



*We don't give up:  
Developing family and community responses  
to adolescent-to-parent violence*

*by Ben Shannahan*



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*Abstract*

This paper explores the use of narrative therapy practices in developing a community response to a young man's use of violence towards his family. Opportunities and ethical tensions experienced in incorporating principles and methods of nonviolent resistance (Omer, 2004) are discussed along with opportunities narrative therapy might offer as a response to these tensions. Different conceptions of responsibility and accountability, and the pushes and pulls of dominant aspects of men's culture, are considered in relation to how these factors might shape responses to adolescent-to-parent violence, and how multi-generational men's meetings were incorporated as part of this work.

***Key words: community building, narrative therapy, externalising conversations, men's groups, adolescent-to-parent violence, family violence, nonviolent resistance (NVR), team of life, children, adoption, men's culture, ethic of risk, collective accountability, partnership accountability, intellectual disability***

## Introduction

This paper describes narrative therapy practices used in my work with a family affected by adolescent-to-parent violence and their support network. I offer examples of some of the ways I have sought to:

- elicit parental skills that support the re-building of relationships and practices of safety and agency in the face of adolescent-to-parent violence
- promote experiences of strength and solidarity in the face of shame
- support the development of a community response to adolescent-to-parent violence
- develop collective and partnership accountability through multi-generational men's meetings to address problematic aspects of men's culture and support the development of alternative and preferred ways of being.

## Cultural and contextual factors guiding responses to the use of violence by children and young people in families

Adolescent-to-parent violence and adult-to-adult domestic violence can be alarmingly similar in their impact on families (Holt, 2012). Parents can find themselves doing everything they can to avoid conflict, which sometimes leads parents to feel they have little choice but to comply with the child's demands because the threats of retribution are so extreme. In other situations, parents may respond to their child's aggression with aggression (Millham, 2014). Often, these responses inadvertently escalate the conflict and aggression (Omer, 2004).

The many factors that shape the meaning of and responses to child or adolescent-to-parent violence vary tremendously across cultures. In Western psychology, public policy and many other settings, parents are often held accountable for the violence of their children (Jakob, 2016). Furthermore, the conceptual frameworks that many teachers, therapists, social workers and other helping professionals draw on in their responses to young people's use of violence in their families can contribute to the maintenance of parent-blaming culture. These operations of modern power (Foucault, 1990) represent a system of 'normalising judgement' and a culture of external and self-surveillance that readily invites parents into 'experiences of inadequacy, incompetence and personal failure' (White, 2007, p. 268).

Parent-blaming discourses have profoundly detrimental effects on parents and their responses<sup>1</sup> to their children's violence (Holt, 2012). They contribute to the demoralisation of parents and often lead to parents being blamed for their own victimisation (Sánchez Uribe, 2012, p. 7). These dominant discourses often evoke an ethic of control (Welch, 1990; White, 2007, 2011). Well intended attempts by caregivers to exert greater control over their child can inadvertently contribute to the escalation of violence (Omer, 2004).

## My journey of becoming

Jenkins (2009) emphasised the importance of the notion of the *parallel journey* for workers involved with men and young men who have abused. This concept refers to 'understandings of the political nature of the intervention and the belief that our journeys as workers must mirror the journeys of our clients' (Jenkins, 2009).

The focus on the *parallel journey* is regarded as paramount in work with men who have abused; standing alongside the vital notion of *accountability* to the experiences of those who have been subjected to abuse. The maintenance of our own journeys towards *becoming ethical* has a far more substantial impact, in assisting our clients to challenge abusive behaviour, than any practice methods or techniques for intervention. (pp. xiii–xiv)

To illustrate my own parallel journey in my work with this family, I offer a snapshot of some of my training in dominant masculinities. Most men in my family were successful sportspeople and I quickly embraced values of fierce competition, winning and domination on the sporting field. These values were also championed at the all-boys secondary school I attended, where misogyny was rife, any sign of weakness was frowned upon and sexual and sporting conquests were celebrated. Being White, cisgendered and heterosexual, as well as good at sport and part of a 'popular group' at school, I benefited from these operations of masculinity.

Values and practices of dominant masculinity have crept into my life, sometimes without me being aware of it. For example, I grew up with the expectation that I should have the answer to any problem that confronts me (see Hall, 1996, p. 228). There have been situations in my professional and personal life in which I have desperately wanted to help others and felt a deep sense of failure at not having the answers or being able to exert a sufficient amount of influence to successfully tackle the problem and/or help others to do so. White (1997, p. 198) suggested that in therapeutic relationships, these

sorts of experiences can 'serve to alert therapists to their participation in the reproduction of the ethic of control', whereby notions of 'effective action' by therapists are informed by taken-for-granted privilege (Raheim, et al., 2004) which centres the knowledge and skills of the therapist in *changing* the lives of others. This ethic of control often hides the nature and significance of the contributions made by other people, relationships and contexts in making change possible in people's lives, and can 'render all parties vulnerable to a sense of personal failure' (White, 1997, p. 198).

White advocated instead that poststructuralist therapists aspire to work from a de-centred and influential position (White, 1997, p. 201; see also Morgan, 2006) and within an 'ethic of collaboration'. This recasts 'effective actions' as those taken in partnership with others to 'contribute to the establishment of a *foundation of possibility* in persons' lives in the time that is required to take these steps' (White, 1997, p. 198, italics added). Furthermore, Epston (2001) suggested that the role of the therapist is 'to be able to assist people to know their own knowledge' and to 'ask questions that guide people to discover the grounds of their knowing' (p. 181). In this paper, I reflect upon ethics and politics that I have been turning to and striving towards to work in partnership with those who consult me to find and develop cracks that might let the light in (Jenkins, 2009, p. xiii, after Cohen 1992).

