

**The Michael White Archive:
New learnings from White's therapeutic practice
in the realms of abuse and trauma**

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*Note: The resource provided for this meet the author session, is an extract/chapter from Kelsi's PhD thesis on Michael White's video archive. The chapter is entitled: 'Narrative practice at times when the therapist is more centred'

4. NARRATIVE PRACTICE AT TIMES WHEN THE THERAPIST IS MORE CENTRED

Domain I: Narrative practice at times when the therapist is more centred

This chapter focuses on what there is to learn from those moments in Michael White’s therapeutic conversations when he was relatively more centred and influential? I am using the words ‘centred’ and ‘influential’ in relation to the therapeutic stance of being ‘decentred and yet influential’, as described by White (2005). Michael White (2005) depicted this ‘therapeutic posture’ in Figure 3 below, which is from his teaching notes.

THERAPEUTIC POSTURE

	De-centred	Centred
Influential	De-centred and influential (potentially invigorating of therapist)	Centred and influential (potentially burdening of therapist)
Non-influential	De-centred and non-influential (potentially invalidating of therapist)	Centred and non-influential (potentially exhausting of therapist)

Figure 3. Therapeutic posture

White elaborated on what it means to be in a ‘decentred but influential’ position in the following quote:

This is a decentred participation in that therapists endeavour to privilege the authorship of the people seeking consultation. And it is an influential participation in the sense that the therapist brings structure to this inquiry about the

developments of people's lives that may potentially be unique outcomes (M. White, 2007, p. 233)

Brief history

The concept of remaining ‘decentred but influential’ (M. White, 2005, 1997b, 2007) is regularly drawn on in the narrative field today; however, the historical context in which this concept was developed is not richly articulated in White’s published writings. As Dragana Ilic (2017) noted in their dissertation on White’s decentred and influential position: ‘Not much is written about this position and it is usually unclear to many students of narrative therapy what this position means and entails and how it is performed in the session’ (2007, p. 109). However, having access to White’s early teaching videos (particularly those in which he is teaching with Karl Tomm), and discussing these early teachings with people who knew Michael and his work well (e.g., Jill Freedman, Mark Hayward, Cheryl White, David Denborough), I came to understand that the stance of ‘decentred but influential’ was proposed in response to the concept of therapist ‘neutrality’ that had been articulated by systemic family therapists (Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata, 1980; Tomm, 2016; M. White, 1998, 2005, 1997b, 2007). Karl Tomm has provided a succinct description of the history of ‘neutrality’ in systemic and narrative practice:

One of the things that I don’t think people are aware of, is that when the Milan team popularised this notion of neutrality, it was in the context of psychiatric practice which consisted of professionals having and using authority to tell people how they ought to lead their lives. Introducing the concept of neutrality in that context, was therefore, not neutral! In fact, it was challenging the status quo in a very powerful way. People who aren’t familiar with that history think that the concept of ‘neutrality’ was a wholly conservative notion, but it wasn’t at the time. Of course, considerations of the power differential between therapists and clients, and between different genders, and so forth, have all questioned the notion of neutrality. But actually, it was a radical notion at the time and I think that’s an aspect to the history that has been lost.

The Milan team were hoping to encourage professionals within the mental health system not to impose their particular views on what people should be doing in the family, where, prior to this, it had been assumed that this was to be the role of the professional. (Tomm, 2016, p. 30)

Conversations about the concept of neutrality and therapist influence can also be found in commentaries and critiques of White’s work from therapists from systemic and

family therapy traditions. For example, commenting on White's therapeutic work, Karl Tomm said the following:

We [Michael and I] used to have debates at first because he claimed that he didn't have so much influence on clients. He had a horror of dominating others but did eventually acknowledge his 'decentered but influential position.' He was influential because he understood the structure of narratives, unique outcomes, absent but implicit desires, future storylines, etc. (as cited in Duvall, Beres, & Beaudoin, 2008, p. 4)

Karl Tomm elaborated on White's skill in being 'decentred but influential' by referring to his ability to remain 'humble' while also exuding a sense of 'confidence' that things could improve:

Michael had a way of attending in such a complete, full manner to others' experiences that had a profound effect in opening possibilities. He had an unusual combination of respectful humility and absolute confidence. He was very humble with respect to the other having legitimate experiences of their own and was very attentive to them. You have to be humble to do that because if you are too full of your own ideas, you project them onto others. At the same time he exuded confidence, a strong sense of knowing that something could be done, which created a willingness to trust' (Tomm, as cited in Duvall, Beres & Beaudoin, 2008, p. 4).

