

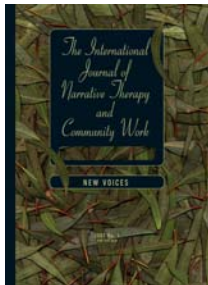


Dulwich Centre  
Publications

Dear reader,

Most of the papers that can be downloaded from the Narrative Therapy Library and Bookshop were originally published in the **International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work**. We recommend this peer-reviewed journal to practitioners who wish to stay in touch with the latest ideas and developments in narrative therapy. This journal offers hopeful and creative ideas for counsellors, social workers, teachers, nurses, psychologists, and community workers.

In each issue, practitioners from a range of different countries discuss the ideas and practices that are inspiring them in their work, the dilemmas they are grappling with, and the issues most dear to their hearts. Their writings are easy-to-read while remaining rigorous and thoughtful. The first section of each issue revolves around a particular theme, while the second consists of a collection of practice-based papers on various topics. The journal is produced four times a year. If you wish to stay in touch with the latest developments in narrative practice, we hope you will subscribe and become a part of our community of readers!



### To subscribe

If you wish to subscribe to this journal, please contact your local distributor:

North America: Narrative Books (USA) [kenwoodtherapycenter@mac.com](mailto:kenwoodtherapycenter@mac.com)

UK: Narrative Books (UK) [mark@hayward.flyer.co.uk](mailto:mark@hayward.flyer.co.uk)

Australia & elsewhere: Dulwich Centre Publications:  
[dcp@dulwichcentre.com.au](mailto:dcp@dulwichcentre.com.au)

Ask about current special offers for new subscribers!

### Narrative Therapy Library and Bookshop

Back issues of the **International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work** are available for purchase via: [www.narrativetherapylibrary.com](http://www.narrativetherapylibrary.com)

This website makes it possible to research, browse, and purchase writings about narrative therapy. It contains an extensive bibliography about narrative therapy and community work which can be searched via author, title, or keyword.

**[www.narrativetherapylibrary.com](http://www.narrativetherapylibrary.com)**

Email: [support@narrativetherapylibrary.com](mailto:support@narrativetherapylibrary.com)

**Dulwich Centre website:**  
**[www.dulwichcentre.com.au](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au)**

#### Copyright

The following material is copyright © Dulwich Centre Publications. Except as permitted under the *Australian Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, communicated, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission. All enquiries should be made to the copyright owner at: Dulwich Centre Publications, Hutt St PO Box 7192, Adelaide, SA, Australia, 5000; email [dcp@dulwichcentre.com.au](mailto:dcp@dulwichcentre.com.au)

#### **4. Naming Abuse and Breaking From its Effects\***

*Interviewer: Christopher McLean\*\**

**Chris:** Your approach to working with survivors of abuse seems to focus on helping people to break free of the negative stories they hold about themselves. Could you start by talking about this?

**Michael:** When I meet with a person who has survived abuse in childhood and adolescence, very often what's brought them to the consultation are certain behaviours that are self-destructive or self-abusive, behaviours that are experienced as actions against the self, that are unfavourable to their life. These actions can take many forms including self-mutilation, addictions, and multiple suicide attempts. It is my view that these self-destructive behaviours are an expression of the abuse that the person has been subject to. But this is a particular form of the expression of this experience. This is an expression of the experience of abuse that brings about profoundly negative consequences in the person's life, an expression of the abuse that informs real effects that are highly impoverishing to the person's life.

---

\* This interview was conducted at Dulwich Centre in May 1994.

\*\* Christopher McLean can be contacted c/- Dulwich Centre Publications.

The narrative metaphor provides a particular perspective on this phenomenon. It would suggest that these self-destructive expressions of the abuse are shaped by the meanings that the person is giving to the abuse itself; that it is these meanings that determine the form of the expression of one's experiences in life. This consideration is usually confirmed when we talk with people about their understandings of the abuse that they have been subject to. These understandings invariably feature themes of culpability and unworthiness; that somehow the person deserved the abuse or had it coming to them, or could have stopped it if they really wanted to. And, in that these people believe that the acts of self-abuse confirm these themes, there is a circularity to all of this.

To summarise, self-abuse is an expression of one's experiences of abuse, an expression that is shaped by the meanings given to the abuse. And the shape of this expression, in turn confirms these meanings. It is the meanings that mediate the expression of one's experience of abuse. So when we are considering the nature of people's expressions of abuse, it is vitally important that we consider these expressions as units of experience and meaning.

**Chris:** How are these meanings arrived at?

**Michael:** These meanings are arrived at very much through the private stories that people have about their lives. These stories provide the frame through which people interpret their experiences of life. And if a person is recruited into a very negative story about who they are as a person, then it is likely that they will give meanings to their experiences that emphasise culpability and worthlessness.

**Chris:** So where does that take you in terms of working with people who have survived abuse and who have been recruited into very negative stories about who they are, and who might be expressing their experience of abuse in ways that are self-abusive and self-destructive?

**Michael:** It suggests that one of the primary tasks of this work is to assist

these people to derive alternative meanings of their experiences of abuse; to establish the conditions that make it possible for them to reinterpret the abuse. If we can play some part in assisting these people to break their lives from those very negative personal stories that have such a profound effect on shaping the expression of their experience, and if we can help them to step into some other more positive account of who they might be as a person, then it will become possible for them to actively engage in the reinterpretation of the abuse that they were subject to. And this reinterpretation will change the shape of the expression of people's experiences of abuse, and therefore the shape of their lives.

**Chris:** Say something more about the process of this reinterpretation.

**Michael:** This reinterpretation is not one that is imposed by the therapist, but one that is generated collaboratively in the course of this work. When people break their lives from the very negative stories of their identity, and when they have the opportunity to stand in a different territory of their life, they start interpreting their experiences of abuse as exploitation, as tyranny, as torture, as violence and so on. It's very clear that this reinterpretation facilitates a different expression of their experience of abuse. This expression of the abuse now takes the form of outrage, of passion for justice, of acts to address injustice, of testimony, of searching out contexts in which others might be available to bear witness to these testimonies, and so on.