## Introducing Peter and his family<sup>2</sup>

Peter (15 years old) and his sister Sarah (13 years old) were adopted by Lisa and Kristy when Peter was three years old and Sarah was just over a year old. The family are of White British heritage and are middle class. Peter is very talented at sports, has a passion for horses and can be very kind, patient and considerate towards other people and animals. Peter also has a moderate intellectual disability and a diagnosis of ADHD. He attends a specialist school and has been involved in a range of therapies for many years. He can become obsessive and anxious about minor changes in his life and relationships and can be extremely aggressive. At the time of referral, Peter's longstanding and extreme violence at home appeared to be leading towards the conclusion that it was no longer safe for him to remain with his family.

Peter's parents were told that 'professionals had done everything they could' and that 'there was nothing else that could be offered' outside of admitting Peter to an adolescent psychiatric inpatient unit or residential school. Peter's parents refused to accept these suggestions on the basis that this would have devastating consequences for Peter and the family. Lisa and Kristy continued to research other possible avenues of support to help keep their family together.

They stumbled across nonviolent resistance therapy (NVR) (Jakob, 2011, 2016; Omer, 2004, 2011). It was via my association with an organisation that offers NVR as an approach to responding to adolescent-to-parent violence that I was approached by Peter's social worker on his parents' behalf with a request that I offer this intervention.

## Nonviolent resistance therapy

Nonviolent resistance therapy (NVR) (Jakob, 2011, 2016; Omer, 2004, 2011) draws on the principles of nonviolence<sup>3</sup> developed by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and others. These principles have guided struggles for social justice all over the world. In diverse therapeutic contexts, NVR is often applied to address controlling behaviour, including young people's violence, aggression, and self-destructive behaviour.

NVR encourages parents and their community to step out of an ethic of control ('control or be controlled') to develop a new sense of authority and agency in their relationships with their children, whereby they actively resist attempts by their children to control them while simultaneously desisting from their efforts to control their children (Omer, 2011). Rather than focusing on modifying (or controlling) a young person's behaviour, NVR seeks to support parents and their community to take action to improve their relationships with the young person. This involves developing and planning alternative responses to their children's acts of violence and coercion in ways that help to de-escalate conflict, resist and protest against controlling interactions, acknowledge their child's distress, facilitate reconciliation and 'raise the presence' of parents and caregivers.

NVR offers a range of interventions to guide members of the family and community in taking action in response to young people's violent and controlling behaviour. NVR is sometimes offered to parents as an 'instruction manual' of interventions (Day, Heismann & Spyrou, 2007; Weinblatt & Avraham-Krehwinkel, 2004) and has been used in multi-parent groups (Day & Heismann, 2010). It is also commonly incorporated as part of systemic family therapy with individual families.

## Tensions between two paradigms

I have been drawn to NVR and have witnessed the potential for it to be profoundly helpful for families facing the challenges that adolescent-to-parent violence brings. However, inviting parents to 'de-escalate' situations, as an alternative to efforts to control and discipline their children, may be counter to cultural practice, a violation of their parenting values and

contrary to their beliefs about change. This creates the potential for parents to feel criticised and blamed for their own victimisation.

Inviting parents to step out of an ethic of control is a significant step. Doing so may risk local or family culture being colonised (Akinyela, 2002; Freire, 1990) and care must be taken to mitigate against this possibility. Current and potential alternative responses to violence must be contextualised in ways that fit with and develop people's preferred stories of identity. Otherwise, these initiatives may be rendered insignificant, contribute to further 'failure' descriptions, and lead to the family, their community and the therapist feeling helpless.

As a narrative practitioner commissioned to adopt a nonviolent resistance approach with Peter and his family, I found myself facing several dilemmas. How could I honour the expectations of the referrer, my employer and Peter's parents? How could I apply the principles and methods of nonviolent resistance in ways that avoided colonising local culture and honoured the family's histories of resistance and their knowledges, skills, values and commitments in life? What immediate responses were needed in order to increase the safety of family members at home? How might I join with others to identify and respond to the prescriptions and constraints of patriarchy as part of this work? (see Hall, 1996; Tamasese & Waldegrave, 2003). Following are some of the ways I have drawn on narrative therapy ethics and practices to respond to these questions.

## *Steps towards an ethic of collaboration*

### ***Honouring expectations and holding ideas lightly***

Lederach (1996) described the benefits of both prescriptive and elicitive approaches to cross-cultural training in conflict resolution, and the tensions between them. Lederach suggested that:

... when a given approach to conflict is presented as the model, and when no efforts are made to build from the context and cultural resources in the setting, the very strength of the expertise becomes its main weakness, dominated by a narrow vision and even arrogance. On the other hand, respecting people and their knowledge and encouraging them to look for answers within themselves and within their context – the essence of the elicitive approach – are crucial aspects of building appropriate models and long-term sustainability. Yet if the elicitive approach adapts a purist stance that does not encourage comparison, does not share the full knowledge of others'

approaches and ideas, it can be disempowering and narrow in the opposite direction, by keeping people ignorant. (p. 70)

Kristy and Lisa said they were interested in understanding more about NVR so I sent them some information. However, I wanted to avoid imposing nonviolent resistance methods and therefore asked Lisa and Kristy to 'hold these ideas lightly' (Halliwell, personal communication, 11 September 2014) and to ignore any of the ideas or suggestions that they found unhelpful. I encouraged them to think about nonviolent resistance as a set of principles that may or may not be useful rather than a set of 'techniques'.

