

# 2025 CONFERENCE KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

## Keynote: Veronica Peters

### **The triangle: it's regulatory function in nature and in human relationships**

This keynote presentation will explore the regulatory function of triangles, how they appear in nature and in human relationships. "In fostering the greatest likelihood of overall survival and reproductive success, social species have evolved through an emotional system that exerts pressure on its members, especially on some members, to be something other than what they are as individual organisms, especially during times of threat. Each is under pressure, though to different degrees, from the emotional system, and, at the same time, each individual contributes to the pressure on others to function as components of the system." p64 Lassiter (2008)



#### **Speaker Bio:**

Veronica Peters is a psychologist and family therapist with more than 25 years experience working extensively with people experiencing mental health difficulties, couples and a range of clinical issues, and has a special interest in supporting people with eating disorders towards recovery. She now works in private practice, and provides supervision for people in ministry, and serves on the faculty at The Family Systems Institute. Veronica also provides leadership

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## Keynote: Jenny Brown

### **The "I" Position: What happens when one person interrupts relationship patterns?**

This presentation seeks to better understand the idea of the "I" position in Bowen theory - its context in the broader theory and particularly exploring what happens when one person interrupts the underlying emotional patterns operating in a relationship.



#### **Speaker Bio:**

Jenny co-founded the Family Systems Institute in 2004. In June 2021, Jenny stepped down from her leadership role but continues as faculty and is committed to contributing to FSI events and mentoring emerging systems thinkers. She is a clinical member and supervisor for the Australian Association of Family Therapy. In 2022 she was awarded the Polly Caskie research award by the Bowen Centre for her work with parents and the family projection process. Jenny Brown has been working in the field of child and family mental health and family therapy since the 1980s. Her PhD research was exploring parents' experience of their child's mental health treatment.

## Keynote: Lauren Errington and Antone Martinho-Truswell

### Distancing: The evolutionary advantage of flight and how much is too much in human relationships?

Dr Bowen described the use of emotional distance in relationships as the most universal mechanism adopted to manage the degree of intensity in a relationship. Separating ourselves either by internally distancing or physical distancing, or both, is one approach almost all of us use to some degree or another as a way of trying to preserve as much self-identity and autonomy as possible in relationships. There are hundreds of different combinations of the internal mechanisms and physical distance movements in relationships which are employed as the emotional system uses this mechanism to regulate itself.

In this joint keynote session, Lauren Errington will share the platform with Dr Antone Martinho-Truswell, a behavioural ecologist from the University of Sydney, to consider the idea of flight in natural species and how this can help us think about the natural adaptation of distance in human relationships.

Lauren will share observations from her engagement with Bowen Theory and her clinical practice about the way distance is used as a regulatory mechanism in the functioning of relationships, asking the question – when might this help or hinder relationship processes?

How did an unremarkable group of primates from one corner of Africa evolve the extraordinary cognitive tools that allowed it to envelope the planet, bending nature and other species to its will? Any why hasn't any other species come close?

Dr Antone Martinho-Truswell will explore how evolutionary pressures and uncommon traits interlock to create virtuous cyclers that push species to extreme outcomes – including humans' unparalleled intelligence and birds' extraordinary lifespans. No trait evolves in isolation, so along the way, learn why birds are unusually resistant to viruses, why humans have absurdly long feet, and why animal intelligence broke all the rules of evolution when it first emerged.



#### Speaker Bio:

Lauren Errington is the Executive Director of the Family Systems Institute and a Mental Health Social Worker and Clinical Family Therapist and Supervisor at the Family Systems Practice. She has over 15 years of experience in clinical practice in mental health and counselling settings, in Sydney, Canberra and Scotland. Lauren has published several articles in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* and most recently has been a co-editor for a special issue of this journal on Bowen Family Systems Theory.



#### Speaker Bio:

Antone Martinho-Truswell is a scientist, commentator, and author interested in how evolutionary biology and culture interact. He is a member of the Sydney Policy Lab and research affiliate of the School of Life and Environmental Sciences at the University of Sydney. He was previously Fellow in Biology at Magdalen College, Oxford. His debut book, *The Parrot in the Mirror: how evolving to be like birds made us human* (OUP, 2022) explored the evolutionary history of humanity through a comparative lens, and his upcoming book *Darwin's Swindlers: on the trail of the rare species defying extinction* (Profile Books, forthcoming), chronicles the beneficial effects of insularity on the evolution of unique and extraordinary life forms. He is a regular contributor to *Aeon*, *Psyche*, and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and explores the cultural side of biological topics on his substack, [The Village Green](#).

## Keynotes: Barbara Fraser and Katherine Burke

### **Conflict in relationships and the emotional processes at play in families when family law is involved: how BFST thinking and clinical practice is a good fit**

Murray Bowen identified predictable mechanisms used by all families to adapt to and manage the tension and anxiety that comes with being human and living in a range of active and alive systems.

This presentation explores the practice area of family assessment and clinical therapy within the family law system in Australia and explores the opportunities within BFST to navigate the intense emotional forces.

The presenters propose that BFST assists the professional to conceptualise and act in ways that addresses family functioning detrimental to children and provides parents with the opportunity for change and growth during extremely challenging conditions.

The presenters explore the application of BFST's focus on the self of the practitioner in family law related work and the opportunities that applying BFST generate in navigating the intense emotional forces that are predictable as families engage with the family law system.

The effort to articulate professional thinking as it relates to defining and intervening with problematic relationship patterns, will be explored throughout, providing conference participants with the opportunity to consider their role and responsibilities as it relates to families intersecting with the family law system.

Case presentations will identify how structured and emotionally containing interventions assist parents to assume the crucial higher ground in their functioning and to move beyond the victim/perpetrator narratives in relation to family violence. Child focussed conversations between children and their parents, as well as between parents are facilitated using fact finding questions and thought provoking discussions about family of origin, extended family and significant others [as well as significant professionals] who might be triangled in to defuse/escalate the emotional intensity.



#### **Speaker Bio:**

Barbara is a senior psychologist and family consultant in the family law field with a long history in family therapy practice, research and education. She has experience in forensic assessment of families in family law, and particular expertise in providing Court ordered therapy for high conflict families where children are estranged from parents following acrimonious separations.

Barbara has developed an approach to working with families in the family law field that draws particularly on BFST and attachment theory, and that focusses on discouraging cutoff, supporting the emotional maturity of parents and repairing the deep woundedness experienced by families when chronic anxiety threatens to overwhelm their functioning.

Barbara is a passionate advocate for the therapist's ongoing work with differentiation and the therapeutic self as the source of clinical neutrality with compassion, processes crucial for clinicians working in the high intensity field of family law.

**Speaker Bio:**

Katherine began her social work career working regionally in a generalist counselling setting. Katherine worked with people across the lifespan dealing with a range of life struggles. This work provided the foundation for Katherine's career long pursuit to understand the role that the family emotional process, the broader environment and experiences of structural and systemic oppression all play in a person's presenting struggles.

Over the 15 years Katherine has worked as a counsellor and therapist, Katherine has worked in the specialty areas of perinatal and infant mental health, family inclusive therapeutic work in the child protection sector and working with families impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence. Katherine has also worked with people committed to breaking generational family patterns through a focus on couple work or work within their family. Katherine currently works with people struggling with parenting, post separation challenges, grief and loss, and people impacted by abuse of all forms (including child sexual abuse and domestic and family violence).

Katherine's ongoing commitment to finding a way of thinking that could be applied to the diverse range of human experiences led her into the Family Systems Institute (FSI) training programs.