



Resisting violences, reclaiming lives:  
Honouring the insider knowledges, initiatives  
and contributions of young people responding to  
intimate partner & family violence through film

by Phillipa Johnson

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### Abstract

This article recounts a collective narrative film methodology emerging from co-research with a group of young people at the Domestic Violence Action Centre in Ipswich, Queensland. This paper illustrates a process of using narrative practices and film in a community setting to discover, link, document, celebrate and inspire creative responses to violence. It represents a body of work that could not have been generated without the diverse contributions of many people and organisations.

**Key words:** *collective practice, documentation, enabling contribution, justice and healing, film, linking lives, resistance knowledges*

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## Introduction

This is a story with many histories, many paths, and many futures. Its seeds stretch back into feminist movement (hooks, 2000), the herstory of the Domestic Violence Action Centre in Ipswich, the offerings of narrative practices and of course its participants' own unique journeys. Its form began to emerge through a series of workshops and conversations in which I was struck by the rich wisdom, skills and knowledge that young people, in the community of Ipswich, were using to resist domestic and family violence and to reclaim their lives from its effects. This article will present a fragment of this story across a period of ten months with five young people, two creative filmmakers and myself as main protagonists. The project ultimately came to be comprised of a series of interconnected phases that weaved through individual conversations, group conversations, film-making workshops, film screenings, and the development of a blog.

Across this article I will canvas the ways in which I employed and adapted narrative practices to generate double-story development in individual conversations, group conversations, and in collective documentation. On embarking on this journey it was and still is now my hope, as Sharon Welch contends, that this is 'participation in a communal work, laying the groundwork for the creative response of people in the present and in the future' (Welch, 1990, p. 75). That it might 'provide partial resolutions and the inspiration and conditions for further partial resolution by others' (Welch, 1990, p. 75). It is my sense that the use of narrative practices in this context has 'enabled ideas of how to counteract the problem to be generated from the community itself rather than be imposed from the outside' (Sliep, 1996, p. 155). This seems especially significant in a human services industry that is deeply influenced by ideas of client and community deficit, and relies heavily on 'professional expertise' for solutions and responses.

## Context and community

Thalia was silent. When I met first her at her local high school she had made a commitment to remain mute all day as a symbolic act in acknowledgement of the silencing that young people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer, experience. She let me know later that I had made keeping this commitment particularly hard, as we were hosting conversations with her class on topics she said she was almost irresistibly drawn into having verbally. As a community educator employed with a local domestic violence service, these were conversations about relationships, sexual ethics, and gender injustices. Thalia wrote furiously on a little notepad from 9am to 3pm, communicating her thoughts

and responses to the themes of discussion. Witnessing this extraordinary act, in which she so skillfully navigated resistance to multiple and intersecting oppressions and contributed to the dialogue even through a vow of silence, I began thinking in new ways about the creative and powerful stories I had heard from young people in responding to violences and in creating preferred visions of themselves, relationships and communities.

It got me wondering ... how many other young people were speaking about these issues in ways that required a different kind of listening to be heard? What might it mean to discover, document and celebrate these sorts of voices and acts? What difference might it make to young people to know they are not alone in these sorts of hopes, intentions and endeavours? What sort of healing might become available for the injustices young people have suffered? What sort of further actions and social movements might this make possible? What effects might this have on the influence that violence has over our communities?

## Experimenting and adapting

Using community members' stories and experience as the foundation for theory and practice (Horton & Freire, 1990; Ledwith, 2011) in my community development work, incidents of this kind were crucial sparks in igniting my experimentation and adaption of narrative practices. In reflecting upon the process of developing this innovation project, Kuhn's contention that 'discoveries come about through prepared minds bumping into accidents' (Kuhn, 1962, in Epston, 2013, p. 3) became highly resonant for me. A host of narrative literatures and histories of innovation alongside many accidents and mishaps came to shape and influence the construction of my own forms of practice. These influences represent a mix too vast to canvas here, so I have chosen just four of those most centrally relevant to my development process to discuss. These include:

- a) Collective Narrative Practice (Denborough, 2008)
- b) Creative Interventions & the STOP storytelling project (Kim, 2007)
- c) Bush Adventure Therapy (Knowles, 2013)
- d) Attending to Responses as well as Effects (Yuen, 2009)

## Collective narrative practice – 'healing & justice'

Working in a community development and education (Westoby & Dowling, 2009; Westoby & Schevellar, 2012)

context at a feminist domestic violence service, I have been keenly interested in ways of working with communities towards the pursuit of social movement towards gender justice. Meeting with people who have experienced significant sorrow and have a profound wish to contribute to others going through similar times, I was hooked by the invitation from collective narrative practices to work in ways that might attend to both healing and justice (Denborough, 2008). Particularly resonant was the question, 'How can we receive these stories and engage with them in ways that not only alleviate individual sorrow, but also enable and sustain local social action to address the broader injustices, violence and abuses in our varying contexts?' (Denborough, 2008, p. 192). It was this question that provided the underpinning to develop my practice innovation. This dual purpose has woven its way through each attempt, mishap and success of the project. Guided by the scaffold outlined by Denborough (2008) I experimented with ways of:

- Discovering and describing the responses people have made to experiences of domestic and family violence
- Individually and collectively documenting their skills, knowledge and wisdom in these responses
- Engaging creative practices in doing so through making and re-making local folk culture
- Convening performances, ceremonies and celebrations around which people experience preferred self and collective identities
- Finding ways for these skills, knowledges and wisdoms to contribute to others experiencing hard times

In doing so, it was my hope that we might 'establish a context that brings the knowledges of life and skills of living of community members to the fore in addressing shared concerns and predicaments, and in subsequent community action' (White, 2003, p. 28), thus generating together 'local, meaningful, resonant, sustainable, social action or social contributions' (Denborough, 2008, p. 192).