## *Naming and externalising conflict leading to violence revealing and developing safety and crisis management skills*

### ***The explosions***

In early meetings with Kristy and Lisa, we explored the extreme nature of the violence they had been subject to by Peter, how this affected them, and some of the ways they had been responding. Responses included intervening verbally, physically restraining him (in self-defence), and ignoring Peter's provocative actions towards them. It seemed that no matter what actions they took, no strategy returned consistent results and all fell short of preventing what Lisa termed 'the explosions'. Their responses sometimes contributed to the explosions. At other times, violent attacks happened 'out of the blue' without being preceded by interaction with them, for example if Peter had become very worried about or fixated on something (like a spider in the bathroom or interactions on social media). On other occasions Peter appeared very calm and seemed to have planned his attacks on them.

With 'the explosions' having been named by Lisa, I sought to facilitate an externalising conversation (White, 1989, 2007) about the explosions with the intention of inviting Lisa and Kristy to examine their relationship with this problem and to elicit historical and contextual factors.

### ***Mapping the influence of the explosions***

Lisa and Kristy explained they were 'constantly walking on eggshells': anticipating an attack from Peter and preoccupied with how they might prevent one. They had to supervise Peter's every move in order to keep themselves and each other safe and were feeling 'miserable' and 'absolutely exhausted' as a result. They said the explosions had them feeling like they were 'failing' as parents.

### ***Deconstructing the explosions: exposing the fuel***

I was interested in exploring taken-for-granted ideas that might have been contributing to the explosions. I asked Kristy and Lisa about the ideas that were guiding their responses towards Peter when he engaged in acts of violence or aggression. They spoke about wanting Peter to receive the message that 'he can't just get away with violence and disrespecting us' and that 'as responsible parents we have to intervene'. Ideas from family members and friends ranged from 'you're being too hard on the lad' and 'he can't help it with all he's been through' (prior to being adopted at three years old) to 'you should be firmer with him' and 'it's just not safe – perhaps he shouldn't be living with you anymore'. Overall, they described how these conflicting ideas sometimes left them not knowing what to do and they worried terribly about the consequences for Peter's future if he continued with this career of domination.

### ***Stepping out of an ethic of control into an ethic of protest: revealing skills in disobedience***

In discussing an ethic of protest, Jenkins conceptualises 'protest' in the face of abusive actions as taking place 'through refusal to participate in what has been an established power relation. It entails political realisation with a corresponding relinquishment of a sense of culpability and worthlessness' (Jenkins, 2011, p. 276). Foucault asserted that 'where there is power there is resistance' (1990, p. 95); however, I am conscious of the ways in which small acts of resistance in the face of oppression can easily be overlooked, forgotten or rendered insignificant (Wade, 1997). With these ideas in mind I asked Kristy and Lisa:

- *If the explosions were an invitation for you to respond to Peter in a certain way, what do you think they were inviting you to do?*<sup>4</sup>
- *If the explosions were seeking your obedience in that moment, what do you think they were requiring of you?*
- *Has there ever been a time that you have not fully complied with these demands? Can you tell me about this?*
- *What would you call this? (standing tall, disobedience, protest, etc.)*
- *How did you manage to do this? Can you help me understand a bit about the history of this in your life? Are there other people who would have some knowledge of your commitment to taking this sort of stance in the face of oppression or attempts by others to control you?*

Lisa responded by reflecting that at times she felt extremely angry and at other times quite frightened. She often felt she needed to try, in different ways, to control Peter's actions, which frequently made things worse. Lisa was amused by and drawn to the possibility that she might be 'disobedient' (or even mischievous!) in her responses to the explosions and recalled a situation in which she had resisted the impulse to reprimand Peter when he was verbally abusive towards her while destroying a picture frame. She stood at a safe distance and watched, making eye contact occasionally, and waited for him to finish.

Lisa described Peter being surprised and confused by this response. When I asked about her experience of responding in this way she said that it had made her 'feel taller' and 'strong'. She described this act of disobedience as a way of 'taking the power back' and went on to recall other situations in which she had taken power back through acts of disobedience. During a subsequent conversation, Lisa spoke of how deferring her responses until Peter was calm and letting go of the expectation that she should control Peter 'in the moment' had helped her to feel more in control. She said this experience had been empowering. It provided her with a growing sense of strength and helped her to avoid being pulled into sadness and despair.

**Ben:** What's it been like to be letting go of the expectation that what you do is going to change Peter?

**Lisa:** It really makes you feel strong, I can't explain it. He did something the other day when he had urinated all over his bedroom. Usually I'd react to that and try and stop him; ask him 'What are you doing!' But I just went downstairs, filled a bucket of water and took it upstairs to him and said, 'you know it would be nice if you cleaned that up', and I left the room. And he was really shocked. And normally he probably would have thrown it but he didn't! He cleaned it up! Then he took it down and cleaned it out in the basin.

Exploring the history of 'disobedience' in Kristy and Lisa's lives revealed alternative and preferred responses to oppression, which made their values and commitments more visible. This provided a foundation for them to develop further proposals for action from within an ethic of protest which helped them to turn their attention away from engaging in 'control battles' with Peter, focusing instead on their own responses during episodes of conflict. This contributed to an increased sense of agency. It also sparked their interest in experimenting with other methods of nonviolent resistance.

