

PACFA History Interview: Tim Johnson-Newell

Interview recorded: 2024

Interviewer: Nigel Polak

Interviewee: Tim Johnson-Newell

Introduction

Nigel Polak: Welcome, Tim, and thank you for joining me.

I'm Nigel Polak, current President of PACFA, and this interview forms part of PACFA's project recording the experiences of past presidents and documenting the history of the federation.

Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting and pay my respects to Elders past and present.

Tim Johnson-Newell: Thank you. I'm currently living on Dunghutti Country, beside a sacred mountain known as Yarrahapinni.

Coming here during COVID changed my life.

It was difficult at first because we arrived during floods and lost most of our belongings, but it also reconnected me with something important about freedom, land and community.

In many ways it reminded me of my younger years and the political and therapeutic ideals that shaped me.

Early Life and Education

Nigel Polak: Could we begin with your life and career before PACFA?

Tim Johnson-Newell: I grew up in Britain as the son of a naval officer.

My father had begun his service on D-Day, and military life shaped much of my childhood.

We moved constantly around Britain and the world.

For a long time I reacted against the military culture I grew up in, though later in life I developed a much deeper understanding of my father and of the men who chose military service.

I attended a state grammar school with military boarding houses and later studied economics, politics and philosophy at Cambridge University.

Before university I completed what was called a “sandwich course”, spending time working in British Leyland factories.

I trained across multiple trades including:

- fitting and turning
- tin smithing
- foundry work
- vehicle assembly.

It gave me a very practical education alongside the academic one.

After Cambridge I trained as a secondary teacher and then travelled extensively with my wife through Asia and eventually to Australia.

We travelled through Afghanistan during a brief peaceful period before the Soviet invasion.

That journey was transformative.

It exposed me to radically different cultures and ways of living.

Arriving in Australia

Tim Johnson-Newell: I first arrived in Australia in the 1970s.

At first I disliked it because it felt like a poor imitation of England.

But once I travelled through the Australian bush, I encountered something very different.

People were extraordinarily generous.

If you stopped on the road, people would stop to help you.

That experience changed my relationship with Australia.

Years later, after further travel and periods of illness, I returned permanently in 1987.

I immediately had a strong feeling that this was where I belonged.

Illness and Personal Transformation

Tim Johnson-Newell: During my twenties I became seriously ill.

What began as glandular fever developed into chronic fatigue syndrome.

The illness lasted for years.

Oddly enough, it became one of the most important experiences of my life.

It forced me to let go of ambition, productivity and rigid planning.

I learned to care for myself differently.

I learned about food, rest, healing and slowing down.

I realised that if you throw away your diary and stop trying to control everything, the world does not collapse.

In many ways it was liberating.

Introduction to Psychotherapy

Nigel Polak: How did psychotherapy enter your life?

Tim Johnson-Newell: In England I was trying to decide between a more conventional psychodynamic training in London or a newer and more experimental training in Leeds.

I chose the Leeds training.

It was run by Nick Totton and Maureen Edmondson, both trained in Reichian psychotherapy.

The training involved:

- body-oriented psychotherapy
- experiential group work
- residential intensives
- psychodynamic theory.

It was a deeply experiential training and very transformative for me personally.

As someone who had grown up emotionally contained and academically driven, the training loosened me up enormously.

I began practising psychotherapy during the training and received supervision as part of the program.

Afterwards I undertook additional transpersonal and Reichian-based psychotherapy training involving psychodynamic group processes and Tavistock-style experiential work.

When I arrived in Australia, I came as a fully trained Reichian psychodynamic psychotherapist.

Somatic Psychotherapy and Early Professional Work

Tim Johnson-Newell: Shortly after arriving in Australia I joined the newly formed Somatic Psychotherapy Association.

There were many talented and passionate people involved.

We organised conferences, trainings and professional gatherings.

However, there were also serious ethical problems in some of the early training cultures.

Boundary violations by senior trainers led to major ethics complaints and significant upheaval within the association.

That period pushed many practitioners toward stronger ethical structures and more bounded forms of psychotherapy.

It also encouraged deeper engagement with psychoanalytic thinking and self psychology.

During this period I undertook:

- nine years of somatic psychotherapy
- an eleven-year psychoanalysis
- psychoanalytic child and adolescent psychotherapy training.

I also completed infant observation training and extensive seminar-based psychoanalytic study.

The Formation of PACFA

Nigel Polak: Tell us about the beginnings of PACFA.

Tim Johnson-Newell: It was incredibly exciting.

Before PACFA, psychotherapy and counselling existed in separate silos.

The first major meetings took place during the mid-1990s.

The second meeting I attended had around 60 people in the room representing a huge range of modalities and traditions.

Present were:

- psychoanalysts
- somatic psychotherapists
- Gestalt therapists
- counsellors
- family therapists
- training organisations.

The meetings were initiated by Hugh Craig and Ruth Stury and facilitated by Ron Perry and Margaret McGovern.

What mattered most was that people who had previously worked separately were finally speaking together.

There was a real sense that counselling and psychotherapy might create a unified professional body.

Psychoanalytic Involvement

Tim Johnson-Newell: The psychoanalytic groups played an important role in the formation of PACFA.

