



A storyline of collective narrative practice: A HISTORY OF IDEAS, SOCIAL PROJECTS AND PARTNERSHIPS

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Collective narrative practice is an emerging field. Building on the thinking and practice foundations of narrative therapy, collective narrative practice seeks to respond to groups and communities who have experienced significant social suffering in contexts in which 'therapy' may not be culturally resonant. This paper tells a story of this emerging field. It describes the author's journey through the intellectual history of six key aspects of narrative therapy as well as richly describing a range of social projects and partnerships. In doing so, this paper provides an historical foundation to the emerging field of collective narrative practice.

Keywords: narrative therapy, collective narrative practice, history of ideas, externalising, narrative metaphor, therapeutic letters, partnerships, anthropology, folk psychology, Michael White, David Epston, the Just Therapy Team, Cheryl White, Barbara Wingard, Dulwich Centre Foundation.

Collective narrative practice is an emerging field. Building on the thinking and practice foundations of narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1989, 1990; White, 1989a; Epston 1989a), collective narrative practice seeks to respond to groups and communities who have experienced significant social suffering in contexts in which 'therapy' may not be culturally resonant. This paper tells the story of my path through this emerging field. It provides an intellectual history of six key aspects of narrative therapy as well as richly describing a range of social projects and partnerships. I hope this historical tale can contribute to what is at present a relatively thin literature about the social and intellectual origins of narrative therapy.¹ I also hope this paper will provide an historical foundation to the field of collective narrative practice.

In writing this paper I have returned to texts that Michael White and David Epston wrote in the 1980s, prior to the naming of 'narrative therapy', and to the sources they were drawing upon. Alongside this intellectual history, collective narrative practice has also emerged from experiences, relationships, encounters, and cross-cultural and cross-gender partnerships. This paper describes my journey through all of this. It is a journey that began in 1993.

In 1993, at 23 years of age, I was living in Sydney. A few years earlier, I had graduated from Social Work, and I was working in a maximum security prison within the Welfare and Education Units. This involved facilitating groups for transgender inmates and for young men who had recently been imprisoned, and 'teaching' about issues of class, gender, and race within a welfare course for inmates who hoped to work in this area when they were released. At the same time, I was volunteering to meet regularly with young men in schools about considerations of gender and violence.

Looking back at this time in my life, I can see that I was really struggling to work out how to respond to what were, for me, two relatively recent discoveries:

- My family tree had been 're-planted on someone else's yard'²

Working within prisons meant that I was now in contact and forming significant connections with representatives of the First Nations of Australia. Before working in prisons, I had never to my knowledge met Aboriginal people. I had certainly never before tried to understand my life through the lens of Indigenous Australia. I had never before grappled with how police and prisons

in Australia represent the continuing occupation of Aboriginal lands and the continuing disenfranchisement of the poor.

- The harm that people of my gender (men) had done and were continuing to do to women, to children, and to other men.

Working within schools, I was meeting with young men on the cusp of adult masculinity. At times, delight, mirth and openness could be seen in their eyes. At other times, brutality and cruelty predominated. Each workshop we would run in schools with MASA (Men Against Sexual Assault³) involved witnessing how dominant forms of masculinity were shaping these young men's lives and trying our best to open space for other ways of being. Monday through to Wednesday I would meet with men in prison, some of whom had raped, assaulted, murdered others. And on Thursday and Friday, I would meet with young men in schools, some of whom were already convinced that they would spend part of their lives behind bars and razor wire.

At the time, I was reading everything and anything that could provide possibilities for action. This included feminist writings of the second wave (Greer, 1970; Morgan, 1970), post-structuralist gender theorists (Davies, 1993), and those writing about masculinities (Segal, 1990; Connell, 1987; Kimmel, 1987; Messerschmidt, 1993).

And so it was that one day I was sitting at my desk at Long Bay maximum security prison when a colleague handed me a copy of the Dulwich Centre Newsletter entitled *Some thoughts on Men's Ways of Being* (1992).

'I think you might be interested in this', she said.

She was right.

'SOME THOUGHTS ON MEN'S WAYS OF BEING'

There was much about this publication that was fascinating to me, particularly a paper by Michael White entitled 'Men's culture, the men's movement, and the constitution of men's lives' (1992). Within it, Michael articulated some of the 'real effects of the essentialist project' of masculine identity (p. 37) which:

- 'identifies certain "truths" about men's nature' (p. 37)
- 'is inherently conservative and provocative of a paralysing form of nostalgia for what never was' (p. 37)

- 'recruits us into a mytho-myopic account of men's nature' (p. 37)
- 'blinds us to our complicity in the maintenance of the domination and abuse of others, and to our support of economic, political and social structures that preserve and further men's privilege' (p. 38)
- 'incites men to separate from and to distance from women' (p. 39)

He then proposed an 'alternative perspective on the personal, a perspective that brings the personal and the political together' (p. 35). He referred to this as a 'constitutionalist perspective' which proposed that:

- 'an objective knowledge of the world is not possible; that knowledges are actually generated in particular discursive fields in specific cultures at specific times' (p. 40)
- 'all essentialist notions about human nature are actually ruses that disguise what is really taking place' (p. 40)
- 'the descriptions that we have of life are not representations or reflections of life as lived, but are directly constitutive of life' (p. 40)
- Identity is multi-sited, and that it is a product of the ongoing negotiation of multiple subjectivities' (p. 43)

Within this paper, Michael drew on writings of Foucault (1979, 1980, 1984, 1988), Billig et al. (1988), Sawicki (1991), E. Bruner (1986), and J. Bruner (1990), and provided what was for me an entirely new way to understand identity and, as a consequence, provided new possibilities for action:

The constitutionalist perspective proposes more than just a challenge to the essentialist project and to its negative real effects. And it is provocative of more than a determination to separate our lives from the problematic aspects of the dominant men's culture.

It also provokes a determination to engage in processes that generate and/or resurrect alternative knowledges and practices of men's ways of being, and that lead to the development and the performance of alternative narratives of self that have preferred real effects. (White, 1992, p. 43)

It was this article by Michael White that introduced me to a narrative perspective – one that draws together the personal and the political in particular ways:

I have proposed an alternative frame of reference for men's attempts to transform the dominant

men's culture, one that I have referred to as the constitutionalist perspective. I believe that this perspective makes it possible for us to face and to come to terms with our history, and frees us to do something that is very difficult – that is, to take the courage and to find the wherewithal to act against our own culture. It is a perspective that draws together the personal and the political at several levels. (White, 1992, p. 51)

I was gripped. Could these ideas provide new options for the conversations I was sharing in prisons and schools? And what could they possibly mean in terms of how I understood my own life and relationships?

There was something else that was profoundly significant to me about Some thoughts on *Men's Ways of Being* (1992). The papers and interviews were by both men and women and the note from the Editorial Team (Cheryl White, Maggie Carey and Chris McLean) indicated that this publication was the result of gender partnerships. What were these gender partnerships? What could they make possible? How did they come about?

Later, I learned that these gender partnerships and the development of the publication *Some thoughts on Men's Ways of Being* (1992) were due to a challenge from Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese and the Just Therapy Team from New Zealand, as Cheryl describes:

(Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese) ... said something to me that made a huge difference to my approach to these issues [of culture and gender]. She said that she knew that I was genuinely concerned about women from other cultures, but that to her, I was more like a white man than I was like a woman of colour. This wasn't personal. She said that she believed that, in terms of lived experience and privilege, white feminists are more like white men than we are like women of colour. And therefore, she said it was our responsibility to work with white men. 'Go and work with the people who you can influence', she said! And so I did. I went and worked with white men on issues of gender in all kinds of ways ... For some years, Dulwich Centre Publications focused its energy on issues of men and masculinity. With other women, we held workshops, took up petitions, tried to encourage the development of ways of working with men around issues of violence, and published a number of journal issues which ended up as a book. I have often joked that a lot of men in Australia wished I hadn't listened to Kiwi! As I saw it, an apprenticeship was required

in which I and other white feminist women needed to work within our own culture on issues of gender before seeking to work in partnership across cultures. We also needed to develop a network of people connected to Dulwich Centre Publications who were willing and wanting to address issues of gender and culture, and this gradually developed. (Yuen & White, 2007, pp. 23-24)

It was this social history of partnerships that had led to the publication *Some thoughts on Men's Ways of Being*. On page 69 of the same publication, I read the following advertisement:

Family therapy training – 1993

One week intensives with Michael White

This course will provide an introduction to a 're-authoring therapy'. This therapy is premised on an idea that the lives and relationships of persons are shaped by the very knowledges and stories that people use to give meaning to their experiences, and by certain practices of self and of relationship that are associated with these knowledges and stories. A re-authoring therapy contributes to persons resolving problems by, (a) enabling them to separate their lives and relationships from knowledges/stories that are impoverishing, (b) assisting them to challenge practices of self and of relationship that are subjugating, and (c) by encouraging persons to re-author their lives according to alternative and preferred knowledges/stories and practices of self and of relationship that have preferred outcomes.

Intrigued by the prospect of 're-authoring lives', I registered a place.

