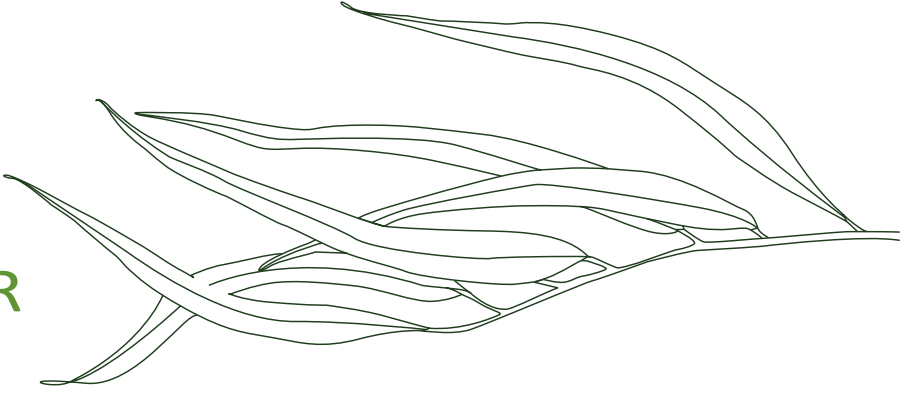




DEAR READER

The following is an extract from Kelsi Semeschuk's PhD thesis:

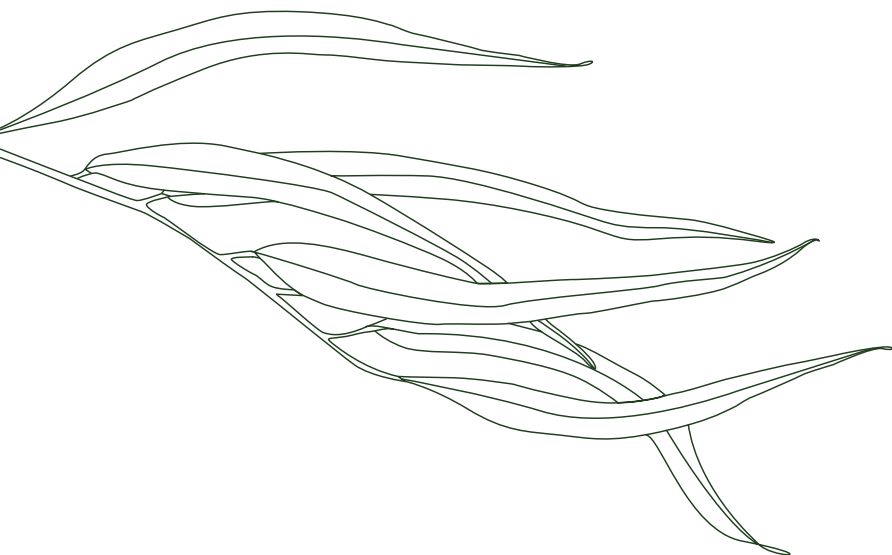
The Michael White Archive: New learnings from White's therapeutic practice in the realms of abuse and trauma

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7. NARRATIVE PRACTICE AS A WAY OF ATTENDING TO GENDER POLITICS AND A REFUSAL TO SEPARATE PRACTICES OF ABUSE/VIOLENCE FROM POWER

Domain IV: Narrative practice as a way of attending to gender politics and a refusal to separate practices of abuse/violence from power

I would like to introduce this Domain with a quote from Michael White's writings that seems to speak to how he attended to gender politics in his therapeutic practice. In this quote, Michael White (1995b) is being asked to comment on the notion that 'women who have experienced abuse actively seek further abusive relationships due to some internalized, psychological mechanisms' (1995b, p. 92). In response to this, Michael said the following:

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

Now, we have to ask, what effects do these interpretations have on women's lives? Well, I have asked women this question, and I am sure that it would not be too hard

for you to guess the responses that have come back. These interpretations encourage women to take responsibility for the abuse that is being perpetrated by men. These interpretations encourage women to persevere in relationships in which they are being subject to violence by men. Interpretations of this sort are in the service of maintaining the status quo. (M. White, 1995b, p. 92)

What I have witnessed in the Michael White Archive is a diligent privileging of this question: ‘What effects do these interpretations have on women’s lives?’ I find this quote especially significant as it speaks to a discourse that often emerges in my therapeutic conversations with people who have experiences of abuse. For example, in discussing the notion that ‘women seek out abusive relationships’ in a practice meeting, my colleague, Jo, spoke about a woman consulting her named Sally (pseudonym), who had found herself in another relationship in which her partner was perpetrating abuse and violence. In response to this, Sally said aloud, ‘Do I have a fucking sign on my forehead that says “please abuse me”?!’

Although it was some time ago, I still clearly remember Jo sharing Sally’s words, as they succinctly captured the very real and damaging effects of this pathologising discourse. It filled me with outrage. I recall Jo being equally livid in conveying this statement from Sally and I remember the team joining together in this outrage with a position that seemed to utter: ‘Why are we taught to look for signs on women’s foreheads instead of turning our heads to look at the person (and culture) that enacted this abuse?’ and ‘Why was Sally not recruited into asking “Why are practices of abuse and violence against women so prevalent?”’ – or really any other question that did not place this problem, quite literally, on her forehead. To me, Sally’s question and Jo’s sharing of it demonstrated an enactment of feminist ethics, and pointed to a willingness, among narrative practitioners, to question taken-for-granted discourses that show up in our counselling rooms. Or as Rachel Hare-Mustin (1994) so aptly noted, ‘What shimmers and bounces off the mirrored walls of the therapy room are reflections of dominant discourses that are as pervasive as the air we breathe’ (1994, p. 33).

When I first heard this practice story about Jo’s work with Sally, I remember thinking about the many times I witnessed Michael White enacting a similar sort of ethic in his therapeutic practice. The examples that came to mind were times when White demonstrated a careful attendance to gender politics and when he spoke out about the gendered nature of acts of abuse and violence. With this in mind, I engaged in a search through White’s video archive for specific examples that, in my opinion, demonstrated

an attendance to gender politics and the very real effects of this on the lives of people who endure acts of abuse. It is my hope that the following examples from Michael White's video archive will provide a sort of scaffolding for us (as practitioners) to discuss how these examples might be relevant in our therapeutic work today.

Examples from video archive: Countering pathologising accounts of why abuse enters and re-enters many women's lives

The following example is from one of Michael White's early videos in the 1980s in which he was engaged in a 'post-session discussion' with a group of practitioners. Specifically, White was responding to a question from a practitioner who was asking about the apparent pattern of women finding themselves in multiple relationships with men who use violence. This post-session discussion occurs following a live consultation where Michael had met with a family in which the stepfather had been accused of perpetrating sexual abuse against his stepdaughter. In this post-session discussion, the focus was on responding to perpetrators of violence and abuse. White made reference to his article 'The conjoint therapy of men who are violent and the women with whom they live' (M. White, 1986b).

Male practitioner: The thing about her leaving that relationship, and if I'm not mistaken on this, the pattern is that she will get in another relationship that is also violent. First of all, would you accept that as typical, and if so, how do you explain it?

MW: Well, the first thing is violence ... There's a good chance of a woman being a recipient violence in marriage in family life in Australia. I think it's the same in the United States. There's far more chance that she could be the recipient of physical violence or homicide in the family than she would in the street. It's very well established ... Secondly, I think we'll answer that question if I go through the notes a little bit further [looking at (M. White, 1986b)], because it has to do a lot with notions of property and so on. You know, it's often been said: 'there must be something in it for these women because they don't leave' –have you heard of that sort of thing? Despite the fact that they don't have the support, they don't have alternative housing, they don't have any money, they will be rejected by family, friends, and so on. But the other problem often is that their identity has been co-opted. They no longer have an identity apart from the man. They've been indoctrinated with this notion that they can't be whole without the man, and they're obviously far more vulnerable to being taken over in relationships, and persisting in relationships that are not viable for them. I guess the other point that you may discover is that many of these women are protective, and they're hooked into that romantic notion that women can and should save men. I mean if women just persist in their relationships. I mean, if you think about some of the disgusting country and western records, 'stand by your man' and that sort of stuff ... I mean if you listen to it, it's a recipe for women as property and men's

violence towards women. So, um... I'm getting a bit of amnesia [laughter] I forgot what we were talking about.

Karl Tomm: [Reminding MW] Stealing identities.

MW: Right, so there's this – this is reinforced everywhere – so in fact women will actually persevere in situations that are very, very expensive for them, that men would not persevere with. And there's a belief that things will improve over time ... when in fact, it's been demonstrated very statistically – [MW struggles to say the word 'statistically'] I hate statistics as you can tell [laughter from the group] – that violence tends to increase over time not lessen and so ... there are these myths.