These alternative forms of expression of a person's experiences of abuse are not lesser expressions of one's experiences of abuse than those self-destructive forms. As expressions of one's experiences of abuse, these are not less complete. In fact, the people with whom I work invariably state that these alternative forms constitute a fuller expression of that experience. These are expressions of that experience that brings with them very different real effects on the shape of their lives, effects that are judged to be constructive rather than destructive.

**Chris:** I believe that you have some reservations about practices involving

revisiting the original traumatic experience as a way of breaking free of it. I would be interested if you could explain your concerns, as it seems to relate to what you have been saying.

**Michael:** First things first. There is no excuse for people to experience re-traumatisation within the context of therapy. Distress yes, re-traumatisation no. I believe that the notion of healing practices based on the imperative of returning to the site of the abuse in order to re-experience this is a highly questionable notion, and, as well, dangerous. This notion is often justified by the theory of catharsis, and this is a theory that obscures the critical dimension of meaning. To simply encourage people to return to the site of trauma can reinforce for them the dominant meanings that inform the self-destructive expression of the experience of abuse. And, this can contribute to renewed trauma and it can incite renewed actions of self-abuse.

Of course, there are many other reasons to question this idea about the importance of returning to the site of trauma. At the time that these people were subject to abuse, they had no power, they had no choice - they were trapped. In response to such impossible and agonising circumstances, many developed rather fantastic mechanisms that enabled them to escape the abusive context - not materially, but to spirit themselves away in mind. Others used what little manoeuvring space that was available to them to create experiences of self-sustenance - and, in circumstances such as these, this is simply an extraordinary achievement. Now let me pose a question. In requiring people to return to the site of trauma, are we not reproducing conditions that are entrapping, that are dispossessing people of choice?

And there are other questions that we could ask about this. In requiring people to return to the site of trauma, are we not also unwittingly reproducing our culture's phobia about flight? Are we not being just too complicit with this culture's imperative of "facing up"? And in this complicity, are we not closing down the possibilities that might be available to people for the honouring of the special skills and the personal qualities that made it possible for them to navigate through the dark hours of their lives and into the present?

**Chris:** What is the alternative?

**Michael:** In the work that I am proposing, it does become possible for people to give expression to their experience of abuse in ways that don't bring about the negative consequences to which I have referred. Circumstances can be established that make it possible for people to enter their lives into alternative expressions of their experience, and this can be achieved without imposition on the therapist's part. Under these circumstances, people find themselves standing in some of the alternative territories of their lives, territories in which they can get in touch with different and more positive stories of their identity. And this makes it possible for people to give different meanings to their experiences of abuse which, in turn, makes it possible for them to express these experiences in ways that aren't likely to be retraumatizing of them.

**Chris:** I think that the whole concept of the cathartic expression of grief as a freeing thing is so deeply ingrained in modern ways of thinking about these sorts of issues, that what you're saying could easily sound as though you favour a very intellectual way of dealing with the effects of abuse, and that somehow you are uncomfortable with the open expression of emotion. I wonder if you would like to say a bit about that.

**Michael:** I cry with the people who consult me, and I also laugh with them. I join them in outrage, and also in joy. We experience sadness together, and also hope. As I walk for a while with these people, I experience all of the emotions that one experiences in bearing witness to testimony. As well, there are contexts in which I find myself celebrating with people - contexts in which the alternative stories of their lives are being honoured, when the other accounts of their identity are being powerfully authenticated. And I experience inspiration from the steps that people take to dispossess perpetrators of their authority, the steps that people take in reclaiming the territories of their lives, in the refashioning of their lives, in having the "last say" about who they are.

So, let me put to rest these concerns about "intellectual ways" and

about "discomfort with emotion". I do not regard my position to be an academic or an intellectual one. But this doesn't mean that I feel compelled to join the dominant "feeling discourse" of the culture of psychotherapy, to practice in the ways that are specified by this discourse, and to talk with people about the experiences of their lives in the contemporary ways of speaking about such things that are prescribed in and sanctioned by this discourse. I do not respond at all well to the various incitements to "fit myself out" with the responses that are called for by this "feeling discourse".

At this point, I would like to further respond to your comment by reiterating what I have said about the notion of catharsis. I don't believe that there is any expression of any experience that stands outside a system of meaning. And I would also like to reiterate what I have said about distress. There is an entirely significant distinction to be drawn between distress and traumatisation. I think it is possible for people to be expressing aspects of their experiences of abuse in ways that might be distressing, but that aren't re-traumatising of them. It is possible and desirable for people to find options for giving voice to their experiences of abuse in ways that are profoundly healing for them, and in ways that they judge to be entirely expressive.

**Chris:** How can you be sure that re-traumatisation is not occurring?

**Michael:** We can assist people to take a far more active role in monitoring the real effects of the expressions of their experiences of abuse, instead of leaving it to chance or to the authority of a therapist. Very often, when people attend therapy, they get disconnected from this role. They cease to monitor the consequences of their interactions with their therapist, and leave this to the therapist's determination. This outcome is problematic. Throughout the process of therapy, we need to be continually consulting people about what they perceive to be the effects of our work with them, about how the reinterpretation and expression of their experience is affecting the shape of their lives, and about what they understand to be the limitations and possibilities associated with our conversations.

**Chris:** I'd like now to explore your views on the importance of establishing a political or contextual appreciation of a person's experience of abuse, and, in particular, how the concept of recruitment fits into this idea.

**Michael:** To assist people to establish an account of the politics of their experience helps to undermine the self-blame and the shame that is so often experienced in relation to the abuse itself. One way that this can be achieved is through engaging with people in externalizing conversations about the self-hate, self-loathing, or whatever it is that constitutes the person's primary relationship with their "self". In these externalizing conversations, we can explore with people what this self-hate talks them into about who they are as people, how it has them treating their lives, their bodies, their thoughts, how it interferes in their relationships with others, and so on. And together we can also explore the processes by which the person was recruited into self-hate and self-loathing.

**Chris:** So you emphasise questions about how the person got recruited into self-hate, or self-loathing, or whatever, and this has the effect of bringing forth the politics of the person's experience?