International psychoanalytic organisations had apparently encouraged Australian analysts not to repeat the fragmentation that had occurred in Britain.

As a result, analysts contributed significant intellectual leadership, committee work and financial support during PACFA's formation.

There was genuine excitement and optimism.

The Emergence of ACA

Tim Johnson-Newell: Shortly after PACFA formed, the Australian Counselling Association emerged.

That came as a shock to many people.

It created a split within the counselling and psychotherapy field that consumed a great deal of energy for many years.

There was concern that ACA operated with lower training standards and a more individual-membership business model.

At the same time, governments were reluctant to engage seriously with either organisation while the professions remained divided.

That division weakened the collective professional voice.

The PACFA Register

Nigel Polak: Could you explain the development of the PACFA Register?

Tim Johnson-Newell: The Register was designed to demonstrate who met minimum professional requirements and who agreed to operate within ethical and professional standards.

It was intended to provide governments and the public with some confidence regarding professional accountability.

I became heavily involved in the Register Committee and later served as Assistant Chair.

At first only a small number of practitioners joined the Register.

Many practitioners remained loyal primarily to their own modality associations and questioned the need for a federation.

Over time, however, the Register became increasingly accepted.

Treasurer and Board Work

Tim Johnson-Newell: In 1998 the founding Treasurer resigned and I was asked to take on the role because of my accounting background.

I served as Treasurer for several years.

That involved enormous amounts of volunteer work, including frequent travel to Melbourne for long board and committee meetings.

PACFA had very little money.

One of my tasks was continually explaining why increased membership contributions were necessary to sustain a national professional body.

Many members questioned the value of PACFA or resisted paying fees.

But without funding there could be no advocacy, administration or professional development.

Deputy President and President

Tim Johnson-Newell: Eventually I became Deputy President and later President from 2008 to 2010.

Those were difficult but important years.

One major development was the appointment of Colin Benjamin as CEO.

Colin had extensive experience in government systems and mental health reform.

He immediately focused on the question of Medicare recognition and broader professional recognition for counselling and psychotherapy.

He developed a strategic plan involving:

- GST exemption
- government recognition
- membership of national health bodies
- collaboration with ACA
- evidence and research development.

It was an ambitious vision.

I believed strongly in much of what he proposed.

However, Colin was also a highly intellectual and forceful personality.

Relationships within the board became increasingly strained.

There were major internal conflicts about leadership, governance and direction.

Eventually Colin's employment ended in very difficult circumstances.

That entire period was painful and divisive.

I also became unpopular because I supported aspects of his strategic vision.

By the end of my presidency I was exhausted.

Psychotherapy Identity and the Analysts Leaving

Tim Johnson-Newell: One of the most disappointing developments was the eventual withdrawal of many psychoanalytic groups from PACFA.

Different explanations circulated.

Some believed government representatives had encouraged psychoanalysts to form separate structures.

Others felt analysts no longer trusted the direction PACFA was taking.

At one point PACFA even created a third membership tier specifically recognising psychoanalysis.

Despite those efforts, many analysts still left.

I regarded that as a significant loss.

Psychoanalysis is foundational to psychotherapy and counselling traditions.

Losing that connection weakened the broader profession.

Defining Psychotherapy

Tim Johnson-Newell: After my presidency I became involved in work defining psychotherapy within PACFA.

There was concern that psychotherapy itself was becoming marginalised or diluted.

Particularly concerning was the growth of training programs that taught psychotherapy theories without requiring:

- extensive personal therapy
- experiential training
- long-term supervision
- cohort-based developmental learning.

For many psychotherapists, these elements remain central to professional identity.

Psychotherapy is not simply learning theories.

It involves deep personal work and relational transformation.

Reflections on the Profession

Nigel Polak: Looking back, what do you think are the major ongoing challenges?

Tim Johnson-Newell: One of the greatest dangers is the gradual medicalisation and monetisation of mental health.

Increasingly, psychological distress is understood primarily through medical and diagnostic frameworks.

That risks excluding psychotherapy and counselling as independent ways of understanding human suffering.

Many younger psychotherapists now feel compelled to qualify first as psychologists because psychology has institutional recognition and funding pathways.

But in doing so, psychotherapy risks losing its own language and identity.

I often compare it to the loss of Indigenous languages.

When a language disappears, an entire way of understanding human experience disappears with it.

Psychotherapy carries unique ways of thinking about relationships, embodiment, suffering and transformation.

Those ways of thinking are valuable and worth protecting.

A Long-Term Vision

Tim Johnson-Newell: I believe this is a very long struggle.

Perhaps even a hundred-year project.

The task is not simply obtaining government recognition.

The task is preserving and strengthening the ethical, relational and experiential foundations of psychotherapy and counselling.

We need to remain proud of what psychotherapy and counselling are, rather than trying to imitate medicine or psychology.

At the same time, we must continue developing research, professional standards and public understanding.

If psychotherapy disappeared as a profession, it would be a major loss to society.

Closing Reflections

Nigel Polak: Thank you, Tim. This has been an incredibly rich conversation.

Tim Johnson-Newell: Thank you. I've really appreciated the opportunity.

It has helped me reflect on the journey and think again about the future of psychotherapy and counselling.