Making broader context more visible (in relation to women trying to leave abusive/violent relationships)

MW: There's some fine line I think... she [mother of a young girl who disclosed sexual assault from her uncle] is in a very difficult spot. She's pregnant with this child and this guy is the father, and she's been living on \$300 a month or something, and she's got this baby coming on. I mean there are so many issues involved. But, in relation to what you're saying, I think it's very important that she doesn't get acclimatised. I mean she's got herself deacclimatised to violence and sexual assault and she's done a wonderful job of extracting herself from that, and I'd really like to talk with her more about how she did that. Because that's amazing. I mean she's achieved enough in this lifetime, and I would be talking with her about that, you know: 'that you've done something that no other, I doubt that any other generation, any other generation in your family has done. I expect that what's happened is that each generation has replicated the lifestyle of the last. And what you've done is you've done something: you've broken with that tradition, and in a sense, your daughters have a future that they could never have had and they have a future that no-one in your family could've had, or the family that came before that could've had ... and so you've really done enough in this lifetime already, and I'd like to understand more about how you did that'. And then I would want to talk with her about the extent of her opposition to him ... and I guess seeing if we could go even further in what I might call deacclimatising her to violence and sexual abuse and so on ... emotional abuse in relationships ... But I mean, I think she's amazing. I mean she has done something and she must be ... despite the fact that her daughters have also been the victims of sexual abuse, I'm quite sure they have opportunities for the future that virtually no-one in her family history has ever had ... so I'd be wanting to talk with her about that ... about the significance of what she's achieved ... and maybe um ... if um ... like I'm quite sure that there's a lot about that for her to discover yet, a lot about what she's actually achieved to discover, and if so, then she is going to be less vulnerable ... I mean, if she's quite vulnerable now because of a number of reasons, you know, having a baby and so on, um ... she's going to be less vulnerable. She's going to experience her strength ... you know, there's lots more for her to discover about that ... about herself.

Patriarchal ideology and its effects on women's experiences of violence/abuse

MW: Now I'd like to say that I don't really talk a lot about patriarchal ideology in this paper [(M. White, 1986b)], but I talk about just some of those notions ... the notion that women are property of men, flying from this the idea that men have the right to do whatever they wish; the notion of hierarchies of natural order, a man's unquestioned entitlement to assume a superior position in that natural order, and this is accompanied by this emphasis on control of those less entitled beings – that's women – by power-over tactics ... Now these notions are reinforced in a thousand different ways, every day ... you know, in the media, in jokes, in every possible way that you could think of ... and they're the sort of notions that I think establish the context for this ... [pause – MW seems to be thinking and looks at his article] I'd like ... perhaps if I can just talk about some of the consequences of that sort of way of thinking ... Obviously the consequences for women include oppression, exploitation, despair, personal impoverishment ... The consequences for the man include self-righteous anger, they become intoxicated with ... and now that's really interesting, because I don't, I'm not really into anger-control groups for men who are violent. I tend to think that is reinforcing certain notions about men – you know, the theory that men have aggression inside them. It's a dormitive notion, and that all they need to do is redirect their aggression ... I don't think it gets to the heart of the matter at all, and I think it can actually reinforce that notion ... The anger is a self-righteous anger that's intoxicating ... it's like somehow this person's rights have been interfered with in some way, and they get angry about it ... and it's like if you go to Hyde Park and see someone standing on a soap box. It's like I was saying yesterday, the more anger they express, the more angry they become. It's an intoxicating self-righteous anger ...

Male practitioner: It's double anger. They're getting angry because they're angry.

MW: That's right, yeah ... And I think we need really to challenge the basis of this self-righteous, intoxicating anger ... The other implication for men is that they have engrossing sensitivity to others, particularly to the woman's experience, like 'it was just a tap. I don't know what she's upset about. I just tapped her'. Have you had that sort of? [looks at audience of therapists] ... and, um, the man has an enormous inability to draw distinction between his experience of the event and the woman's experience of the event. The man never has double description. And I really believe that has to do with the fact that the woman is construed as property. I mean you don't try and draw a distinction between your experience of driving a car and your car's experience of being driven. You would never entertain that as a distinction. The car is simply property; it's a thing. So that men are unable to draw these distinctions, and because of that, these men are out of touch ... I mean, they really are. It's very interesting that often when the women do leave, or the man is confronted, he falls apart. And you find out the mateship is entirely shallow ... you know what I mean by mateship? [asks the audience] I don't mean ... the mateship is an Australian term for men ... for men going to the pub together, you know that sort of mateship, macho, sort of mateship thing. It's very, very shallow ... and um, obviously it's possible to do things with your property that you could never do, if you weren't construing that as your property, but you were aware of another person's experience of you, and so

on ... And so these men are very out of touch, very isolated, and very intoxicated ...

Reinterpreting a woman's history: Co-opting identity and history

MW: I've often seen situations where men have actually systematically reinterpreted the woman's history ... that the woman's history becomes a man's property, as much as she becomes his property physically ... it can enable the woman to actually reclaim herself in the very context in which she was claimed by the man, and that can be very empowering. And conjoint therapy often is more empowering because it can enable the woman to actually reclaim herself in the very context in which she was claimed by the man, and that can be very empowering.

Pam: Contextualising women's experiences of anger: Linking to historical and ongoing injustices

In the following excerpt, Michael White was speaking with a woman named Pam (pseudonym) who had been experiencing disrespect from her nephews, and who was describing a sense of 'weariness' about possibly speaking up to her nephews about this disrespect. What caught my attention about this exchange were the ways in which White asked about the broader context of Pam's experiences of disrespect with men. This led to Pam linking her sense of being disrespected to a long history of acts of abuse and violence perpetrated by men. Had White not asked about Pam's past experiences, it is my sense that the current upset she had been experiencing in response to this disrespect could've been taken over by the dominant story that 'she just has a problem with men'. Pam mentioned that she was worried about 'over-reacting' in this situation, and stated that she did not want to blame her nephews for the wrongs of men in her past.

As I reflect on Pam's and Michael's conversation, what comes to mind are my experiences working with men who have perpetrated acts of violence and abuse. Although most of my work has been with people who have endured acts of abuse, I have heard many men say things like: 'She keeps dragging up history' and 'Why can't she just get over this by now?' These sorts of understandings have, in my experience, a very negative effect on women who have survived violence/abuse, because they can often have the effect of cutting women off from their history – from what they have lived through up until this point. Thus, these sorts of comments do not take into account the fact that memories of surviving abuse/violence often do not simply go away, even when the person who perpetrated the abuse is taking steps to be accountable in relation to their use of violence. Instead, what I see White doing in this conversation with Pam is

evoking a rich account of Pam's current and past experiences with disrespect, injustice, abuse and violence to counter pathologising accounts that might paint Pam as just 'having a problem with men'.

White's response to Pam's expression of anger strikes me as quite different to approaches that might locate this problem inside of her. For example, a different conversation could have led to a conversation about how Pam has 'trust issues' when it comes to men because of the trauma she had survived. Or it could have led to a focus on 'anger management', or one of the many other pathologising understandings that are available to women who express outrage. However, what I saw occurring in this conversation between Pam and Michael, was a very different sort of conversation – one that did not psychologise and pathologise Pam's expressed sense of being disrespected.

MW: If it was women doing what these young men [Pam's nephews] have been doing, would that be different?

Pam (P): I don't think so because I'd have the same thing with her [MW: Yeah] in the same sort of, 'if you want something from me, you ask me, thank you very much' [MW: Right, okay]. Don't assume anything [MW: Right]. You know what I mean?

MW: Right, okay ... so it's not a gender-specific thing, in that sense?

P: I don't think it is.

MW: That if it was young women, you'd be responding in the same way?

P: Yeah.

MW: You'd be saying, 'if you want something from me, ask for it', is that right?
[...]

MW: Does it make a difference for you to know that it's not gender-specific? That it has to do with just potential disrespect?

P: Well, maybe it's a little relief because before— People, they've just said, 'oh I'm just angry with me', do you know what I mean? [MW: Okay, yeah, right] And it's like it dismisses my feelings, but I wonder about that ... a little bit ... I have been angry with men.

MW: Sorry?

P: And I have been angry with men.

MW: Yeah, yeah, sure... But it makes a difference to you to know that it's not gender-specific [P: Yeah] But it's to do with certain practices that can be very

costly ... [P: Mmm, yeah] [Silence] Why is that an important realisation for you?

P: Mmm ... For me, it speaks more fully about who I am, [M: Right] as opposed to 'I've got a problem with men' [M: Okay] Do you know what I mean? [M: Yeah] Or, 'I've got a problem with...' you know, it just speaks of what I want in my life.

MW: Right.

P: And the sorts of things that I, in some ways, have been demanding of.

M: Right, so it challenges that identification of who you are and clarifies what it is that you're demanding?

P: Mmmm. [nods]

[...]

P: Maybe it's a sense of weariness around that issue?

MW: Okay ... that there's been so much disrespect of women in your history and in your family and of your family, there's a sense of weariness of yet more of it?

P: Yeah.

MW: Yeah ... okay. And having to ... that sense of weariness around how do you let people know this stuff so that they don't do it?

[....]

MW: Yeah ... Okay, and your understanding is that those emotions just have to do with all of those years of the disqualification of women and your own experiences of being devalued and [P: Yeah] abused and—

P: And in my family, those things still exist.

MW: They still go on?

P: In a huge way.

MW: Those injustice still take place?

P: Yeah, yeah. They are there ... yeah.

MW: Right.

P: And are affecting our lives.

MW: Right, and um ... so, they're ongoing? [P: Yeah] and you, you have to witness them in one way or another?

P: Yeah ... I distance myself from some [M: Yeah] ... by saying I won't participate in whatever [M: Yeah] ... but there are the parts that I can't distance myself from.

MW: Yeah ... things that have happened to what, your mum? Or to—

P: Ah, particularly my daughters.

MW: Your daughters?

P: Yeah.

‘Playing a part to undo what men have done’

The following piece of transcript is also from Michael White’s conversation with Pam. In this excerpt, it seems that Michael is working to counter the idea that it is a ‘burden’ to invite men to take responsibility for the damage that other men have done.

MW: I just figure that as young men, I just wondered if they [Pam’s nephews] would be interested in playing a part to undo what men have done, um ... I don’t mean putting any special responsibilities on their shoulders, or whatever [P: Yeah ... yeah, that’s an interesting] ... and what difference would it make to you if you experience young men playing a part to undo what men have done...?

P: Mmmm. [seems to be thinking]

MW: To mend what men have tried to break?

