

Narrative therapy is about telling our stories in ways that make us stronger. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country, our stories are precious. They have survived over generations.
Aunty Barbara Wingard

This book shares stories of creative inventions by Aboriginal narrative therapists and community workers, including the 'Shame Mat', the 'Language Tree of Life', 'Conversations with Lateral Violence', and 'Narrative community gatherings'. These significant innovations are expanding the field of narrative practice, not only in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts, but also across cultures and internationally. Significantly, this book also illustrates how narrative practices are being used by Aboriginal communities to decolonise identity stories, to move beyond mental health labels, and to step out of missionary rules and closets of shame.

In these pages you will find moving stories from individuals who are finding ways to have conversations with those who have passed on, or who are undertaking profound journeys away from the effects of alcohol and abuse. You will also read descriptions of community projects in which hard-won knowledge and skills in surviving injustices are being shared across communities and oceans.

We invite you to see narrative practice through Aboriginal eyes. This is both spiritual and political practice.

This treasure of a book weaves together local knowledge and traditions of Aboriginal people, a recognition of some of the ongoing effects of colonisation, and the use of narrative ideas and practices tailored to local concerns and Aboriginal culture. It is full of heartfelt stories and new ideas. The authors show how through creativity and attention to culture, narrative ideas can be adapted and developed to respond to situations facing particular communities. Read it and be inspired!

Jill Freedman, co-author of the book *Narrative Therapy: The social construction of preferred identities*.

DULWICH CENTRE

Email: dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au

Phone: +61 882233966 | Fax: +61 82324441

Webpage: www.dulwichcentre.com.au

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Aboriginal narrative practice

Barbara Wingard, Carolynanha Johnson & Tileah Drahm-Butler

Aboriginal narrative practice:

Honouring storylines of pride, strength and creativity

Barbara Wingard, Carolynanha Johnson & Tileah Drahm-Butler

PART II

Lateral violence

The following chapter describes Aunty Barbara Wingard's theatrical narrative approach to enable communities to speak about, and respond to, lateral violence (the abuse and undermining practices that people in subjugated and marginalised groups engage with in relation to each other).

It also contains two documents from the Woorabinda Aboriginal community about the ways Elders and young people are trying to stop 'dangerous talk' and lateral violence.

Chapter 4

A conversation with Lateral Violence

Barbara Wingard

Lateral violence is the name given to the harmful and undermining practices that members of oppressed groups can engage in against each other as a result of marginalisation. This chapter comprises an 'interview' with Lateral Violence, played by Aunty Barbara Wingard. In this interview, Lateral Violence provides 'its own' exposé. Since its first publication, this externalising script has been used to spark conversations in many communities about Lateral Violence, including in Woorabinda Aboriginal community. The special skills that Elders and young people from Woorabinda are using to respond to Lateral Violence have also been included here.

Lateral violence, sometimes also called 'horizontal violence', has received much investigation and discussion in recent years, and refers to the abuse and undermining practices that people in subjugated and marginalised groups engage with in relation to each other. Nurses have done a lot to raise awareness of the phenomenon, and the term has been taken up by First Nations groups in North America, Australia, and elsewhere (see Native Counselling Services of Alberta, 2006). The following 'conversation' with Lateral Violence is a brief exploration of the kinds of harmful actions that can impact on Aboriginal communities as a result of colonisation and continued dispossession.

The following conversation follows the narrative concept of externalising conversations (White, 2007), through the specific practice of one person interviewing another who is role-playing a problem (see Cronin-Lampe et al., 1998/1999; Sliep & CARE Counsellors 1996/1998; Roth & Epston, 1996; Wingard, 1996/2001a, 1996/2001b). These 'collective externalising conversations' (Denborough, 2008, p. 207), can be powerfully effective in allowing groups and communities to talk about problems that affect them. We hope the following script and documents will assist workers to run workshops on this significant issue in their own contexts.

Good afternoon Lateral Violence. It's really good to meet you in person. You usually seem to be in the shadows, so we appreciate it that today we can talk to you face-to-face. Can I ask you some questions?

Yes, go ahead.

What do you like to do?

I do my best work destroying people. I like to divide people and break their spirits. I break communities and create nastiness between families because people don't know how to deal with me. I can even create violence and big punch-ups sometimes, hurting people and stabbing people. But often I use words and stories more than physical violence and break spirits that way.