**Michael:** Yes, it is primarily through such questions that this is achieved. It is through such questions that we wind up identifying the specifics of this process of recruitment - not just the physical processes of abuse, but also the knowledges, the strategies and the techniques that were employed, and the workings of these knowledges, strategies and techniques. But we would not arrive at this place by referencing our work to the idea of returning to the site of the trauma. In responding to these externalizing questions, people are actually engaging in a reinterpretation of their experiences of abuse, and are breaking from the negative stories of identity that have been so capturing of them. No longer can the abuse reflect personal culpability, and no longer does it reflect to people the truth of their "nature" and of their "personality". I believe that these externalizing conversations can be considered as "deconstructing" conversations.

Perhaps another way of stating this, one that is inspired by the



narrative metaphor, is that the reinterpretation that is triggered by these questions provides a basis for a renaming of the dominant plots of people's lives - away from themes of personal culpability, and towards exploitation, tyranny, abuse, and so on.

**Chris:** You have talked, I believe, about the importance of naming abuse, not simply as abuse, but in its particularities. Could you say more about that?

**Michael:** Yes. I understand that it is really important that people go further than a general naming of the abuse. The word abuse is an important but global term, but its lack of specificity is somewhat limiting in several senses. For example, testimony requires specificity, as does the establishment of a capacity to discern, in one's life, actions that are of a loving nature from actions that are abusive or exploitative. Also, to connect one's experiences of abuse to the dominant knowledges and practices of power in our culture requires this specificity.

Once abuse knowledges and techniques are established in their specificity, they can be contextualised - linked to the dominant knowledges and practices of power of our culture, the familiar operations of which can be traced through history in families and other institutions of our culture, and through the history of the dominant knowledges and practices of men's ways of being in relation to women, children, and to other men. This contextualisation of abuse knowledges and practices is a very important aspect of this work. It provides further opportunities for the reinterpretation of one's experiences of abuse and for the deconstruction of the negative stories of identity of which we have been speaking.

Once abuse knowledges and practices are established in their specificity, this very significantly (a) facilitates the preparation of "adequate" testimony, one that is experience-near, (b) assists people to develop a degree of "discernment" that makes it possible for them to distinguish those actions that are directed towards them that are exploitative, abusive or neglectful in nature from those actions directed towards them that are supportive, loving or caring in nature, and (c) expands the possibilities that

are before people to take action to resist and to challenge these knowledges and practices in their day-to-day lives.

**Chris:** I believe that you have, on occasion, even prescribed the reading of a book on the purposes and effects of torture. I am wondering about what actual effects this has, and, in the light of your statements about re-traumatisation, is there a danger that this could in actual fact be a traumatising experience?

**Michael:** I'd like to go back to the point that I was making before about meaning. I'd never suggest such reading until I had a strong sense that the person who was consulting me was actually engaging in the reinterpretation of their experiences of abuse. Once that's established, it can be very helpful to read such accounts. It is particularly interesting to people who have survived abuse to learn that those people who have survived torture also experienced similar degrees of guilt and shame, and were recruited into very negative attitudes towards themselves through that experience. It might be distressing to read of these accounts under these circumstances, but the transparency is not re-traumatising. This contributes further to the renaming of the abuse.

It really helps for people to know that torture is not a test that establishes an individual's moral worth, that torture is not a response to wrong-doing, that torture is not even primarily about extracting confessions - but that its purposes relate more to breaking down identity, to breaking down a sense of community and to isolating people from each other, to destroying self-respect and to demoralising, to depersonalising the world in people's experience of it, and so on. For those who have survived abuse, this is an important understanding, one that undermines the sense of culpability and of shame that is so disabling.

**Chris:** You have talked about the importance of survivors of abuse expressing outrage at what they have experienced. How do you think this is affected by our culture's attitude to anger, particularly women's anger?

**Michael:** I do appreciate that everybody has the right to express what is generally referred to as anger, and the fact that for women this right has so often been disqualified in this culture. But I do want to ask, "Why this word?" Why always mediate this expression through a word like anger? In this culture, people always want to talk about anger, and they do so within the context of a specific discourse. In the context of this discourse, anger is so highly valued. It's venerated. It is put on a pedestal. It is constantly referred to. It is considered the primary force of our nature. It is fetishised. This anger is something that people are always having to do something about. We are fixated on the notion of "unresolved anger". It is considered to be at the root of all sorts of terrible maladies. But I've often thought that perhaps this fixation itself is the malady that we suffer from.

And there is so much talk about "the angry woman", which is invariably a disqualification of women's experience of gender politics. I have often been consulted by women who refer to themselves in this way and who have learned to pathologise themselves on this account. I have interviewed these women about how they have made this interpretation, and they often share with me the "insights" that they have achieved during previous counselling experiences. Now, these insights provide for thinking about whatever the experience of "anger" is in a way that is devoid of context. Anger, in this sense, is one of those words that is part of a discourse that psychologises, obscures context, and limits possibilities for action in the world. But what about "outrage"? What about "passion" for justice? These interpretations or descriptions are part of a different discourse, one that brings with it options for addressing context, and options for the expression of this experience through action. Discourses are constitutive, they are shaping of our lives. Within the context of these alternative interpretations or descriptions, the experience that is so often referred to as anger is no longer something to be worked through, or some state of being, but something to be honoured.

**Chris:** What you are saying here about anger seems to me to fit in with some of the concerns that I have heard you express about popular psychological concepts as co-dependency, and about systems analyses that

interpret abuse as a function of a relationship. Could you say more about your concerns?

**Michael:** All of this psychologising of personal experience, and all of these formal analyses, are deeply conservative. They are invariably pathologising of the lives of those people who have been subject to abuse, and, in so doing, divert attention from the politics of the situation. As well, so many of the interpretations of this sort discriminate against women's ways of being in the world and champion dominant men's ways of being in the world.

**Chris:** One of the specific notions implicated in this is the idea that women who have experienced abuse actively seek further abusive relationships due to some internalized, psychological mechanisms. Could you comment on this?