Salvador Minuchin, who willingly embraced a centred and influential (some would say authoritative) position within his form of structuralist family therapy, also had certain critiques of White's work in relation to his 'influence' on the people consulting him. Minuchin said the following about White's work:

I remember seeing Michael White do a very masterful session of narrative therapy, but it was like watching a sheep dog at work. He kept pushing people through a series of constructed questions into the groove of seeing their stories in the more positive way that he wanted for them. The therapist changes the old story and convinces the client that the new story is more true than the old. We all offer our patients a language, and we say, 'Let's begin to see your life in this language, and I will give you solutions in this language'. I do it. Everybody does it' (Minuchin, as cited in Simon, 1996, pp. 55-56)

In response to this comment by Minuchin, White said the following in an interview with Michael Hoyt and Jeff Zimmerman:

I have always admired Minuchin's questioning of therapeutic practices, and his efforts to encourage people to acknowledge and to name the power relations of therapy. And, although I don't see myself or my work in the description of

Minuchin's that you quoted, I think the issue of the role and meaning of questions in therapeutic conversations is a really good one to consider. I am interested in how we can talk about this issue in ways that do not blur distinctions around different practices. This is important because if all acts of power in the name of therapy are equal – if it is not possible to differentiate between those acts that are more imposing from those that are less imposing – then we don't have anywhere to go in terms of questioning therapeutic practice, and there will be no impetus for us to find ways of making what we do more accountable to the people who consult us. (M. White, 2000a, p. 100)

I view White's determination to discern and differentiate 'acts of power in the name of therapy' as very significant. To me, it reflects White's unwillingness to be resigned to the fact that therapists hold a status of power and privilege in the therapy room – and that what they *do* to respond to this position of power, matters. I hear White saying, 'we can work with this ... we can still make distinctions between acts that are more imposing from those that are less imposing, because otherwise, what are we left with?'

The efforts that White made to differentiate 'acts that are more imposing' from 'acts that are less imposing' is clearly evident in his video archive. Throughout the many therapeutic encounters recorded in the video archive, one can see that the vast majority of White's therapeutic work took place on the 'less imposing' (decentred) but influential side of the continuum. However, there are also instances when he travelled towards the 'more imposing' (centred) end of the continuum, and one is left to wonder, what was influencing White at these times? What was he thinking? What might he have been resisting or attending to? What can we learn for our own practice from these moments?

Therapist positioning: A reflection of political and ethical commitments

In reflecting on the questions mentioned above about Michael White's positioning in the therapeutic context, I found the words of Mark Hayward to be especially helpful and illuminating. In a paper that Hayward (2003) wrote in response 'to some of the specific and the generalised challenges to narrative therapy from therapists of other persuasions' (2003, p. 183), he skilfully highlighted the ways in which the therapist's position reflects quite profound political and ethical commitments. The following two quotes stood out as especially significant in linking therapeutic posture(s) to political commitments:

Family therapy models are much more than a set of connected ideas and practices. They contain a philosophy, a view of the world and a schema for relating to it. This

therapist positioning reflects attitudes that embody principles, beliefs and values. These are commitments about what's important, how people should be treated and what's right. It should be no surprise, then that therapists are so committed to their models — a model might represent something as important as a commitment to justice or equality. As an early structural therapist, I stood for accessible theories, jargon-free clarity and therapeutic leadership. In my days as a Milan therapist, I stood for neutrality and self-determination. Come post-Milan, I also stood for more collaboration and a disbelief in grand theories. And now, as a narrative therapist, I stand for transparency, for accountability, for social justice and for reducing hierarchy. (Hayward, 2003, p. 184)

Hayward goes on to further articulate the political alignments related to narrative therapy:

For example, the narrative approach to reflecting teams (White, 2000) that asks team members to situate their comments ('embodiment') represents a particular commitment to the value of accountability. This accountability is further developed in the 'Part 4' of narrative sessions where the team and family are encouraged to ask the therapist to account for their questions and/or areas of interest and/or theoretical orientation, etc. ... it is hard to imagine any new narrative practice developing that does not reflect values like transparency and collaboration or that does not make us accountable to those who consult us. (Hayward, 2003, p. 186)

Having now set a context for understanding therapeutic posture as representing certain political alignments, in the following sections I have provided extracts of transcript from Michael White's video archive that I believe demonstrate moments of more *centred* practice. I have also included some reflections on the extracts as a way of situating my interest and hopefully inviting you to make your own links and connections to your life and practice.

White overtly challenging and naming practices of abuse and 'power tactics':

Julie

The following exchanges are from White's work in the early 1990s with a young woman named Julie (pseudonym). I am not sure of the broader context of White's work with Julie, as I have not come across any writings that link to this conversation and there is only one video clip from this meeting with Julie. However, what is clear is that Julie was consulting White about experiences of manipulation, control and physical violence from her partner, Jason (pseudonym).