## Community building and collaborative action

### **Turning away from shame: preparing for collaborative responsible action**

Sharon Welch described how the feminist movement taught her that it is 'impossible to control or guarantee the outcome or success of a particular action'. She posed the question, 'How does a movement persist in the face of partial victories and continued defeats?' (Welch, 1990, p. 13). I often find myself ruminating about similar questions, and wondering how I might explore this with families I meet with who are affected by severe adolescent-to-parent violence. Welch answers her question above with the suggestion that one must take 'responsible action within the limits of bounded power' and 'name the resources that evoke persistent defiance and resistance in the face of repeated defeats – an ethic of risk' (Welch, 1990, p. 19). In describing her conceptualisation of 'responsible action' Welch writes:

Responsible action does not mean one individual resolving the problems of others. It is, rather, participation in a communal work, laying the groundwork for the creative response of people in the present and in the future. Responsible action means changing what can be altered in the present even though a problem is not completely resolved. Responsible action provides partial resolutions and the inspiration and conditions for further partial resolutions by others. It is sustained and enabled by participation in a community of resistance. (Welch, 1990, p. 75)

With the intention of supporting Kristy and Lisa to develop their own community of resistance, we talked about the prospect of arranging a meeting at the family home with their network of friends, family and professionals. Kristy was apprehensive about this. She spoke about how feelings of shame and embarrassment had restrained her somewhat from reaching out for help when they needed it.

After spending time talking with Kristy about what 'the shame' had tried to convince her of, I was curious about what might be absent but implicit (White, 2000) in Kristy's experience of shame. This led me to ask, 'What important or precious ideas or beliefs or people do you think you might be turning your back on in turning towards shame?'<sup>5</sup>

Kristy paused, and then tearfully speculated that in doing so she was 'turning her back on the love that people have for her and on the people she loves – including Peter'. Lisa could relate to this experience and added that in turning towards shame, she and Kristy were also turning their backs on 'the

hope things will get better' and on their commitment to 'not give up' on Peter. Lisa and Kristy confirmed they were not okay with this and we went onto explore the history of their shared commitment to 'not giving up' on what was important to them and their refusal to allow shame to stand in the way of this.

### **The supporters meeting: escaping from secrecy, developing hope and resisting shame**

After meeting with Lisa and Kristy on four occasions, they decided it would be useful for us to convene a supporters meeting at the family home with extended family, friends, and Peter's head teacher and social worker. Peter was not present but he was aware it was taking place.

Lisa and Kristy wanted those present to have a better understanding of the extent of the violence they were facing and how they had been responding to it recently. I introduced the idea of a definitional ceremony (Myerhoff, 1982, 1986; White, 1999, 2007) to Lisa and Kristy before the meeting, suggesting it as a way of facilitating witnessing of our discussion. They were interested in trying this out. White (2007) set out three stages to a definitional ceremony: the telling; the re-telling; and the re-telling of the re-telling (p. 185). In addition, White proposed four categories of enquiry as a guide to interviewing outsider witnesses: the expression, the image, resonance and transport (pp. 190–192).

Prior to commencing the interview in the supporters meeting, I asked three people to volunteer to be asked questions about what stood out to them. I explained how I would be inviting them to respond.<sup>6</sup> Following a welcome and introductions, I interviewed Lisa and Kristy in front of the rest of the group. In the interest of developing a double storied account (White, 2006; Yuen, 2007) of Lisa and Kristy's experiences, the following sorts of questions were used as a guide:

- *Could I ask you to talk about the challenges that you have both been facing with Peter? What would you like those present to understand about this?*
- *What effect has the violence (and/or other difficulties) been having (on family / relationships / personally / work / siblings / other contexts)?*
- *How have you been responding to these concerns recently? What name would you give to these sorts of responses?*
- *What's it been like for you to be responding in these ways?*
- *What differences have these actions made? (to you / to how you see yourself as a parent / to relationships / to your children / others)?*
- *What is helping to sustain you in responding in the way that you have been?*

Kristy and Lisa described the relentless and extreme violence they had been subject to up until recently including being kicked, punched, shoved, threatened with a knife, having furniture thrown at them, cherished possessions being smashed, and suffering a constant stream of aggression and verbal abuse. They shared that Peter's sister, Sarah, had been hit and was suffering as a result of Peter's actions. They described being totally preoccupied by hypervigilance, how this had stolen their time with friends and made it difficult to function at work.

Kristy and Lisa went on to describe their practices of 'disobedience' and 'de-escalation' during episodes of Peter's aggression and how this often involved 'striking when the iron is cold' (Omer, 2004); deferring their responses in the moment and planning responses for when they (and Peter) felt calmer and ready to address his actions. Lisa said that being proactive (rather than re-active), including not hesitating to call the police when this was necessary, had been empowering, provided her with a growing sense of strength, and helped her avoid getting pulled into sadness and despair. Kristy spoke of feeling a renewed sense of hope.

Following contributions from the outsider witnesses, discussion continued about the possibility of shame rearing its head in the future in ways that might rob those present of the opportunity to offer their support when it was needed. This sparked a lively discussion about people's positions on the potential operations of shame on the parents, and the actions they might take to undermine shame's influence.