**Michael:** This is an interpretation that is based on certain observations. Women who have experienced abuse in childhood and adolescence, and who have, in their adult life, stepped into a relationship in which a man has subjected them to further abuse, often only escape these relationships to wind up in other relationships in which they are again subject to abuse by men. This phenomenon is taken up into the various psychologies, and triggers the fabrication of a whole range of explanations that refer to psychological mechanisms. Most of these explanations include a pathological account of the woman's motive for entering into these relationships.

Now, we have to ask, what effects do these interpretations have on women's lives? Well, I have asked women this question, and I am sure that it would not be too hard for you to guess the responses that have come back. These interpretations encourage women to take responsibility for the abuse that is being perpetrated by men. These interpretations encourage women to persevere in relationships in which they are being subject to violence by men. Interpretations of this sort are in the service of maintaining the status quo.

**Chris:** So, how else might this phenomenon be interpreted - women who have been subject to abuse entering into relationships in which they are further abused by men?

**Michael:** There is lots of evidence to support the idea that this vulnerability is born of difficulties in the area of discernment - difficulties in distinguishing abuse from nurture, neglect from care, exploitation from love, and so on. This difficulty with discernment renders many women quite vulnerable to being exploited in relationships. If it is not possible for a woman to discern abuse from nurture at the outset of a relationship, then it is not possible for her to attend to the early warning signs and to confront this abuse, and to seize upon the option of breaking the connection before it becomes more fully established and encompassing of her identity.

**Chris:** What's the background for this difficulty in discernment, with this difficulty in drawing crucial distinctions around one's experience?

**Michael:** Most people who have been abused as children or adolescents have experienced this within the institutions of our culture that are formally designated as loving and caring contexts - that is, in families, extended kinship networks, or in the institutions that substitute for families and for these networks. To experience abuse in contexts that are designated as loving and caring contexts is both mystifying and confusing. To experience abuse in these contexts makes it difficult for people to establish the distinctions to which I have referred, that is those that relate to abuse and nurture, neglect and care, exploitation and love. The popular myth that the family is "the haven in a cruel world" has contributed significantly to this mystification. It has been established that a very significant proportion of families are highly dangerous places for children.

But we don't need to experience abuse in our families of origin to have later difficulties in discerning abuse from nurture. At times we all find it difficult to make this discernment. After all, we have grown up in a culture that is informed by folklore that blurs crucial distinctions: "You've

got to be cruel to be kind", "Spare the rod, spoil the child", and so on. Now, for those people who have been subject to abuse, and I am here talking about traumatic abuse perpetrated in a context that this culture defines as protective and supportive, this makes it incredibly more difficult to discern abuse from nurture and exploitation from love.

And, for many, this blurring of significant distinctions is recurrent. Let us take commonly-accepted notions of jealousy. So often counsellors are consulted by women who are subject to forms of abuse from their male partners that are interpreted as "jealousy". And, in these circumstances, this display of "jealousy" is understood to be an indicator of the extent to which the man values the woman partner, or is taken as a reflection of the degree of the intensity of his feelings for her. Women who have been subject to abuse historically are highly vulnerable to these sorts of interpretations that are used by men justify and extend on their abusive behaviours.

**Chris:** Could you say something about how you go about reinterpreting these stories, so that a person who has experienced abuse is more able to develop this capacity for discernment?

**Michael:** Therapy can provide a context for assisting people to establish this discernment. We can start by exploring with them some of the real effects of the abuses that they have been subject to in their lives. We can work to identify self-destructive acts as expressions of experiences of abuse, and we can engage them in conversations that draw distinctions around these sorts of expressions of the experience of abuse and those sort of expressions that are based on a reinterpretation or a renaming of the abuse itself. We can work together to identify unique outcomes - those personal actions that cannot be read as self-rejection, but as self-care. These unique outcomes provide a point of entry to the counterplots of women's lives, those accounts that have to do with survival, resilience, protest, resistance, and so on.

Once these plots have been juxtaposed, and as this work proceeds, we can encourage the woman to sort their day-to-day experiences of life into one or the other. Does this event fit with abuse or self-abuse, or does

it fit with care or self-care? Does this interaction invite self-rejection, or does it invite self-acceptance? And so on. One outcome of this work is that it becomes much easier for women to distinguish the different actions that they are subject to, and those that they subject themselves to, as either supportive or neglectful of their person. Another outcome is that the counterplots of women's lives become more clearly articulated - this sorting and linking process "thickens" these counterplots - and often for the first time women begin to identify preferred accounts of their wants, tastes, desires, purposes, goals, hopes and so on.

As this capacity, this skill in discernment develops, women report that the confusion that has been all-pervasive begins to dissipate. Women and men who have been subject to abuse in childhood and adolescence, and who have been isolated in this abuse, so often report that they never experience being in touch with life. And more than this. Not only do they talk of their inability to touch life, but also of the fact that they cannot see "it" clearly - that trying to see life is like looking through a haze or a fog. As people start to draw the sort of distinctions to which I have been referring, invariably the fog begins to lift. Initially there are wonderful but fleeting episodes of clarity of "sight". Over time, this clarity is generalised. Women are then less at risk of persisting in relationships in which they are subject to abuse and exploitation.

**Chris:** So often during the course of this interview, you have emphasised the importance of bringing forth the context of people's experiences of abuse. I did have some understanding of this before this interview, but it has to an extent surprised me to hear about just how far you go in attending to context in this work.

**Michael:** You are right about this emphasis. It is very important that the abusive practices to which men and women are subject get put in context. This is important for all of the reasons that we have already discussed, and also because it brings for the people who consult us an appreciation of the extent to which they are not the sole recipients of these abusive practices, that this is not something that is unique to their lives - that, although the

abuse was isolating of them from others, they were not alone in their experience of this.

I know that people can achieve this appreciation without in anyway contributing to an understatement of their experience of the trauma of abuse - without in any way minimising this experience, or the expression of this experience - and without in any way diminishing their understanding of and articulation of the very significant consequences of this abuse to their lives. As people reference their experiences of abuse to context, they become less vulnerable to the pathologising of their identities, and less likely to be recruited into the shame that this pathologising is in league with.