What do you mean? How do you use words?

I often show myself in words. That's how my nastiness starts. I get people to tell stories about other people who aren't there. This can be very hurtful and painful for people and this makes me happy.

Why do you want to do this?

I want to keep Aboriginal people back. I don't want them to get anywhere. And if I can keep causing disharmony in Aboriginal communities, if they keep fighting with each other, then there will always be a place for me. I will be able to show myself all the time. I will get stronger and stronger. I want to be around for a long, long time. It keeps my spirit strong when I'm making other people weak.

[To the audience:] *I'm not sure I like this character very much!*

[To Lateral Violence:] *How long have you been trying to do this? How long have you been around?*

I've been around for quite a long time now. The thing is, Aboriginal people have to deal with racism, not being able to get housing or jobs. Many Aboriginal people have to deal with poverty, with alcohol. Many families were separated because of the Stolen Generations. Aboriginal people have faced so many injustices in this country for over two hundred years and all these things have made it much easier for me to do my work. I get into communities when they are facing racism, poverty, and injustice.

Because I've been around a long time, sometimes now I get carried on through generations. I love this! I'm pretty sneaky because I make people think I'm part of Aboriginal culture. I tell them that I'm part of their culture. I tell these lies and people believe me. They now say this is Aboriginal way, our way. And this protects me. They think I'm their way of dealing with things and this makes me very happy.

What makes you powerful?

I reckon I'm doing my best work when I get families to fight against one another. Or when I break down families. It's fantastic when everybody wants to take sides. This creates a bigger divide or division. One of my favourite sayings is: 'If you talk to them, then we won't have anything to do with you. We're on their side.' Isn't that a beautiful phrase – 'We're on their side'.

I can also stop Aboriginal people from working with white people. I do that pretty well. And I confuse white people about Aboriginal culture too. I try to convince white people to think bad things about Aboriginal culture.

Actually, I'm very strong about culture. In some Aboriginal communities I try to get people of Aboriginal heritage to be suspicious and judge each other by asking 'who is Aboriginal and who is not really Aboriginal?' I try to get people to say who is fit to be Aboriginal and who is not fit to be Aboriginal. I start to manipulate who is and who is not. This works very well too!

As you can see I've got a few different specialities!

Yeah, but I bet you don't have many friends ...

No I don't have many friends. Just one really. My friend is Gossip. Gossip can be harmless when it's not trying to hurt people, but nasty gossip gets back to people and breaks their spirits. It's pretty good stuff! When Gossip and I are working together we often start small. Someone might want to know how someone else is going so they ask 'How is so-and-so going?' So they start talking about someone else who is not there, and then they start hearing things they shouldn't

A conversation with Lateral Violence

hear. Or the conversations start taking a nasty journey. Nice, quiet gossip can be a way of checking things out, but I twist gossip, turn things around, and make those conversations take a nasty journey. I'm really good at twisting harmless gossip into harsh gossip. I listen out for when people are talking about someone who is not present and whenever there's an opportunity I think 'I'm going to get in there'.

I make people quite sick this way. It's like there's a mental drain when I come into people's lives. I can make people really worried about what other people are saying and doing.

Is there anything that makes you particularly happy?

Yes. Can't you tell? It makes me happy to break people's spirits, to make them feel no good, to confuse them about their culture and Aboriginal ways of doing things. I usually either make people silent or I make them be nasty themselves. I start to convince them that the way to feel stronger is to be nasty. Once I get going, people get determined not to give in. This keeps nastiness alive and hopefully they then pass this onto their children.

[To audience:] *This is unbelievable ... it's lucky I don't believe in violence or I'd be tempted to do this bloke in!*

[To Lateral Violence:] *Sorry, what were you saying?*

I was talking about the children actually ... Whenever possible I try to get children to witness nastiness, to try to encourage them to be nasty. Sometimes this goes wrong though ... [pause]

This sometimes goes wrong?

Yes, but I don't really want to talk about that.

Oh, please continue Lateral Violence, we're so grateful that you are sharing your wisdom with us ...

