

Jones, A. (2011). *Barking mad: Too much therapy is never enough*. South Yarra, Victoria: Publish In Ink, 212 pages. ISBN: 978-0-646-54998-9.

Reviewed by
Lyn O'Grady
Hoppers Crossing
Victoria, Australia
lynjogrady@gmail.com

“What made all the difference to me was the collaborative company of two therapists [Gab and Viv] who'd done time in the mill, whose personal material had been processed into a fine-grained perspective on what ails all of us ...” (Jones, 2011, p. 193). This quote towards the end of Jones' memoir summarises what had benefited the author most after four decades of searching for professional assistance to help her manage her psychological needs. There is quite an industry now in the mainstream book market of memoirs – what makes “Barking Mad” different to the usual memoir is the ability of the author to sit between client and therapist.

The book provides the reader with the opportunity to reflect on a personal journey of a woman who experienced some significant challenges throughout her life, beginning with her troubled relationship with her mother. She was able to narrate her life experiences with intimate details of day to day experiences while complementing this with her understandings of the impact of her early life experiences on her future development and life journey. The account of the death by suicide of her son is particularly wrenching. For me, as a mother, it was at that point I found the book difficult to put down as I became curious to find out how Jones had been able to get through the days ahead: not least how she found the commitment and stamina to write the book but also to find some kind of resolution with what life had thrown at her. I particularly enjoyed her unique ability to balance her vivid

descriptions of distress and unbearable sadness with irony and humour.

Throughout the book, the author's skill is in her ability to juxtapose between herself as an individual with herself as a professional. It takes the reader on a journey from which the personal aspects are reflected upon through a professional lens. Although at times this became distracting as it required the reader to think on a number of levels, on the whole it reflects how in fact the personal and professional worlds can collide and, importantly, the ways in which strength and knowledge may be drawn from both arenas of one's life to inform and support the other. This approach of including a professional voice along with the personal seemed to reduce the uncomfortable sense of voyeurism I sometimes feel when reading memoirs.

One of the other striking features of the book is the way in which the author shows the impact of the various therapies on her – on how she saw herself, how she responded and how she felt – often judged and blamed. From a strength based perspective, it was interesting to read about her ability to recognise that although the therapy she had received had not met her needs she could continue to reach out in attempts to get the support she was seeking. The author, four decades on, was able to look back and reflect on the needs of her 19-year-old self when she first sought professional help – when she was searching “with no map, no compass and no idea: how to understand and empathise with myself and forgive my mistakes” (Jones, 2011, p. 192). This may be a useful way for therapists to think about what it is they are charged with when consulted by clients. It seemed suitably just that the epilogue provided a critique of the therapy she had received – almost a turning of the tables on those whose approaches had led to her disempowerment over many years.

For me as a community psychologist, the book forced critical reflection about the role of therapist or counsellor. As individuals

often seek support at the most vulnerable periods of their lives, there is both a sense of privilege and responsibility that arises for the professional from whom assistance is sought. When considering the training and counselling work I have undertaken I feel relieved that we now have approaches to therapy (such as Narrative Therapy) which openly acknowledge the power imbalances inherent in the client-therapist relationship and work towards “decenter[ing] the voice of the therapist [which has] the effect of bringing to the centre of the therapeutic endeavour some of the “knowledges” of life and skills of living of the people who consult therapists” (White, 2011, p. 3). This is perhaps near to what Jones felt when she described her positive experiences with Gab and Viv who “cut their cloth to suit their clients’ needs. Thus better clad, I was able to face my worst fears and learn a better way of being with them” (Jones, 2011, p. 192).

From a community psychology perspective, I was particularly interested in Jones’ descriptions of the freedom she felt after recognising the systemic nature of her difficulties, particularly society’s expectations on women to nurture other’s needs before their own, the ongoing role of patriarchy in contemporary life and the potential role of family factors in mental illness. Her recognition that she was angry at “the system that grinds down generation after generation of people like my parents, people excluded by circumstances beyond their control from ever calling the shots” (Jones, 2011, p. 178) led to her better understanding what it was she needed from a therapist – for them to be politically savvy and acknowledge the social, not just the genetic and physical, roots of anxiety and depression. I would have liked to have heard more about how she reached this understanding and how useful this understanding may be to others seeking support.

Overall, the book provides a useful resource for those mental health professionals

who provide counselling services to be challenged by the rawness of the story and hear firsthand about the potential effect of their interactions with clients. For Community Psychologists in particular the book provides powerful affirmation of the importance of the value of empowerment and reminds us to always view individuals within the context of broader societal factors.

Reference

White, M. (2011). *Narrative practice: Continuing the conversations*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.