

The Read Everything Michael White Published Project

by Will Sherwin



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Abstract

This paper tells the history of The Read Everything Michael White Published Project, in which I read all the works available to me that were published by Michael White, the co-originator of narrative therapy. I describe the reading project's conception, its effects on my work, some practices that Michael White believed were useful for therapists, tips for others considering a reading project of their own, and new initiatives this project was generative of in my work.

Key words: *Michael White; reading; self-education; professional development; narrative practice*

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Statement of commitments and purposes

In this paper, I am committed to not paraphrasing or trying to summarise what Michael White, the co-founder of narrative therapy, wrote. Instead, I discuss specific quotes from his writings. My first purpose is to share how the project of reading all of Michael White's published writing came to be and how the reading affected my work. My second purpose is to entice others to start a Michael White reading project of their own.

I first became enthusiastic about narrative therapy through reading. In 2010, I was studying the exam preparation material for the California marriage and family therapy license, and it had five intriguing pages on narrative therapy. As I read them, I thought, "These are good questions!" I remember one of the narrative therapy principles it included: "People are profoundly influenced by the discourses around them" (AATBS, 2009).

All the other modalities had assertions about what caused problems, but the narrative therapy section discussed what influenced problems. Influence stood out to me as a more humble verb than "cause". Thinking of influences rather than causes freed me from having to confidently identify the underlying determinant of a problem. Instead, I could enquire with others about the problem's influences and play a part in creatively shifting their relationships to those influences.

From there, I read *Maps of Narrative Practice* by Michael White (2007). Reading that book changed the trajectory of my life. It lit up an inquiry that led to the deconstruction and depsychologisation of much of the "modern problem speak" (White, 1995c) that had constituted my thinking before. Narrative therapy didn't just take things away; it helped me construct something else that was creative, lively and versatile. I developed a sense that I was becoming more effective in my efforts at work. I worked as an early childhood mental health consultant at a time when much of the clinical discourse in my role was around attachment styles, positive reinforcement, and encouraging everyone to be more aware of their triggers and to regulate themselves. I started to speak up more in clinical meetings, offering alternative possibilities like making certificates for "peaceful problem-solving" for teachers to give to parents in front of their kids, recording parent voices to play to their kids in early childhood centres,

and shifting from diagnostic speculation to creatively brainstorming what to do with kids who really want to move their bodies a lot or who have "big feelings". I heard from friends and colleagues things like, "You're really starting to come into your own", "How are you so creative?", and from my mom, "It's like your ideas are coming from some other place". I'd tell them, "It's this narrative therapy stuff I've been looking into".

In those first few years, I read about a third of what Michael White published. But somewhere around 2015, I began reading less in general. I was excited by the potential of other media like podcasts, video courses and videochat discussion groups. I loved getting a sense of people through their voices. I started my narrative therapy podcast, BANTR.¹ These were wonderful ways to connect with others while learning, and they've enriched my life greatly. However, I think there's something special about reading that I was missing. When I got back into reading substantially in around 2020, I felt its benefits return. When I'm reading something I find genuinely meaningful, I feel a better sense of focus, more facility with words. I have more things to talk about with others, and I think I'm less susceptible to bleak thoughts about the future.

In 2023, I was thinking of ways to develop a rigorous learning practice. My friend-colleague Marcy Anne Rivas mentioned that she and a friend had read everything Michael White had published, and I thought, "I want to join that club". The more I thought about the idea, the more I liked it. What would it be like to read the remaining two-thirds of Michael's writing? I said to myself, "When I finish, I bet I'll have learnt some things". I got a bibliography from the Dulwich Centre website, put it into a spreadsheet and started the project. I gave myself a generous 20 years to finish, with a possible 10-year extension if I needed more time. I also permitted myself to quit if I was not having a good time with it. I invited others to join me in a Facebook group as I shared two or three quotes a week from Michael's writings.²

Early on, I read the article "Journey metaphors" (White, 2002). In it, Michael wrote about expectations in relation to "opportunities to be transported to other places in life in which I might become other than who I was at the outset of the journey" and to "think beyond what I routinely think" (p. 12). I took along those two purposes for my reading journey. These expectations made the reading project more poetic, more of an adventure. It satisfied something in me to be living my life in adventurous and poetic ways.