P: It’s an interesting thought.

MW: And I don’t imagine that that would have to be a burden to them ... and I wondered whether you’d feel more or less weary if you experienced some young men playing a part [P: Yeah, joining me in that] ... Would you feel more or less weary if you experienced—

P: Less weary.

MW: Less weary?

P: Yeah.

MW: Yeah ... and I just had this idea: there might be a way of doing that, that wouldn’t be a burden to them, that might be important to them, you know?

P: Mmm. [seems to be thinking]

MW: So ... because I just wondered about when they, if they see you getting upset about something that they were doing, if they could take the initiative and say, ‘look, I understand that what we’re doing is we’re reproducing some conditions that have been very oppressive to you [P: Mmm] and we’d like to take responsibility for that and take some action that would be a bit healing [P: Yeah]. What thoughts do you have about the actions that we could take? To consult you about that, I just wonder what difference that would make?’

P: Ah [smiles] That would be a lot easier.

MW: Would it?

P: Yeah, because it would feel less as though I'm taking too much responsibility [MW: Yeah, yeah] and that notion of responsibility has been really big for me ... in the notion of knowing how much should I take? How much is somebody else's business? [MW: Yeah]. I guess it would be really tricky to find a way of talking about it without me being in tears all over the place.

MW: Yeah...

P: Which is what I'd get in touch with [MW: Yeah] – huge emotion.

MW: Yeah...

Michael's suggestion to invite these young men to play 'a part to undo what men have done' reminded me of the following quotes from White (1995c):

Pathologising discourses have the potential to bring to us a degree of comfort in a world in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to find this. These discourses make it possible to define those problems for which people seek help as aberrations. As such, they assist us to avoid the acknowledgement of the fact that these problems are very significantly of our culture, that these problems are products of our modes of life and of thought. The discourses of pathology make it possible for us to ignore the extent to which the problems for which people seek therapy are the outcome of certain of relationship and practices of the self, many of which are actually informed by modern notions of 'individualism'. (1995c, p. 115)

If we can see the difficulties for which people seek help as the outcome of some aberration rather than a product of our ways of thought and ways of life, we can avoid facing our complicity in the maintenance of these ways of life and thought. This assists us to disavow our complicity in the constitution of the worlds we share with others. In obscuring this link between the problems for which people seek help and the modes of life and thought of our culture, we can avoid facing the responsibility that we have to take action to address the context of people's lives, and we can avoid facing the responsibility that we have to dismantle the various structures of inequality that are associated with these. (1995c, pp. 115–116)

In these quotes from White's writings and in this conversation with Pam, I get a sense that White was endeavouring to avoid reinforcing the idea that men's acts of violence and abuse are 'aberrations' rather than products 'of our ways of thought and ways of life' (M. White, 1995c, pp. 115–116). Instead, what I am witnessing in White's exchanges with Pam is a willingness to stand against the taken-for-granted idea that men who perpetrate violence are 'aberrations' or a rarity. Furthermore, it seems to me that White was firmly locating himself and Pam's nephews within the broader context of 'men's culture' and was speaking to the potential effects of this culture.

Annie: A project: ‘A refusal not to be defined by the abuse’

The following transcript is from Michael White’s work with a woman named Annie (pseudonym). In this conversation, what stood out to me was how White and Annie named her journey as ‘a refusal to not be defined by the abuse’, and as ‘a project’. Using language of a ‘project’ in the naming of Annie’s efforts throughout the years to not be defined by the abuse and to escape the practices of abuse in her family of origin seems significant as it speaks to the ongoing effects of practices of abuse in people’s lives. For example, in my work with people who have experiences of abuse, it seems that there is often an expectation that they speak up about the abuse, they seek out justice for this abuse, there is some sort of response or justice to this speaking up, and then they are supposed to move on with their lives. However, what I have noticed is that this linear narrative does not always align with how many women experience their journeys away from practices of abuse. Instead, many women talk about their experiences being more like a ‘project’, which speaks to the ‘long game’ nature of responding to and recovering from experiences of abuse. Thus, to name Annie’s initiatives as part of a bigger project seems to give weight to the ongoing and hard-won work that she had done over the years, and continued to do, to resist a context in which practices of abuse were the norm. The use of the word ‘project’ also served to link these resistances throughout her life together into a storyline that could be traced back through her history and into the future. Furthermore, White asks about the people (e.g., her sister, her daughters) who might be included in this project.

MW: The injustices that women are subject to in your family have gone on...? Like your daughters are experiencing them as well...?

Annie (A): Mmmm, yeah.

MW: Have there been other women that have really, um ... I guess ... stepped into the sort of position that you’ve stepped into, in which you, I guess, are making it your business to render those injustices more visible, and not be available to them personally, and ...

A: I guess, in my family there’s not.

MW: There’s not in your family?

A: No ... and I guess my sister says she tries [MW: Right] but she said, ‘I’m not where you’re at, Annie’ ... you know? She struggles [MW: Right, okay] and so, I guess she says to me, ‘be gentle with me and not expect me to be where you’re at with understanding, or what you’re prepared to do, or...’ Yeah.

MW: Okay ... so you've stepped out – stepped away from this, or broken from it, or escaped, or – what term would you use?

A: I would say escaped [smiles]

MW: You'd say escaped?

A: Yeah.

MW: Yeah ... in ways that other women haven't been able to [A: nods] historically in the family that you come from?

A: Yeah. Yeah, and I guess even sisters-in-law [MW is writing] ... they might be directly involved, but are still blind to things, or [MW: Yeah] co-opted into ways, or ... yeah...

MW: [Silence] Do you understand how it is that you've been able to see what many other women who've gone before you couldn't see as clearly about this state of subjugation or whatever...? Like what ... or their state of oppression, or abuse ... taken-for-grantedness and so on ... Do you understand how it's been possible for you to discern that it as clearly as you do?

A: Ummm [silence] it's taken a long time [MW: Yeah] ... It's like it's a process that's happened over time [MW: Yeah] and um ... how I've been able to do that ... is actually being more and more clear about what I'm responsible for and what I'm not responsible for, and that's been through having distance from people. That's helped, physical distance, [MW: Right] and through study and through reading ... and through talking.

MW: So it's been quite a project?

A: Yeah.

MW: It's been like an ongoing project in your life for quite some years? [A: Mmmm] Yeah...? Would you say a developing a project? Would you say that realisations and consciousness about things grow over time?

A: Yeah ... but I guess in early stages, it was a real project around not being defined by abuse ... And that was a real project: refusing ... absolute refusal to being put on the other hand ... like wanting caring or connection with family [MW: Yeah, okay] that would have you give up some of that at times ...

MW: Yeah, so it's the valuing of the connection [A: Yeah] and the caring?

A: Well, the need for it.

MW: And the need for it ... connection with...?

A: Yeah, I'd say family or whatever

MW: Yeah ... [Looking down and writing] [Looks up] Okay...

A: So, it might be ... sometimes put a hold on it ... and then afterwards realising, you know, it comes with costs that I'm not prepared to wear.

- MW: Yeah ... so somehow ... despite things that you've been through and you've witnessed other women being put through in your family, ... you're not to be defined by abuse. You've been still able to treasure the connection and the care and the warmth or something – is that right? [A: Yeah, yeah]. That it's not split you away from ...
- [...]
- MW: And this project, ... you said it was like a refusal? A refusal ...? What name would you give to this project that's, that's been gathering over quite a period of time for you?
- A: Like, the refusal? Umm ...
- MW: You said, 'refusal to be defined by abuse', ummm [A: Yeah]. Is that a good name for this project?
- A: Umhmm. [nods]
- M: Okay.
- A And so, I've got clearer in times [MW: Yeah] about responsibility – about where my responsibility lies and what I'm prepared to ... but on the other side of that, it's made me very— like it's, um, sometimes it can be too big a project, yeah?
- MW: Yeah.
- A: And so, it's like hang on, just relax and live life [both MW and A laugh]. You know, it's too big a— it doesn't have to be ... like 'hang on a bit'...
- MW: Yeah.

Inviting others to join in the project of 'lightening the load'

In the following example, White continued to speak with Annie about her project of moving away from practices of abuse. Prior to this piece of transcript, Annie had spoken about how she had invited her sister to join her in this project, but that her sister had said that it was too much for her.

There are many aspects of the following conversation that caught my attention, but one aspect that particularly stood out to me was when Annie distinguished between 'getting relief' and 'lightening the load' in relation to this project. For example, Annie said, 'before I used to try and get relief from it [this project], which is different than lightening the load ... you're still carrying the load and you might do walking or listen to music or whatever to get some space from it'. I found this particularly interesting because Annie's comments seem to oppose dominant ideas about 'recovery', in which someone either has a problem or they are 'healed' from this problem. However, Annie's

description speaks to the ways in which she was on a long journey to oppose practices of abuse in her own life and the lives of others, and that although she could get exhausted, there were others with her who could contribute to ‘lightening the load’.

MW: I’d like to ask some questions about some of the territory we’ve been covering. Would that be okay?

A: Mmm [nods].

MW: But before that, I’m curious about your response to another question, and that is that ... you invited your sister to join you in the project, and she says, ‘I can’t’, you know. And at times, the project seems too big, like, to turn back all of that abuse that disqualification that’s been heaped on women in your family in your life and probably for generations. It seems a very big project [A: Mmmm] and your sister’s not really available to join you in it in the way you’d like her to ... because she’s very clear that she’s not ready for that [A: Yeah] or that she’s not where you stand, is that right?

A: Yeah.

MW Um ... Do you think that John and Jack [two of Annie’s close male friends] would accept an invitation to join you in the project?