THE IDEAS/PRACTICES OF NARRATIVE THERAPY

During the intensive I stayed in a youth hostel, just around the corner from Dulwich Centre. A number of my room-mates were accomplished snorers so, as sleep was not really an option, each night I took the opportunity to go over the notes I had taken during the day. There was so much happening that week. Two related realms were equally influential – the ideas/practices of the 're-authoring therapy' as taught by Michael White and the social projects with which Dulwich Centre was engaged.

John McLeod has proposed that narrative therapy represents a 'postpsychological perspective' (McLeod, 2004, 2007) and that it can be described as 'cultural work' (McLeod, 2005). What had brought me to Adelaide was a search for ways to respond to issues of culture including masculinity, violence and other forms of injustice.

Each night in the living room of the youth hostel, I found myself revisiting a number of themes that I believe are directly relevant to the development of collective narrative practices:

- (i) Placing personal problems back into the realm of culture and history – externalising
- (ii) The narrative metaphor and narrative practice
- (iii) Counter documents and therapeutic letters
- (iv) The significance of partnerships
- (v) An anthropology of problems and archiving alternative knowledges
- (vi) Folk psychology and performed identity

I will not describe these themes in ways that I could not have done in 1993. And as I do so, I will also briefly trace the intellectual history of these ideas that I found so exciting in 1993, and still do.

PLACING PERSONAL PROBLEMS BACK INTO THE REALM OF CULTURE AND HISTORY – EXTERNALISING

Rather than locating problems within individuals, narrative practices locate personal problems in the realms of culture and history. As McLeod explains, this involves: 'moving out' into stories of a culture rather than 'moving in' to individual personal experience' (McLeod, 1997, p. 27). This ranges from putting the problem of encopresis back into children's culture as "the 'treacherous' character of the sneaky poo" (White, 1984) to locating the problem of the "voices and visions" of so-called schizophrenia outside the person and back into the realms of politics and justice:

It has been important for us to experience our work to reclaim our lives from the troublesome voices and visions as a struggle against injustice. These voices and visions are oppressive, and since our work on revising our relationship with these voices and visions addresses issues of power and control, then this relationship is a political relationship. This political understanding provides us

with strength, as it keeps us in touch with the fact that we are not just on a personal journey, but also on a political journey. (Brigitte, Sue, Mem & Veronika, 1997, p. 29)

This process of placing problems back into the realm of culture and history is now widely known as 'externalising the problem', a concept/practice that came to international prominence with the publication of *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (White & Epston, 1990).

The process was first described by Michael White, in his ground-breaking papers 'Pseudo-encopresis: from avalanche to victory, from vicious to virtuous cycles' (1984) and 'Fear busting & monster taming: An approach to the fears of young children' (1985). At this stage, the phrase externalising was not used, but children and parents were being invited to stand together in response to 'sneaky poo' and to tame and secure 'the fears' in elaborate ways in order to attain a 'Monster and Worm Catching and Taming Certificate' or 'Fear Busting Diploma' and to achieve membership in either the 'Monster and Worm Catchers and Tamers Guild of Australia and New Zealand' or the 'Fear Busting Association of the Southern Hemisphere' (White, 1985, p. 111).

In 1986, in the paper 'Family escape from trouble' this process was first named as 'externalising': 'Externalizing and objectifying the problem and placing this between persons is the first step towards an interactional definition of the problem and an interactional solution to the problem' (White, 1986, p.59).

One year on, in the paper 'Family Therapy & Schizophrenia: Addressing the 'in-the-corner' lifestyle' (1987), Michael White begins to draw on the writings of Michel Foucault (1979) to explain that:

In the process of externalizing problems, cultural practices of objectification are utilised against cultural practices of objectification. The problem itself is externalized so that the person is not the problem. Instead, the problem is the problem. This objectification of and externalization of the problem challenges those individualizing techniques of scientific classification and other more general dividing practices (White, 1987, p. 52).

Here is the origin of the phrase 'the person is not the problem ... the problem is the problem' which has become an emblem for narrative practice and its externalising ethic, its refusal to pathologise or individualise problems.

THE NARRATIVE METAPHOR AND NARRATIVE PRACTICE

'Writing your history', by David Epston (1986) was the first paper to describe what could be called a 'narrative therapy'⁴. It described David's conversations with Marisa which took place in 1985 and which led him to 'abandon the metaphor of strategy/strategic and replace it with story/narrative' (Epston, 1989b, p. 134).

Within this paper, David Epston quotes Gergen & Gergen (1983, 1984):

Gergen and Gergen (1983) used the term *self-narratives* to describe the social process whereby people tell stories about themselves to themselves and others. They characterize self-narratives as the way individuals ...

"establish coherent connections among life events. Rather than seeing one's life as simply 'one damned thing after another', the individual attempts to understand life-events as systematically related. They are rendered intelligible by locating them in a sequence or 'unfolding process'. Most events are thus not sudden and mysterious revelations, but the sensible sequence of ongoing stories." (Gergen & Gergen, 1984, p. 174).

David Epston also quotes Murray (1985) and Goffman (1959) as he brought a narrative metaphor to the field of therapy.

During Michael White's writings in the late 1980s, he makes a number of references acknowledging the ways in which David Epston had been developing a unique approach to therapy based on the theory of self-narrative (White, 1987, p. 48) and how David Epston had been encouraging Michael to cast his work against the text analogy (White, 1988b, p. 40). Encouraged also by Cheryl White's interest in the narrative metaphor through her reading of feminism (White, 1989b, p. 12), the externalising approach of Michael White was brought together with the narrative explorations of David Epston ... and suddenly so much became possible!

In 1988 Michael White wrote three critical papers, each published by Dulwich Centre Publications which had by now become a vibrant publishing house:

- A process of questioning: a therapy of literary merit (1988b)
- Saying hullo again: the incorporation of the lost relationship in the resolution of grief (1988a)
- The externalizing of the problem and the re-authoring of lives and relationships (1988/9)

And in 1989, four-and-a-half years after David Epston first met with Marisa, he met with her again. In this follow-up conversation, Marisa reflects on the experience of 'writing her history':

So the letter did a lot of good to me ... to actually see it all written down. I mean you read stories and they're stories. But this wasn't a story, it was my life as I live it. And today as I think back – I couldn't have ... how could I have survived all that? But I'm still here to tell the story (laughter). (Epston, 1989b, p. 135)

In his paper 'Marisa revisits' (Epston, 1989b, p. 128), David Epston cites Barbara Hardy (1968): 'we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative'.

He also quotes Lowe (1989) in order to locate these attempts to create a new form of therapy as part of a broader social project:

... we can invent a human nature that is more benign, by reinventing our categories. This must be an exercise of will and imagination. Though we can attempt to let our clients evolve their own meanings and explanations as some models suggest, that is surely impossible, we cannot not influence them ... A more positive approach would be to acknowledge the degree of our influence and accept the responsibility to invent theories of people that might contribute to the formation of a more just society. (pp. 32-33)

1989 also saw David Epston and Michael White co-author *Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends*. Influenced by the wider 'interpretive turn' occurring in anthropology and literary theory, and drawing significantly on J. Bruner (1986), E. Bruner (1986), Foucault (1979, 1980, 1984), Geertz (1983), Gergen & Gergen (1984), and Goffman (1961, 1974), Michael White and David Epston proposed a therapy based on the 're-authoring' (Myerhoff, 1982) or re-storying of lives.

This re-authoring therapy is based on the assumption that:

... persons experience problems, for which they frequently seek therapy, when the narratives in which they are "storying" their experience, and/or in which they are having their experience "storied" by others, do not sufficiently represent their lived experience, and that, in these circumstances, there will be significant aspects of their lived experience that contradict these dominant narratives. (White & Epston, 1989, p. 22)

Thus the task for therapy becomes:

... the identification of, or the generation of, alternative stories that enable persons to perform new meanings that bring with them desired possibilities; new meanings that persons will experience as more helpful, satisfying, and open-ended. (White & Epston, 1989, p. 22)

A therapy of literary merit was proposed which is interested in the elaboration and performance of these alternative stories. After *Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends* was republished by W.W. Norton as *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, this therapy of literary merit, or re-authoring therapy, gradually came to be known as 'narrative therapy'.⁵

There was, however, a further key aspect of *Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends* that is significant to mention. This was its invitation to practitioners to consider both oral and literate traditions (Stubbs, 1980) and to investigate the therapeutic potential of practices of the written word.

COUNTER DOCUMENTS AND THERAPEUTIC LETTERS

Two-thirds of *Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends* consists of wide-ranging examples of therapeutic letters and counter documents that celebrate 'the new story' (p. 131). These are examples of the written word that stand in contrast with degrading psychiatric 'files':

There are those practices, situated in the domain of alternative local, popular knowledges, that have the capacity to redescribe and specify persons in ways that emphasize their special knowledges and competencies, and their place in the larger community of persons ... The practices associated with these alternative documents are in contrast

with those associated with the (psychiatric) file ... Awards of various kinds, such as trophies and certificates can be considered examples of alternative documents. Such awards often signal the person's arrival at a new status in their community, one that brings with it new responsibilities and privileges. As these alternative documents have the potential of incorporating a wide readership and of recruiting an audience to the performance of new stories, they can be situated in what Myerhoff (1982) refers to as definitional ceremonies. (White & Epston, 1989, p. 131)

The examples of letters and documents are diverse:

- Declarations of independence from asthma
- Winning against bad habits certificates
- Escaping from misery certificates
- Escaping from guilt certificates

And so on.