I finished³ the remaining two-thirds of Michael's writing in six months, reading an average of half an hour a day. I estimate that at my reading rate, reading everything he published would take roughly 135 hours.

Two descriptions of relative influence questions

To give an evocative sample of what I came to value upon returning to Michael's writings after 10 years away, here are two descriptions of relative influence questions: my best attempt at a summary and Michael's original text:

My description of relative influence questions	Michael White's description of relative influence questions
<p>Relative influence questions can be used to inquire into a problem's influence in a person's life and that person's influence in the life of the problem. These questions can give people some distance from the problem, emphasise their sense of agency, and develop an alternative relationship to the problem.</p>	<p>"By inviting persons to review the effects of the problem in their lives and relationships, relative influence questions assist persons to become aware of and to describe their relationship with the problem. This takes persons out of a fixed and static world, a world of problems that are intrinsic to persons and relationships, and into a world of experience, a world of flux. In this world, persons find new possibilities for affirmative action; new opportunities to act flexibly" (White, 1988b, p. 5).</p>

How would you describe the difference between Michael's description and mine? I first only evaluated mine in terms of inferiority to Michael's. However, if I'm intentionally generous with myself, I'd describe mine as shorter, more accessible and maybe more user-friendly. I have found it useful to have a simple version of narrative therapy to think from. However, reading Michael's version reminds me that the simplified version does not fully encapsulate narrative practice. Reading Michael's version helps colour my version

with possibility and richness when I go to ask a relative influence question to someone I'm working with. Reading everything Michael White published helped to "exoticize the domestic" (White, 2004, p. vi) version of narrative therapy that I had settled into over the last 14 years. I think that taking persons into "a world of experience, a world of flux" is an intriguing way to look at what it is that narrative therapy can do.

Metaphorically speaking⁴

I was asked to write about the difference this project made in my practice. After considering it for a while, I'd like to speak metaphorically about the difference.

What I feel best about saying is that doing all this reading has made me *sharper*. Reading Michael White was like sharpening a dull blade into one that cut through things more easily. I could think more clearly. Words and creative initiatives came more easily to my mind as I read for 30 minutes a day. Also, when I stopped reading for a while, I could feel my thinking get a bit more dull.

I've also heard a metaphor used about learning narrative therapy: that it's like jazz – before you can improvise, you have to learn the scales. I've been studying jazz guitar for a couple of years now, and I thought, "So what are the scales in narrative therapy and what's the routine to practice?" Maybe reading Michael White is like practicing scales. When I've been practicing scales regularly, I feel more relaxed, playful and pleased with my music-making. When I've been reading Michael White regularly, I feel more relaxed, playful and pleased with my therapy conversations. In both cases, it feels good to have a regular practice to sharpen my chops and develop my skills and understanding.

Developing statements of assumptions, commitments and purposes

While reading, I had a special eye out for projects that I could take on based on Michael's words. For example, Michael's (1988a) article, "Assumptions and therapy"⁵ starts with this:

I believe that it is entirely useful for therapists to develop an explicit statement of their assumptions about the experience of persons seeking therapy and about the requirements of a therapy to satisfactorily address this experience. These assumptions largely determine therapists' interpretation of events in the world and in them can be seen the operation of our beliefs, attitudes, values, premises, presuppositions, and so on. Although it is not possible for us to avoid having assumptions, it is possible for us to avoid awareness of them and to avoid formulating them as an articulate statement. (White, 1988a, p. 7)

Michael went on to list 20 of his assumptions about therapy. For example, one of his assumptions was that "a therapy of merit" invites persons to "redefine the problem in the vernacular, rendering it accessible to their problem-solving resources" (1988a, p. 8). In another article, he writes for two and a half pages on assumptions he does *not* hold when working with communities before he lists the assumptions he does hold (White, 2003). I thought for a while about what it would be like to write explicit statements of my assumptions. Then I thought, "Instead of thinking about writing down my assumptions, let me just start writing some down and see what happens". I gave myself 20 years to come up with a comprehensive statement of my own assumptions, and so far I have five:

1. People seeking therapy are often nervous before their first visit.
2. Bringing in ways of working that are friendly to visual thinking can often help us focus and can give people something to take with them after the session ends.
3. Any assumption I come up with may not be true for all people.
4. "People are profoundly influenced by the discourses around them".
5. Critical reflection can lead to feeling more room to work rather than less.