A: Um ... it worries me a bit the thought of that [MW: Does it?] ... because it’s almost like, this is my stuff from my life, [MW: Yeah] I haven’t wanted it to muck up my relationship [MW: Yeah, okay] ... and I don’t want it to be their worry [MW: Yeah] ... And I do ask of them certain things.

MW: Right, okay.

A: And I guess, ... I think it’s such a big imposition.

MW: Okay, alright. I just wanted to check that with you.

A: Yeah.

In the following extract, Annie continues to talk about the various people (e.g., her friend Cathy, her mum, and sister) that she has included in her project and the ways in which this has contributed to ‘lightening the load’.

A: Well, I guess an acknowledgment of, yeah, um ... like, that long journey.

MW: The long journey?

A: Yeah.

MW: Yeah.

A: Like the long project [MW: Yeah] and the weight that has ... and the ways, I think particular too, the ways in which that might be lightened right now or one of the ways it already has, like with Cathy [Annie’s friend] and the times

when I actually speak to certain people that I might choose ... or other things that I might do ... Because I guess I have done that with my mum and sister [MW: Yeah] at some level [MW: Yeah] in saying, you know, there are particular things that would be just too burdensome [MW: Yeah] so um ... I won't, I don't want to be in those conversations, you know what I mean?

MW: Would you say that 'lightening the weight' is the most recent turn in this project? Like, that's the more recent development? Like, when we're talking about other aspects of the project, but to then, um ... find ways of lightening the weight, is that—

A: That's new.

MW: That's a new turn?

A: Yeah.

MW: Yeah ... and you've done that through your conversations with Cathy, through your conversations with your mum and your sister, and making it clear about what you don't want to talk to ... So lightening the weight is a new development?

A: Yeah.

MW: Is that part of why you decided to step into this conversation here? Is that, part of that?

A: Yeah ... because it's about, yeah, it's about wanting to do something about that.

MW: Right, okay.

A: But not realising that's, you know what I mean, this, the turn now is more clear about those bits and how they connect together.

MW: Sorry? umm... [Looks down about to write]

A: It's like this conversation today makes that notion of 'lightening the load' [MW repeats 'lightening the load' while writing] a lot clearer [MW: Right] as something that's even possible [MW: Right, okay] ... and I can see the connections of where I've attempted to do that and other places, little bits.

MW: Yeah ... So it's a new initiative? Um ... and it's been a bit frustrated, but it's also been relieving as well? [A: Mmm] You know, at the time this initiative had been frustrated by people's responses ... other people's responses have contributed to it lightening the load? [A: Mmmm] Yeah ... like Cathy's and yeah ...

A: Yeah.

MW: Do you think this conversation might contribute to lightening the load in any way? Um ... like what are your thoughts about that— [A starts talking; MW stops]

- A: Yeah ... because I do have maybe other thoughts about ... maybe other ways of talking about ([MW: Yeah] you know, or thinking about it. If I open up ways of speaking about it that are different from ... whereas before I used to try and get relief from it [MW: Yeah], which is different than lightening the load [MW: Okay] ... You're still carrying the load and you might do walking or listen to music or whatever [MW: Yeah] to get some space from it ... [MW: Yeah] to get some relief from it, which is different ...
- MW: Different than lightening it?
- A: Yeah.
- MW: Yeah, yeah ...
- A: Which is quite different ... yeah, because like I said, I wish sometimes I could um ... like I've said 'cut it off' so I could just go and enjoy more and feel more joyful and be more spontaneous.
- MW: Yeah ... Well, cutting it off is a different idea, isn't it [A: Mmmm] than the idea of lightening the load?
- A: Yeah ... whereas lightening the load, there are probably lots of possibilities.
- MW: Yeah ... this initiative of lightening the load, it's been – how long has that been in place for? When would you say you initiated this as another aspect of your project? When did you first step into this initiative, do you think?
- A: Well ... I sort of hadn't thought of it this way before [MW: Yeah] but I guess, um ... right back to about seven years ago, with the way I would be in groups and what I would take on, [MW: Yeah] and I'd be saying, 'Hey, you know, you don't ... this project, or whatever project, doesn't have to be that big. You can be kind to yourself [MW: Right] you don't have to put your head on the block all the time' [MW: Yeah, okay]. Yeah ...
- MW: So, it—
- A: Because I used to be outspoken [MW: Right] whenever I thought something, I'd say it ([MW: Yeah], or I'd raise it [MW: Yeah], whereas other people might be worried about what the boss might say or whatever ... whereas I'd actually ask questions ... by saying to myself, 'hey ... you know, this isn't your – under your job, there's a team here'.
- MW: Right ... So it's got about a seven-year history [A: Mmmm] lightening the load, and that's a... has it been gathering? Like, your connection with Cathy [Annie's friend], is it more recent, or is it?
- A: Yeah.
- MW: That's more recent?
- A: Yeah, very recent.
- MW: Very recent ... So would you say it's been gathering? In a sense ... the lightening the load initiative?

A: Very slowly.

MW: Slowly?

A: Yeah, really.

MW: Okay, slowly [writing]

A: And not really ... not with a notion that it's all connected, if you know what I mean?

MW: Okay ... it's only looking back on it that those connections get more visible? Is that right?

A: Yeah ... and maybe before it's about that ... um... with great intensity saying, you know, what I'd be responsible for, whereas with the notion of lightening the load, you can be a lot more gentle about it [smiles and laughs].

MW: [Laughs]

A: I can feel gentler about it, you know what I mean? [MW: Yeah] It isn't like ... yeah, I have to be shouting about it. Yeah, I don't mean shouting at people ...

MW: My guess is that Cathy would be really happy for you in knowing, well in hearing about um ... and happy for you in steps that you were taking lightening the load [A: Mmm]. Who else would be happy for you? Like who else would be ... you know, um.... who else would be happy for you about this, in your life?

A: Mmmm ... I have a sense my mum would [MW: Your mum would?] but I'm not sure how I'd ever talk to her about it, you know?

Joan and Terry: Trust: Acknowledging a woman's right to not trust others after experiences of abuse/violence

The following excerpt is from Michael White's work with two women (Joan and Terry) who had been in and out of prison and who had been up against experiences of trauma and substance use. In this conversation, Joan and Terry were speaking about how important 'trust' was to them and how rarely they were willing to trust someone. This conversation seemed especially significant given that both Joan and Terry had experiences of being incarcerated, and like many people who have spent their lives in institutions, they had rightly learned not to talk in the first person and to reveal things about themselves (D. Denborough, personal communication, November 6, 2020). Thus, discussing the concept of 'trust' within the broader backdrop of these women's lives seems especially significant.

MW: One of the things I heard was about how trust is important to you ...

Terry (T): Umhmm. [nods]

MW: [To Joan] Is that important to you as well, trust?

Joan (J): [Nods]

MW: Yeah, so ... how important is trust? Obviously, it's something that you value?

T: Right, well I can tell you from experience that I have a problem with trusting men, and it may not appear like that, because I'm talking to you quite well, but I easily detach [...] And my mental health counsellor said, 'We have to deal with this because you have relationship issues and we need to deal with this' [Tells a story about putting a male counsellor on a pedestal, and then him 'falling off' – proof that she couldn't trust men].

MW: Well, that gives me idea of just how important trust is for you.

T: Right.

MW: And it's something that you ... what would you say to trust someone is like? Is it, like, a very special step that you would take to trust someone?

T: Mhmm. [nods]

MW: It's something that you ... you know, is trust something that you treasure? Or what words would you use, to say that? To give importance to trust?

J: I'd have to say it's priceless.

MW: it's priceless to you?

J: Yeah.

MW: So, trust is priceless?

J: Yeah

MW: Okay ... [To Terry:] Would you say the same, that it's priceless to you as well?

T: Yeah.

MW: And so, what's an example ... Can you tell me a story that shows just how important trust is to you as well? Like I've heard a story from Terry—

J: Yeah ... I trust like five people in all of my whole life.

MW: Okay, yeah.

J: And that would be my mum and my three kids and Terry, and that's it ... I don't trust any counsellors, I don't...

MW: [Writing] It's with your mum, three kids and Terry...

[...]

MW: And so ... are there particular people for you? Like Joan has talked about her mum and you, Terry, and her three kids ... umm ... who's been particularly important to you in terms of trust?

T: I honestly ... probably Joan [MW: Yeah] and ... I can't say... and this is terrible because she's going to see this too ... I can't say that I totally trust my mental health counsellor [MW: Yeah, yeah] I trust her probably ... She's the next one I trust next to Joan, but other than that ... I don't think I have anybody else that I truly, truly, trust ... My dog—

MW: Your dog?

T: [Laughs]

MW: And you trust your counsellor to a degree? But not totally...

T: Yeah.

J: Yeah, certain stuff, I guess ... is how I feel about it ... there's just certain things you don't—

T: Umhmm. [nods]

J: There's certain things you don't tell your counsellor [MW: Yeah, yeah, yeah] I don't know ... that sounds bad.

MW: Why does that sound bad? I don't understand that ... I ...

J: I have issues about getting snitched on [Laughs]

[T and MW also laugh]

MW: It sounds wise, actually [laughs].

J: Yeah ... and that's where a lot of my trust issues come from recently ...

MW: Yeah.

J: Probation parole.

MW: I'm not going to ask you about the trauma that you've been through, because that's not my place ... You've been so clear about the importance of having a foundation so that you can revisit what was wounding in a way that is not traumatising of you. And we're looking at maybe some preliminary steps in building that foundation so that it's safe ... and so ... I'm going to ask you a little bit about the history of trusting in your lives ... I know that you've been through a lot of trauma, and my guess, some of that was a bit tyrannising of you, or abusive of you. I'm just making a guess here [J: Umhmm]. But somehow you didn't allow that to separate you from what you hold precious, and that is trust ... you know? And that you keep some faith in your own reality about what's happening around you...? [J: Umhmm] And you don't just open your lives to everybody, you hold that trust precious ... You just don't give it away ... Is that correct?