There is now a rich tradition of documentation within narrative therapy (see also Epston 1998, 2008a, Epston & White, 1990; White, 1995a; Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997; Fox, 2003; Newman, 2008; Madigan, 2011; Freedman & Combs; 1996; Lobovits, Maisel, & Freeman, 1995).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PARTNERSHIPS

The foreword to *Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends* was written by Karl Tomm. Within it, he writes: 'Breaking new ground in any field is a major accomplishment. To do so in different directions at the same time, and in so doing, open up whole new territories, reflects a tour de force.' (Tomm, 1989, p. 5)

This *tour de force* represented eight years of conversation, friendship and intellectual partnership between David Epston and Michael White. In the following extended quote, Cheryl White (2009) conveys the significance of this partnership:

Their [David Epston's and Michael White's] enduring friendship and intellectual partnership ... was characterised by unshakable optimism, a passion over ideas, what seemed like boundless energy, and a real dedication to assist the families with whom they were meeting ... Their collaboration included stimulating challenges due to their different perspectives. Both were family therapists, but David also came from an Eriksonian background. Both

were serious readers but went about this in quite different ways. David read unusually widely, calling on his background as an anthropologist, while Michael rigorously focused on one author at a time (Bateson, then Foucault and others). In fact, David was known to say that while he himself read a thousand books once, Michael read the same book a thousand times, continually finding new sources of inspiration for therapeutic practice. Appreciating each other's differences was something they shared.

In the early days, if one of them was 'stuck' with a family they were seeing, they would call the other and talk it all through, generate new ideas and then go back and try them out. It seemed like almost every week there was a new development. What's more, the ideas were to be shared:

"... we decided to make our ideas and practice common property and vowed that we would never become rivals. We did what we said we would do all these years up until he died ..." (Epston, 2008, p. 5)

There wasn't a sense of ownership, possession or preciousness about ideas, but instead a joy in offering them out to a world that was looking for new ways of working ... In acknowledging the contribution of both Ann Epston and Michael White to his ideas and work, David said: "By now, I don't know where it begins and where it ends" (Epston, 1989, p. 118).

This sentiment to me sums up the intellectual partnership between Michael White and David Epston. The origins of what is now known as narrative therapy coevolved from a shared political philosophy, and through endless hours of conversation. (White, C. 2009, pp. 50-60)

To reiterate, three distinct partnerships have already been acknowledged here that relate to the development of ideas that I engaged with in 1993 and that have gone on to shape collective narrative practices. These partnerships are:

- (i) The partnership between David Epston and Michael White;
- (ii) The partnership between the Just Therapy Team, New Zealand, (represented by Kiwi Tamalieutu Tamasese) and Dulwich Centre Publications that led to Cheryl White's determination to address and publish on issues of masculinity;
- (iii) The partnership between women and men within the Adelaide Dulwich Centre 'community of ideas' that led to the publication of *Some thoughts on Men's Ways of Being* (1992).

AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF PROBLEMS AND ARCHIVING ALTERNATIVE KNOWLEDGES

David Epston was initially trained in anthropology and the influence of this history pervades the field of narrative practice: "I gradually moved from undertaking anthropology as an academic pursuit, to instead finding ways in which anthropological ways of thinking could underwrite my practice as a therapist" (Epston, 2001, p. 178).

One way to describe David Epston would be as an anthropologist of problems and an archivist of alternative knowledges:

I've always thought of myself as doing research, but on problems and the relationships that people have with those problems, rather than on the people themselves. The structuring of narrative questions and interviews allow me and others to co-research problems and the alternative knowledges that are developed to address them. (Epston, 2001, p. 180)

In the 1980s, David Epston began to circulate the knowledges of those who consulted him in therapy to others who were experiencing similar difficulties. He collected client "wisdoms", and what he referred to as client "expert knowledge", into archives (Epston, 2001). These archives contained audiotapes, letters, and artwork that represented "a rich supply of solutions to an assortment of longstanding problems such as temper taming, night fears, school refusing, asthma, and ... anorexia and bulimia" (Madigan & Epston, 1995, p. 263). Gradually, David Epston began to create networks of clients which he called 'leagues' so that they could provide consultation, information and support to each other. The best known example of such a league is the Anti-Anorexia/Anti-Bulimia League (Grieves, 1997; Lock, Epston & Maisel 2004; Lock, Epston, Maisel & de Faria, 2005; Maisel, Epston & Borden, 2004; Malson & Burns, 2009; Epston, 2008). Along with his colleague, Stephen Madigan, this approach to linking groups of clients in order to share 'solution knowledges' came to be known as generating 'communities of concern' (Madigan & Epston, 1995). Employing new technologies, these communities of concern first used fax machines to send messages around the world. This was followed by online leagues to respond to various issues, including the 'Archive of resistance: Anti-anorexia/ anti-bulimia' (www.narrativeapproaches.com).

Much of my work as a narrative therapist has been linked to my concern to act against this appropriation

of knowledge in the field of the health professions. In acknowledging the alternative knowledges about life that are often co-created in re-authoring conversations, it then becomes a question of how to remain faithful to the sources of this knowledge, and how to do justice to the representation of the sources of this knowledge. This has led to the formation of leagues (for instance the Anti-Anorexia and Bulimia League) through which the insider knowledges of those who consult therapists can be represented in ways that acknowledge the authors of this knowledge, documents the very means by which it came into being, and also makes this knowledge accessible to others.

In turn, this has led to thoughts about archives and the role of archivists. The idea of archiving has always fascinated me and in many ways I see myself as an archivist, a co-creator and anthologist of alternative knowledges. (Epston, 2001, p. 179)

This anthropological researching of problems and an archiving of insider knowledges has provided a foundation for collective narrative practice.

FOLK PSYCHOLOGY AND PERFORMED IDENTITY

Following Bruner (1990), David Epston and Michael White were also interested in locating their narrative explorations within traditions of folk psychology. One theme that emerged through the new cultural anthropology was to consider people's realities and identities as distributed throughout communities:

With meaning at the centre, this new cultural anthropology took the focus of inquiry to the social construction of people's realities. These were realities that were not radically derived through one's independent construction of the events of one's life. These realities were not the outcome of some privileged access to the world as it is. They were not arrived at through some objective grasp of the nature of things. Rather, people's realities were understood to be historical and social products, negotiated in and between communities of people and distributed throughout these communities. This was the case for identity as much as for any other construction; identity was understood to be a phenomenon that was dispersed in communities of people, its traces to be found everywhere, including in:

- socially negotiated self narratives,
- the impressions and the imagination of others,
- the performance of drama,
- dance, in play, in song and in poetics,
- ritual, ceremony and symbol,
- attire and in habits of life, and
- personal and public documentation, dispersed through the inscriptions entered into community stories, into personal diaries, into correspondences in the form of letters and cards, into public files in the form of profiles, assessments and reports, and in the longstanding tradition of autobiography. (White, 2001a, p. 12)

Considering how identity is dispersed in communities of people through drama, dance, song, ritual and documentation (see also Turner, 1986) has inspired us to explore each of these as sites for collective narrative practice.

RETURNING TO THE YOUTH HOSTEL

When I attended my first intensive training in 1993, three years had passed since the publication of *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. In those three years, the potential of the narrative metaphor to therapy had been further expanded. A key paper by David Epston & Michael White (1990) had focused more thoroughly on possible applications of the rite of passage metaphor (van Genep, 1960; Turner, 1967) and ways to 'consult your consultants': 'what distinguished consulting your consultants from any other 'therapy' practice of its time was 'consultation' from a 'veteran' of the problem to a 'sufferer' of the problem.' (D. Epston, personal communication, May, 29, 2011; see also Marsten, Epston, & Johnson, 2011) This process was a key precedent for collective narrative practice.

Around the same time, Michael White (1991) in writing a substantial text 'Deconstruction and therapy' had drawn upon Bourdieu (1988), Derrida (1981) and Bruner (1986) to provide more detailed examples of 'landscape of action' (p. 128) and 'landscape of consciousness' (p. 131) questions and how these could contribute to the generation of alternative stories. And of course, *Some thoughts on Men's Ways of Being* (1992) had been published. Thanks to the generosity of Cheryl White, I left that first intensive with a copy of everything that had ever been written about 're-authoring' or 'narrative therapy'! Eighteen years later, as I have been revisiting this history, I have been relying on these same copies of the original early texts.

Each night, sitting in the youth hostel lounge, there was so much to think about. Given that I was not a therapist and never planned to work as one, I was particularly interested in how these re-authoring ideas could relate to broader projects. There seemed so many possibilities, as John McLeod (2007) describes:

In social terms, traditional individualist psychological therapies operate as a kind of emotional 'sink' into which communal and interpersonal tensions can be absorbed. By contrast, narrative therapy has the capacity to channel the energy arising from individual troubles, and shape it into productive social action. In this work, the concept of narrative provides a bridge between the stories told by specific persons, and the dominant discourses and narratives within which we all collectively live our lives. (p. 244)

It was this bridge that both fascinated and excited me. So too did the ways in which the Dulwich Centre 'community of ideas' was already engaged with a number of social projects.