I plan to add assumptions to the list as I think of them. I've shared this early draft of my assumptions with several other colleagues and with the Facebook group and other people have shared their assumptions with me. I notice that all our assumptions so far are different from Michael's and from each other's. This makes me think we're all emphasising different principles or

wording similar assumptions slightly differently, which has different effects on our work. It makes me think that this practice of sharing our assumptions may be a way to see some of the diversity among those of us whose practice is informed by narrative ideas. Writing my assumptions has given me more of a sense that I have a particular foundation to my work.

In the interview article "Passion, commitment, and common sense" (Duvall & Beier, 1995), Jim Duvall asks Insoo Kim Berg⁶ and Michael White,

What would you say to a therapist who was just starting out in the field, or who might want to hear something that you have to say?
If you could speak to that person what would you say to that person? (1995, p. 79)

Insoo Kim Berg answers:

That's a wonderful choice that you've made. I think that it's enriching. Your life is going to be full of mystery, journey, and wonder and amazement, and a journey of discovery about how we do the kind of work we do; it's a special privilege to work with the clients and I think that that's the discovery of it. (1995, p. 80)

Michael White picks up on the privilege theme and adds:

Another piece for anyone coming into this field is to think about ways to acknowledge the privilege. That's a very important question. Find ways of acknowledging and acknowledging that privilege. It is important when you are coming into this field to think about the context of your own work and how can it be structured in a way that supports the acknowledgment of that privilege. To think about a working context that contributes to inspiration of the therapist. To try and figure out for people who work in this field to start to exchange their own statements of commitments and purpose for doing what they are doing and to have those statements honoured. (1995, p. 80)

In response to these suggestions, I've drawn up a rough draft statement acknowledging the special privilege of working with clients. I have been sharing my statements of assumptions, commitments and purposes with my friend-colleagues and have been inviting them to share their own; it's made for rich, interesting conversations. I noted that Michael didn't write that others should adopt his assumptions,

commitments and purposes. Instead, he encouraged readers to explicitly write out their own and share them with others, as he did.

Similarly, in the introduction to *Maps of Narrative Practice* (2007) Michael wrote:

I will emphasize here that the maps of this book are not the maps of narrative practice or a “true” and “correct” guide to narrative practice, whatever narrative practice is taken to be. (2007, p. 5)

On occasion, in teaching contexts, I have been asked why it is necessary to have maps for therapeutic practice. My response: “It is not at all necessary.” However, I believe that we all refer to guiding ideas of some sort in the development of therapeutic conversations, although very often these guiding ideas have become so taken for granted and accepted that they are rendered invisible and unavailable to critical reflection. I believe that this is a hazardous development, for it has the potential to restrict us to the unquestioned reproduction of what is familiar in terms of therapeutic practice, regardless of the consequences on the lives of the people who consult us. (2007, p. 6)

In all of my Michael White reading, I didn’t find any statements with a tone of “you should do it this way”. Instead, I read ethical arguments, critiques of the status quo ways of doing things; offerings of creative alternative practices; and encouragement to critically reflect on my assumptions, commitments, purposes, consequences, privilege and guiding ideas. And to share these with others. This led to another major effect on me.

Feeling more room

Michael refuted an interpretation of poststructuralism that suggests that it means “anything goes”. On the contrary, Michael wrote, “Rather than contributing to an ‘anything goes’ sentiment, poststructuralist inquiry contributes to a ‘nothing goes’ sentiment — nothing goes without question” (White, 2000, p. 115). I thought about that and about why I feel more room after all this reading, and I reframed this idea positively as “critical reflection can lead to feeling more room rather than less”. When I’ve critically reflected on a practice, and when I’ve considered others’ critical reflections about

the practice, a lot can work; a lot can be helpful; a lot can be possible.