An understanding of this context also makes it possible for people to determine the extent to which their own parents might have been reproducing the abusive practices that they were subject to in their own families of origin, and to determine whether or not their parents had done even fractionally better than their grandparents did. Of course, not all parents do better than their parents did, and some do worse. But women and men have informed me that determinations of this sort are very important. Determinations of this sort engage people in a comprehension of the extent to which, in their personal work to reclaim their lives from the effects of abuse, they are involved in a project that has to do with making it their business to challenge abusive practices that have often been carried across generations in their families. And determinations of this sort make it possible for these women and men to appreciate the ways that they might have done better than their own parents did, and provides them with direction in the furthering of this work.

**Chris:** For some reason, this discussion brings to mind a question that I have heard you use in your work: "If you'd had yourself for a parent, what difference would this have made to your life?" This raised my curiosity. What are you getting at with this question?

**Michael:** There are two categories of questions of this sort that are very helpful, and they go something like this:



- (a) *How do you imagine your life might have been if you'd had yourself as a father/mother? If you'd had yourself for a mother/father, what would have been appreciated about you as a child that wasn't appreciated in you as a child? What difference would it have made to you growing up if you'd had yourself for a father/mother? In what ways would you have been more accepting of yourself? In what ways do you think that you might have experienced yourself as lovable?*
- (b) *Just imagine, if you were your own son/daughter, what would it be about your experience of being parented that would enrich your life? If you were your own son/daughter, what parenting qualities do you think you would be experiencing that would be enriching of your life?*

Questions of this sort are generally effective in challenging the negative "truths" of identity that people get recruited into through their experiences of abuse. One's sense of identity is very significantly determined by one's experience of other people's experiences of who one is. And since one's parents are primary in this, so often it is parents who abuse who wind up having the last say about who one is, and about how one relates to one's self. Questions of the sort that I have outlined here undermine the authority of parents who abuse, who are mostly men, and open up possibilities for women and men to revise their relationship with their "self".

These questions make it possible for people to identify aspects of their lives as children, as well as personal qualities and characteristics, that might have been entirely appreciated under other circumstances, within the contexts of other relationships. These questions also make it possible for people who have been abused to experience the sort of compassion for themselves that they often experience for others. In this way, women and men's responses to these questions have the effect of dispossessing those parents who abuse from having the last say on matters of identity.

**Chris:** Okay, that satisfies my curiosity to an extent. But I would like to know more about this, so perhaps we could pick it up again at some other

time. Let us now turn to the difficulties that women have in leaving and staying out of relationships in which men are abusing them. I know that you have said that this can be far more difficult than most women expect.

**Michael:** There are many important considerations that make it difficult for women to leave these relationships. Apart from those that we have already discussed in this interview, there are considerations of an economic nature, and those that relate to the existence of few options for alternative housing, lack of support from relatives and friends, threats and harassment from the men concerned, and so on.

But there is another important consideration that we should discuss here. Usually, at the point of separation, and/or in the period leading up to this point, women who are being abused by their men partners do experience rising expectations - expectations that, through this course of action, that is, separation, they might emerge from the terror and the despair that has become so much part of their daily existence, and expectations that they might find themselves arriving at a degree of well-being. However, despite the rising expectations that are experienced up to the point of separation and for a short time after this, wherever these women find themselves following separation - whether this be in their own accommodation, in refuges or staying with friends or relatives - there is a very real risk early in this journey that they will turn back to an unchanged violent situation. And, a great percentage of women in fact do this.

So often, shortly after leaving the man who is violent, women begin to lose their sense of relief at having escaped, as well as their hopefulness about new options and possibilities for their own lives and for the lives of their children, and find themselves sinking back into despair. Very soon they find themselves in a "trough", one characterised by confusion, disorientation, profound insecurity, and a sense of personal failure. Women's experience of this trough can be so overwhelming that they can find themselves feeling even worse than they did prior to leaving the abusive man. This development is often read as regress ("I am worse off than before"), and for many women this reading plays a significant role in forming a decision to turn back to an unchanged violent situation, despite

the alarm and the protest that this decision arouses in concerned others.

However, other readings of this "trough-like" experience are available, and some of these bring interpretations of this that can contribute significantly to averting this turning back to an unchanged violent situation, and can introduce new possibilities for action that are likely to be supportive of, and sustaining of, women through the separation process.

**Chris:** What is an example of such an alternative interpretation, and how is this introduced?

**Michael:** If women who are working to leave and to stay out of relationships in which they are subject to violence by men appreciate the extent to which this project engages them in a "migration of identity", and if they come to understand the processes involved in such migrations, then it becomes more possible for them to see this project through.

The identity that women have experienced prior to the separation is one that has been imposed in so many ways by the man who is abusive of them, and, as well, by other persons who might have perpetrated abuse in their families of origins, and/or in some of the other institutions of this culture.

Because achieving control of the woman is such an imperative for men who abuse, throughout their relationships with women they go about relentlessly and systematically reinterpreting these women's histories and identities. So, when women take steps to break free, they are doing a great deal more than breaking from the ongoing trauma, they are doing a great deal more than breaking from a familiar social network, and they are doing a great deal more than stepping into material insecurity - although all of this alone is more than enough to have to deal with at any time in one's life.

At this time, women are also embarking on a migration of identity. And, in this migration, there is always some distance between the point of separation from the abusive context and the point of arrival at some preferred location in life, and at some alternative and preferred account of one's identity. There is always some distance between these two points in

terms of time. And in this space, as in any migratory process, women characteristically go through a range of experiences, many of them difficult. In this "liminal" or "betwixt and between" space, confusion and disorientation reigns, and often nothing seems manageable any more, not even one's relationship with one's children. It is in this space that women are vulnerable to a sense of total incompetence and personal failure, to feelings of desperation and acute despair.

**Chris:** So, how is this migration metaphor helpful in this work?

**Michael:** If women have the opportunity to map their experience of the descent into this trough of confusion and disorientation as part of a process, if they have the opportunity to map this as a part of an ongoing journey, rather than interpret it as regress, then they are less at risk of turning back to an unchanged violent context. If women can understand these experiences as the products of a migration of identity, it becomes more possible for them to persevere with their journey despite the disorientation and the confusion. Such acts of mapping assist women to place their distress within the context of progress, to stand by and to hold onto the idea that the future might hold something different for them, to hold onto their hopes, to their expectations for a better life, to keep in sight the horizon of another world.