### *Creative Interventions - 'Story telling as contribution'*

The work of Creative Interventions (2014) and their invitation to envision 'communities as spaces of possibility' (Kim, 2007, p. 35) also significantly nourished the conditions out of which my project emerged. These narrative practices had me wondering, if 'stories of courageous acts of everyday people can be collected in one place, documented, analysed and then turned back to our communities, what further community interventions will be inspired' (Kim, 2007, p. 38)? My practice

innovation is an attempt to adapt these practices (STOP, 2014) to fit my local communities and build on a heritage of linking 'struggles for personal transformation and healing with struggles for social justice' (INCITE!, 2001). Doing so has revealed the significant wisdoms, ways and knowledges of everyday people in responding to and taking action about oppressions and violences in our communities. After all, it is 'those closest to and impacted by violence who have the greatest motivation to end that violence' (Kim, 2007, p. 37).

### *Bush Adventure Therapy - Journeys into new territories*

Whilst this project was conducted in urban settings and we did not take a literal expedition, there were many aspects of our project that drew upon the invitation to embark on a journey with 'a sense and an intention for exploration, fun, challenge, camaraderie, intrigue and surprise – with a pen, a camera and some paper' (Knowles, 2013, p. 40). Embracing the idea of hosting some form of adventure in which the 'potential for people to experientially author preferred stories' (Knowles, 2013, p. 40) was present, we crafted a film-making journey that provided a 'newness and remoteness from the physically known and familiar territories of life' (Knowles, 2013, p. 40). On completion, all of the young people involved reflected on the adventure with words such as, 'I have never done anything like this before', and 'This was a completely new experience'. As such, this project seems to resonate strongly with an ethic present in Bush Adventure practice in creating 'environments where young people can act out a preferred self. It is a place where we can create a good news story that can then contribute to the discovery of other good news stories' (Knowles, 2013, p. 47).

### *Attending to responses - The power of the small*

In weaving these practices together, I attempted to tightly lace them with an ethic of paying attention to responses made in the face of violence by young people. As Yuen (2009) contends, 'although physically not visible, a gesture, mental escape, determined thought or memory, or purposeful blank face, is nonetheless doing something. The smallest of responses when attributed with significance can ripple in ways we could never predict' (p. 7). In this intention I employed double listening (Denborough, Freedman & White, 2008; White, 2006) in orienting my ears to both the stories of trauma and hardship young people have endured, as well as what they have tried to protect, hold dear, or stand for in life.

## Many maps - Many histories

*Subversive historiography connects oppositional practices from the past and forms of resistance in the present, thus creating spaces of possibility where the future can be imagined differently – imagined in such a way that we can witness ourselves dreaming, moving forward and beyond the limits of confines of fixed locations.* (bell hooks, 1995, p. 151)

While this project has not been a linear, clean or straightforward process, it did fundamentally begin with a series of individual conversations. Each of these conversations emerged from very different contexts and requests. In order to demonstrate how I used narrative practices to externalise the problems that each person came with, name the dominant stories, trace and articulate their effects whilst also generating rich description of alternative stories, I will share some small discussion of two individual conversations here. It was my intention that these conversations might be 'a social collaboration that assists people to traverse the space between what is known and familiar to them, and what might be possible for them to know about their lives and identities' (White, 2007, p. 269). This feature of my practice innovation provided the foundation upon which each of the following phases was established.

## Walking with Gandalf - Discovering neglected knowledges and migrations of identity

Surprisingly, some of the discoveries I made throughout this project are related to Zombies. These Zombies showed up when I asked Scott about what had him interested in meeting up with me in relation to a creative project loosely described as investigating and responding to 'relationships of power, gender, and violence' (Denborough, 1996, p. 103). They appeared as Scott replied to my questions, 'What was it about this invitation to meet up today that sparked your curiosity? Got you interested in coming along?' I must admit that these zombies weren't wandering down the street towards us and we weren't ready to put our apocalyptic plans into action just yet. They became present in our conversation as Scott began to share how much he loved playing Zombies, making backyard movies of Zombies, and how his involvement in this project to respond to violence was really just an endeavor to achieve this. Having been faced with the walking dead as I took my first steps into this unknown territory, I was sure that I could almost hear some familiar voices crying out, 'I told you so! How can you trust the community to respond, they just don't have the knowledge, or the will! Leave it to us professionals.' I resisted these ideas with the contention that

those voices are a part of the co-option of the anti-violence movement. As Suzanne Pharr (2004) notes, one way in which this has occurred is that 'we started seeing survivors as clients who simply required services rather than also as potential organisers on their own behalf' (in Smith, 2010, p. 269).

I am grateful for this encouragement, for it was from these beginnings with Zombies that Scott and I explored together re-authoring paths that came to more richly story some of his precious values, skills, knowledges, histories of survival, and responses to family violence. Introducing the journey metaphor (White, 2007) I asked, 'Scott, do you have some sense of this journey metaphor?' Scott said yes, he did. In fact, he knew of a very important journey in 'Middle Earth' (Tolkien, 1979) where there was a battle between two wizards, Saruman and Gandalf. Through a series of investigative questions, we traced the landscapes of action of the wizards Gandalf and Saruman (Tolkien, 1979), and Scott put forward his guesses of what this said about their landscapes of identity. Scott talked about Saruman's actions as influenced by the 'ring' and its 'power, which corrupts his mind' that resulted in him 'throwing away his honour'. In contrast, Gandalf 'doesn't dare to even touch the ring, because he knows its power would come through him, he might go on a rampage, and if he went on a rampage in the shire he would never forgive himself'. Enquiring as to why Gandalf wouldn't forgive himself, Scott replied that this was because 'he had been exposed to so much hate and he treasured the shire'.