Over the years, I heard others say things about Michael White like “he only used questions, not statements” and “he only uses a client’s own words”. Those practices felt a little restrictive when I imagined applying them to my conversations. But I respected and wondered about taking those positions. However, upon reading more of Michael’s work, I was heartened to see exceptions that told me he didn’t fully restrict himself to these practices. Michael shared a graph to illustrate what a woman might typically expect in a journey of breaking from abuse (1995a). He gave multiple copies of an article on gaslighting to a woman to read and leave in her former therapist’s waiting room (1995b). I also realised that in his letters to people he consulted with, Michael would express admiration for steps they had taken, introduce metaphors, editorialise about their story up to that point, urge people to not go too fast in their initiatives, and report back what his colleagues had said about their steps (White & Epston, 1991, pp. 150–154). Hearing these exceptions to “only” asking questions made me feel more relaxed about the various ways I occasionally introduce visuals, quotes, song lyrics and art references into therapeutic conversations.

I don’t see narrative therapy as a container that I try hard to stay within. I don’t hold it as a big long list of “don’t do these things, and don’t use these words” that feels tight and confining. Instead, I see it as an inspiring ethics-based therapy with lots of creative ideas that, compared with what I was doing before, provides me with a foundation to see more possibilities and enquire more interestingly into the worlds of others. I feel more room in the therapist’s chair than I did before this reading project. When I had a blurrier image of the key ethical arguments, I think I was more likely to imitate what others seemed to do. I think having a sharper picture of the ethical arguments Michael offered has helped me to feel more room in the therapist’s chair and has prompted me to try more things.

Reading everything Michael White published helped “exoticize the domestic” version of narrative therapy I had settled into. It helped me feel sharper; gave me a regular practice routine akin to practicing musical skills; inspired me to write explicit statements of my assumptions, commitments and purposes and to share them with others; and made me feel more room as a therapist.

For all this, I am grateful.

Tips for others considering reading everything Michael White published

- My reading focus improved greatly when I printed out articles instead of trying to read them on my computer.
- The best time for focused reading for me was first thing in the morning with my phone away from arm's reach.
- Reading Michael's writing every day made his language and style significantly easier to follow after about three weeks.
- Giving myself permission to move on if I didn't feel like I quite understood certain ideas kept me from getting too discouraged. Michael would often talk about a similar point or principle in a different article in a different way and sometimes that would help me get clearer about it.
- Posting the quotes that I was moved by on The Read Everything Michael White Published Project Facebook group helped the project feel more collective. It was motivating to sense that I was accompanied by others and that I was helping to circulate interesting quotes out there in the world. Also, asking questions to the group on topics I was confused by was helpful.
- Readers can contact me if they run into obstacles in their own reading project.

Possible future projects

- I wish there was a way to get continuing education credit for reading. I am looking into options for doing this through being a continuing education provider myself. Please contact me if you're excited by the idea of reading and discussing articles as a form of continuing education, and I'll let you know where I'm at with the development of it.
- Since Michael developed so much from his own massive reading project, I was thinking of starting The Read Everything Michael White Referenced Project or at least reading one thing by each author Michael cited.

- I might re-read everything Michael published again. It could become my regular practice of keeping myself sharp, like using a knife sharpening rod or a regular musical practice routine.
- I'd like to be available for others when they finish reading everything Michael White published. I envision others contacting me when they complete the readings and we set up a video chat meeting inviting the community to be an audience to the accomplishment. The reader could share their favourite quotes, musings and initiatives in whatever ways they'd like.

Final point: If you are looking for a rigorous, substantial, low-cost learning project that you can do at your own pace, in your own time, The Read Everything Michael White Published Project is something you could consider. Especially if you are looking for "opportunities to be transported to other places in life in which I might become other than who at the outset of the journey", to "think beyond what I routinely think" (White, 2002, p. 12), and to learn some things.

Notes

- ¹ BANTR: A Narrative Therapy Podcast: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/bantr-a-narrative-therapy-podcast/id1632676221>
- ² The Read Everything Michael White Published Project Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/811538933806423>
- ³ Actually, I could not get copies of nine articles between 1979 and 1986 despite asking around various communities I'm a part of. So it's more accurate to say I read everything available to me.
- ⁴ Listen to the interesting narrative practice podcast *Metaphorically Speaking*, which inspired the subtitle: <https://www.metaphoricallyspeaking.com.au/category/podcast/>
- ⁵ An easy way to get this article and others is through Dulwich Centre's website: www.dulwichcentre.com.au Some articles are free, and others require a Reading Room subscription. Papers can be requested on the "Hard-to-find Michael White writings" page.
- ⁶ Insoo Kim Berg is the co-founder of solution-focused brief therapy.

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