the Riverina College of Advanced Education, which later became part of Charles Sturt University. I was theoretically supposed to be teaching literature, but instead I taught a subject called Communication.

I became very inspired by the idea of working in groups. I didn't know much about it at the time, but while I was in England I had read a lot of radical educational material from the UK and the US and became excited by those ideas. I wanted to try working in groups where people interacted and reflected on their interactions.

Looking back now, I can see that this was the forerunner of the group work approaches I later came to value, particularly Irvin Yalom's group model.

At the time, though, I realised how little I knew and how untrained I was. So I enrolled in some intensive counselling courses run by Kay Miller in Melbourne. We didn't practise many counselling skills, but I became very excited by the idea of counselling.

Eventually, the college wanted to get rid of me because, in their words, I was "practising psychology without being qualified as a psychologist". I didn't think I was practising psychology, but that was how the psychology people saw it.

That was really the beginning of what became a recurring theme in my career.

My wife Maureen and I then went to Antioch New England Graduate School in New Hampshire in the United States. We completed a two-year full-time master's in counselling psychology.

That was the best academic training experience I ever had. It was exciting, inspirational and highly practical. We worked with clients all the way through the course rather than doing theory first and practice later. I still think that is an excellent model.

When we returned to Wagga, however, we couldn't get jobs because we were neither psychologists nor social workers. There was really no place for us in the mental health establishment at that time.

So we started a private practice in Wagga and worked there for seven years. Again, I had successes and many failures and kept discovering how much I still didn't understand.

Family Therapy and Early Professional Identity

Hugh Crago: By this stage, Maureen and I had become involved in the family therapy movement in Australia.

Family therapy was relatively open-minded about people's qualifications. We fitted into that movement because we were not psychologists, social workers or psychiatrists. Family therapists at that time often saw themselves as people creating something new and different, and we felt aligned with that vision.

We attended conferences and became very involved in that community.

Later, I worked as coordinator of a youth refuge in Southport for disaffected teenagers. It was a huge learning experience because my counselling skills were totally inadequate for what was needed.

The young people generally did not want counselling anyway. I didn't yet have the flexibility or presence that would have helped them feel safe. So I mostly worked with families and parents in the hope of improving family relationships.

Again, there were some successes and many failures.

Teaching Counselling

Hugh Crago: Eventually I was offered a junior lectureship at the Gold Coast campus of Griffith University.

There I taught a one-semester subject called Elements.of.Counselling. It wasn't really practical counsellor training, but it introduced students to counselling and what counsellors do.

After three years, management changed and the people who had appointed me were no longer in charge. A new managerial culture emerged in universities, one that seemed less interested in understanding disciplines and more focused on management itself.

After that, I moved to the University of New England and taught in a postgraduate counselling training program.

I thought there was a great deal wrong with the program, so I worked intensively to rewrite six one-semester units to improve the learning experience and make the program more meaningful.

I also changed the admissions process so we were more selective about who entered the course.

That did not make me popular.

Eventually, although I was promoted to senior lecturer, my contract was not renewed.

The Need for a National Counselling Organisation

Nigel Polak: It sounds like during your time at the University of New England you started to become concerned about the place of counselling in Australia and the need for a national organisation.

Could you speak about that?

Hugh Crago: Yes, and it's important to mention my colleague at the time, Dr Ruth Stury, now Dr Ingrid Stury.

She deserves a great deal of credit for recognising the political situation and sharpening my awareness of how important it was for the counselling profession to organise itself.

At that time there were growing concerns from government and media about counselling being an unregulated profession. The phrase often used was that "anyone can hang up a shingle and call themselves a counsellor".

At the same time, there were rumours that the Australian Psychological Society wanted psychology to take over counselling regulation and absorb counselling training programs into psychology.

We strongly opposed that idea.

So Ruth and I organised what became the first Standing Conference of Counsellor and Psychotherapy Educators and Trainers in 1996.

My contribution was proposing that it be a search conference rather than a traditional conference with keynote speakers and passive audiences.

I wanted a conference where people actually spoke with each other in small groups and explored ideas collaboratively.

We invited about 30 people representing a range of therapeutic modalities and training organisations.

The conference unfolded very much according to group process theory. By the end, participants agreed that the profession needed to organise itself and embrace self-regulation.

I think bringing people together at that time was probably the biggest success of my professional life.

Tensions Within the Emerging Profession

Hugh Crago: Over time, divisions began to emerge.

Some people who identified as psychotherapists did not want to be grouped together with “mere counsellors”.