Julie (J): But what usually happened was when I went out with my own friends, Jason would usually make sure that it would be at the same place [as him].

MW: He'd make sure it would be at the same place, so it was still somewhat controlling of you?

J: Yeah.

MW: Okay.

J: Which really shouldn't bother me.

MW: Yeah.

J: Because—

MW: Why shouldn't it bother you?

J: Well... we both have the same circle of friends.

MW: To me it makes sense that it would bother you, if you were trying to reclaim some of your own power, some of your own territory in life, to see him occupying it ... (J - yeah) I don't understand why it wouldn't bother you ... It would bother anybody else.

J: I guess I just see it as he can go wherever he wants to ... and if he's at the same place as I am, well... I should be able to [inaudible]

MW: So, you have all these shoulds operating on you, huh?

J: Yeah.

'When did you make a decision that your hair was your own?'

MW: Okay, alright, so I'm just trying to get a sense of what developments there have been in the last four months. So ... you've started to reclaim your own life with friends, and also, if you wanted to go, you would just go, is that right? [J nods; MW is writing] Okay.

J: And I used to have blonde hair until Monday, and [laughs] I knew that he wouldn't like it so I probably went and did this to my hair [laughs]

MW: Right, okay, so you had blonde hair and ... okay, so you decided that this would be your hair and not his hair? [J: yeah – laughing] Is that right?

J: Yup.

MW: So, you made a decision that your hair was your own?

J: Umhmmm. [nods]

MW: When did you make a decision that your hair was your own?

J: On Monday.

MW: on Monday?!

J: Yup.

MW: [MW pauses while he's writing] Okay.

J: And he keeps making little comments about it: 'it's not the Julie that I love' or 'it's my friends talked me into it', or... he's taken the decision...

MW: He won't acknowledge the fact that it was your decision.

J: Umhmm. [nods]

MW: Well, this is really exciting, and so you took your hair back in a sense.

J: [laughs]

MW: 'This is my hair...'

J: Yup.

MW: So, I'd like to just come back at this point to get some idea of the effects of this abuse on you as a person. You said that it's, um..., it's undermined your strength and your assertiveness ... is that correct?

J: Yeah.

MW: Who has it isolated you from?

J: One of my best friends.

MW: How has it isolated you from one of your best friends?

J: We don't see each other anymore ... she just can't be bothered picking up the pieces all the time.

MW: Right [MW is writing] And it's, it's um...

J: It's probably because of her own insecurities with me as well...

MW: So, it's provoked a lot of insecurity, it's isolated you from your best friend, it's undermined your strength.

J: Umhm. [nods]

MW: And fourthly, it's um ... it's interfered with your happiness. [MW is writing] Okay, is that a reasonable summary of the effects that this verbal and emotional abuse and emotional blackmail, verbal and physical and emotional blackmail has had on you as person?

J: Yeah.

MW: Is that a reasonable summary?

J: Yeah.

MW: It is? Okay... I guess I'm interested in ... I have a sense that you've been in a couple of relationships where the man has tried to get power over you? Is that, does that sound? [J: nods] and physical abuse, and emotional blackmail, and verbal abuse are a way of trying to achieve that I guess ... I guess they're like ... I wonder if we could sometime, somehow, name these power tactics, you know? Or these techniques of trying to control you a bit more ...

White sharing knowledge about abusive practices being 'hard to spot' when someone has not experienced abuse/violence in their family of origin

J: But I don't understand though, because in my family situation none of this happens [MW: yeah, yeah] and ...

MW: Well, I guess maybe, maybe, it's something you haven't seen in your family, and so I guess it's a bit hard for you to spot it, you know, when it's happening? Have you found it's a bit hard for you to see it when it's happening?

J: I get caught in it.

MW: you get caught in it? Okay... I'll write that down...

These exchanges between Julie and Michael White stood out as significant to me because they seemed to challenge dominant ideas about how and why many women end up in multiple abusive relationships. Also, White's comment about abusive practices being 'hard to spot' because Julie wasn't exposed to them in her family of origin caught my attention and made me stop and think. That is, I imagined myself being Julie in this situation, and then hearing White say this, and I found myself thinking: 'Right, that makes a lot of sense because I wouldn't even think to expect that someone would be trying to control, manipulate or abuse me because I never had to look out for this growing up – it simply didn't cross my mind.' This comment from White also seems to simultaneously challenge multiple ideas at once, such as: the idea that control and manipulation are 'okay' or 'normal' practices that everyone should be able to spot; that Julie is somehow 'foolish' for not being able to pick up on these practices of manipulation; that these 'power tactics' from Jason are accidental.