Well, sometimes when children witness nastiness, they say to themselves 'I don't want to do that when I grow up'. In fact, sometimes children go and find one nice, kind auntie or uncle, or someone I haven't got to yet and they spend time with them. They say 'I don't want to be nasty' and they grow up in ways that I can't infect. It's like they make some decision and I can't get to them.

Young people too actually. It seems they can stop me from coming into their lives by not getting into nastiness and gossip. Sometimes a group of young people don't let my friend Gossip into their lives and then I can't get in either.

Adults sometimes make a stand against me too. They get fed up with what is going on and they start trying things to undermine me. I know of one woman who was so fed up with the nasty

talking about her that I had created that she asked a lawyer to draw up a letter to the people I had infected. That actually worked quite well, I had to take a back seat for a while.

Another time I had managed to get someone to tell lots of lies about this same woman in the workplace. Even though she was retired I was able to get a really good thing going. But then this woman decided to confront the person who was telling the lies and she did this in a very nice, calm way. Of course, I told the person just to deny everything. I told them just to smile and say hello and pretend that they had done nothing. But this woman just kept her voice low, she didn't get aggressive, but she also didn't back down. After she had done this I could tell she was really proud of how she had faced what I was doing but in a nice way. This really confused me. When people find nice ways to stop me spreading around it's quite hard for me to continue.

That's very interesting. What do you think about people knowing your name these days?

I kept my name a secret for a very long time. It worked better for me when I was undercover. Actually it was nurses who first found out my name. I've done some good work in dividing nurses, but while I was doing it they somehow found out my name. I don't know how this happened, although I suspect Gossip might have had something to do with it. Maybe Gossip isn't such a good friend after all.

And then this First Nations group in Canada, they noticed that I was doing a lot of work in their community. So they started talking about me. They even made a video about me (Native Counselling Services of Alberta, 2006). At first I felt quite proud about this. I quite liked the idea of being a movie star.

But then they started to show this DVD in other places. They brought it here to Australia and now Aboriginal people here seem to be noticing me more often. They're even holding workshops about me now. People are starting to talk about how they can confront nastiness but in nice ways. Some people seem to be getting quite excited about this. I'm not sure if that is a good development.

In fact, now I'm wondering if it was a good idea to agree to be interviewed. I think I was more powerful when I was invisible and had no name. But it was a bit lonely and it has been nice talking to you.

You know what Lateral Violence? As you've been talking, I've been thinking about what you said about having only one friend. And it sounds like even that friendship might be a bit rocky at the moment. Have you ever thought about retiring? If you stopped doing all this work to divide people and break their spirits, maybe there'd be chance to build more friendships ...

You might be onto something there. I'll give it some thought.

Anyway, thanks for coming in today, Lateral Violence.

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Chapter 5

Creating and sharing stories to heal our spirits (and weaken Lateral Violence)

Barbara Wingard

Once Lateral Violence has been named and externalised, it becomes possible to start sharing ideas about ways that adults and young people can weaken Lateral Violence.

We can share ideas in so many different ways. We can use documents, letters, songs, paintings, poems, films, and more!

Aboriginal people have many different skills and knowledges but they don't see this because of other problems and injustices in their lives. It can be our job to start noticing their hopes, dreams, skills and knowledges, including skills and knowledges in weakening Lateral Violence.

Recently, when in Woorabinda in Central Queensland, after having an externalising conversation with Lateral Violence, we asked the Elders about some of the different things they've learnt so far about Lateral Violence.

We also asked the young people if they had any ideas to share with young people in other communities about ways of stopping 'dangerous talk and lateral violence'.

Their words have been turned into the following two documents.

What we've learnt about Lateral Violence

Knowledge from Woorabinda



Today a group of us came together in Woorabinda to talk about Lateral Violence, to bring it out of hiding. By talking about it we hope we can find ways to deal with it, to run it out of town.

Lateral violence is everywhere. It's fully grown in all communities across the country. It's been here in Woorabinda for a long, long time. We've had to face so much injustice here and Lateral Violence came along for the ride.

Around here you grow up with Lateral Violence. It moves in generations. One of the younger people said that Lateral Violence is now known round here as a way of life, it's used as a way of life.

One of us talked about how at school it was bad. In fact, it's so bad in some places that kids don't want to go to school. Staying out of school is the way some kids avoid lateral violence. People don't often talk about this.