J: Right.

MW: And so ... so I understand that despite the trauma that you've been through, you haven't allowed that to ... somehow ... um ...

T: Alienate us.

MW: Pardon?

T: Alienate us.

MW: Alienate you ... Alienate you from who you are ... and alienate you from trust. That's something that you hold precious ... and that you're very, very ... it's so priceless that you don't just let others take that from you, or whatever ... So, I'm going to interview you a little bit about the history of the value that you give to trust in your lives ... and about how you've held on to in your lives ... because I guess you've had a lot of experiences in which trust has been betrayed [T: Umhmm] and yet, despite the betrayal of trust you've actually continued to hold it priceless, and you've taken more care with it ... by the sounds of it ... that you've taken more care about how you offer – who you offer your trust to ... Would that be true?

T and J: Umhmmm... yeah.

[...]

MW: So, you haven't allowed betrayal of trust to extinguish trust? Instead, you've been more careful about who you offer that to. You've actually given it – it's something that you hold priceless ...

[...]

MW: And we could just reflect on that a bit ... I've learned that for both of you, trust has been important. For you, Terry, it's got a shorter history of importance or the significance that you give to trust, but it's still very strong, something that's priceless to you. It's something that you've developed strong, I guess a strong relationship with trust, and it's something that you take care, in terms of how you give it out, or dispense it. You just don't dispense it willy-nilly to anybody, because you hold it so precious [Terry nodding]. [MW turns to Joan] And you do the same thing ... The value of, giving value to trust goes back much further for you, but you don't just give it away, it's something ... it's priceless, and you won't just give it away, you won't just ... and despite all of the trauma that you've been through, you haven't allowed that dispossess you of this, the value that you give to trust. And you know, despite what you haven't allowed that to stop you developing a connection with trust [T: Umhmm. Yeah] ... That's one of my understandings, does that sound reasonable?

[...]

T: For me, before I met Dierdre [Terry's and Joan's parole officer], I was angry and disenchanted [MW: Yeah]. But I think she breathed some life back into me.

MW: Life, life, life back into—

T: I was just awful ... I was angry about everything ... and I was very negative [MW: Yeah] Yeah ... you know, and ...

MW: So, what did she breathe life back into? Like what was it that she breathed—

T: Well, I guess my hope for humanity, not just myself.

MW: Hope for humanity?

T: Yeah, and that all plays a big role in trust, you know ... Having faith or belief and trust ... How can you have hope for anybody or anything?

MW: So, she believed, she actually breathed life back into this hope for humanity?

T: Yeah, I think so.

MW: Right, and this is a hope that you'd had in your life, but she breathed life back into it?

Another reason why I included this transcript is because it reminded me of the many times that I have heard women say to me that they have 'trust issues' following experiences of abuse and violence. For example, I remember a woman named Marie (pseudonym) telling me that she was seeking out counselling because she had 'trust issues with men'. When we explored what this meant to Marie, she explained that these 'trust issues' had been present since she was a young girl and was subjected to ongoing sexual abuse from her grandfather. In my conversations with Marie, I had the sense that this focus on *her* 'trust issues' put all the responsibility for this problem on her shoulders – rather than her right to have some questions about who is trustworthy. I felt like this orientation to the problem made the possibility of exploring her knowledge about 'who is to be trusted' and 'who is not to be trusted' much harder to access.

As I reflect on my conversation with Marie, and Michael White's consultation with Joan and Terry, the following questions came to mind:

- With the knowledge we have about the pervasiveness of practices of abuse and violence, might it be more fitting for us to privilege 'careful practices of discernment' rather than trust?
- Where do these ideas come from that being able to 'trust' is a *good* thing? Are there perhaps instances when it is more important to be 'slow to trust'?
- What sorts of questions have you (as practitioners) found helpful in responding to comments about 'trust issues'?

Seeking healing and justice together

The concept of ‘justice’ or ‘seeking justice’ has been a central theme that has run through my therapeutic work with survivors of childhood sexual abuse. This is likely due to the fact that a *true* injustice has taken place, but also because many of the people who seek out ‘sexual abuse counselling’ are in the process of reporting experiences of abuse/violence to the ‘justice system’.

Unfortunately, what I have come to learn from consultations with people going through this process is that the ‘justice system’ can often fail to get people the elusive sense of ‘justice’ they have been searching for. As David Denborough (2013) noted, ‘our so-called ‘justice system’ is one of the major sources of injustice in our land; not only historic injustice, but continuing injustice’ and ‘for many survivors of sexual violence, child abuse and domestic violence, the criminal justice system doesn’t offer healing or justice, and in fact regularly contributes to re-traumatisation’ (2013, p. 14).

Denborough’s critique of the justice system unfortunately fits quite well with many of stories I hear when working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

With the theme of ‘justice’ in mind within the context of sexual abuse, I have included the following examples from Michael White’s work with a woman named Victoria.

Victoria: ‘A passion for justice’

The following examples from Michael White’s video archive depict his work with a woman named Victoria (pseudonym). The broader context of White’s work with Victoria will not be included here, with the aim of protecting her identity. However, I will note that, Victoria had endured experiences of childhood sexual abuse, along with other traumatic experiences that were ongoing in her life. In this example, White is discussing the concept of ‘justice’ following several conversations about the abuse and trauma that Victoria had survived.

MW: Justice ... does that ring a bell with you?

Victoria (V): Yeah.

MW: That the anger is there, but there’s also a passion for it, you know? [V: Mmmm] ... So that.... like taking some step to make sure that this can’t be done to others, you know? That’s what I’m relating to ... does that fit for you?

V: Yeah, yeah.

- MW: That idea of passion for justice – you have a passion for justice? [V is nodding and saying ‘yeah’]
- V: Yeah, yeah.
- MW: Okay, so I’d be interested in exploring that passion for justice more [V: Nods] because my guess is it’s something that’s been with you for a long time, that you’ve been able to notice when—
- V: It’s been with me a very, very long time.
- MW: Right ... and when you see injustices out there in the world, you’re very quick to see them?
- V: Yeah.
- MW: And you’re very quick to notice them and would that be right?
- V: Yes.
- MW: And that’s something that’s been with you for a long time?
- V: Mmm [rocking in her chair]
- MW: And the other things is that ... the other conversation was to try and understand the history of this passion for justice ... I know that you’re interested in history, [V: mmmhmm] and you’re curious about history ... And that’s the other thing to spend some time actually trying to get to uncover more about this history of passion for justice, because despite all the abuses that you went through, they never talked you into the idea that that’s acceptable, or that’s okay...
- V: No, they didn’t.

The following exchange between Victoria and White occurred within a broader conversation about how Victoria had been taken from her mother at a very young age. Specifically, the following questions from White about ‘the tears’ were asked within the context of Victoria saying that her mother would be ‘crying with happiness’ if she were able to be present (to bear witness) to Victoria talking about how she had been able to know *joy* for the first time in her life.

- V: She’d probably be crying with happiness ... or she’d give me a hug.
- MW: Do you... those tears would be of happiness – do you think they’d also be to do with the fact that an injustice was being addressed? Like, do you think it was unjust that you were taken away from each other like that? [Victoria being taken from her mother when she was just a toddler]
- V: Yeah, yeah.

MW: Do you think that would also be tears because something that hadn't been addressed was now being addressed? What do you think?

Defining 'justice'

MW: What sort of justice would you like to see done? I mean what ... what do you think?

V: I'd like my father in jail.

MW: Okay [writing] ... So for your father to be in jail, that would be ... ?

V: Yes, that would be justice.

MW: That would be justice ... Okay....

V: [inaudible]

MW: Sorry? Say that again...

V: Nothing [laughs]...

MW: I think I heard ... to be castrated?

V: Yeah.

MW: Okay ... and for him to be castrated, that would also be justice?

V: Yeah.

MW: Yeah, okay.

J: Well actually he never, he never went that far. [MW: Yeah] I'd rather have his hands chopped off than anything else.

MW: Okay.

V: That's what I'd like.

MW: His hands chopped off? [writing] And that would be justice?

V: Yes, that would be justice.

MW; Okay.

V: So, he couldn't hurt no more little children [MW: Right], and I know he's out there doing it, I know he is.

MW: So, it goes on...?

[...]

MW: What else would be like 'justice'? You know, like your father in jail and having his hands chopped off so that he couldn't hurt other children, that would be justice?

V: That would be one form of justice, and the other one would be to punish me.

MW: To punish you?

V: Yeah.

MW: What ... um ... Tell me a bit about that one...

V: I can't really explain it. It's just a feeling I got, like I need to be punished [MW: Right, okay]. It's like I'm responsible for all of it [MW: Okay].

MW: What difference would it make to you if you had a sense of some justice being done? Like as if the load was taken off you and placed at the feet of those people who were responsible for betraying you.

V: I'd feel freedom.

MW: You'd feel freedom? Yeah.

V: Freedom from all the shit that's been placed on me. I just need freedom [MW: Right, yeah, okay]. I need to feel like it's not my responsibility, that it's not going to go on forever and that those people are being punished.

MW: Right, okay ... and that would ... that freedom, just feeling that freedom, that would make a difference to your life? To have that – to experience that freedom?

V: Yes, it would. But they say it's illegal to do anything that I'm thinking [laughs]

MW: [Laughs] Well, it might be ... But they're pretty powerful thoughts though, aren't they?

V: Yeah [laughs]

MW: Yeah? Have you spoken of these thoughts about justice very much?