It was my sense that Scott's ascriptions of value and meaning to the actions of these wizards, and his evaluations and justifications of their choices, were leading us closer to what was absent but implicit in Scott's own histories, values, intentions, purposes, and dreams. Tentatively, I said to Scott that the story he was sharing with me got me wondering about other stories where power had seemed to 'corrupt minds' and cause 'rampages', and perhaps this was connected in some way to our hope of investigating relationships and violence? Scott enthusiastically agreed with this. I mentioned that I had a short video, which some other young folks had made as they investigated power, gender and violence, and perhaps this might be relevant to our discussion. Scott agreed. It was after all in the shape of a film!

I invited Scott to experiment with the four outsider-witness categories of inquiry (White, 2007) as we watched the film. Through this outsider-witness process, Scott said that it had him thinking that he had an 'ability to empathise' because he had been through domestic violence himself. Double-listening had me on the lookout for other skills and abilities that might show up, and we discovered the 'Skill of Independence'.

Hoping to externalise this skill further, I asked what colour, textures or images came to mind when Scott thought about this skill. It was then that we discovered that 'Independence' was actually like armour! Suddenly, we were back into middle-earth territories, with a host of characters to witness and join with Scott in the development of his preferred identity. Asking Scott about the purpose he thought this armour served, he said it is because he is 'striving to be the hero rather than the villain I was destined to be'. Scott said, 'I could have been corrupted by the power and hate like Saruman, but instead I found my Shire, my Nan. And then I ranked up a level, I replaced the hate with love, honour and safety, with the will to be what he (Dad) isn't'. These rich phrases and imagery were captured quickly in my notebook, and I asked Scott if it would be all right to come back to them in our future creative meetings. As I read them back to him to check their accuracy, Scott said he might even put them on a coffee mug before then anyway!

### *Nanna's and neighbours - Tracing and archiving individual and community skills*

Having first met Emily three years ago at a local high school presentation, she let me know that she would be interested in volunteering for my organisation. As I thought about the creative project underway, Emily sprung to mind as having spoken of a similar passion and hopes. I gave her a call and we set up a time for smoothies at our local café. During this conversation, Emily and I traversed territory where she spoke about the effects of physical violence as sadness, depression, feeling alone, and bruises. Emily spoke about how these effects can 'act as a barrier that stops us doing what we love', 'not wanting to go outside', and 'pushing others away'. As we explored the problem story of family violence, I became interested in Emily's responses to this problem and its effects. I asked Emily if there were any times when physical abuse might have been less around or anything that Emily knew of that had helped her. Emily traced back to a time when her neighbours had let her and her brother come over when the police arrived because of her step-dad's violence. Emily spoke about how this had made her feel 'protected, because other people cared'. Emily spoke about how 'getting to know your neighbours and really caring for one another can make a difference' and can make someone suffering the effects of violence feel good. She spoke about 'how just one person can make a difference'. Looking to more richly fill out this emerging story and detail the knowledge and skills implicit in these phrases, I asked Emily to imagine that another young girl, a little younger than her, was sitting with us (Johnson, 2010, p. 12). This young girl is experiencing family violence and is looking for a supportive neighbour to help her feel more

protected. What should she look for? What is important to know? How did Emily do it? The following list describes some of the emerging themes.

#### **Tips for people looking for neighbours who can help you feel protected:**

- These neighbours might give off a friendly vibe
- We recommend that you be observant of their household – if there is screaming and drinking they might not be the neighbour you are looking for
- If they want to get to know you a bit more that's a good sign
- Sometimes they might deliver gifts of goodness like marmalade – these things can lift your mood
- Don't worry about whether they are wealthy or poor
- Sometimes people who have walked the road of adversity are very helpful, it makes it easier for them to help people

This final point was a poignant reminder of Gatensky's contention that 'it's gonna be the very same people that have gone through that process themselves, they are the most powerful helpers... those are the people that need an opportunity... they need to be heard... given a little responsibility, it's amazing what these people can do' (in Denborough, 1996, p. 199).

Following this discussion, we speculated that there might be neighbours out there who want to be a support to people experiencing family violence, but are unsure how. Emily then spoke about some of the qualities that her neighbours had and how this was helpful. From this we generated the following list:

#### **Tips for neighbours who want to support people suffering family violence and help them feel protected:**

- Be observant
- Just being there for the person is a big thing
- Provide them with reassurance that somebody cares
- Try stepping out of your comfort zone into the journey of bravery towards them
- Try going on this journey by knowing that you can make a difference and can be part of someone's support network

As Emily shared her advice for future petitioners, I became interested in how she had come to these knowledges and skills. We wondered together if there had been other times

she had experienced a sense of someone being there for her that had helped her recognise and accept the neighbour's support. Emily traced back to times which included 'intentional caring' acts from her Nanna, such as dicing up watermelon, bringing her ice creams, and asking her how things were at home. As this second story of her Nanna being there for her during tough times grew, Emily made a connection with these acts and acts from neighbours supporting her through family violence who used to bring her marmalade. I asked Emily what it was like to think that neighbours and her Nanna had been on the lookout for her during these times. Emily seemed to light up and began drawing connections between these two experiences and expressing a sense of expanding support network. I asked her, 'Is this connection and these ideas you have been talking about new to you? Or have you thought about them before?' She replied, 'They are new! It's crazy, it's like there are these ideas in the back of my head that shoot off like shooting stars when they get sparked!' This seemed like important feedback as to sparks that narrative questions can provide.

### Linking lives, co-research and enabling contribution

*At the point of encounter, there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting together, to learn more than they now know.* (Freire, 2011, p. 90)

As 'ideas of self and life are continuously negotiated through the communities, experiences and constructs we live amongst' (White, 2004, in Handsaker, 2012, p. 4), I then became interested in hosting a space where young people I had been meeting with could join together. We began a series of workshops to research the problems and effects of domestic violence as well as to discover, link, document, celebrate and inspire creative responses to reclaim lives and communities from its grip. During these meetings, we grappled together with the ongoing effects of violence, invitations into frustration and hopelessness, as well as savoured moments of enthusiasm, shared values, hopes, dreams, and the pleasure of being together. Over five workshops we used a synthesis of community development practices and collective narrative practices from which a range of experiences and creative material emerged.