THE SOCIAL PROJECTS

Cheryl White (2011) has recently described the ways in which the development of narrative therapy was intricately linked to broader social movements and social projects of the 1960s and 1970s:

We were of the times when social movements were challenging taken-for-granted authority in a range of areas. Initially, the focus was the Vietnam War and feminism. And then the focus changed. Along with many others, Michael (White) became determined to challenge and put forward alternatives to the taken-for-granted authorities within mental health services and psychiatry.

From the 1960s onwards, writers including Michel Foucault, Erving Goffman, R.D. Laing, Thomas Szasz, and Franco Basaglia began to critique routinely accepted practices within psychiatry and the influence of psychiatric understandings within society more generally. Consumer/survivor movements of those who had endured degradations within mental health institutions also began campaigning for change. We had seen a social movement stop a war, and another change the ways in which women and men relate to each other and to life. As people

in many different countries became determined to alter the ways in which their societies responded to those in social and emotional distress, this became a passion in Michael's life. And it is this commitment that led to the development of what is now known as narrative therapy. (White, C., 2011, p. 159)

During my first week in Adelaide, I was introduced to three different social projects that Dulwich Centre was currently involved with, and learning about these social projects was of equal significance to me as the ideas taught in the intensive. In this section I will briefly describe the social projects I was introduced to during that week and discuss their implications.

EXPLORATIONS OF GENDER PARTNERSHIP – SOCIAL ACTION IN RELATION TO GENDER JUSTICE

My first conversation with Cheryl White involved me mentioning that I was working with an organisation called Men Against Sexual Assault and Cheryl raising a number of brilliantly articulated questions and critiques about the politics and naming of such work. Two years later, a group of young men⁶ who were also exploring ways of taking local social action in relation to men's violence travelled to Adelaide and the community of practitioners associated with Dulwich Centre opened their homes and lives to provide us with a context to further consider ways of addressing the very real harm caused by men's violence and by dominant constructions of masculinity (Flood, 1995; Kriewaldt, 1995).

The result of these conversations in Adelaide, and Michael White's intensive training, led me to reconfigure the work that I was involved with in prison and in schools. I was intrigued as to how re-authoring conversations could occur collectively, in non-therapeutic contexts, and in response to social issues of gender and violence (see Denborough, 1995a).

Through this process, I had discovered how gender partnerships, of which I was now a part, could provide the context for the generation of new ideas and practices. I, for one, was profoundly appreciative that Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese had challenged/inspired Cheryl White to work with men in her own culture on issues of gender. While the shape, form and memberships of these gender partnerships have changed over the years, they remain central to collective narrative practices.⁷

AN ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH PROJECT

On the Wednesday evening of that first intensive, an informal gathering of those involved in the Dulwich Centre alternative community mental health project took place. This project involved team members and community members working alongside each other to expose the tactics and effects of the 'voices and visions' (often referred to as the auditory and visual hallucinations of schizophrenia) experienced by the latter. The knowledges and skills of community members were honoured and built upon; ever-widening communities of reflection and support were created; and in the process many aspects of mainstream culture were called into question. During that first meeting, I was inspired to consider how these 're-authoring' practices I was learning in the intensive could re-configure community responses to mental health concerns.

Five years on, the Dulwich Centre Newsletter, 'Companions on a Journey' (Dulwich Centre Community Mental Health Project, 1997) was published. This includes the first 'collective narrative documents' by the Power to Our Journeys Group (Brigitte, Sue, Mem & Veronika, 1997). Further developing and refining ways in which collective narrative documents can be used in a range of contexts continues to be a key element of collective narrative practice (see Denborough, White, Claver, Freedman & Combs, in press).

RECLAIMING OUR STORIES, RECLAIMING OUR LIVES: RESPONDING TO ABORIGINAL DEATHS IN CUSTODY

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody handed down its report on the 15th April 1991. This landmark commission was conducted by Elliot Johnson QC who had coincidentally owned and worked from 345 Carrington Street, Adelaide, which in 1991 was the location of Dulwich Centre. Recommendation 5 of the Royal Commission stated:

That governments, recognising the trauma and pain suffered by relatives, kin and friends of those who died in custody, give sympathetic support to requests to provide funds or services to enable counselling to be offered to these people. (Australian Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, & Johnston, E., 1998)

In response, Tim Agius, the Director of the Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia, was determined to provide some sort of counselling response to Aboriginal families who had lost loved ones in custody. Most significantly, he was determined to find or develop a culturally appropriate response to grief caused by injustice. This endeavour led him to consult with Dulwich Centre and these collaborations would lead to a gathering for all Aboriginal family members from South Australia who had lost a member in custody. This gathering was shaped by narrative ideas and is documented in 'Reclaiming our stories, reclaiming our lives' (Aboriginal Health Council, 1995).

The gathering was held at Camp Coorong and Aboriginal participants identified a number of aspects of the event as particularly helpful, including:

- Naming injustice: Aboriginal people were able to identify the "dominant story", which was about personal guilt and inadequacy, and rename it as injustice and oppression. The freedom to use words "murder" and "racism", and to publicly name their experiences of injustice, was experienced as profoundly freeing.
- Listening teams: The practice of using "listening teams" in which members of the counselling team formed an audience to Aboriginal people's stories, and then reflected upon what they had heard. A number of Aboriginal people commented that hearing their own stories reflected back in this way enabled them to see themselves differently, and to reclaim a pride in who they were. It also allowed them to recognise the remarkable strengths that they had demonstrated in surviving in the face of so much injustice. As one participant said about the listening groups, "This reclaims the strengths of Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal culture has always had this. This has reiterated it, rejuvenated it. This is going on every day really around people's kitchen tables – so all you are doing now is going much wider and getting back to our culture."
- The "journey" metaphor: The narrative approach makes considerable use of the "journey" metaphor. Moving from dominant stories about one's life to preferred stories is like making a journey from one identity to another. The provision of metaphoric "maps" of the sorts of experiences, feelings and pitfalls that can happen on this journey by other people who have already made it, can play an important part in enabling people to move forward

in their lives ... A number of Aboriginal people commented on the usefulness of the journey metaphor. (Aboriginal Health Council, 1995, pp.19-20)

This event at Camp Coorong represented the first narrative 'community gathering', an approach which again was the result of partnerships as Michael White describes (2003):

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Tim Agius and Barbara Wingard to our first explorations of the relevance of narrative practices in working with communities. The foundation of these first explorations was Tim's unwavering vision of a community-wide gathering that would provide a healing context for Aboriginal families of South Australia that had lost a member through death in jail or prison. The spirit and wisdom that Tim and Barbara then brought to this initiative and so willingly shared with the members of our team sustained us in so many ways ... (White, 2003, p. 53)

While I was only involved in a very peripheral way in the Camp Coorong gathering (I took part in early consultative conversations about prisons), this project was profoundly influential to my own work in the following four ways.

Firstly, this project provided the blueprint for further narrative gatherings in which I played a part. These gatherings involved Aboriginal communities in Narrandera and Bowraville, NSW (Denborough, 2002a); people with an HIV positive diagnosis and workers within the HIV sector (Living Positive Lives, 2000); and gatherings in relation to mental health (South Australian Council of Social Services (SACOSS) & Dulwich Centre, 1995; ACT Mental Health Consumers Network & Dulwich Centre, 2003).

Secondly, it was during these gatherings that a form of narrative community song-writing emerged (Denborough, 2002b, 2008) and we discovered ways in which songs can contribute powerful outsider-witness responses (White, 2000). While I remain devoted to the written word, particularly its rigour, its capacity to record all that is spoken, the ways in which drafts can be shared and collectively edited, and its intimate characteristics (how it speaks to each individual who reads it), songs can be sung together in ways that the written word cannot. In some contexts, the written word is not accessible to all, whereas songs and music can include most people

in any community. And perhaps most significantly, with a good melody, songs can remain in one's mind, available for instant recall in a way that the written word cannot.⁸

Thirdly, the 'Reclaiming our stories, reclaiming our lives' project heralded the beginning of partnerships between Dulwich Centre, Tim Agius and Barbara Wingard that remain to this day and that continue to influence work within Aboriginal communities.

Fourthly, upon the completion of 'Reclaiming our stories, reclaiming our lives', Dulwich Centre decided to focus further on the role of prisons in the perpetuation of injustice, to investigate ways of looking 'beyond the prison', and to 'gather dreams of freedom' from Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada. I was 25 at the time and this research turned out to be life-changing (Denborough, 1995b):

At first glance, the current culture of imprisonment appears to be growing stronger. Increasing numbers of men and women are being locked away, for longer and longer sentences, and in newer and larger prisons. And yet, as described in this book there are rich alternative traditions upon which to build, both here in this country and elsewhere.