To facilitate this mapping of one's experience of these migrations of identity, I regularly share with the women who consult me the graphs of other women's migration experiences under similar circumstances - graphs that other women have put together during our work, graphs that these women have given me permission to share with others. Upon reviewing these graphs, I regularly encourage the women who are consulting me to mark where they think they might be in their journey.

**Chris:** So women are invited to plot their own journey through reference to the journey of others?

**Michael:** Yes. I encourage women to reflect on their experiences of this

migration, to choose one of the sample graphs, and to mark on this the point at which they believe they are currently located in this journey. Women find that to put a cross on a graph that provides them with some indication of their location in a trajectory called a "migration of identity" - the very act of doing this - brings about a dramatic change in their attitude towards what they are going through. Interpretations of regress dissolve, and hope, an antidote to despair, resurfaces - and this is something that women can rely upon to see themselves through all of the confusion and disorientation that characterises, and can be predicted for, such journeys.

**Chris:** How do you go about introducing the idea of marking one's location on these maps?

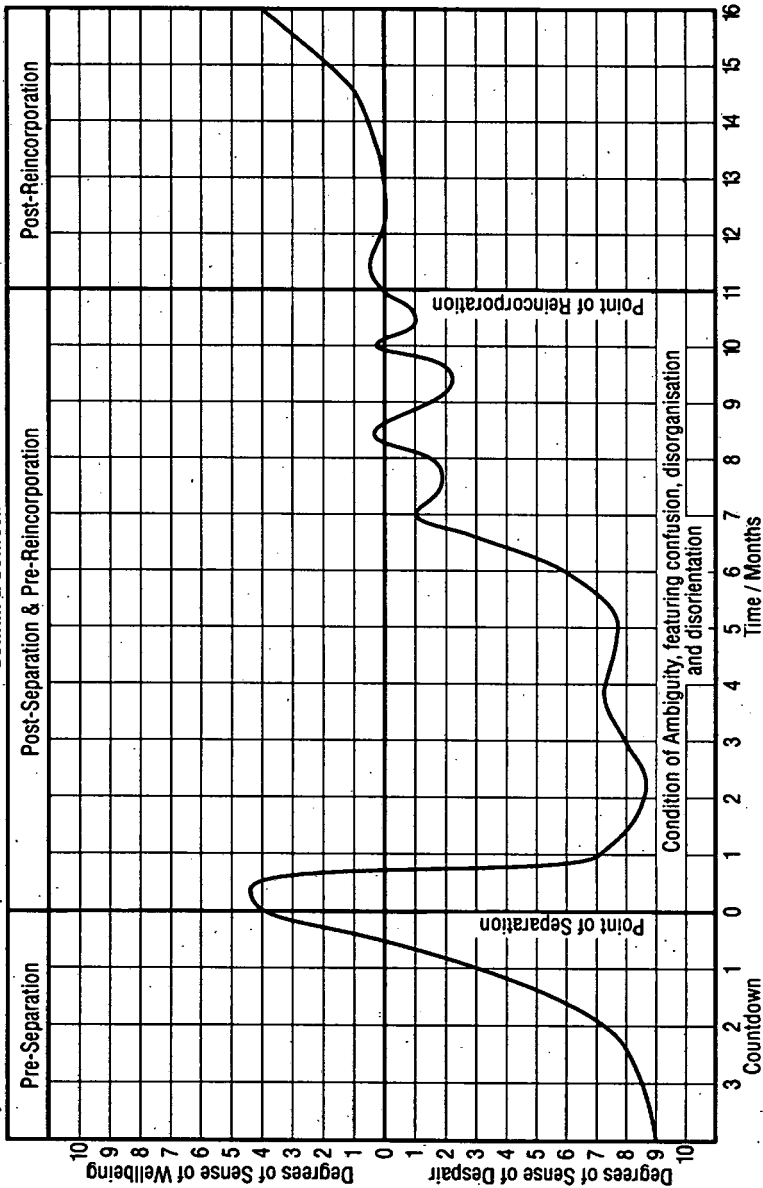
**Michael:** I usually ask questions like: *This is where Jane was at the three week mark. You are three weeks into this. Where do you think you are on this graph? Where would you locate your present position?* Mary might respond to these questions with something like, "Well, I think I'm feeling worse than Jane was at this point", and, depending on the shape of the sample graph, might wind up placing a mark on the graph that locates her current position somewhere further into the journey. Or Mary might say, "I don't think I'm feeling quite as desperate as Jane was at this point, so I think I'm here", and might locate her current position at a point that Jane had already reached at two weeks into her migration. I will include a copy of one of these graphs that might be published along with this transcript [page 102]. From this, readers will see that, in the initial stage of this migration, because of the sorts of experiences that can be predicted in migrations of identity, feeling worse is invariably interpreted as progress rather than regress.

**Chris:** So, women breaking from violent contexts are less at risk for turning back when they can refer to these maps. And if they can read their experience within the context of these maps they will know what to expect?

**Michael:** Yes. And in this way begin to feel less alarmed about the "betwixt

## Migration of Identity Betwixt & Between

**Voyager's Name:** Betty Noble  
**Departure Date:** 5th Sept 1991



and between" experiences of confusion, disorientation, and so on, and less vulnerable to states of acute despair which can only be complicating to these journeys.

I would like to emphasise here that no two graphs of this migration of identity are exactly alike, and together we have the task of identifying the particularities of the woman's journey. To achieve this, we can spend time reviewing all that the woman is separating from, as well as her recent experiences of the journey, and can begin speculating about what this might suggest about the future - about future circumstances of life, about ways of being in the world that might be on the horizon. We can also step into speculation about the distance that might be expected between separation and arrival or "reincorporation".