### Joining together

Having notes from my prior individual conversations provided me with the exact words of each young person and a scaffold of some of their hopes, dreams, values, and intentions. This was a crucial aspect of the innovation and enabled me to

ask much more resonant questions, link experiences, and provide space for acknowledgements in these meetings that I might otherwise have missed. In particular, I was hoping in facilitating such a meeting that young people's 'lives might become joined with a shared sense of values, beliefs, purposes and commitments' and 'by actively taking these issues out of the private sphere, a sense of collective action can be made possible' (Handsaker, 2012, p. 4). I hoped that these acts would move young people and my organisation towards an appreciation of the diverse skills, knowledges and capacities of those most affected by the issues and away from the centralisation of professional services. Additionally, this act seemed to open space for young people to research their own problems and construct their own knowledge.

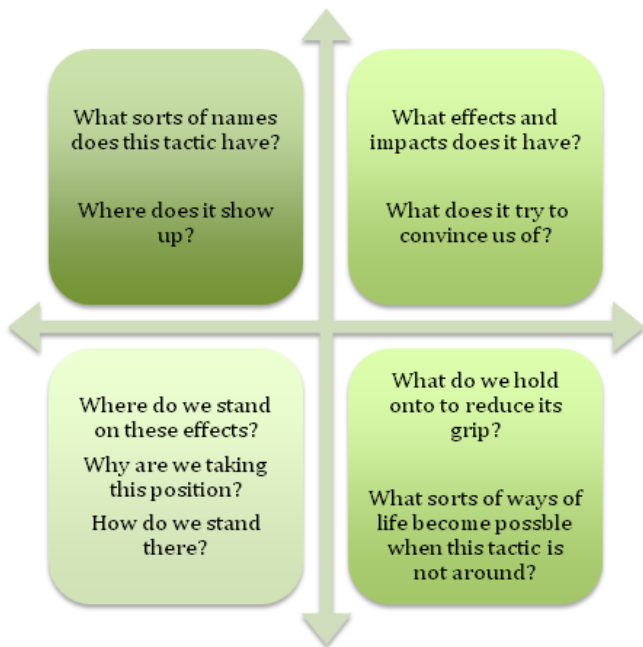
### Discourses and tactics

In beginning our research we first took time to analyse the context of gender construction and the history and influence of men's culture on domestic and family violence. In doing so, we explored and examined the words, messages and ideas that young people have been exposed to in relation to their performance of gender and relationships. This provided an important feminist foundation for the context in which domestic and family violence was situated in our research endeavours. Additionally, the discussion was framed with reference to Jenkins' (1999) work as naming problems of domestic violence as 'tactics' that invite people, predominantly men, to use them in their lives and relationships. This way, we externalised problems of domestic and family violence without diminishing the responsibility we each have in choosing whether to use them in our lives or to take action to resign from their service.

### Co-research & storyboarding

When we began to research the various tactics of domestic and family violence, I came to employ a storyboarding methodology developed somewhat by accident! Emerging as I found myself concerned that power in the room might be accruing to me in ways that could have young people experiencing limits on what they felt they could express and contribute, I experimented with taking the focus off myself and onto the whiteboard by drawing up four wide boxes. As we were now all configured alongside each other and looking to the whiteboard, a sense of co-research and joint investigation seemed to enter the room more fully. The whiteboard looked a little like this, but ultimately came to be full of colourful and sometimes very hard to read scrawlings!

While in the written word this storyboarding might seem quite tidy, I want to assure you that there were many moments of



clumsy questions, rowdy diversions, and general mayhem. These were not linear conversations and we at times moved back and forth from each question and from each tactic being researched. Much of our time together was spent surrounded with reams of butcher's paper, cushions strewn everywhere, and hot chocolates. Nonetheless, through this unwieldy path we were able to generate an externalisation of four tactics of domestic and family violence, acknowledge and trace their effects, and assist young people to identify special skills, knowledges, purposes, commitments, hopes and dreams they have and keep close to in responding to hard times and tricky tactics.

The tactics that we investigated included verbal abuse, pressure to measure up to stereotypes of being a man, physical abuse, and social abuse, as the most pressing and important problems to the group to tell at this time. There were many other stories, skills and wisdom that emerged through these conversations that were not able to be included in the collective narrative film, but were captured through other mediums to provide supporting documentation or as personal signposts. At the end of our first workshop together, the group decided to embark on this creative film adventure with a spirit of activism to collaborate on a project to 'inspire something different' and make movement towards their desire to be able to say 'I'm from Ipswich!'

### *Investigating the 'Chain of Distressing Words' and re-claiming preferred identities*

As we began to brainstorm the questions on our whiteboard, the group spoke about the tactic of 'verbal abuse' as words

that tell you that you are 'ugly, fat, stupid, dumb, pathetic, shameful, a disgrace, worthless, and a slut'. Through externalising questions, this tactic came to be called the 'Chain of Distressing Words'. In the past, this tactic had the effect of making members of the group feel ashamed and carrying a sense of 'diminished potential'. Scott talked about this tactic causing an 'incapability of embracing inner beauty'. On further enquiry with the use of the question, 'How does this problem affect how you see yourself?', Gabriel answered that it 'can take away your vision of yourself'. Attempting to negotiate an experience-near and particular description of this problem, I continued to research this tactic by asking, 'Gabriel, what image or mental picture comes to mind when you think about this problem taking away your vision of yourself?' Gabriel responded that it was an image of looking into a mirror, surrounded by a haze of the distressing words. This evocative description of the problem resounded with silence in our little group for a moment before other members began to echo an experience of connection with the image of the mirror and the terrible weight of seeing yourself in ways that are shameful.