My mind flashes to songs deep within prison walls, to the daily acts of resistance, to those who care, to those who dare to speak, to those who survive another day marked off on a calendar. In concert with these people are Indigenous Australians, vocal in their resistance to deaths in custody and imprisonment as a tool of colonisation. From here to the circles of the Yukon, to marae justice, to the creation of new courtrooms and new ways of working, there are powerful foundations on which to build. The communities most affected by imprisonment seem to be lighting new ways forward, creating the possibility of weeding out notions of punishment from our beings, from our institutions of degradation, and from our cities.

This country was invaded to become a prison, not only for the Indigenous Peoples, but also for the poor of Britain. Now, over two hundred years after this country was invaded to become a prison, cracks are beginning to appear in the culture of imprisonment, cracks caused by generations of protest. (Denborough, 1996, p. 221)

When the book *Beyond the prison: gathering dreams of freedom* was complete, I moved to Adelaide and began to work 'behind the scenes' within a flourishing 'community of ideas' (White & Denborough, 2005).

'A COMMUNITY OF IDEAS'

Since the 17th century, magazines have been a peculiarly modern device for bringing a public space into existence. Like a town meeting, a magazine enables people to be in each other's company by sharing talk about matters that concern them. And it is through talking with others that most of us start to make some sense of the world, and begin to discover who we are and what we think. (Denneny 1984, p. 13)

Influenced by her studies of anthropology and her participation in the women's liberation movement, when Cheryl White founded Dulwich Centre Publications it was with a particular ethos. She drew her inspiration from feminism and from the work of alternative community publishers such as Michael Denneny, the editor of the gay male magazine, *Christopher Street*, who describes here a particular publishing aim: 'Christopher Street has never tried to develop a party line; we always thought our task was to open a space, a forum, where the developing gay culture could manifest and experience itself.' (1984, p. 13)

While the context for Dulwich Centre Publications was very different than gay New York, the publishing aim was similar. In this case, how to open space and forums where a developing 'culture' of non-pathologising practice could experience and manifest itself.

It is worth mentioning that the Dulwich Centre Publications actually began as a series of free forums, entitled 'Friday Afternoons at Dulwich':

Twenty years ago, here in Adelaide, some therapists began to share their work in free forums that involved short presentations on particular ideas and then rigorous debate and discussion ... these forums ... were open to anyone interested in the particular topic being addressed. There was so much energy and interest in the presentations that it seemed a good idea to write these down and a small news-sheet was developed for this purpose. Links were generated between a range of local practitioners and these first news-sheets were simply a way to continue the conversations. Over time, people from other places requested copies of the news-sheets and it gradually turned into a journal. Interest in the ideas continued to grow and, in 1989, Dulwich Centre Publications published its first book, *Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends*, by David Epston and Michael White. (White & Denborough, 2005, p. 4)

In the early days, there were very few places where emerging 'narrative therapy papers' could be published. A number of early papers by Michael White, now seen as breakthrough papers and referred to by practitioners throughout the world, had been rejected by other publishers and only saw the light of day due to Dulwich Centre Publications. Throughout its history, Dulwich Centre Publications has consistently expanded the boundaries of what is thought to be 'appropriate' to therapists. For instance, in 1995, the publishing of 'Reclaiming our stories, reclaiming our lives' in relation to responding to Aboriginal families who had lost a family member to a death in custody resulted in the loss of 1/3 of subscribers to the Dulwich Centre Newsletter¹⁰. Sixteen years on, a recent conference in relation to Aboriginal health heralded it as a landmark publication¹¹.

Establishing a feminist informed publishing house dedicated to the generation and sustenance of a 'community of ideas' required the development of alternative review processes, deliberate efforts to ensure gender parity of authors, and a continual investment to ensure that the voices of those rarely heard could inform discussions in the emerging field of 'narrative therapy and community work'.

My job, as staff writer, was to research and document hopeful stories of work that would be of interest to readers. There was an aspiration that each publication would not simply confirm what was already known, but instead lead practitioners to engage with new possibilities for the narrative metaphor in therapy and community work.

TOLD IN THE 'THIRD VOICE'

Sometimes the work of an editor is to support the writing projects of other authors. At other times, it involves conducting interviews and then publishing these. But often, at Dulwich Centre Publications, we interview practitioners and/or community members and then write up these interviews which are then published in the voice of the interview subject.

Each story is written in the voice of those who told it (whether this was an individual or group), but the story conveys all of the information that has been developed through our conversation/interview. I am active in asking questions to learn more about and to generate rich descriptions of the ideas, skills and knowledges of the interview subject, and the stories are written to

include all the information that is generated through the conversation. In our experience, this creates a far richer telling than is otherwise possible if the person writes up their own work or if it remains in an interview format – particularly when the interview subject's first language is not English.

This method of working and documenting can be likened to the generation of the 'third voice' that Barbara Myerhoff, the American anthropologist, was exploring in the later years of her life. As Marc Kaminsky (1992) explains: "She (Barbara Myerhoff) wished to find a way of editing the tales so that everything she knew about them would be 'invisibly' embedded in the tales, through the editing: the tales would be presented without .. [any] framing discourse ..." (p. 13). Of course, these practices require processes of accountability and partnership to ensure that the interview subject has control over how they and their 'knowledge' are represented.

SIGNIFICANT MARKERS ALONG THE WAY

A number of 'third voice' publishing projects have been highly influential in the development of collective narrative practices.

COLLECTIVE EXTERNALISING CONVERSATIONS / NARRATIVE THEATRE

In the mid-1990s, Yvonne Sliep and the CARE Counsellors of Malawi (Sliep & CARE Counsellors, 1996) were responding to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in rural Malawi. Local health workers applied the narrative concept of 'externalising problems' (see Roth & Epston, 1996) in theatrical ways. Community members were invited to interview health workers who played the roles of 'Mr AIDS' and 'Mrs CARE' (representing Community Action Renders Enablement). These 'collective externalising conversations' then provided the opening for conversations in the villages between older men, older women, younger men, and younger women as they tried to find ways to build upon the skills, knowledges, and traditions of the community. Yvonne Sliep has gone on to further develop forms of narrative theatre (Sliep, Weingarten & Gilbert 2004; Sliep, 2005), while Aboriginal health worker, Barbara Wingard, has developed her own forms of collective externalising conversations in response to diabetes ('sugar') and grief (Wingard, 1996a, 1996b) and lateral violence (2010). Others have taken this approach into school contexts (McMenamin, 1999).

BEYOND NEO-LIBERAL FATALISM – MEETING PAULO FREIRE

The work of Paulo Freire (1973, 1994, 1999; Freire & Macebo, 1987), has inspired approaches to popular education and community work throughout Brazil and across the world. In 1997, while in Brazil to document the work of the Association of Street People (Varanda, 1999), Cheryl White and I conducted what was to be Paulo Freire's final interview (Freire, 1999). Within it, Freire railed against the ways in which the privileged in the world routinely look for solutions in the wrong places and then, when they cannot find the solutions there, they feel despair, and become convinced that broader change is not possible and therefore not worth aspiring to or acting towards. He named this phenomenon 'neo-liberal fatalism' (Freire, 1999) and believed it was perhaps the greatest obstacle we face.

These words, about neo-liberalism and the politics of despair, were highly significant and challenging to me. I have known despair at different times in my life: despair about whether broader social change is really possible, despair about how people treat people. Paulo Freire had also lived a life in which he had known despair. His pedagogy of hope (1994) was not born of simple optimism. It is a hope that knows despair and is stronger for this knowledge.

The interview with Freire and his challenge within it to shape our lives and work in ways to prioritise contributing to broader social change, have contributed significantly to the development of collective narrative practice (see Denborough, 2008, pp. xi). In fact, collective narrative practice is shaped by the question: How can we respond to stories of social suffering in ways that not only alleviate individual sorrow, but also enable and sustain local social action to address the broader injustices, violence and abuses in our varying contexts?

COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

Seeking creative and effective ways of preventing and responding to violence has been a longstanding commitment of Dulwich Centre Publications (Durrant & White, C., 1990; Jenkins, 1990). Between 1998 and 2002, we published a number of projects to further articulate how narrative practices can inform collective responses to violence. These included documenting the work of: Silent Too Long – a group of women survivors of childhood sexual (Silent Too Long, 1998, 2000, 2001);

WOWSAFE – a group of women survivors of domestic violence (WOWSAFE, 2002); the Anti-harassment Team of a Selwyn College in New Zealand (Selwyn College, Lewis, A., & Cheshire, A., 1998); and work within Latino communities in California attempting to prevent domestic violence and create respectful relationships in culturally resonant ways (Colorado, Montgomery & Tovar, 2003). More recent texts have also considered multicultural responses to gendered violence (Yuen & White, 2007).

ENABLING PEOPLE TO BECOME GUARDIANS OF THEIR OWN HEALTH - AMERICA BRACHO

Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, America Bracho's work with Latino Health Access in Orange County, California, has re-configured a physical health service (providing services in relation to diabetes, heart disease, HIV/AIDS) to become an 'institute of participation' (Bracho & Latin Health Access, 2000, p. 4):

It is our responsibility to provide mechanisms in a sensitive way that enable people to demonstrate, to perform their caring. It is our responsibility to notice and enquire about the assets, talents and skills of the community and to provide contexts by which the people we are working with can take actions to contribute towards the accomplishment of their hopes, aims and dreams. (Bracho & Latino Health Access, 2000, p. 7)

If it is possible to transform a physical health 'service' in this way, could it also be possible to similarly re-configure responses to mental health and/or responses to trauma? Ten years on, influenced by the work of Latino Health Access, Dulwich Centre Foundation's use of collective narrative practices is exploring this question.