To assist speculation, I often share with women some of the details of the journeys of other women who had similar graphs. Based on the understandings of these journeys that other women have given me, I usually inform women that the very minimum time required for these migrations of identity is about nine months. However, I also inform them that, if the circumstances of this journey are right, they can expect to be feeling somewhat better well in advance of the point at which they are established in another location of life, and at a point at which they have secured a different and preferred sense of identity.

**Chris:** What do you mean, "if the circumstances are right?"

**Michael:** We can work to establish the right circumstances. For example, I usually encourage the women who consult me to interview other women about their migrations. These might be migrations similar to their own, or other kinds of migrations, including geographical migrations. In Australia, there would be very few people who would not know anyone who has migrated, and most would know someone who found the migration process difficult - who found the going hard to the extent that they nearly turned back, or perhaps wished they could have turned back. In interviewing others about migration experiences, women can identify what sustained them through this, and they can develop knowledges about what circumstances

are most favourable to perseverance. Further, they can get a keener sense of how far down the track they might be before feeling that they are breaking from some of the insecurity, confusion and disorientation that is associated with these migrations.

Planning a celebration at the point of arrival at the journey's end can also assist in establishing these circumstances. This planning can extend all the way through to putting together the invitation list, and even to preparing the invitations.

**Chris:** You have talked about the difficulties that survivors of abuse often have in developing supportive networks, and the negative meanings they often give to their need for help. Could you say something about this?

**Michael:** Many of the women I meet, and the men as well, who have been subject to abuse historically, are rather critical of themselves for what they see as their "dependent natures". They tend to pathologise themselves through various self-accusations for what they construe to be their dependency on others. At times, this is the concern that has been the basis for seeking the consultation. "Dependency" is a problem that is presented to be "resolved", and, in resolving this, people expect to reach a destination in their life at which they can "stand on their own two feet".

Now I often find this definition of the problem and this conclusion about the solution to be somewhat curious. Could it be that these definitions and these conclusions are informed by and reached through dominant cultural notions of what it means to be a real person - that is, "independent", "self-possessed", "self-contained", "self-actualising" etc. - and dominant cultural notions of how this might be achieved - that is, through separation?

My response to such self-accusations is often to take notes about "abuse team" membership over the course of the person's life, and notes about the operations of, and the period of operations of, this abuse team. This makes it possible for me to calculate the "weightiness" of the abuse team and its work through simple multiplication - that is, the number of abuse team members operative by the level of their operations by the



period of these operations. Membership includes all of those who were centrally and peripherally involved, including those who were complicit with the abuse, if not active in its perpetration. Then, together we can determine what might provide a counterweight to the abuse team. Now, it is logical that the establishment of a "nurturing team" could provide such a counterweight, and eventually tip the balance in the person's favour. It becomes possible to determine, through calculation, the requirements for nurturing team activity and membership. Certain projections can be made about these requirements through a calculation in which duration of involvement of, intensity of activity of, and the number of, nurturing team members are all linked in an inverse relationship - so it makes sense to include more people in the nurturing team, rather than less.

So, in this work, what people have determined to be dependency is reinterpreted. People step into alternative discourses about identity. Whatever "dependency" was, it is no longer some psychological fact of the person's life that needs to be "worked through", and the practices of self-accusation associated with this recede. It becomes possible for people to approach those whom they have believed they were dependent upon, and to formally extend an invitation to them to join the nurturing team. As well, nurturing team membership can be increased by encouraging people to identify and to approach others whom they think might be willing to join. If, after these steps there is a shortfall in membership, therapists can put people in touch with others who are "card carrying" nurturing team members who would be willing to play a part.

When prospective members receive formal invitations to join such teams, they are less likely to experience being burdened, and it is more likely that they will look forward to the first nurturing team meeting so that they can discuss their contribution. Upon receipt of this invitation, they are also far more likely to experience acknowledgement for their contribution to date. And it helps if, in the formal invitations, the nurturing work that they have already contributed is acknowledged.

**Chris:** So, what do these nurturing team meetings look like?

**Michael:** First, the person who has issued the invitations provides some account of the abuse team's membership, its activities, the duration of these activities, and the long-term effects of these activities. Second, the notion of the nurturing team is introduced, along with some thoughts about the part that this team could have to play in undoing the work of the abuse team. Third, the work that has already been done in this direction by prospective nurturing team members is acknowledged, along with the effects of this work. Fourth, prospective team members then talk about the sort of ongoing contribution to nurturing work that they believe might challenge the work of the abuse team, and that might fit with the necessities of their own lives in a way that would not be burdensome to them. Fifth, the person who called the meeting responds to these proposals, and makes further suggestions about what might work best for them. Sixth, all of these proposals and suggestions are negotiated, and plans are made for their introduction. At this time, these plans are worked through in their particularities.

**Chris:** Do you join these meetings?

**Michael:** I think that it is very important for the therapist to be present for at least the first of these meetings, to provide support and clarification. For therapists, as much as for the team members and for the person who called the meeting, these occasions can be deeply moving.

**Chris:** I suppose that this process of formalisation has a considerable effect on the morale of the team.

**Michael:** Yes. The team members experience stepping into more of a proactive role, one that doesn't exhaust - for example, one team member might enjoy expressing their artistic skills in making cards with messages that counter the "voices" of the abuse team, cards that the person who convened the nurturing team can receive in the mail three times a week. This proactive role is one in which the nurturing team member's central contribution is no longer one of responding to crises. Besides, the person

who has convened the nurturing team experiences fewer crises once the work of these teams is under way.

**Chris:** Do you think that the development of nurturing teams is particularly important in the period of time when a survivor of abuse is engaged in the migration of identity you spoke about earlier?

**Michael:** Yes, I think it is particularly important. It contributes to conditions that are favourable to perseverance and to hope, to conditions under which people are less likely to see themselves as a drain on others, and under which they are more able to just reach out and to take advantage of the support that is available.

**Chris:** I'd like to change the subject and ask a few questions about how you see the therapeutic relationship. I know you think it's important that the built-in power differences between the therapist and the client be openly recognised and addressed. Could you say why you see this as important, and how you approach this?