V: No, no I haven't.

MW: So, you haven't really given much voice to some of these thoughts about justice?

V: I haven't really thought about justice at all in this. I just keep thinking there's no justice.

MW: Right ... but what's it like for us to be talking about what would be justice here, for you? Is that ah ...

V: It's actually quite positive.

MW: Is it? Yeah, why is that? Do you know?

V: I don't know ... Maybe because somebody's talking to me about justice and what happened in the past ... um...

MW: Sorry, I don't quite understand that.

V: Uh ... Being able to verbalise and talk with somebody about forms of justice, already does something in itself [MW: Does it?] ... to improve the situation. Doing it ... you don't have to do it, to get justice, just the feeling that it's possible to do.

MW: Yeah ... okay ... alright. Well, that's good for me to know, because I'm really dependent on people I'm working with, for them to give me feedback about what are more healing directions in conversations and what are not ... But I figure that we've really only just started to talk about acts that will address the injustices [V: Mmm]. You know... we've talked about your father being in jail and having his hands chopped off so he can't continue to wreak havoc in people's lives ... You've talked about what you feel like doing to the psychiatrist, um. We haven't yet really figured out what would be an act of justice, you know? [V: Yeah] because that ... you wound up feeling more guilty, so that's not ... you know ... but my guess is that it would be good to identify all the key players of the abuses you've been subject to and the betrayals, and just to figure out what would be justice, you know? What would be justice to you ... I think that would be a pretty important thing to do ... Would you be interested in doing that?

[...]

MW: These are very powerful thoughts about justice ... you know?

V: I never thought there was any [MW: Yeah] It was just a figment of somebody's imagination. I've never been shown justice .. so I wouldn't know.

MW: Yeah ... I guess. Do you think that makes it hard for you to heal? If you're not shown justice? Because it leaves it all at your feet, or on your shoulders ... ?

V: Yeah. I mean ... I've heard of people only getting three months in jail after sexually abusing a child ... I mean, that's not justice. It's just a whole lot of shit ... there really is.

MW: There's a whole lot of shit?

[...]

V: When you said that passion for justice, that's when I perked up a bit [Victoria made this comment in a post-session discussion with White and a group of practitioners]

[...]

MW: You were telling me about what it was like ... What happened to that voice of self-hate, when we were talking about the passion for justice...?

V: Ummm ... it actually, um ... went quiet.

MW: Yeah, right.

V: Mmm.

MW: Okay.

V: It didn't say, 'I was....' – I do have a passion for justice I suppose.

MW: So, this acknowledgment overwhelmed the voice of abuse for a bit there ...?

V: Yeah ... For a bit, yeah.

MW: That's fantastic! Well that ... it's good for me to know that, because that gives us an idea about directions in this work, to know that ... okay... and that was a good feeling, for you, to overwhelm that voice?

V: It was a good feeling, yeah...

MW: Wow.

V: I don't have many of them.

MW: Wow ...

'I don't think I would've survived without that sense of justice'

The following examples are also from Michael White's work with Victoria, but they are from a consultation later in their work together. In this instance, White was asking Victoria to catch the team of practitioners up (the practitioners were behind a mirror) on the work they'd done together. In this description, Victoria talked about the effects of her work with White, and how this led to a rich description of her 'passion for justice', which, she discovered, stretched back into her history.

V: [Updating the reflecting team on her work with MW] Through my meetings with you [MW], I've learned to stand up for myself against certain sexual abuse situations when I was a child. I finally confronted my father who had been sexually abusing me since I was a child until I was an adult ... and other abuses that happened at the same time. I've been learning to deal with them. I've been learning to be strong, and I've been learning about my own sense of justice ... which I didn't even know I had.

MW: Yeah ... and it turns out to be a pretty powerful sense of justice that you have...?

V: Yeah ... it's fairly strong actually.

MW: Yeah ... and you hadn't really been aware of that ...?

V: It hadn't been brought out at all ... nobody had even pointed it out until I came to see you.

MW: Yeah ... I, just to tell the team, I've been a witness to some very powerful expressions of that sense of justice that you have, Victoria, and I, you know, would've been in the situation where I've witnessed you take that up and express that sense of justice very powerfully.

V: Yeah ... I mean, without, I don't think I would've survived without that sense of justice. I don't think ... I'd probably be dead.

[...]

MW: What's it been like for you to get in touch with that sense of justice and its history, and to know that it's there?

V: It's been ... it feels like I've gained more power over my own life ...

MW: You ... you have more power over your own life, yeah?

V: Yeah, I suppose because I know for me, and I'm not saying for anybody else, but for me, what is right and wrong, what affects me in a negative or positive way [MW: Right, yeah] ... and that way, I can basically... I have the strength to deal with it that way

MW: Right...

V: Because I know what I want to happen and what I don't want to happen.

MW: So ... so ... it's also helped you get much clearer about what [V: Exactly] what's right for you and what's not?

V: That's right.

MW: And it's also ... helped you to see what's wrong from what's right, in terms of your own life...?

V: Umm.

MW: Would that be true?

V: Yes, in a lot of ways it has. I mean ... I suppose in a way I've always known what was wrong [MW: Yeah] ... I just haven't known what was right [laughs]

MW: Okay, I see ... that helps to clarify that.

V: Yeah.

MW: Could you say a little bit more about what getting in touch with this powerful sense of justice, or this passion for justice ... has meant to you?

V: Well as I said, it propelled me after 18 years of holding it inside and not telling anybody and all this stuff ... When I found my sense of justice, I was able to send a letter to my father telling him how much I hated him and what he'd done to me [MW: Yeah] ... and that sense of justice, without that sense of justice I would never have been able to do that.

MW: Right, yeah ... it wouldn't have been a possibility for you [V: No, no] without that sense of justice ...

V: I mean, I'd been holding it in for 18 years. I hadn't even told anybody, and when I did, they didn't believe me [MW: Wow, yeah] So ... I mean it's just ...

that sense of justice was the one that got me through the worst part of my life ... I spent nearly a year in hospital.

MW: Yeah ...wow.

V: And I wasn't going to put up with it anymore. I had to do something about it, and if it hadn't been for you ... I wouldn't have been able to do that.

MW: So ... the ... the ... I really appreciate you including me in this ... it's been great to be—

V: [keeps talking over MW] Yeah, well it has been ... If you hadn't pointed it out, I would have never have found it.

MW: Yeah ... I guess that sense of justice is something to be powerfully honoured, isn't it?

V: It is. Yeah.

MW: It's such a ... such a ... extraordinary force in your life and history...? [V: Yeah ... ummmhmm] Would you say that?

V: Yup, for sure.

MW: Um ... I guess that catches the group up a bit with what this has been about ... And last time I got to hear a little bit about how some other people are now actually joining you, supporting your sense of justice a little more [V: Yeah] even some family members [V: Yes] were starting to acknowledge ...

Narrative practice as a way of drawing significance through collective historicising

The following examples are a collection of extracts from various therapeutic conversations in which Michael White seems to have been engaging in the practice of 'drawing significance through collective historicising'. I have found it quite difficult to name what has stood out to me in these examples, but what I have noticed is that it seems that White was doing *more* than linking people's lives through history. That is, the 'linking' that White was inviting seems to be very much informed by an understanding of gender politics. For example, in the following extracts, White focuses quite heavily on 'the women who have gone before' when working with women, and 'the men who have gone before' when working with men.

It is my hope that through discussing these examples with you, we might find ways to more fully articulate what seems significant in the following examples.

Inviting links with women who have gone before them – links among women's initiatives through time

MW: I was wondering whether women who have gone before you have been able to take the steps that you've taken? In terms of speaking to injustice, or whether you'd be one of the first women in the history of women in your family to take those steps...?

[...]

MW: [Speaking to a group of practitioners] I think it's very important that she doesn't get acclimatised. I mean she's got herself deacclimatised to violence and sexual assault, and she's done a wonderful job of extracting herself from that, and I'd really like to talk with her more about how she did that. Because that's amazing. I mean she's achieved enough in this lifetime, and I would be talking with her about that, you know: that 'you've done something that no other, I doubt that any other generation, any other generation in your family has done. I expect that what's happened is that each generation has replicated the lifestyle of the last. And what you've done is you've done something. You've broken with that tradition and in a sense your daughters have a future that they could never have had and they have a future that no-one in your family could've had, or the family that came before that could've had and so you've really done enough in this lifetime already ... and I'd like to understand more about how you did that'.

[...]

MW: Do you understand how it is that you've been able to see what many other women who've gone before you couldn't see as clearly about this state of subjugation or whatever? Like, what ... or their state of oppression, or abuse ... taken-for-grantedness and so on ... Do you understand how it's been possible for you to discern that it as clearly as you do?

Agatha and Matthew: Breaking from 'training' in family of origin

The following transcript is from an interview that took place in the 1990s with a heterosexual couple named Agatha and Matthew (pseudonyms). This interview took place at a teaching workshop in which White was engaging in a one-off or 'live' consultation – that is, he was interviewing Agatha and Matthew for the first time, with a group of practitioners watching.

In the following extracts, Agatha was speaking about breaking from practices of 'holding things in' (i.e., keeping quiet), which were reinforced in her family of origin. Similarly, Agatha's partner, Matthew, talked about efforts he had made to be more open and receptive to Agatha's expressed feelings. This was identified as significant because it contrasted with the messages he received from his parents and his time in the military about how a man *ought to be*.

MW Yeah, so somehow you broke with this ‘holding it in’? Somehow you managed to do that in in July?

Agatha (A): Umhm. [nods]

MW: And I guess, have you received a lot of encouragement to hold things in? In the family you came from? Or....