Taking a moment to acknowledge the heaviness of this tactic seemed important in order to honour the significance it had in our group. In doing so, I noticed a sense of frustration with this tactic through facial expressions and tones of voice. This got me wondering if there were hopes and values in their lives that were absent but implicit (Geertz, 1973; White, 2000, 2004) in these discussions. As we took our next storyboarding steps and wondered together 'Are these things okay with you?', 'Where do you stand on these effects?', a resounding and collective defiance was expressed. From here I began to engage in re-authoring questions such as, 'Gabriel, could you tell us about a time where you might have resisted this tactic? What were some of the things that you might have done?' Gabriel replied that she has a set of cardboard sayings lining her hallway, one of which says 'It's my story, I'm holding the pen'. Gabriel said that she sometimes tells herself this when these words are around, while remembering 'not everybody thinks that way about me'.

Whilst Gabriel's insider knowledges were at the fore of responding to this tactic, this was a collaborative discussion, bringing together diverse experiences that held a common thread. The group spoke about how they felt it becomes more possible to pursue a path of 'embracing your inner sense of beautiful' through a number of skills and knowledges named, and this path is one which holds 'hope, strength and reassurance'. I asked Gabriel what image might accompany this skill of saying, 'It's my story, I'm holding the pen', and she spoke about writing on the mirror the word 'Beautiful' in lipstick. She saw this action as making the 'Chain of Distressing Words' fade away.

There were so many choices to make at these cross-roads. I wanted to know about histories, other people who wouldn't be surprised to know of these skills, and what steps this might make possible for the future. However, I chose to prioritise the pre-negotiated mandate of assisting us to collect stories to tell through film in order to contribute to social action towards ending domestic violence. As such, we began to write down and imagine how this conversation might find a new expression through film.

## *Researching male stereotypes and choosing preferred masculinities*

In these co-research workshops I wanted to ensure that 'the object of investigation is not persons (as if they were anatomical fragments) but rather the thought-language with which men and women refer to reality' (Freire, 2007, p. 97). In doing so, it was vital to investigate the specific vocabulary that gender construction was utilising in our local communities to have young men recruited into controlling and abusive ways of life. It seemed critical to go beyond general languages and locate the specific, resonant and locally grown themes that are employed by dominant male cultures in Ipswich.

Having spoken previously with Scott about powerful invitations from male culture to act with violence and entitlement, I invited him to share with us some of the messages he had received from school, friends, and our local culture. Amongst ideas such as 'man up' and 'man or mouse', the idea of 'sandwiches' brought much laughter and a caucusing of voices. This is something I have heard in nearly every school in Ipswich, and has many variations aimed at young women including 'make me a sandwich', 'get in the kitchen and make me a sandwich', and is often completed with the word 'bitch'. Upon using the whiteboard questions, we identified that no-one in our group was okay with the effects this has on individuals, families, and communities. In particular, they named effects such as restricting boys' ways of caring, and boxing women into the kitchen. Wondering out loud to the group, I asked, 'If you are against these messages of stereotypical masculinity, what does it mean you are standing for?' In response, we discovered that this group has hopes for people to be able to act outside prescribed norms of gender and experiment with more equal ways of being in relationships.

I was also conscious of the alternative story Scott had shared with me in our previous conversations of how he was now walking and standing for an alternative story of 'love, honour and safety'. With Scott's permission, I read out some of his words that I had archived in my notebook. Through outsider-

witness questions (White, 2002), the group identified that they felt connected to a different ethic of life that could be called 'The Respect of Treasuring your Loved Ones'. With this rich detail, we collaboratively embarked on re-telling its story through our script.

## *Investigating physical violence and the knowledge of the power in community support*

At this point in our co-research we had seemed to develop a rhythm to our storytelling method. This was helpful in maintaining momentum as new young members had joined us as creative consultants. Turning our gaze to the problem of physical abuse, our team came to give it a more experience-near name of a 'Storm of Hurt'. Asking the group about the effects this 'Storm of Hurt' had on their hopes, plans, values, and relationships, they responded by saying it can 'get you living in fear', 'isolated', and 'having to put on a face'. Moving into conversation around their justification for standing against this problem, they spoke about their value for 'Safety' and that people 'should be able to fulfill their life potential'.

Once we had externalised the problem, acknowledged its effects, and ascertained why they were taking a stance against it, I consulted Emily on her knowledge of what can reduce the grip of this tactic. With her permission, I read out her words from my notebook that 'neighbours really getting to know you, can help you feel protected because you know other people care'. In doing so, vivid imagery was brought into the room. At one point a young person interrupted me and said with enthusiasm, 'We know! What's the image that comes to mind!', followed by a roomful of laughter. This was so encouraging as I watched the group step into asking themselves narrative questions. From here the group began a discussion where they imagined a young woman walking home plagued by the effects we had named, but when she reached her front door she could see her neighbours who sent smiles and waves to let her know they cared about her. Our film script was racing away! These images resonated with Emily and connected to her hope of illustrating how 'community commitment' can make a difference to people's lives. This was also a particularly exciting aspect of our storytelling project for me, as we were now including stories that not only illuminated individual skills but also highlighted the power and influence of community actions.

In this story and others, I appreciate the gaps (Bruner, 1986) in the storyline greatly. I agree with Bruner that stories of 'merit, to be sure, are about events in a 'real' world, but they render that world newly strange, rescue it from obviousness, fill it with gaps that call upon the reader, in Barthes (1986)



sense to become a writer, a composer of a virtual text in response to the actual' (p. 24). It is my hope that these gaps will spark speculation and debate for future audiences to grapple with the complexities and dilemmas of responding to intimate partner and family violence. In this way, we have left room for multiple meanings, various responses and diverse dilemmas' to be brought forth from reflection on the film.