### ***Growth from the seeds of community building and collaborative action***

Kristy, Lisa, and their network of professionals, family members and friends developed a 'campaign of concern' (Jakob, 2011) aimed at supporting the message that Peter's parents were providing for him that he is loved by them, with a simultaneous message regarding their concern for him and others in the family and a robust expectation that the violence must stop. The campaign was to avoid statements to shame or humiliate Peter and avoid any threats of retribution. Kristy and Lisa led and coordinated the campaign and offered guidance to their supporters regarding the messages they preferred Peter to receive.

During the month after the supporters meeting, there was a significant reduction in the frequency and severity of Peter's violence. The police had not been called to the home nor was it necessary for a male family support worker to be present in the house each morning to help protect against the possibility of violence in the lead up to Peter going to school. The parents reported having benefited significantly from

'galvanising' their support network<sup>7</sup> and they observed Peter becoming 'more reflective and willing to take responsibility for his actions'.

Unfortunately, within a few months, there was a resurgence of Peter's use of coercion and violence at home following him moving to a new school.

### ***A question of accountability: where does this belong when it comes to young men's violence?***

I became concerned that the resurgence of Peter's use of violence might be a reflection of there being inadequate structures to facilitate Peter's accountability for his violence. In my discussions with Kristy and Lisa about this, I advocated for the importance of violence not remaining secret and of involving supporters in responding to episodes of violence. In response, they would often contact the support network to request that the intensity of the campaign of concern be increased.

This sort of response was sometimes effective at inviting Peter to reflect on his actions and seek to repair damage he had done. However, I realised that up until this point in my work with Peter's family there had been a significant amount of attention directed towards providing Peter with the message that it was *his* responsibility to stop the abuse. I recognised that as a community responding to violence we were being guided by individualistic and patriarchal notions of responsibility. I had been focused on patterns of interaction and their meaning within the family with the intention of reducing risk and encouraging Peter to take responsibility for his actions at the expense of also looking at broader cultural influences that might be supporting the perpetuation of the violence. When reflecting on their early work, Campbell, Tamasese and Waldegrave of the Just Therapy Team wrote:

We realised that the problems these families were bringing to us were not the symptoms of family dysfunction, but instead the symptoms of broader structural issues. We, like other family therapists, however, were treating their symptomatic behaviour as though it were a family problem, and then sending them back into the structures that created their problems in the first place. We were unwittingly adjusting people to poverty or other forms of injustice by addressing their symptoms, without affecting broader social and structural change. (Campbell, Tamasese, & Waldegrave 2001, p. 197)

I realised that I had neglected to consider ways in which dominant aspects of men's culture might be implicated in the perpetuation of Peter's violence. I also realised that I had

perhaps been overly influenced by beliefs that as a result of his intellectual disability and the extensive efforts that previous therapists had put into trying to support Peter to tackle these concerns, that 'therapy doesn't work with him'. The notion of collective accountability (Tamasese & Waldegrave, 2003; White, 1995) suggests that we are responsible for more than our own personal and individual acts. In the case of men's abuse of their power, men are responsible not just for ourselves but for each other (Tamasese & Waldegrave, 2003, p. 87). In addressing men's violence against women, White argued that:

It is the responsibility of men (as a community) to: address abuse; develop an exposé of the discourses of men's culture; make reparation; and develop ways of being in the world and in relationships to others that are not exploitative and that are non-abusive. (White, 2011, p. 100)

In line with this, I shared the view with Kristy and Lisa that it is the responsibility of men to collectively address problematic aspects of men's culture that might be contributing to the violence; that this was not Peter's responsibility alone. I mentioned the possibility of convening meetings with Peter and significant men in his life for this purpose. Lisa and Kristy were very enthusiastic about this idea.

## Multi-generational men's meetings

Peter was quite excited about the prospect of being involved in 'men's meetings' as part of the plan to help him to take action to stop the violence at home. In discussion with Lisa and Kristy, Peter identified three significant men in his life – his former head teacher Steve, his uncle Brian and close family friend Jerry. They all accepted the invitation to join the men's meetings and were keen to play any role they could in helping Peter cease his use of violence and aggression towards his family and support him to take new steps in preferred directions in his life.

### **Collective accountability: working in partnership with women**

In seeking to address the effects of men's culture and men's violence on women it was important to me that we did this in partnership with women, in line with the Just Therapy Team's conceptions of collective and partnership accountability (Hall, 1996; Tamasese, Waldegrave, Tuhaka & Campbell, 2003). For this reason, Peter's parents and Jennifer, a family friend with whom Peter has a very close relationship, were closely involved. As part of this commitment, I:

- spoke with and/or wrote to Lisa and Kristy prior to each group meeting to ascertain whether there were any issues they wanted the group to address and afterwards to tell them what was discussed
- invited Lisa and Kristy to join the men's meetings on two occasions
- established that Jennifer would meet with Peter in between meetings to talk about how he was experiencing and understanding the men's meetings and review plans to reduce violence and for reparation.

When reflecting on my involvement with Peter, his family and their support network after the men's group had met on six occasions (and I had been involved with the family for around 18 months), I asked Lisa whether there was anything about our work together that she thought might be helpful to others to understand. The first thing she mentioned was the men's group:

The men's group for Peter has been very powerful I think. He's had some really emotional and powerful moments in the group. There's also been something very powerful about bringing us [Lisa and Kristy] into the men's group and feeling like the group is really connected to the family unit, to the women in the family unit. It's been so important that we as women have been consulted on the work in the group. Why? Because it's so easy for men when they get together to get into certain ways of talking ... like there are men in our lives that if they get together could fall into that unspoken idea that 'All you need is a good man and all would be fine!'