TELLING OUR STORIES IN WAYS THAT MAKE US STRONGER

Perhaps the most significant 'third voice' publishing process involved a writing partnership with Aunty Barbara Wingard and Jane Lester which resulted in the publication of *Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger* (Wingard & Lester, 2001). This beautiful book contains the stories from Aunty Barbara and Jane about their work, their lives, the histories of Australia and their own forms of narrative practice. My involvement in the writing partnership was powerfully significant to me, so much so that it has altered the ways in which I understand my own family histories. When Jane Lester

(2001) presented a keynote address, 'Coming home: voices of the day' at the 3rd International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference, I presented alongside her:

Three years ago, I first spoke with Jane and learnt of her meticulous searching and how she was able to link the stories of her family with the history of this country. I was quite overcome at both the sorrow and the extraordinary reclamation of which she spoke. As I reflected on how little I knew of my own family histories, and how they might be linked to events in this nation's past, I made a quiet vow to myself. I vowed that I would trace the histories of my family in the hope that in future conversations with Jane and others, the stories I discovered could in some way be linked and shared. It was Jane's generosity of spirit that started me on a journey through family history that has led me to be speaking here this morning.

Just as Jane offered stories of family this morning, I would like to do similarly. But of course the stories of my family are very different. My father was not forcibly removed from his family and nor were his siblings or his cousins. In fact, in many ways, the histories I wish to speak about could not be more different. I wish to speak about my relationship to the life of my great-great grandfather on my mother's side. His name was Samuel Griffith. He was instrumental in drafting the Australian Constitution and went on to become the first Chief Justice of this country. He is considered one of the founding fathers of Federation, the centenary of which is being celebrated in Australia this year. In some ways, my search to understand the life of Samuel Griffith could not be more different than the search Jane spoke of earlier. But there are some similarities. I would not be alive if it were not for Samuel Griffith, and my search to understand his life is changing the ways in which I understand my own. I have learnt largely through my conversations with Indigenous Australians something of the importance of honouring heritage, or respecting those who lived lives dedicated to us – their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. But honouring ancestry is a complex process when your family histories are interwoven with the dispossession of others. One side of my Australian ancestry were involved in literally dispossessing Aboriginal people of their land in northern Queensland. Another side was instrumental in crafting a constitution which in some

ways legalised this dispossession. To quote Andrea Rieniets (1995): 'What do you do when you find that your family tree has been replanted in someone else's yard?' That is the question with which I and so many other non-Indigenous Australians are currently grappling.

In some ways, it seems to me that the process of tracing history involves speaking across time and across generations. And so in preparing for this morning I decided it might be most appropriate to try to write Samuel Griffith a letter. I'd like to share that letter with you if that's okay. (Denborough, 2001, pp. -8)

While I will not include this letter here, I do wish to reiterate that the writing partnerships associated with the book *Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger* created far more than a text. They also contributed to new ways for all of us involved to understand our lives, our relationships and our families in this country.

FAMILY THERAPY: EXPLORING THE FIELD'S PAST, PRESENT AND POSSIBLE FUTURES

Speaking of families, narrative therapy's 'family of origin' was the field of family therapy. In 2001, in order to honour this history, Dulwich Centre Publications embarked on a project to interview a wide-range of leading family therapists. The idea was to bring together in one text many different practitioners' perspectives on the histories of family therapy, the work that people were currently engaged in, and their hopes for the future of family therapy.

As I had not been a part of the field of family therapy, and had come to know it only through my engagement with narrative practice, I needed to undertake considerable research prior to interviewing, amongst others: Insoo Kim Berg, Salvador Minuchin, Monica McGoldrick, Gianfranco Cecchin, Kerrie James, Kenneth V. Hardy, Olga Silverstein, Tom Andersen, Peggy Papp, Karl Tomm, Michael White, Peggy Penn, Lynn Hoffman, David Epston, Warihi Campbell, Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese & Charles Waldegrave.

Being introduced to these people, these stories, and their histories, changed my understanding of narrative practice. I could now locate certain narrative philosophies of practice within wider family therapy 'traditions'. For instance, the following principles (see White, 2001b),

which all inform narrative practice can be linked to earlier developments within the field of family therapy:

- Considering identity as something that is achieved in relationship with others rather than something that derives from 'human nature';
- Understanding people's problems within the wider contexts of their lives rather than locating problems within individuals;
- Committing to meet with families and other networks/communities of people to address the problems in their lives (rather than considering individual therapy as the only form of legitimate interaction between therapist and client);
- Emphasising how the re-negotiation of people's identities occurs within the context of their interactions with others;
- Conceptualising therapy as a process of questioning; Proposing an ethic of transparency in that the work of therapists should be made visible through live interviews and videos.

MAKING NARRATIVE IDEAS ACCESSIBLE TO A WIDE READERSHIP

One further publishing project is also relevant to mention here. Dulwich Centre Publications has been determined to make narrative therapy ideas accessible to as wide a readership as possible. This involved publishing the introductory text *What is Narrative Therapy? An easy-to-read introduction* (Morgan, 2000) and its accompaniment *Narrative Therapy: Responding to your questions* (Russell & Carey, 2004). Both these books were the result of significant collaborations. The hope of making narrative ideas accessible to a wide readership was also influential in Michael White writing the book *Maps of Narrative Practice* (2007). The reason I mention this broader publishing project here is that it has informed how publications about collective narrative practice have been written – in the hope that they will be accessible to a wide audience.

CONFERENCES AS COMMUNITY GATHERINGS: HONOURING HISTORIES, CULTURAL PROTOCOLS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Being a part of the Dulwich Centre conference organising team from 1999 onwards has brought its own challenges and learnings which have been significant in the development of collective narrative practice. Dulwich Centre Publications conceptualises its conferences as 'community events' and this involves considerations of

honouring histories, cultural protocols and partnerships (White & Denborough, 2005).

The work of Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese, Flora Tuhaka, Warihi Campbell and Charles Waldegrave of the Just Therapy Team of New Zealand (Waldegrave, 1990; Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka & Campbell, 2003) and partnerships with Aboriginal Australian colleagues, Barbara Wingard and Tim Agius, have transformed our understandings of what it means to honour the histories of the land on which a conference is to take place, how to welcome participants to such an event, and how to respond to cultural complexities and historical and present injustice through partnership.

In relation to the co-hosting of conferences, these partnerships have involved travelling with African American colleagues, Makungu Akinyela and Vanessa Jackson, to visit together the Cape Coast slave castles of Ghana (Amemasor, 2002) prior to holding an event in Atlanta, Georgia. They have involved Patrick Moss and Julie Moss travelling hundreds and hundreds of miles in a van load of young men from the Keetowah Band of the Cherokee to open this same conference. They have involved Indigenous Traditional Healers from different parts of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, welcoming participants and offering consultations during the 6th International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference.¹²

These experiences, partnerships and relationships in some ways laid the groundwork for the cross-cultural inventions of collective narrative practices which I will describe in the next section.

THE EMERGENCE OF COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE PRACTICE

Having outlined a range of projects in which narrative therapy ideas and principles were put to work outside of a counselling context from the early 1990s, I now wish to describe how, over the past eight years, a number of factors have seen the evolution of an emerging field which has come to be known as 'collective narrative practice'. This field endeavours to build upon the histories described above and put them to use in responding to situations of hardship and trauma in contexts where counselling or therapy is either not culturally resonant or not possible.

I will briefly outline here a number of factors that coalesced in order to lead to the generation of this field.

A RENEWED FOCUS ON RESPONDING TO HARDSHIP AND TRAUMA

From 2003 onwards, Dulwich Centre started to focus more attention on narrative responses to trauma. This coincided with being invited to visit and work with Palestinian therapists working at the Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre for Victims of Torture and Trauma (TRC) based in Ramallah, Palestine. The presentation that Michael White gave at the TRC in October 2003, was recorded. In consultation with those present, it was decided that it would be helpful to have this presentation transcribed, edited and then translated into Arabic to be made available to Arabic-speaking workers in Palestine and elsewhere. This paper, 'Working with people who are suffering the consequences of multiple trauma: A narrative perspective' (White, 2004) placed an emphasis on the priority given to the redevelopment and reinvigoration of a 'sense of myself' in working with people who have been subject to trauma. It described how this can be achieved through the use of definitional ceremony structures, outsider-witness practices, and re-authoring conversations. And the last section of the paper discussed the work of memory theorists and its relevance to work with people who have experienced trauma. This approach has proved influential and Michael White gave a keynote on a related theme at the 4th International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference¹³. He also taught a number of five day special intensives on narrative responses to trauma, as well as presenting internationally on this topic.