## Investigating social control and choosing your own freedom

As we researched the problem of social control as expressed through technological abuse, members of the group spoke about witnessing its effects as to 'limit and isolate'. On enquiring, 'Does this problem happen more in any particular places or situations?', they responded, 'It can happen anywhere, it doesn't matter where you are, even if they are not around', and 'Yeah, you can still feel someone's control and carry it with you'. Looking to develop a storyline in which the special skills, wisdoms and actions of the group were present in responding to this tactic and developing an alternative path, I asked them, 'Can you think of a time when you might have kept the problem at bay a little? Is there a special skill or some special knowledge that helps you in resisting the problem?' Emily answered quickly that she would tell herself and friends that, 'It's not okay, this doesn't happen in every relationship, and you still need to be your own people. There are things that are valuable and secure just to you.' Upon asking questions to generate visual images that might accompany these phrases, the group imagined including a girl on a skateboard in order to express their value that girls are capable of things outside restrictive sexist norms of identity and represent their value of embracing 'Freedom'.

However, having created a fourth and final scene with group members being taken up in other re-tellings and acting, we were short one female team member, who could preferably skate! I had been invited to play this role, however I had declined the invitation to be a fellow film star in order to stay close to a de-centered (White, 1997a) ethic. So we invited a colleague of mine to be on the lookout for someone who might fit our search! Remarkably, she soon met a young woman at a school's workshop who expressed interest in being part of initiatives to reduce domestic and family violence. They had gotten talking about her arm in a sling and discovered that she had suffered the injury through her avid skateboarding! Perhaps unsurprisingly given its prevalence in our community, this young woman also knew quite a bit about suffering the effects of social control through technological abuse. As such, she was able to assist us to name it more appropriately as 'The Harsh Electricity of Limiting Choices'.

## Book ends

Finally, we needed to create an introduction and conclusion to our film. Through time constraints and other circumstances, we had not been able to write this until our final creative workshop and voice-over recording session. However, this turned out to be a fortuitous accident, as reflecting back across our adventure and the initial available film footage, Emily spoke of how we had been 'binding our stories together' and that this experience had given her a greater sense of social justice and being part of a stronger community. These words seemed to fit perfectly in bringing our film to a close.

## Co-Creating Film

Once we had the shape of each story, we began to plan and engage in the filming of each. The filming of each vignette provided an avenue to:

- Experientially thicken alternative stories and special skills, knowledge and wisdom
- Contribute to other members of the team through encouragements and supports
- Contribute to 'anticipated petitioners' (Johnson, 2010, p. 12) seeking wisdom in reclaiming their lives from tactics of violence
- Build on budding friendships creating antidotes to isolation and the ongoing effects of violence
- Generate a new experience and sense of self through migrations of identity

Across three days our team practiced, filmed, and recorded the script. During this time, I utilised 'skills of sitting within an experience; skills in building collegial relationships; skills of noticing when new understandings are coming about; and skills in highlighting those emergent understandings so that they do not get lost along the way' (Knowles, 2013, p. 43). Particular questions that I asked drawing on Knowles' (2013) work and re-membering practices (White, 1997b) included:

- What do you think it took for you/someone else to do that?
- What do you think it says about the direction you/someone else is heading in?
- What does it get you thinking of for yourself? For them?
- Who might not be surprised to know you have done this? What might they have seen you do in the past that mean they wouldn't be?
- What difference do you think you doing this today will make to you in the future?

In these filming events, I also drew on playful characterisation of problems (Wingard, 2010) stepping into my own limited acting abilities! Reading the script as young people acted out their responses, resistances and skills in facing the tactics of violence, I assumed the position of role-playing a problem (Sliep & CARE Counsellors, 1998). At times we paused and I drew into past conversations and brought present ideas and phrases we had discussed during our script-writing conversations to give further detail and richness to my character development. On reflection, I believe that this gave young people an opportunity to respond to problems we were canvassing in a supportive and playful way rather than experience re-traumatisation.

## Gathering an audience and enabling contribution

*If our preferred story of who we are remains only a conversation in our own head, it will not have the sense of being real. This sense of realness or authenticity only comes when our preferred stories are witnessed and responded to by a significant audience.* (Russell & Carey, 2004, p. 67)

As we moved through each phase of the project, the intention of sharing the journey and film with others was always with us. In conversations prior to deciding on even making a film, some young people spoke about their hopes and intentions in creating something that would be made widely available to their communities in Ipswich, and online in order to contribute to communities of care and equality. In thinking about making the film available to others, I also considered that 'the incorporation of a wider readership and the recruitment of an audience contribute not just to the survival and consolidation of new meanings, but also to a revision of the pre-existing meanings' (White and Epston, 1990, p. 191). This seemed vital to the life of the project and to the lives of young people. While I also experienced reticence about making such personal stories so public, I eventually decided that any material that was generated needed to be distributed according to the hopes, understandings, intentions and insider knowledges of those whose stories are at the centre.

In response to my concerns that young people might experience harsh criticism or bullying through online forums, I prepared and discussed with them this risk and we developed a scaffold of response within the team and other supports. This included a conversation around 'troll tactics' and their relationship to the sorts of violences we were responding to in our film. We remembered and drew on individual and collective skills, wisdom and knowledge in preparing to face new tactics. Scott provided us with a beautiful metaphor to hold close should anyone start to

experience these 'troll tactics'. He invited us to imagine that we are Frodo (Tolkien, 1979) on one side of a large door. Orks are on the other side of this door trying to get in. Frodo is pushing the door, and the Orks are pushing back. Scott said, 'But our team is like the rafters, we might not be able to see them in that moment, but they are there, holding up the door, they are our support'. It was from this place that we embarked on gathering a range of audiences for the film. This has constructed opportunities for young people to be 'seen in one's own terms, garnering witnesses to one's own worth, vitality and being' (Myerhoff, 1986, p. 267), as well as to begin processes of mutual contribution (Denborough, 2008) between our team and other young people.