These days it's bad on Facebook and on Divas Chat. People are deadly at putting others down. A little story can become a big story and then there are big family fights. Of course the children see this. They play 'fight' in the school yard now along with other games.

We all have to find our own ways to deal with nasty gossip and Lateral Violence. There are going to be different solutions in different places. One thing we can do is bring Elders and young people together to talk about ways of dealing with gossip, how not to get sucked in, how to make sure stories don't get twisted.

Today, here in Woorabinda, we made a start. We're happy to be yarning about Lateral Violence. We're happy we've started the conversations. Here are some of the different things we've learnt so far.

Trying not to play a part

Some of us try not to play a part in gossip. I learnt a long time ago the effects of gossip; how a story can travel through the community and then someone who has been hurt by the story says to you, 'Did you say this?' So now I try not to play a part.

Each person to themselves

Around here, people are always concerned about who is involved with who. It's a small community. Well I say, 'each person to themselves as long as they are happy'. That helps me to stay out of Lateral Violence and nasty gossip.

Having a bad memory for gossip

It helps me a lot that I have a bad memory for gossip! If someone tells me something about somebody else, I forget it. Sometimes it's good to have a bad memory.

Having the same rules for everyone

I work with the young people round here with sports. There's a rule here, no swearing in the stadium. If someone does swear then it's a one minute sin-binning, just like in rugby league. This has really worked and swearing is decreasing now. If I swear, I also go in the sin-bin. I have to abide by the same rules. If I put rules on the young people, then they get to put rules on me too. They said I have to come to all of their games. Having the same rules for everyone seems to help reduce Lateral Violence.

Don't just take a story on as truth

Sometimes it can be important not to take on a story about someone as the truth. I try to remember the stories that I heard about me ... I knew they weren't true! So now if I hear a story about someone else, I don't just take it on as truth. I take a bit of care with this.

Try not to be there

If we know trouble is coming, some of us try really hard not to be there. I try not to be a part of it, try not to be there standing around. This is about protection. I don't want to get on the wave of the fight. I don't want to pick up the anger. I don't want to hear someone say something and then think to myself 'How could that just come out of her mouth?' The best thing for me is not to be there. I try to stay away.

Walk a mile in another person's shoes

There's a song you know, 'walk a mile in my shoes'. When someone says something bad about another person to me, I try to remind them of what that other person has gone through recently. I say things like, 'Do you remember that they just lost someone in that family?' I try to help the person to walk in the other person's shoes, to downplay the negative story. Every family here goes through hard times. We can try to help each other to walk in each other's shoes.

What that fella can do?

I work with young people now and I so often hear negative stories about children: 'He's a bad kid'. There are such negative stories about kids and young people. It takes me a while to put aside all those negative stories. I've had to learn a new way to relate to children. When we grew up, no-one listened to kids. We're trying to change this. I don't want to hear that the kid is bad, I want to know what that fella can do? We try to find what these young fellas can do and talk about that, instead of all those negative stories.

Nip it in the bud

We've had to find ways to interrupt kids fighting and to nip it in the bud. These days, if two kids are fighting, we quickly separate them and one of us talks with one of them, and the other staff member talks with the other one. We send them home, separately. We take one child on its way and the other the other way. If any other kids want to come with us we say no. We can't have people following. We've learnt ways to not escalate fights. To nip it in the bud.

Finding ways to speak directly

Fights between adults and between families can start from little kids' fights. So we have to be smart about how we respond. Some of us are trying to find ways to speak directly to other parents. If there's trouble between my kid and other kids, I try to speak directly to their parents, to sort things out. This is linked to the old ways. When I was a kid, if I got in trouble, then someone would talk directly to my parents and they would take responsibility for me. We're trying to find ways to speak directly, and in a nice way.

We're serious about taking a healing journey here in Woorabinda. And the only way we can be serious about this is to make sure we're not putting other people down. That's why we're yarning about Lateral Violence.

We'd love to hear your ideas too. What do you do in your community? How do you lessen the power of Lateral Violence?

Where to from here?