A: That was the way I raised, yes.

MW: It was the way you were raised?

[...]

MW: Okay ... wow ... so you had a lot of training in keeping up a façade, a lot of encouragement...?

A: Umhmm.

MW: And in not contributing to anyone else being distressed, or ... ?

A: Right.

MW: Okay ... and somehow in July you broke from a lot of this? You turned this upside down? Or you, went through a bit of a turning point in July...?

[...]

MW: Can I just ask ... there are so many things I’d like to understand about this, because ... you know, I feel that in some sense, that I’m in on a pretty big event in your life, like, it’s something that somehow is greater in magnitude than most of the things I can think of. You know, to break from this hope that, I guess... having that hope that maybe if you were just good enough, or if you just kept on keeping up a façade, that somehow, your mother and others would turn around and accept you and embrace you and love ... was that the hope?³⁴

A: Umhmm.

[...]

MW: [To Matthew about Agatha expressing her anger towards Matthew] Do you think that ... has this changed the direction of your life at all?

Matthew: Oh yeah ... We’ve gotten much closer.

MW: It has?

Matthew: We’ve gotten much closer.

³⁴ These comments were made within the context of Agatha talking about her mother never wanting her, but keeping up the hope that if she was ‘good’ her mother would love her.

MW: Have you?

Matthew: We communicate an awful lot more now ... I mean the TV is off practically all the time. We just sit on the couch and babble back and forth about just anything in general that comes up from the day's work to God knows what ... But we communicate a lot more, you know?

MW: Yeah ... so you're finding yourself being with Agatha in quite a different way?

Matthew: Umhm.

MW: Yeah? [To Agatha] Is that true of your reflections on this?

Matthew: Umhm.

MW: What's different about how you and Matthew are together now?

A: We're talking more.

MW: You're talking more?

A: Umhm ... a lot more ... I still don't let everything out... But I let some out.

MW: Are you surprised that Matthew's joined you in this turn?

A: Well ... I knew despite the hard shell that there was a sweetheart in there, but it's to always ... to pull it out is not always easy.

MW: Right, okay ... So, what was he breaking from, in terms of ... to achieve this? Like I got some understanding of what you've been breaking from and freeing your life of, you know, this paralysing hope, and the messages that— What do you think ... is there some ... Do you have some thoughts about what Matthew's been breaking from in being with you in a different way? And what sort of training he's breaking from?

A: Well ... he's not so cold. So, I think he's trying to ... he's letting some things out from himself too. You know, that he's a nice guy. He's had ... you know, we've gone through a lot too ... So, I think he's letting a lot out. There's a lot that he's held in for a lot of years ... but he's talking more he's opening up a lot more.

MW: Is that something that was common in his family? For the men to talk?

A: No! It would be cold-hearted

MW: Really?

[Matthew is laughing in the background]

A: Cold ... cold! Oh yes, cold [laughs]

MW: Right ... so this is a departure from how men are trained to be in the family that Matthew comes from?

A: Yes, definitely. His father was real cold and his brothers are ... He's different right now [laughs].

MW: Wow ... okay ... alright ... There are some other questions I'd like to ask about this ... I know that the team will also take up some of these reflections and um ... Do you have any idea about how Matthew achieved that? Like if he had all of that training in being a man in a particular way, do you know how he's managed to do this?

A: I think I scared the hell out of him in July.

[...]

Matthew: The kid [Agatha and Matthew's foster-son, Andy] is a jerk. He's an idiot ... And he was a nice kid until middle school and then all of a sudden, he flip-flopped ... he became a worm of life ... I think he's been abusive toward her as a mother. I mean she's given him everything [MW: Right] and he's always taken her for granted and wanted more, more, and more ...

MW: So, his struggle, in terms of how to be in this world, is a different sort of struggle than the one that you had?

Matthew: Yeah... yeah.

[....]

MW: I guess, I'd just like to make a couple of comments, and then we'll hear from the team, but it seems that Andy's [foster-son] struggle, to find ways of being a man that are distant from those abusive ways or cold ways or whatever ... is a different struggle from the struggle that Matthew had ... If Andy knew about Matthew's struggle and the steps that he's taken, would he be interested in listening to that? To know this? Or not? [silence]

A: Would Andy be interested in listening to what Matthew's going through?

MW: How Matthew's had a real struggle ... like he got, sort of recruited into being, being a particular way as a man, and he's breaking with that ... and it's been something that, obviously hasn't been an easy thing, and it's required a crisis and it's also required over the years a fair bit of input ... but it's also building upon, my guess, some want or hope that Matthew has for his own life, you know? Like it's ... or a belief about how, about what it means – about what life means, or something, and we haven't got to explore that yet ... because my guess is there's more to change, but if Andy... would Andy be interested in hearing about this, do you think? Or not?

A: Oh yeah ... I think so ... I think Andy would be interested what his father thinks of him too [laughs].

Matthew: He knows.

MW: Right ... but, but—

A: It would open his eyes up to an awful lot [MW: It would open his eyes—] because Matthew was cold when Andy was being raised... and I mean it

would be nice if he knew his father's got a good heart [MW: Right]. It was just covered up.

MW: It would be nice if he knew his dad was reflecting on all of that? And ... and had taken a position on it, [A: Umhm, I think so] and made it his business to... yeah?

A: I think so.

MW: What difference do you think it could make to Andy to know about another man's struggle to find ways of being in the world that are more loving and caring?

A: Hopefully he'd smarten up.

MW: Hopefully he'd smarten up?

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

Domain-specific findings

on Narrative practice as a way of attending to gender politics and a refusal to separate practices of abuse/violence from power

This section highlights significant learnings that occurred as a result of the focus group participants' engagements with the Domain: 'Narrative practice as a way of linking emotion with meaning and action'.

Eight themes were generated:

1. turning the gaze: making visible who and what is being focused on and the political implications of this
2. making gendered discourses visible in invitational ways
3. introducing a 'car as property' metaphor
4. a renewed attention to the politics of trust
5. honouring mistrust and diverse forms of justice
6. renewed determination to establish accountability structures to render visible our complicity in dominant power relations
7. exploring further possibilities for collective historicising / historicising solidarity across generations
8. creating collective projects as a way of engaging with feminist critique of individualising of therapy.

1. Turning the gaze: Making visible who and what is being focused on and the political implications of this

One practitioner spoke to how she had started noticing *differently* when women consulting her were being recruited into pathologising themselves about experiencing abuse, and when noticing this, then making this visible and turning the gaze back on those who have perpetrated abuse.

[After the initial focus group] I kept noticing particularly mothers say, 'Why is this a pattern in my life?' [a pattern of abusive relationships]. And there was a mother I was working with who is going through the court system and has to prove what she has done to support her daughter, who has mental health struggles, but there's no focus on the father, who left them at the age of five ... [After the initial focus group] there was a turning point in our conversation, where the work was not so much clinical, but it was political, and we made really visible the broader context of how these systems work and how they often put the focus on her [as a mother],

and not on him [the father] and his role as a parent, which was a perspective that was previously not even visible to her. So, in some of our conversations, I started looking at the discourses that perpetrate and maintain [this focus on the woman rather than the man as a parent] ... And this also reminded me of this quote from the Domain: ‘Why are we taught to look for signs on the women’s foreheads instead of turning our heads to look at the person and culture that enacted this abuse?’ and ‘Why was Lily not recruited into asking “Why are practices of abuse and violence against women so prevalent?”’ (Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett)

As a result of engaging with this Domain, this practitioner spoke of a renewed determination to be ‘turning the gaze on patriarchal ideology and the effects it has on women’s experiences of the violence and abuse’.

2. Making gendered discourses visible in invitational ways

Participants spoke of wanting to take up the responsibility to make gendered discourses visible in therapeutic conversations.

In the transcript when Michael’s with Agatha and Matthew [referring to the transcript in the Domain], and he’s asking about Matthew’s ‘breaking from training in dominant masculinity’ and it was Michael introduced that into the conversation ... so that could be like influential, centring ... maybe? I don’t know ... but ... and for me, it’s like even though that’s sort of being influential, being centring, but also not, because it’s done in a way that’s invitational – so he’s not overtly saying ‘this is my position’ – you know, because for me, it’s sort of like mother-blaming, that gendered discourse around ‘it’s always the woman’s fault’ ... whether it’s a partner in a relationship, or the mother of a child, you know? It’s the woman’s – ‘she’s frigid’, she ‘doesn’t communicate enough’ – it’s like these are the stories that come up [...] and that’s a common theme ... And to me it’s like Michael is standing against the discourse of ‘woman blaming’ by introducing that observation [about dominant masculinity], but without actually making that visible ... doing it in an invitational way ... you know? Like he’s enquiring ‘is this of interest to you?’ And clearly it was of interest to Agatha – she’s like ‘Yeah...!! Actually!’ (Manja Visschedijk)

Practitioners spoke of their wish to take up this responsibility in conversations, and to do so in invitational ways. Rather than problematising Mathew in the same conversation, White located the problem in the training in masculinity that he received from his father who was in the military. Similarly, White referred to training that Agatha received as a woman to remain quiet and not let her distress be shared. Practitioners spoke of a renewed determination to make visible gendered discourses in invitational, non-individualising ways.

3. Introducing a ‘car as property’ metaphor

One practitioner, Jo Allen, spoke of a very direct influence on her practice. Since the first focus group she had introduced the ‘car as property’ metaphor from the Domain within her therapeutic conversations. In the Domain, White was quoted as saying:

The man has an enormous inability to draw distinction between his experience of the event and the woman’s experience of the event ... And I really believe that has to do with the fact that the woman is construed as property. I mean you don’t try and draw a distinction between your experience of driving a car and your car’s experience of being driven. You would never entertain that as a distinction. The car is simply property; it’s a thing.