## Letters and vox pop

The beginning audiences for the film included fellow students and conference attendees at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Conference for Narrative Therapy and Community Work. I was particularly pleased to showcase the film to audiences who carried an appreciation for insider knowledges, intentional understandings of identity, and the value of small and neglected actions towards preferred ways of life. I believe that recruiting audiences of this kind was significant in establishing a foundation from which young people were able to experience nuanced validation of their preferred stories.

In particular, screening Scott's story during a presentation to peers provided me with the opportunity to gather letter responses. On providing these letters to Scott over a milkshake, he was visibly moved. Letter after letter he said, 'Wow', 'I had no idea that my story could mean something to others', and, 'It's pretty cool the contribution I am making'. Scott told me that 'these letters mean the world to me' and he has pasted them up on his bedroom wall to remind him every day of the support he has. Scott also shared with me that he was able to attend his Year 12 graduation ceremony with pride rather than shame because of the offerings of this audience. These new identity conclusions were further strengthened on viewing a video of hearty applause on the conclusion of the film during the 2104 International Conference for Narrative Therapy and Community Work. Scott said, 'You told me this happened, but it's another thing to see it!'

Although practices of applause bring with them the risk of condescension and judgement according to others' standards, given the artistic and creative context of the film, applause seemed to suggest appreciation and a sense of the audience being touched by their stories. However, in order to mitigate these risks of applause, I also used 'vox pop' videos to provide outsider-witness responses back to the young people.

Recruiting colleagues to interview audience members around the four categories of inquiry (White, 2007) ensured that responses developed 'deliberate links around shared values and commitments' (Russell & Carey, 2004, p. 76), and were specific to what the audience member was drawn to, what in their life it connected to, and how they had been moved on account of watching the film. Whilst this outsider-witness practice was significantly adapted given the community work context and distance between audience members and young people, I believe it had, and will continue to have, significant effects on ensuring that the skills, knowledges and actions of young people in the film are not lost but instead richly woven into their preferred and budding storylines.

## Online witnesses

Another forum for the ongoing recruitment of meaningful outsider witnesses, extended acknowledgements and contribution exchanges, is the online blog that hosts the film. You can find the blog here: <https://fourstoriesfilm.wordpress.com/>. It is our hope that this forum will provide opportunities for connection and exchange between our team of young people and others in many other places. In particular, our tab 'An Invitation' offers audiences' outside-witness questions to respond to, either just in their own lives, or to also email to the young people at the centre of the film, via the Domestic Violence Action Centre ([www.iwcadv.org.au](http://www.iwcadv.org.au)). We invite you to be a witness!

## Celebrations, special screenings and certificates

*Ceremonies are rituals that acknowledge and 'regrade' people's lives, in contrast to many rituals of contemporary culture that judge and degrade peoples lives.* (White, 2007, p. 165)

While this project will be ongoing and young people intend to host discussions at their schools in coming years as peer educators, it seemed important to draw this phase of the project to a close with celebration, ceremony, and certificates. As such, I convened a 'special premiere screening'. This involved invitations, a full wall projector, cushions, popcorn, and pizza. There was a buzz in the room! As we prepared to show the film for the first time with all of us present, we took a minute to acknowledge the significance of the moment and appreciate how far we had come. As we dimmed the lights, a quiet anticipation fell. When the credits rolled up and the lights came on a joyous cheer rang out.

In the following moments of celebration I called out each person's name and awarded them a certificate. In creating

these certificates, I had considered that 'language plays a very central part in those activities that define and construct persons, and if written language makes a more than significant contribution to this, then a consideration of modern documents and their role in the redescription of persons is called for' (White and Epston, 1992, p. 188). This certificate hoped to describe those skills and contributions that had emerged through our work together and which documentation might contribute to a 'legitimation of alternative knowledges' (Epston & White, 1992, p. 16), enabling them to be acknowledged and, as such, be more available in future endeavours. The certificate hoped to 'amplify the alternative stories of their lives and see them accomplishing a greater sense of influence over their experience' (Mann, 2002). An example of these certificates is provided below. On receiving this document, a number of young people posted pictures of them on their Facebook pages. Scott's reads; 'Four Stories film is released in five days. Jeez, the amount of knowledge, experience and skills I have absorbed from this project is amazing. I'm proud to take them with me into the world. I've had the privilege of working with some amazing people in the past few months, so unfortunate it's come to an end. But then again, more accurately, it's only just beginning.'

## Dilemmas along the way: Considering operations of power and privilege

Considering my ethics in this work and acts of accountability to positions of privilege, including but not limited to my whiteness, professional status, ableness and adulthood, has been an ongoing endeavour. Across this project I have attempted to grow my noticing of the ways I negotiate and respond to power and privilege in my relationships, and become more conscious of my participation in dominant discourses. Reference to 'an invitation to address privilege' (Raheim, White, Denborough, et. al), and the work of Susan Young (2004), has assisted me to continue to remember, acknowledge, account for and address the privileges that I have accrued through no effort or work of my own and which have come through the domination and oppression of others. This project offered me many opportunities to reflect on these themes, a few of which I will canvas here.

## Dilemmas and responses

A significant condition for the development of this project was a desire to pursue an ethic of 'margin-in ... which values the experience of people at the margins of any dominant culture or at the bottom of any cultures hierarchies and takes a strong ethical stance in favour of making space for such people's voices to be heard, understood and responded to'

*This certificate acknowledges that the*

# *Four Stories Film*

*Was courageously created with and impossible without*

*Scott*

---

The Team recognizes that Scott offered his many skills, knowledge and expertise in reclaiming your life from the tactics of family violence, including the Dark Pressure To Man Up. We appreciate Scott's jokes, his vast knowledge of film, his acting abilities and his love for his Nan. We recognize the actions he has taken through our journey together to reduce the grip of domestic and family violence on his life, others lives and our Ipswich Communities.