This is a 'well-known game of abuse ... this is a game that disadvantages you'

MW: So, let's look at these power tactics ... that have undermined your strength and assertiveness, and interfered with your happiness, provoked insecurity [J: yeah] and isolated you from your best friend. Let's look at these power tactics ... Um, the first one is just the physical violence, that's a power tactic. Intimidation [MW is writing and looking up at J] Intimidation?

J: Yeah.

MW: Okay, second tactic you mentioned was verbal abuse ... Does this diminish you a bit, this abuse? That disqualifies you and diminishes you in ways? [J nods] Diminishing and disqualifying [MW repeats these words as he writes them down] ... Okay, does it have you sort of rejecting yourself a bit, instead of... [J nods] It has you rejecting yourself? [MW is writing] Tell me ... is it a bit inconsistent? Is it hard for you to know when you're going to be abused and when you're not?

J: I can't predict it ...

MW: You can't predict it ahead of time?

J: [Shakes her head no]

MW: Okay, so ...

J: Because he'll tell me he hates me and then ...

MW: He hates you, and then what ... ?

J: Five minutes later he'll say that he loves me and that he didn't mean to say what he said ...

MW: Okay, later, 'I love you' [MW reads aloud as he's writing]. Now, do you think that, um, this inconsistent message makes you more vulnerable...?

J: Yes.

MW: And more uncertain and more insecure?

J: Yeah.

MW: Yeah ... because if you got a consistent message, you'd be able to deal with it, wouldn't you?

J: Yeah, I think that he said that [inaudible – Julie seems to stop talking]

MW: Did you know that inconsistency is like a tactic of control and power?

J: [Nods] He said once ... he said, 'I really do love you'. But I said, 'Well, will you come back?' 'No, I like this game.'

MW: Okay ... 'This game', this is a game that disadvantages you, right?

J: Yeah.

MW: So ... this is a pretty well-known game that is often used particularly by men to colonise women, to dominate them and so on. This inconsistency is a pretty well-known game ... If you go on being subject to these power tactics, what effect is that going to have on your friendship network? You know, is it going to isolate you further?

J: If I....

- MW: If you remain a [J: a victim] ... a victim of these power tactics, will it have a further effect on ... eventually, in terms of isolating you from...?
- J: Mhmmm [nods]
- MW: Okay, okay ... I mean, isolation ... If you really want to dominate someone then you find a way of isolating them, you know?
- J: He's done that. His friends ... his best friend and I used to get along really well, but he—
- MW: He split you off from his best friend, so he's isolated you from his best friend?
- J: Yeah.
- MW: Okay ... and from his best friend [MW repeats aloud as he reads] So, these power tactics could have you isolated from your friendship network. Would that contribute to a further reduction in your own power and confidence? Or...?
- J: Yeah.

Examples from post-session discussion

The following comments from Michael White occurred in the context of a 'post-session discussion' after his meeting with Julie. In these reflections, White discussed the concept of 'neutrality' in relation to his therapeutic practice, and described the broader effects of 'privatisation' on practices of abuse and violence. It is also important to note that Julie was present in this 'post-session discussion', and thus, was included in the ongoing reflection of the group of practitioners.

Not being neutral about abuse

- MW: I'm not neutral about very much at all, and I'm certainly not neutral about abuse. I think that sometimes young women stay in situations with this hope that somehow things will get better. When in fact they have a feeling that maybe somehow the abuse relates to them. Well it doesn't. It has nothing to do with Julie, this abuse...
- Julie (J): Yeah, I've thought that at some points.
- MW: I'm sure you have. Most people in abusive situations wind up taking responsibility for it, even though they've been the victim of it ... Jason is making decisions to abuse Julie, and unless he takes responsibility for that and makes some decisions to do something about it, then it's not going to change. It's more than likely going to get worse...

'Privatisation': linking practices of abuse to the broader sociopolitical context

MW: I'm quite sure that abuse only survived because of privatisation. Which brings us to another issue. And I think privatisation is a good metaphor when working with these families ... that if it wasn't for privatisation, it's very unlikely that these events could take place in the way that they take place. We have privatisation of family life, particularly in this twentieth century, since ... along with the industrial revolution has come the privatisation of family life, and privatisation of family life is something else that we can externalise and we can oppose privatisation ... so in fact, I get men who actually might've been involved some sexual abuse ... and if I'm working in a training situation, what I have done, is that instead of having the team behind the screen, they'll come into the room and ask the man questions about, you know, his lifestyle, the secrecy lifestyle, and the effect of that on him ... his difficulty in exposing his responsibility for the event, what it was like to confront himself as an oppressor and exploiter, and what it was then to start to pit himself against some of those values and what effect that's had on his life in the future ... These things are very important and I would tend to think of that as a bit of a metaphor: that the more public this becomes, you know, the more likely it is there will be some long-term changes.

The Domain concluded with a series of questions for participants in focus groups to consider (see Appendix II).