### **Building bridges to understanding: responding to difficulties with concentration and understanding**

I responded to Peter's difficulties with understanding and concentration with the aim of scaffolding (White, 2007) our conversations in ways that made themes more visible, concrete and accessible to Peter. This included:

- writing brief letters to Peter between men's meetings summarising themes and including pictures (we often read these out at the beginning of a meeting)
- drawing cartoons to support externalising conversations and using spider diagrams to map our conversations on large pieces of paper
- using physical movement to scaffold conversations
- using sticky notes to facilitate externalising conversations
- Peter's meetings with Jennifer between men's meetings.



### **The responsibilities**

In facilitating these men's meetings, I drew on the approach White (2011) proposed for working with men who use violence against women, as set out in the responsibilities conversation map (White, 2011, pp. 102–109). The responsibilities map involves externalising the techniques, practices and constructions of men's dominance with the aim of making it possible for men to take responsibility for their violence or abuse and develop proposals for reparation. This involves movement between 'zooming out' to macro and general contexts to consider ideas and practices available to men if they intend to dominate women and children, and 'zooming in' to explore which of these ideas and practices of domination men have used in their own lives. This includes enquiry into how men might have been recruited into engaging in these practices.

The categories of enquiry offered by the responsibilities map to guide men towards responsibility include:

- exposé of techniques and practices of domination (distant and close)
- exposé of constructs, meanings and attitudes used to justify abuse (distant and close)
- identification of the experiences that recruited the man or young person as a participant, accomplice or instrument of the culture of domination
- mapping short- and long-term consequences of abuse on all parties and relationships (distant and close)
- the identification of unique outcomes where the man or young person has 'drawn the line' and identifying practices in which a man would not participate
- more richly describing other stories or territories of life
- formulating proposals for reparation, to mend what might be mended
- documentation.

Conversations in the men's meetings did not progress in a linear fashion through each category of enquiry and it was necessary to return at different points to different categories. Given Peter's difficulties with understanding and his tendency to be very economical in his use of words, it was important to slow conversation down to ascertain how he was experiencing the discussion, what he understood along the way and to find ways of supporting and facilitating his contribution to the discussion.

### **Exploring dominant constructions of masculinity: trainings in toughness, the harm this causes and some alternatives**

When Peter arrived with his uncle Brian at the first men's meeting his eyes were wary and he offered me a nervous smile as he shook my hand. Early in the meeting, Peter clarified that he would like the men's meetings to help him make things safer at home because he wanted 'more family happiness'.

We used this initial meeting to begin to expose and deconstruct some aspects of dominant masculinity. We identified and discussed some of the pressures the men<sup>8</sup> experienced to act in certain ways in order to 'be a man' in different contexts. A range of themes and personal experiences arose during this discussion including pressures on men to:

- be 'tough' all the time
- make others scared of you to get higher status
- look, walk and talk in certain ways
- not show any weakness (including being stronger than girls and women)
- know all about sex
- have a girlfriend (and to not have a boyfriend).

We explored a range of experiences that constituted 'training' in the dominant ways of being a man, including experiences at school and in their families, the influence of sporting culture, and the way that men are often portrayed in movies. This discussion was guided by the following questions:

- Who introduced you to these ways of being a man?
- When did you first begin to learn that this was expected of you?
- What were the benefits to you of going along with these actions? What were the risks to you if you didn't go along with them?
- How have you been affected by other men using these practices towards you?

Some of the men spoke about feeling they had to act in these ways in order to be accepted by other boys at school. Boys who didn't would get 'targeted' and bullied by others. We went on to explore some of the ways in which the men present had been affected by the dominant masculinities of other men. This included experiences of 'feeling scared and humiliated'

and 'having my confidence stolen'. Peter confirmed he could relate to these feelings, and related being attacked recently by one of his friends at school.

In the interest of moving beyond a single story of masculinity (Adichie, 2011), we went on to discuss whether these dominant ways of being men fitted with the sort of men they wanted to be. In discussing the importance of establishing contexts for adult men's accountability to other men, White argued that:

It's always important to assist men to locate and to meet with other men who are also exploring alternative ways of being and thinking for men. These forums make it possible for men to join their voices against those aspects of men's culture that are abusive, and provide support for men to renegotiate their proposals for alternative ways of being in the light of feedback that they are receiving from their partners and their children. (White, 1995, pp. 161–162)

Jerry explained, 'even though my brother could win a fight and people were scared of him, I realised this was not the sort of man I wanted to be. There are lots of different sorts of men ... I realised being tough isn't about winning a fight'. Steve talked about how his father showed him 'it was unfair to use his size and strength against someone who couldn't fight back ... he taught me problems don't get solved through fighting'. In many respects, identifying and discussing practices men have a tendency to engage in as complicit with a 'culture of domination' (White, 2011) not only exposed the ways in which dominant aspects of men's culture sponsors men's abusive practices, but also created openings for stories and anecdotes about alternative and preferred ways of being a man.

#### ***Post-it notes and anecdotes: opening windows to understanding and responses to dominant masculinities***

Over the next few meetings, we explored the following themes drawn from the responsibilities map (White, 2011):

- the actions that would be available to a man to use if he wanted to frighten, hurt or control a woman
- the excuses men could use to justify hurting women
- the consequences of men's abusive actions towards women for all parties involved (for women, the men who perpetrate the abuse and others).