**Michael:** There's always a power differential within the therapeutic context, regardless of how committed we are to dismantling this, regardless of how determined we might be to establish this context as an egalitarian one. The acknowledgement of this brings to therapists a realisation that it is up to them to do their best to find ways of ensuring that this power differential doesn't have untoward effects on the lives of the people who consult them.

I am often consulted by men and women who have survived abuse, and there's great potential for this inherent power differential to have negative effects on these people's lives, and to reproduce some of the experiences that have been so subjugating of them. So, it is imperative that I talk with people about the possible negative effects of this power differential in the therapeutic context, and about how we might build in structures to mitigate these possibilities. But as well, and this perhaps is a more primary consideration, there is the fact that I'm a man and it's usually men who perpetrate the abuses that we have been talking of in this

interview. So, I also need to talk to those who consult me about how this fact might introduce certain hazards to the therapeutic interaction, about how this fact could possibly lead to the inadvertent reproduction of past experiences of domination and of disqualification.

**Chris:** What do you talk about that draws attention to the potential hazards in this work that are the outcome of your gender?

**Michael:** This depends entirely upon the circumstances at hand, and can be informed by a developing appreciation of the person's experience of the politics of gender. In response to this I might find myself talking about my understanding of the extent to which the behaviour of others is so often governed by the mood of "senior" men - or, if you like, by a senior man's display of mood - and of the extent to which there are possibilities that some of my responses might be read as mood-related, and might be experienced as somehow controlling of the person, or disqualifying of the their knowledgeableness in the context of therapy. Or, in other circumstances, I might find myself speculating about entirely different hazards. In reviewing potential hazards such as these, plans can be worked out for monitoring them, drawing attention to them should they be recognised by either party, and for addressing them within the context of therapy.

But, this sort of acknowledgement of these possible dangers and limitations of this work is not enough. I believe that we need be thorough in our efforts to build in practices and structures of accountability. I have described some of these practices and structures of accountability in a piece entitled *A conversation about accountability*, and will not review them here.

**Chris:** Just picking up on what you have been saying about the mood of the "senior male", I think that it is particularly important for us to recognise the extent to which interactions in families may be governed by the mood of the father, and the extent to which this can play itself out in therapeutic contexts when families are consulting therapists. I've heard you make similar observations. And I think I've heard you talking about the

importance of therapists recognising the extent to which their participation might be governed by these moods. Have I heard you correctly on this?

**Michael:** That's correct. When working with families, or for that matter, when working with heterosexual couples, I believe that it is important for therapists to be aware of this issue. We all have experiences of the dominant men's culture, and many aspects of this experience are profoundly negative. My guess is that most of the readers of this transcript could readily relate stories about circumstances of their lives under which what they've said and how they have acted has been considerably determined by the moods of some senior male. And a very great number of us have been taught to fear and to be beware of these moods. So, when confronted by the moods of senior men, we are somewhat vulnerable to stepping into behaviour that goes against our own better judgement, that compromises our chosen values, that violates our relationships with our "selves".

So, it makes a great deal of sense for us to take responsibility for the monitoring of our responses to the senior men in therapeutic contexts. This affords some chance of determining whether or not our perceptions of the man's mood are determining of our responses in this work. Needless to say, if these moods are determining of our responses to the other members of the families that consult us, then we are undoubtedly contributing to their experience of oppression.

**Chris:** As part of the increasingly widespread claims that men's experience is being ignored in the process of paying attention to women's experience, I've heard it stated recently by both men and some women that mothers are just as likely as fathers, or even more likely, to abuse young children. Could you comment on your experience in this area, and how you see the context of these claims?

**Michael:** I think that these claims are very much part of a general backlash. These claims are achieved by blurring certain important distinctions around the definition of abuse. Many researchers seem

committed to blurring this distinction. For many years, I have worked with women and men who have been abused, and who have experienced this abuse under a range of circumstances. And almost invariably the abuse has been perpetrated by men.

Now, I know that it has been said that women and men find it more difficult to reveal abuse by their mothers than by their fathers, but this doesn't make a great deal of sense. I've not heard one convincing reason for men and women to have more difficulty in revealing abuse by their mothers than by their fathers. In fact, because in our culture it has generally been expected that the fathers are the disciplinarians, and that they may legitimately resort to corporal methods, I believe that women's attempts at the disciplining of children are more likely to be read as abuse than are men's. In fact, it seems only rarely that the abuses that men perpetrate in the name of discipline get read as abuse.

Add to this consideration the fact that this culture of ours is a "mother-blaming culture" - I do not believe that it is possible to successfully refute this fact. Under this circumstance, I have not a doubt that any abuses that are perpetrated by mothers are far more likely to be taken up and placed under the microscope than are the abuses that are perpetrated by fathers. So, I think that this claim that you are referring to is a spurious claim, and, as I have said, part of a general, and at times well-organised, backlash against the voices of women on the issue of abuse.

**Chris:** So, what would you say about the experiences of those men who have in actual fact been seriously abused by a female person in their lives? Because what you've just said could possibly read as a disqualification of their experience.

**Michael:** I do hope that nothing that I have said at any point in this interview is experienced as disqualification of men's experiences when they have been abused by women, or of women's experiences when they have been abused by women. I have worked with men and with women who have experienced abuse from their mothers, and other women, and, in this circumstance, have attended as carefully to the articulation of this as I have

to the articulation of any other experiences of abuse.

**Chris:** There are more questions that I would like to ask, about other aspects of your work with people who have survived abuse. Is that okay?

**Michael:** I have appreciated your questions so far, and they have provided me with the opportunity to articulate many of my thoughts about this work. But right now I need a break. Perhaps we could get back to some of these other questions on another occasion. Could I also suggest that you might be interested in reading Sheridan Linnell and Dorothy Cora's *Discoveries: A group resource guide for women who have been sexually abused in childhood*. This resource guide is a good source of information about practical and creative applications of this work within the narrative tradition.

**Chris:** Okay, I'll look for this. And let's make some plans to meet again about this work. Thank you, Michael.

## REFERENCE

Linnell, S. & Cora, D. 1993:

**Discoveries: A group resource guide for women who have been sexually abused in childhood.** Sydney: Dymyna House Publications.