Here are the ideas the people of Woorabinda had in relation to what to do with this document:

- We could set up a regular time to meet and talk about Lateral Violence ... like a forum.
- We can send this document to others in other communities and get them to add to it and to send us a message.
- We can share this around the community.
- You can take this to the workshop in Rockhampton (nearby city) and share it with them.
- We could create a comic about Lateral Violence! Like Streetwise comics.
We can get kids to do the drawings.
- We can put it on the internet.
- We can send it to Mick Gooda (the Australian Human Rights Commission's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner who has a connection to Woorabinda).
By the way, we did this and he liked it very much!
- This is the first document like this on Lateral Violence. A world first! We'll claim it.
- We can include this message on the Thursday morning radio broadcast.

What we've learnt about Lateral Violence

- We can send it to Canada ... back to the first people who talked about Lateral Violence!
- Bush TV (<http://bushtv.com.au>) are coming on Monday ...
- We could make a video recording today ... each of us reading out parts of the document.
[This was done.]
- We could share it with young people in the community and then get to hear their ideas.
[This was done ... see the document 'Walk away, leave it to another day: Some of the ways we try to stop dangerous talk and Lateral Violence']

Walk away, leave it to another day: Some of the ways we try to stop dangerous talk and lateral violence

The knowledge and skills of young people at Wadja Wadja High School in Woorabinda

Around here, in Woorabinda, we young people know a lot about the effects of gossip. Around here, gossip is dangerous talk. It turns little things into big things and it can lead to fights, to big punch-ups.

Spreading rumours is really hurtful, to communities and to our culture. It makes people think our home is scary. And when people think your home is scary, they don't come to visit. Part of the problem is that Lateral Violence can make you lazy. When you are feeling low, sometimes it's easier to bring other people down to a bad level, and harder to say something good.

Tongue-wagging, or what we call yarn-carting, happens at school, at home, down the road, and at parties. But we want to stop running each other down. We've got ideas that we want to share with you. These are some of the ways we try to stop yarn-carting and to stop fights:

1. We use our feet. If there is trouble we use our feet to get away. This way me and my family can run free.
2. We can talk to people like teachers and teacher aides.
3. We use songs. We are writing a song about non-violence. We're recording it. We're even making a video clip. The first verse is:
'When I'm walking down the street
See the bogey man looking at me
Use my feet so I don't get beat
Me and my family running free'
4. If dangerous talk is happening, we can sometimes laugh about it in ways that makes it lose its strength. Or we can say 'let it go'.
5. Some of us find ways to not listen to the gossip at all, to ignore it. And then to have a different sort of conversation.
6. If you are already involved it's harder, but sometimes you can not fight. You can walk away if you are strong enough.
7. Another way to stop things getting bigger is to sit down and tongue-bang, talk it out together, you and the other person.
8. –And when someone is being run down, we can just tell our friends to stop it and to come together as a team.
9. If you have been fighting, when there is violence, then you can say sorry and sort it out.
This stops things getting bigger.
10. Finally, we remember to walk away and to leave it for another day.

Today we came together to talk about how gossip and yarn carting hurts people and our community and how it starts fights. It's good to talk about this.

We hope you will talk about it in your community.

From little things big things grow.

As Lateral Violence gets weaker, our community gets stronger.

We hope you like our ideas. Now we would like to hear from you.

We'll meet again sometime.

From the students of Wadja Wadja High
here in Woorabinda, Australia

Making us proud

One of the Elders of Woorabinda, when she heard these ideas from the young people, said: 'The words of these young people make us proud. It makes me realise we are never too old to learn and we can learn together. Now people from other communities will hear the words from the Woorabinda Elders and the smart ideas from our young people. We can learn together. These words of our young people, they make us proud.'

Making us even more proud

Recently the young people at Wadja Wadja High School made a video about Lateral Violence and Lateral Love. You can watch this at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyTRuXjjTAU

This made us even more proud!

About these documents

These documents were created in Woorabinda in November 2012 during a workshop facilitated by Barbara Wingard and David Denborough from Dulwich Centre Foundation (www.dulwichcentre.com.au/dulwich-centre-foundation); organised by Troy Holland from the Central Queensland Rural Division of General Practice; and funded by the Healing Foundation. Prior to the creation of this document, Aunty Barbara played the 'character' of 'Lateral Violence' using the script 'A conversation with Lateral Violence'. For more information, or if you would like to exchange ideas with the people of Woorabinda in relation to ways of addressing and preventing Lateral Violence, please write to dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au or troy.holland@cqrdgp.com.au