At the same time, we were researching and documenting examples of the use of narrative practices in response to trauma from Bangladesh, Israel, South Africa, USA, UK and Sri Lanka (see *Responding to Trauma* (2005) and *Responding to Trauma Part 2* (2005)). I was also creating a framework for receiving and documenting testimonies of trauma (Denborough, 2005a) and initiating a project to respond to sexual violence within prisons (Denborough, 2005b). These new developments were then compiled into a book entitled *Trauma: narrative responses to traumatic experience* (Denborough, 2006). The ideas within this book have provided the intellectual foundation for a range of collective projects responding to traumatic experience within communities in Australia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Palestine, Uganda and elsewhere.

INVITATIONS (DEMANDS!) TO TEACH AND COLLABORATE ACROSS CULTURES

The second development that took place was a curious one. Suddenly, while Cheryl White and I were visiting

various contexts in order to research and document local initiatives, we were asked to teach about the use of narrative practices. We would routinely turn down these invitations and explain that we were actually interested in what local practitioners were doing in response to the local context and local dilemmas. A part of our refusal was our determination to try to avoid imposing narrative approaches that had been developed in Australia/New Zealand upon very different cultural contexts. And yet, suddenly, the invitations to teach became more demanding. I vividly recall colleagues in Bangladesh, India and in Palestine virtually insisting that we were withholding knowledge and experience from them and that they expected us to teach. One afternoon in Nablus, Palestine, was a particular turning point. We arrived with pen and paper in order to document local initiatives, and discovered a room set out with twenty chairs and were told that the training we were to provide was to start in 20 minutes! A similar situation took place in a drug rehabilitation centre in India. With nothing prepared to teach, these contexts required us to:

- Develop forms of teaching that used examples of practice that were resonant to local contexts. This often meant examples that did not involve one-on-one counselling.
- Develop pedagogies that demonstrated the use of narrative practices, using the experiences of local practitioners, but without in any way putting individuals on the spot; for instance, without conducting individual interviews or role-plays. In this regard, a key development in relation to collective narrative documentation occurred while teaching in Nablus, Palestine. Seeking ways to ensure that the teaching was relevant to local practitioners who themselves were living and working under military occupation, I developed a collective narrative document from their words and stories: 'Dealing with life under occupation: The special skills and knowledges that sustain the workers of Nablus' (Denborough, 2008, p. 32). This was then re-told/performed. The process proved to be a significant learning experience for all involved and has subsequently become a routine element of collective narrative practice training.

Around the same time, two other key developments occurred which involved invitations to generate narrative methodologies that could be used beyond the counselling room to respond to profound hardship and social suffering.

THE TREE OF LIFE AND TEAM OF LIFE – COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE METHODOLOGIES

Ncazelo Ncube is a Zimbabwean practitioner who in 2005 was working with the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI), an organisation based in South Africa that builds capacity in relation to working with vulnerable children throughout Southern and Eastern Africa. Through Ncazelo Ncube's interest in narrative ideas, REPSSI and Dulwich Centre were involved in a partnership that saw teams from Dulwich Centre visit Zimbabwe in 2005 and Uganda in 2006. These visits had dual purposes. The first purpose was for the Dulwich Centre team¹⁴, principally Michael White, to provide training in narrative therapy to a range of African practitioners. The second purpose during the visit to Zimbabwe was a request from Ncazelo Ncube for me to develop a form of narrative practice that could be used with vulnerable children in collective contexts. The result of our collaboration was the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006; Denborough, 2008) – the first collective narrative methodology based on a metaphor drawn from local folklore. The second purpose of the visit to Uganda was to develop a way of working with former child soldiers. It was in this context that I developed the Team of Life methodology (Denborough, 2008).

LINKING STORYLINES BETWEEN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

At around the same time, Dulwich Centre was invited by Barry Sullivan and Relationships Australia, NT, to be involved in a suicide prevention project with a number of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. It soon became clear to Barbara Wingard, Cheryl White and myself (who together were leading the Dulwich Centre team¹⁵), that a new approach would need to be developed for this particular context. This new approach was described in the paper 'Linking Stories and Initiatives: A narrative approach to working with the skills and knowledge of communities':

Within any community that is facing difficult times, community members will be responding to these difficulties, they will be taking whatever action is possible, in their own ways, based on particular skills and knowledges, to try to address the effects of the problem(s) on their lives and the lives of those they love and care about. These initiatives may not currently be widely recognised, and they may not in themselves be enough to overcome all that is presently facing the community. These initiatives are,

however, highly significant. Making it possible for community members to identify these initiatives, to richly describe them so that the skills and knowledges implicit within them become more visible to themselves and to others, and to trace the history of these skills and knowledges so that the ways these are linked to local culture are understood, can strengthen these initiatives in ways that make further action possible.

Finding audiences to witness stories about these initiatives is a next step. If richly described stories of community initiatives are witnessed and responded to by those in other communities facing similar difficulties, if messages can be sent back and forth, then support and a sense of solidarity can be generated. Those community members already taking action can be powerfully supported in this process, while others can be inspired to join in. The documentation, circulation and celebration of community skills and knowledge can, in time, take on a life of its own.

This paper describes an approach to community work that requires engagement with at least two communities at a time, as each community is invited to become an outsider witness to the stories of the other. This form of community engagement is characterised by a criss-crossing exchange of stories and messages. (Denborough, Koolmatrie, Mununggirritj, Marika, Dhurrkay, & Yunupingu, 2006, p. 20)

More recently, this new narrative approach that involves working with two communities at a time has influenced the ways in which survivors of the genocide in Rwanda have been linked with Jewish descendants of Holocaust survivors.

DULWICH CENTRE FOUNDATION AND THE CHALLENGES FOR COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE PRACTICE

The final factor that sparked a concerted effort to develop further collective narrative practices came in 2006, when Michael White, Cheryl White and I visited Rwanda and made contact with Kaboyi Benoit, who at that time was the executive secretary of Ibuka: the national genocide survivors association (Benoit, 2007). Sitting at the top of 'Hotel Rwanda' (Hôtel des Mille Collines), we decided that we would form the Dulwich Centre Institute of Collective Practice (which in time became Dulwich Centre Foundation and Dulwich Centre

Foundation International) in order to respond to the following questions/challenges:

- In contexts where one-on-one counselling is not possible or culturally appropriate, how can narrative approaches still be used to assist people who are experiencing hardship?
- Where resources are scarce, how can we develop narrative approaches that can be put into practice by dedicated community people, approaches that can be engaged with beyond the professional world?
- How can narrative approaches be relevant to contexts of profound collective social suffering such as the genocide within Rwanda and the military occupation of Palestine?
- In responding to stories of social suffering, how can our work contribute to 'social movement'?
- As we respond to these questions, how can we minimise the possibilities of participating in psychological colonisation? (see Tamasese, 2002; Pupavac 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2006; Arulampalam, Perera, de Mel, White & Denborough, 2005; Watters, 2010)

Michael White's death at an early age in 2008 was a tragic loss for the field. The legacies of his work, however, live on in many different ways and places. For instance, using Michael's ideas as our foundation, and the questions above as our challenge, new forms of collective narrative practice have emerged. So too have new ways of theorising our roles as practitioners:

Our first task ... is to develop ways of working that unearth (and then richly describe) the skills and knowledges of those who have experienced trauma and hardship. Our second task is to 'enable contribution' ... People enduring significant hardship are often seen to be requiring 'help', 'healing', 'therapy', or 'psychosocial support' and it is often assumed that this 'help' is to be provided through professional services. But perhaps something quite different is required. Perhaps what is required is for contexts to be created in which individuals and communities who are going through hard times can make contributions to the lives of others who are going through similar difficulties. (Denborough, 2008, pp. 1-4)

Through a series of partnerships and projects, new collective narrative practice methodologies have also been developed, including the Tree of Life, the Team of Life, collective narrative timelines, songs, and rituals resonant with local folk cultural practices and metaphors:

The metaphors upon which these methodologies are based have been deliberately chosen ... If we are to find ways of working that are resonant well beyond the professional counselling room, then it seems likely that these will build upon the everyday, ordinary rituals and joys of community life. Our connections to nature, sports, stories, songs and histories are diverse folk cultural starting points ... (Denborough, 2008, p. 2)

Within *Collective narrative practice: Responding to individuals, groups and communities who have experienced trauma*, I also took the opportunity to theorise beyond individualism/collectivism and to draw attention to the existence of both individual and collective speech patterns and what becomes possible in our practice if we notice and follow these (Denborough, 2008).

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE PRACTICE

The last few years have seen a flowering of new developments in relation to collective narrative practice as folk cultural practice; as conflict dissolution/social-historical healing; and as social action/diverse economic 'development'. I will just briefly touch upon these developments here.

COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE PRACTICE AS FOLK CULTURAL PRACTICE

Early examples of folk cultural collective narrative methodologies used metaphors of nature (the Tree of Life) and sports (the Team of Life) to enable children and young people to address experiences of social suffering without having to speak directly about them. In recent years, these methodologies have been adapted by practitioners and put to work in a great diversity of contexts¹⁶. Other practitioners have developed their own folk cultural methodologies including the 'Seasons of Life' (Abu-Rayyan, 2009), 'Crossing the river' (Hegarty, Smith & Hammersley, 2010), 'Recipes of life', (Rudland Wood, in press); the 'Kite of Life' (Denborough, 2010a) and the 'Rhythm of Life' (Müller, in press).

COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE PRACTICE AS CONFLICT DISSOLUTION/SOCIAL-HISTORICAL HEALING/RESPONSE TO RACISM

Three recent projects have explored the use of collective narrative practices as conflict dissolution/social-historical healing or as a response to racism. *The Kite of Life: From*

*intergenerational conflict to intergenerational alliance*¹⁷ describes a response to conflict between generations within the Tamil refugee/migrant community in Toronto, Canada. The paper *Resonance, rich description and social-historical healing: The use of collective narrative practice in Srebrenica*¹⁸, describes the use of collective documentation and definitional ceremonies within a workshop with participants who occupied vastly different positions within a social history of profound conflict/war. While *Life-saving tips: Special skills and knowledge from young Muslim Australians* (Dulwich Centre Foundation, 2011), is a recent collective narrative practice response to racism against young Muslims and conflict between young Muslim and non-Muslims here in Australia. This project collectively documented the skills and knowledge of young Muslim Australians in dealing with hardship in both the written word and in video. These forms of documentation have since been shared with diverse groups of other Australians (young and old) who have in turn responded with outsider-witness responses and their own tips (see: www.dulwichcentre.com.au/life-saving-tips.html). In this way, the knowledge and skills of the most marginalised have been richly acknowledged, and prejudiced attitudes and representations have been diffused.

While these examples are modest, they signal a starting point in considering how collective narrative practices may be engaged with to respond to collective conflicts and discrimination – whether present or historic.

COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE PRACTICE AS SOCIAL ACTION/DIVERSE ECONOMIC 'DEVELOPMENT'

Perhaps the most exciting current project in relation to collective narrative practice involves the work of Caleb Wakhungu in rural Uganda²⁰. The work of the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project represents a post-development initiative (Sachs, 2010) which is using narrative ideas to spark and sustain social action and 'diverse economic development'²¹. Caleb Wakhungu and his team are using people's stories of present and past survival to raise their heads above the clouds in order to aspire to and take future social and economic action.

This work at Mt Elgon also represents a cross-cultural (re-)invention of narrative practice. Other cross-cultural (re-)inventions are occurring through the work of Palestinian narrative practitioners²² who themselves are living under occupation, and trauma counsellors in Rwanda who are themselves survivors of the 1994 genocide²³. In coming years, I have the sense that we will be hearing a lot more about Ugandan, Palestinian and Rwandan forms of narrative practice.

LOOKING BACK

This paper has traced my journey through the history of ideas, practices and partnerships that led to the development of narrative therapy, and the challenges and invitations that have contributed to the development of 'collective narrative practice'. In doing so, I hope it has provided an historical foundation for this emerging field.

In excavating this foundation, I have traversed the intellectual roots of narrative therapy – writings from the interpretive turn of anthropology and the early papers of Michael White and David Epston – in relation to six key aspects of narrative therapy:

- (i) Placing personal problems back into the realm of culture and history – externalising
- (ii) The narrative metaphor and narrative practice
- (iii) Counter documents and therapeutic letters
- (iv) The significance of partnerships
- (v) An anthropology of problems and archiving alternative knowledges
- (vi) Folk psychology and performed identity

And yet, the histories that inform collective narrative practice are not only intellectual, so I have also included stories of the social projects and partnerships that have been critical along the way.

At the beginning of this paper, I described how at 23 I was struggling to work out how to respond to what were, for me, two relatively recent discoveries:

- My European family tree had been "re-planted in someone else's yard" (Rieniets, 1995), namely the yard belonging to Aboriginal Australia.
- The harm that people of my gender (men) had done and were continuing to do to women, to children, and to other men.

Eighteen years on, if I was to attempt to describe how I now respond to these questions, it would be the word 'partnership'. As a white, middle-class Australian man, the only way I can hope to make any contribution to redressing the effects of gender injustice, racial injustice, or the effects of war and social suffering, is through the formation of meaningful and lasting partnerships with those most affected by these injustices. Just as collective narrative practices have developed through partnerships, their future will depend on them.²³

Looking back, the development of collective narrative practices has been quite a journey. If I was to nominate its starting point, it would be a conversation in November 2006 shared with Cheryl White and Michael White at the Hôtel des Mille Collines looking over Rwanda, the land of a thousand hills. The challenges we were seeking to respond to during that conversation in Rwanda remain just as significant today. In writing this paper, however, I have come to more fully appreciate the distances and territories we have travelled since then, the learnings that have accrued, and possible future explorations. I have also come to a much greater understanding of the histories we are building upon and all those who are accompanying us along the way.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Narrative therapy as we know it today would not exist if it were not for the work of Michael White, David Epston, Karl Tomm, Jill Freedman and Cheryl White. In turn, the development of the collective narrative practices described here would not have been possible without the contributions of many people, especially Cheryl White, Michael White, David Epston, Barbara Wingard, Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese, Charles Waldegrave, Ncazelo Ncube, Caleb Wakhungu, David Newman, Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett, Ruth Pluznick, Thilaka Xavier, Jill Freedman, Gene Combs, Angel Yuen, Shona Russell, John Stillman, Tileah Drahm-Butler, Lynn Tron, Alfonso Diaz, Therese Hegarty, Chris Wever, Angela Tsun on-Kee, Daria Kutuzova, Milan Colic, Eileen Hurley, and Kaboyi Benoit. Amaryll Perlesz, David Epston, Cheryl White, Mary Heath, Susanna Chamberlain and David Newman gave invaluable feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.

NOTES

1. To read other histories of narrative therapy see Beels (2001, 2009), Chamberlain (2004, 2011) Denborough (2009), Epston (2011), Madigan (2011), White, C. (2009).
2. From a song by Andrea Rienets (1995).
3. Other key collaborators in MASA at this time were David Newman, Mark D'Astoli and Mark Trudinger.
4. This paper emerged after David Epston and Michael White spent time working together in Adelaide in August 1985.
5. For more information about this development see Epston (2011).
6. These included David Newman, Michael Flood, Ben Pennings, Mark D'Astoli and Mark Trudinger.
7. For instance, Dulwich Centre Foundation International is soon to currently engaged in a project responding to gender-based violence in Palestine and Kurdistan, Iraq. This project relies on both gender partnerships and cross-cultural partnerships. For more information contact Dulwich Centre Foundation International c/o dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au
8. Examples of such songs can be heard at: www.dulwichcentre.com.au/songs.html
9. Cheryl White has recently reinstated Friday Afternoons at Dulwich, this time on-line at: www.narrativetherapyonline.com
10. Personal communication from Cheryl White, 3rd May, 2011.
11. Healing our way: Cultural approaches to working with Aboriginal families and communities impacted by the trauma of violence, 1st and 2nd March 2011. Organised by Family Worker Training, NSW (www.fwtdp.org.au)

12. Lynn Tron's contributions to this process were invaluable.
13. An extract from this keynote presentation was recently published, White (2011).
14. The team in Zimbabwe consisted of Michael White, Cheryl White, Shona Russell & David Denborough. The team in Uganda consisted of Michael White, Cheryl White, Eileen Hurley and David Denborough.
15. This team also included Carolynha Koolmatrerie, Shona Russell, Sue Mitchell and Barry Sullivan.
16. For examples, see: www.dulwichcentre.com.au/tree-of-life.html and www.dulwichcentre.com.au/team-of-life.html
17. See Denborough (2010a)
18. See Denborough (2011b)
19. This work is documented in *Raising our heads above the clouds: The use of narrative practices to motivate social action and economic development - The work of the Mt Elgon Self-help community project* (Denborough, 2010c). See also the Mt Elgon website: www.mt-elgonproject.org and a video about their work at: www.dulwichcentre.com.au/narrative-development-work.html
20. The work of Caleb Wakhungu is not only prioritising market-based economic activity but, through the principle of 'the gift of giving' and a range of collective narrative practices that link individual action to a collective ethos and collective action (savings clubs, collective house-building processes), it is equally prioritising what are sometimes referred to as 'informal economies' (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 58) or 'non-market economies' (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 26). At the same time, the work at Mt Elgon is prioritising 'development' of environmentally sustainable economies and biodiversity. Their work therefore represents the use of collective narrative practices to spark and sustain three inter-relating strands of diverse economic 'development': market-based economic activity, non-market transactions/relations, and environmental/economic transformation. This is why I refer to their work as involving 'diverse economic development'.
21. 21. For information about the work of Palestinian narrative counsellors, see: www.dulwichcentre.com.au/narrative-responses-to-trauma-in-palestine.html
Also included on this website is an acknowledgement of the team of narrative practitioners involved in this project, including Shona Russell, David Newman, Chris Behan, Geir Lundby, Jill Freedman, Sue Mitchell, Stephen Madigan, Cheryl White and David Denborough.
22. See *Working with memory in the shadow of genocide: The narrative practices of Ibuka trauma counsellors* (Denborough, 2010b).
23. I wish to acknowledge here the following longer-term partnerships through which my engagement with collective narrative practices have emerged:
 - in relation to issues of gender: with Cheryl White and Mary Heath
 - in relation to considerations of culture: with Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese and Charles Waldegrave of the Just Therapy Team
 - in relation to Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations: with Aunty Barbara Wingard.

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