With the aim of slowing our conversation down and making our discussion more visible, concrete and accessible to Peter, I gave each person a different coloured pack of Post-it notes. I introduced one of the themes from the responsibilities map and invited each person to think of five or more general or

hypothetical examples (not necessarily specific to their own experiences) that related to the theme being discussed and to write these on separate Post-it notes. These could then be used as a reference point in our conversations. Each person stuck his Post-it notes on the left hand side of a large piece of paper on the coffee table. We would end up with over 20 Post-it notes with actions, words and phrases connected to the theme being explored. Each person took turns reading out and explaining the examples he had listed, often sharing anecdotes of his own experiences of witnessing or being subject to these practices by other men. This provided an opportunity for people to ask clarifying questions and give further examples as part of supporting Peter's understanding. Discussion also included speculation about how these actions might be experienced by women.

Peter was then invited to pick any of the Post-it notes that described practices or issues relating to *his* use of abusive or controlling actions, their effects and/or excuses for these. He placed these on the other side of the paper.

White (2011, pp. 110–111) advocated inviting men who have abused to differentiate between an ethic of control and an ethic of care. When reflecting on the various practices of abuse and control men might engage in to dominate women, as listed on Post-it notes all over the coffee table, I asked Peter:

What do you think a good name would be for a project a man might be engaged in if the aim of this project was to use these sorts of actions to control and frighten women?

Peter wasn't sure at first and after I elicited various suggestions from the adult men including 'Project fear' and 'Project targeting', Peter suggested 'Project abuse and harassment'.

#### ***Exploring the effects of 'Project abuse and harassment' on women: taking a stand from a different position***

Peter's parents had commented to me previously that he rarely demonstrated understanding about how his use of violence affected others, and when this was apparent it was often fleeting. Given we had previously spent time exploring some of the training men receive to act in dominating ways and the actions and justifications available to men who choose to hurt and control women, it seemed fitting to explore the *effects* of violence on women.

Peter's recent actions had been frightening and distressing for his parents and sister and it was important to me that their experience be honoured in discussions in the men's group. For this reason I had asked Lisa, Kristy and Peter's sister Sarah if they would be willing to write something about how

the violence affected them so this could be shared in the men's meeting. Lisa and Kristy agreed and Sarah chose not to. Peter confirmed he was interested to know more about his parents' experience of his violence and I proceeded to read through the letters Lisa and Kristy had written.

White (2004) and Freedman (2014) highlight the possibilities created by inviting people to be witnesses from different positions. I wondered whether inviting Peter to witness his parents' testimony from the position of a friend of someone who was subjecting his parents to this sort of treatment would create different possibilities for Peter to think further about his parents' experience. This turned out to effectively provide Peter with an alternative vantage point from which he was able to express concern for his friends' wellbeing, his future, and his relationships with his family. Peter confirmed that these concerns fitted with the plans he thought 'Project abuse and harassment' had for his own future in ways he had not been able to articulate before.

### ***Restraints of patriarchy and individualism to double story development***

I sometimes experienced a sense of despair and personal failure when Peter resorted to using violence against his family. However, Welch suggested that '[s]ole attention to the failures in history can blind us to the partial successes; the realisation that more is yet to be done masks the fact that some good has been attained' (1990, p. 106). It became apparent to me that in focusing so much on responding to violence and seeking to prevent it, the obligation I felt to support Peter's understanding of the effects of his actions, and the focus required on supporting Lisa and Kristy to manage risk, had me slipping back towards individualistic and patriarchal notions of responsibility. This also diverted my attention away from opportunities for double story development (White, 2006).

White suggests that a man 'cannot take responsibility for abuse if he identifies as an "abusive man"' and that not only is it important to create 'space for the man to start to think about how he might have been an accomplice to, or instrument of, a culture of domination' (2011, p. 104), it is also important to:

... provide men with an alternative territory of life and identity in which to stand and from which they can strongly critique their own abusive and exploitative actions, and in which they will begin to develop some familiarity with other ways of orienting to their relationship with others and the world. (White, 2011, p. 107)

With these ideas in mind, I invited Peter to name an alternative project (Freedman, personal communication,

28 October 2015; White, 2011) that fitted with his preferred way of being and represented the direction he wanted to take his life in. Peter named this 'Project Respect for Girls and Women'.

## *Project Respect for Girls and Women*

Given the difficulties Peter experienced with retaining information, and the practical barriers to convening group meetings with family and friends, I wondered what electronic outsider witness practice (Ishikawa, 2014) might make possible. With the intention of thickening alternative stories about Peter, and with Peter and his parents' permission, I emailed close family members and friends to ask them to share memories they might have about Peter's actions that might fit with Project Respect for Girls and Women. I invited them to respond to the following questions:

- Is there a **story** (or stories) you could tell me about Peter **that really stand out to you** and that might fit with **Project Respect for Girls and Women**?
- What **struck you most** about witnessing Peter's actions in this situation? Why?
- What would be a fitting **name** to describe the **practices or skills or abilities you witnessed** Peter using in this situation? (**Could you please include a photo or image that would fit with this name?**)
- Did this give you any clues about what might be important or precious to Peter in his life or in his relationships?