I have always believed that counselling and psychotherapy exist on a continuum. There are differences at the extremes, but they share a great deal in common.

I became disappointed as sectional interests and rivalries began to dominate.

There was jockeying for positions in the proposed national organisation and increasing focus on organisational power.

That was not why I had participated.

I believed that what counsellors and psychotherapists had in common was more important than the differences between modalities or training programs.

Formation of PACFA

Nigel Polak: What do you remember about the formation of PACFA itself?

Hugh Crago: Initially, many of the key people involved came from family therapy backgrounds.

That makes sense because family therapists often think systemically and relationally.

People such as Jim Crawley were very skilled at finding common ground and creating safety across differences.

Those therapeutic skills were extremely important during the first conference.

As facilitator, I also tried to keep the conference focused on shared goals rather than allowing people to become bogged down in debates about differences.

The idea was to establish common ground before addressing conflict.

Eventually PACFA formed as a federation of member associations.

There were many small modality-based organisations around Australia at the time, including Gestalt organisations, family therapy associations and psychoanalytic psychotherapy organisations.

Later, broader counselling associations formed at state level and joined PACFA.

Counselling, Psychology and the “Relational Art”

Nigel Polak: What have you seen as the major challenges for the profession?

Hugh Crago: One major lost opportunity has been the failure to clearly communicate what counselling and psychotherapy stand for and how they differ from psychology.

Many people think psychology is counselling.

That is exactly what psychology has always claimed.

Psychology presents itself as the scientifically validated form of helping.

But counselling and psychotherapy are fundamentally relational.

I coined the phrase “relational art” because psychology describes itself as a cognitive science.

I believe counselling and psychotherapy are a relational art.

That distinction has not been communicated clearly enough.

People often do not even realise they have a choice.

Most people, in my opinion, are actually looking for a relational experience rather than a cognitive science model.

Accreditation and Counsellor Training

Nigel Polak: You've also spoken critically about accreditation and training standards.

Hugh Crago: Yes.

I felt accreditation processes were often too loose and insufficiently searching.

Panels would read course outlines and speak to carefully selected students, but they rarely observed actual counselling skills training.

No one sat in on classes to see what was really happening.

I believed training programs should place much greater emphasis on personal suitability, self-awareness and emotional development.

Psychology and social work generally assess people academically but not personally.

I think counselling programs should expect students to undertake significant personal work.

Students need to understand that becoming a counsellor is not simply an academic journey. It is also a deeply personal one.

The profession should not shy away from that.

Concerns About University Models

Hugh Crago: One important example was what happened to the Institute of Counselling in Sydney when it became aligned with Australian Catholic University.

The original program had a strong relational and experiential focus.

But over time the university system pushed it toward a more psychology-based, evidence-focused model.

Group work and personal development components were reduced because they were considered financially inefficient.

Eventually the counselling identity disappeared.

To me, that story represents the broader danger facing counselling and psychotherapy.

Academic Writing and Language

Hugh Crago: Another issue is the way academics often write.

Academic language has become unnecessarily abstract and inaccessible.

I was trained in an era when educated people were expected to write in language that intelligent laypeople could understand.

I think counselling and psychotherapy should value clarity and accessibility of language.

We should speak and write in ways that ordinary people can understand.

PACFA and Relationships With Members

Nigel Polak: You've also spoken about the relationship between PACFA and its members.

Hugh Crago: Yes.

In the past I often experienced PACFA as bureaucratic, impersonal and overly administrative.

It felt cold.

I think organisations representing counsellors and psychotherapists should embody relational values in how they interact with members.

Face-to-face communication matters.

Personal contact matters.

When I spoke with Johanna, I felt genuinely heard and understood.

That made an enormous difference.

A professional body should not simply promote itself with corporate language and positivity.

It should also acknowledge real difficulties and engage honestly with members.

That creates trust.

Vision for the Future

Nigel Polak: What is your vision for the future of the profession?

Hugh Crago: I think counselling and psychotherapy need to become much clearer and more confident about what makes them distinctive.

We should not try to imitate psychology.

We should emphasise the relational dimensions of our work, including the therapeutic relationship itself.

That relational focus should shape training, supervision, professional identity and public communication.

And importantly, leaders within the profession should remain personally connected with practitioners.

Relationships matter not only in therapy, but also within the profession itself.

Closing

Nigel Polak: I think that's probably a lovely place to leave it.

Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your experiences and reflections. Future generations will benefit from hearing and understanding this history.

Hugh Crago: Thank you very much for asking me.