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Members of 'The Team'

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Phillipa Johnson Cook Project Coordinator

December 2014

(Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 266). However, this was not always straightforward! One dilemma in particular provided me with the opportunity to experiment with narrative practices in steering a course of accountability through some murky waters. In the early stages of our creative workshops, some young people had ideas of replicating particular frameworks of storytelling, drawing on individualistic, grand and heroic actions of established and powerful actors in our community such as our Mayor and famous footballers. At the time, I felt faced with two choices. I wondered whether to exert my adult and professional privilege and move us away from a vision the young people were expressing, in order to ensure that we weren't participating in thickening the domination of powerful voices in being heard on these issues. On the other hand, should I honour where the young people were taking us as insider experts but, in doing so, continue to participate in dominant tropes of heroism in social change movements, thus possibly silencing the powerful knowledge I knew resided in their experiences and wisdoms? In this situation, I was reminded as Vikki Reynolds contends that 'all positions are political' (Reynolds, 2010, p. 53). In an attempt to hold myself accountable to these positions, I asked myself the question she offers us, 'How am I attending to power in this moment?' (Reynolds, 2010, p. 121)

In response, I sought consent to take a detour from our creative imaginings at this time, to deconstruct where the idea that famous folks have all the answers or should be the ones doing all the talking might have come from. What is its history? Who has it served? What have its effects been? Are these effects in line with their hopes and intentions? Which ones might be, and which ones not? Why or why not? What does this tell us about what is important for us to hold onto? What should we let go of? What might be some of the other ways we could shape our film to stay close to these hopes and intentions? In this way, I resisted stepping into an expert role and dictating where to from here, but I also attended to the politics of whose voice is heard, what is said, and who is positioned as the authority on the tactics of violence they have experienced. I agree with Findlay that a 'naming of dominant cultural ideas can assist people to then examine and question these ideas and, if they wish, to consider ways to counter their negative effects in their lives' (Findlay, 2012, p. 16).

Another ethical dilemma I faced during our project was finding ways to illuminate the resistance knowledges (Wade, 1995) of young people without presenting them as the solution to violence. Familiar with the ways in which our language, service delivery systems and cultural discourses often locate

responsibility for solving violence and its effects with those suffering under its yoke, I hoped to find ways to navigate this delicate distinction. In doing so, I found it helpful to return to the consideration that we 'witness resistance, not because it stops the abuses of power, but because attending to resistance amplifies the person's sense of autonomy and their attempts to keep a grasp on their dignity' (Reynolds, 2010, p. 52). I am under no illusions that the alternative knowledges presented in the film will in some way stop abuse. We do hope, however, that these stories might spark and support possibilities for social movement (Denborough, 2008) towards gender justice.

## Warnings

Finally, I want to be clear that by no means does this project represent a right way, a safe way, or a replicable way, to engage with narrative practices, young people, and film. It is my belief that we make the road by walking (Horton & Freire, 1990), and that the roads we create are often through very different terrains. It is imperative that this project and film be understood through its locally grown roots and locally borne fruit. I think it is also important to acknowledge that there are many gaps, failings and imperfections to this project that I have not detailed. As such, I invite you to consider this work with a 'hopeful yet sceptical position' (Kvale, 1996; Reynolds, 2010, p. 32) and with tentativeness for its usefulness in your context.

## Looking forward and reflecting back

As completion of the project drew near, I took some moments with the group to reflect back to where we had come from, where we stood in that moment, and what was next. Some of these reflections happened on completion of the final day of filming, during our first film screening, and throughout some individual conversations. I have provided some of that feedback here:

- 'Inspirational. It's crazy how things in our minds can turn into like a beautiful thing. We've put it down on paper and now it's a visual and it's going to be shown to other people, so hopefully it can change the face of domestic violence and show other people how this issue is such a big issue in our community today.'
- 'It's amazing what a small group of people can do.'
- 'I can't believe we did it.'
- 'Wow, I kinda think back to that day and to where we are at now and it just seems like a million miles away – I went into that room not knowing up from down or where we are going, and somehow it just developed and formed into something really amazing.'

- 'You're part of something bigger when you come together.'
- 'It has so much meaning and memory.'

Conversations that have been of great significance to me across this project often happened while I was driving, making it hard to capture the exact words of each young person. One of these conversations stood out to me as I think about the implications this work has for my community, my work, and others. As such, I have tried to capture it as accurately as possible here. It was a stormy night and I was slowly and carefully navigating my car through the wet streets of Ipswich. Having just pulled out of the driveway from our first film screening, I was privileged to get to listen in to Emily and Scott's conversation as they excitedly chatted away about the film and all the things they were hoping to do with it in the coming year. As we pulled away from Emily's house and she walked inside, Scott said to me, 'You know, Emily said tonight that I am one of her good friends'. A sense of serious but wondrous happiness seemed to take up our car. Scott went on to say, 'Even though it's the end, I guess it's really just the beginning', and, 'Next year we are going to make another film with all the skills we learnt'. It seems that Scott's participation in the process, journey and film has built a foundation from which further action and learnings might emerge. It seems as if narrative practices and processes have assisted young people to build meaningful friendships, 'deploy their knowledges more knowingly, increase their own authority in matters of their concern and decrease their dependency on expert knowledges' (Epston & White, 1990, p. 24). My heart was very full.

To me, the process of making this film and taking this journey offers a fragment, a crack in the door, towards the ways in which illuminating the knowledges, initiatives and contributions that young people have to offer, can provide us with energising, new and creative ways to understand the tactics of violence, take a stand against their effects, and claim preferred identities and ways of life. As Hedtke contends, 'I believe narrative practice invigorates life, and strengthens the stories that people can live by, while upholding love, even in the face of the unthinkable' (2014, p. 5). To me it also offers insight into the power of community wisdom in the pursuit of liberation.

You can watch the film here:

<https://fourstoriesfilm.wordpress.com/>

Or here <http://vimeo.com/111482868>

You can request a link or password if needed at [cdworker@iwcadv.org.au](mailto:cdworker@iwcadv.org.au)

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