The responses I received from this request were quite overwhelming. Many people offered stories about Peter including his 'protectiveness', 'deep love for his sister', 'politeness', 'kindness and respect for others' and being 'truly compassionate and loving'. They sent a range of photos and images representing the spirit of the stories they told about Peter. His former head teacher interviewed female teachers at Peter's old school and collected several stories about Peter's politeness and respect towards them even when he was agitated about something, and how he had listened to and tried to cheer up a girl in his class who was upset and confused, having very recently moved into foster care. This document is currently 10 pages long and each story is accompanied by photos and images. And it is still growing!

### ***Team Respect***

Peter confirmed that his chances of succeeding with Project Respect for Girls and Women would be better if he had a team of people to support him. Given Peter is a very

talented and enthusiastic sportsperson, I was interested in the opportunities that the team of life<sup>9</sup> (Denborough, 2008) collective narrative methodology might offer. He decided to call this team: 'Team Respect for Women in My Family' ('Team Respect' for short). In developing a team list, Peter clarified that he would be the captain of Team Respect and there was unanimous agreement that he was the right person for this job.

We had an animated discussion about Peter's favourite football player, and Peter told me some of the things he had in common with him including 'he is good at scoring goals, is always busy, can be a patient and kind player and he has good hair'. Kristy and the men listed other qualities in Peter's repertoire of abilities including that 'he never gives up'.

I asked Peter how he learnt the skill of never giving up – whether anyone had taught him about this and why it was important to him. Peter wasn't sure where he learnt about this but said that he likes trying his best. I asked Brian, Jerry and Steve whether they had any ideas where Peter might have learnt about not giving up and they all speculated that Peter probably learnt a lot about this from Lisa and Kristy and the way they've never given up on him. Peter smiled and placed his head on Kristy's shoulder.

Peter had been living with Kristy at her father's place for the past few weeks as Peter was finding it difficult to manage at home and Lisa and Kristy had reached a decision they needed a break. Kristy, Lisa and Peter wanted to make a plan for Peter's gradual return home and we talked about the idea of Peter writing a 'team brief' to all members of the team with his plan for Team Respect and the 'goals' he would be looking to score. In addition to abstaining from physical violence, goals included not going into his sister's room, offering to make Kristy a cup of tea each day and watching a movie and eating popcorn with Lisa.

Denborough (2008, p. 110) suggested it is important to identify a collective goal the team has already scored as a way of precluding the possibility of failure. I asked Peter if he could think of a goal that Team Respect had already scored and he struggled to think of something. Kristy mentioned that Peter had managed almost four weeks with no incidents of physical violence and that this was definitely a goal on the scoreboard. One game strategy Peter and Kristy had employed together to score this goal was to have a checklist of daily activities on a clipboard that he ticked off during morning and evening routines.

At the end of this meeting I presented Peter and others present with a copy of the document I had created from responses to my electronic outsider witnessing invitation.

Peter beamed and leaned in towards his mum as he looked through the document and we read a few pages of it together until it was time to bring the meeting to a close.

## Conclusion

This paper illustrates some of the ways in which I have drawn on narrative practices and ethics in my work with a family and their community to develop collective responses to a young man's use of violence towards his family. By reflecting on my own journey through the pushes and pulls of men's culture, I have sought to highlight the generative potential of collective and partnership accountability practices as well as some of the constraints that patriarchy and individualism pose to this work. Drawing on principles and methods of nonviolent resistance in ways that elicit and honour the histories, skills and values of the family and their community significantly assisted us to navigate the territory we have covered so far together. This has been a journey of many ups and downs, and is a struggle that continues in the face of significant adversity. It continues to be sustained and enabled by participation in a community of resistance.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In making this observation it is not my intention to in any way obfuscate, justify or dismiss the use of abusive parenting practices adopted by some parents within and/or outside of their families. On the contrary, my interest is in identifying the influence of contextual factors that might support experiences of parental entitlement, oppression and powerlessness that incite people to act coercively. Furthermore, I am interested in identifying how these sorts of factors might restrain people from relating respectfully, sensitively and non-abusively with others as a step towards inviting them to take responsibility for their actions (see Jenkins, 1990).

- <sup>2</sup> The names of the family and their community and some identifying information has been changed to protect their anonymity.
- <sup>3</sup> See Sharp (1973, 2013) for an analysis of Gandhi's principles and the methods of nonviolent resistance.
- <sup>4</sup> This question was influenced by the work of Glenda Fredman (2004).
- <sup>5</sup> This question was influenced by the work of Carol Halliwell, personal communication, 3 March 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> White advocated that the interviewer should make it clear to outsider witnesses that they will not be requesting responses 'shaped by contemporary practices of applause' or by 'practices of professional evaluation and interpretation' (White, 2007, p. 165) in order to invite them into a de-centred position which might be conducive to the client at the centre connecting with the life-shaping effect of their own contributions to the production of their life and the lives of others (White, 2007, p. 182).
- <sup>7</sup> It is important to acknowledge the complexity of organising community responses to violence and how the intersection of factors such as race, culture, gender and class might influence the nature of collective responses to violence including responses from statutory agencies. It is likely that the social privilege the family benefit from, as a White British middle class family, contributed to the effectiveness of the community responses in this instance.
- <sup>8</sup> I use the words 'the men' in describing collective responses during the men's meetings. This includes responses from the adult men and from 15-year-old Peter.
- <sup>9</sup> At the time of writing, this work was ongoing therefore I have not presented a completed example of the team of life methodology. I have included details from this initial conversation about Team Respect to illustrate the potential for enquiry into favourite sporting figures to reveal values and skills that young people might value highly and be evident in their lives (see Denborough, 2008, pp. 105–106).

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