In the feedback focus group, Jo Allen described how she had chosen to introduce this metaphor in a recent therapeutic conversation:

I used it with a woman the other day in my practice, who was in a domestic violence situation, and she was taking the responsibility for this [...] and she said, ‘I could write a book on who not to trust’ ... because she knows what to look for now ... And I said, ‘Let’s look at all of your notes that you’ve accumulated over time!’ ... but then I used the car metaphor because it was fresh in my mind ... and she said that was so helpful ... Like, ‘Yeah, I’m not car, you can’t just ride me how you want! You can’t just drive me how you want! Like drive the car you want, mate, but I’m not your car!’

This practitioner spoke of how introducing such a metaphor brought clarity to the abstract ideas of gender power relations and seemed to resonate significantly.

4. A renewed attention to the politics of trust

A renewed attention to the politics of trust was discussed in the feedback focus group:

[I have found that trust] featured [in] a lot in my conversations, which was really interesting to me ... Specifically, I was thinking about the quote from the Domain where the importance of acknowledging a woman’s right to not trust others, after experience of violence is discussed. In response, I found myself wondering: Why does our society embed trust as a foundation to all relationships? and Why is it that this theme of *trust* is so prevalent now, in our work and in our lives...? (Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett)

The same practitioner, as a result of participating in the first focus group discussion, started to research the *understandings of trust* of the women consulting her, in particular what women gave value to in relation to trust:

There were also lots of questions that came up around ‘what does trust even mean?’ ... I think we sometimes take that word for granted. For example, when I asked people what trust meant to them, some would say that trust is a belief, some would say it’s a set of behaviours, others said it was like ... a value, or it’s feeling confident and secure in the other person. Other common themes that people spoke to when they talked about their understandings of trust included things like there needing to be a foundation of connection and vulnerability for trust to exist, that trust was a signal of respect for someone, that trust required faith that you can rely on someone, that trust could promote safety and healing ... and that trust is apparent when you’re acting in ways that show you depend on the other, you believe in the other. (Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett)

These explorations had been set off by participation in the first focus group:

Yeah, so there were some ripple effects. I really appreciated it, Kelsi. And I did put it into action, but the thing that I came back to was ... can we find ways of honouring distrust? Can we hold distrust as an act of agency and resourcefulness and a survival response, instead of some sort of pathology or a reflection of ‘trust issues’? Can we find ways of further acknowledging the fact that sometimes people have earned the right to mistrust others, given their histories and their experiences? Can that not be in some way storied and reclaimed? And can we hold distrust as priceless, and as an act of agency and resourcefulness? (Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett)

This practitioner committed to further exploring the local meanings of trust and exploring ways of honouring distrust.

5. Honouring mistrust and diverse forms of justice

Tileah Drahm-Butler built on the conversation about trust and mistrust from her perspective as an Aboriginal feminist practitioner:

Mistrust is such an embedded value for so many Aboriginal people. It’s been a skill and a knowledge, actually ... I mean, there are so many stories that I could share about the ways that mistrust has protected against things such as child removal and incarceration ... So, that innate mistrust [of colonial systems].

Often, I’m meeting people in situations of crisis [in a hospital Emergency Department]. And what I’ve come to learn is that sometimes honouring that mistrust is also a way of honouring those responses to injustice.

[This involves] being able to even question what is justice, and what is justice for me, what is justice for someone else? ... There’s a story of practice that I tell about that ... where I’d met with this woman who had come in after being raped from her

ex-husband, and her daughter had said, ‘you can’t see my kids, your grandkids if you report it’.

Tileah then worked with this woman to explore what justice meant to her.

In the end, her sense of justice was around being able to pass language on to her grandkids, and not the justice of following through with the legal system and the ‘injustice system’ [criminal justice system] ... And what I learned from that conversation is the importance of having such an open mind, and always being tentative, even on what a person’s ideas of justice are.

In the feedback focus group, other practitioners also highlighted Michael White’s genuine curiosity about what justice would look like for the women he was working with. To one practitioner, this represented ‘Michael “decentring” himself from mainstream ideas of justice and what it’s right or wrong to think or to feel’ (Carla Galaz).

6. Renewed determination to establish accountability structures to render visible our complicity in dominant power relations

After the initial focus group, one participant (Manja Visschedijk) sought out a quote that was particularly significant to them and brought this to the feedback focus group. I am going to include an extended excerpt of how she discussed this.

I [Manja] just wanted to share this quote [from Michael White], which I try to keep with me all the time in my mind, and on paper, because it just speaks to me about what was discussed in this [Domain] that you sent us ... So Michael [White] says:

I want to explore how we can establish a therapeutic context that contributes to an awareness of the contribution I might be making, wittingly or unwittingly in the reproduction of power relations that could drift towards relations of domination.
(M. White, 2000a, p. 108)

So I’m [Manja] thinking in this article and throughout several of the articles, that he’s really aware of his own privilege and location as a male practitioner, whether he’s talking with, you know, Matthew about Andy, or whether he’s talking with any of the women that he interviews, it’s like to me, this is key to everything. You know, Michael White says:

It may be that I’m speaking with taken-for-granted privilege, and that I’m not aware of this. It may be that I sit or generally arrange my body in space that’s an expression of the power relations of gender, whatever. I’m interested in the options

available for rendering more visible these practices of power, as well as the real and potential effects of these on the people we're talking with, so that they can to some extent at least become available to us to modify.(M. White, 2000a, p. 108)

I [Manja] think that's the second key thing that I see with Michael throughout all of this is that he's not static; he's always changing and he's always learning from the people he meets with, and from his colleagues. And so in this one he says:

I've gone through different phases in my explorations, and in these phases I've framed my work in various ways, including the ways that inform some of the schools of family therapy. Similar experiences assisted me to break from some of these efforts. (M. White, 2000a, p. 104)

... [Manja] Reflecting on where he's been recruited back into dominant ways, because I think we all always get recruited back into reproducing our privilege, unless we have people who hold us to account.

[Quoting White] So some of these breaks were in the form of a U-turn. For example, in the latter part of the seventies, Cheryl White expressed concerns about the duration of my explorations in therapy – that these were engaging me in relational politics that were taking me away from my preferred ways of being in my life, and limiting of my considerations of the power relations of local culture, including those considerations shaped by some appreciation of a feminist consciousness, one that Cheryl had introduced me to in the first at the beginning of the seventies. So, Cheryl's expressions of these concerns, her identification of a naming of them, and her faith in the fact that I could find another way was instrumental in my return to the spirit of my earlier engagement with therapeutic practice and with the politics of therapy. (M. White, 2000a, p. 104)

So for me, it's like an ongoing awareness of the politics of therapy, and particularly in this Domain about gender politics. I think our understandings have since moved on a lot with intersectional feminism and with contributions from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners and other people from marginalised communities around the world. (Manja Visschedijk)

This practitioner then went on to speak about how this orientation to the politics of therapy requires a continual establishment of accountability structures to render visible our complicity in dominant power relations:

Intersectional postcolonial feminism has really got me thinking a lot more about how power and privilege operate in the therapeutic conversation; that it's something that needs to be addressed every day; that there needs to be that kind of reflexive practice, but also accountability to teams or colleagues and also to the people who we meet with.

I'm just about to start to meet with like a preteen nonbinary person. So, I'm really thinking about who can I meet with, to consult with, to hold me accountable, because this is a whole new kind of [territory for me] ... of a very, very different generation to mine. I did try to refer them on to several other people because it's a bit scary, but yeah. But I think that's the way through, is to just be so mindful of it in the conversations and then reflexive after, and be open to changing and learning, which is what I've heard Michael [White] do throughout all of the bits you shared. (Manja Visschedijk)

A number of other practitioners concurred about a renewed determination to establish accountability structures to render visible our complicity in dominant power relations.

7. Exploring further possibilities for collective historicising / historicising solidarity across generations

The concept of 'collective historicising' was a term that David Denborough suggested to name what I had identified in a number of transcripts in which Michael White asked questions that seemed to be aimed at linking women across history. There were multiple instances in which White asked these questions like: 'Because I was wondering whether women who have gone before you have been able to take the steps that you've taken? In terms of speaking to injustice, or whether you'd be one of the first women in the history of women in your family to take those steps?'

A number of practitioners picked up on this practice of 'collective historicising' and wanted to explore it further. One practitioner spoke of always thinking it was important to address the broader historical-sociopolitical context of people's lives, but struggling to know how to do this. This practice of 'collective historicising' enabled them to 'see a practical way to do it' (Carla Galaz).

Another practitioner spoke of the significance of thickening preferred stories and finding links and histories and shared a story of this:

I had an experience recently where I was speaking to a mother and a daughter, and the mother didn't realise her own history of activism until some of the questions were asked such as: 'Were there other women who took steps in relation to speaking to injustices they'd seen?' As a result, I found out more about this mother's Chilean background, when she told a story about how her mother and a group of women were doing their own activism. And then, as a result of hearing this story, the daughter then got to bear witness to these stories about her mum and her grandmother. So, after hearing this, the daughter said, 'Oh my goodness, I

didn't know my grandmother was doing that'. And she then started talking about how she also sees herself as following in her grandmother's footsteps.

There was something very rich about creating those links, and it gives a richer understanding that it's not by chance that people take up initiatives; that there's often a history to it and we're shouldered by giants. But for some reason, those stories become hidden or buried away, and by bringing them to the surface, it often becomes clearer that you're not alone in your journey, whether someone is present or not. We're shouldered by these significant others who have paved those kinds of paths for us in some way. (Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett)

This practitioner linked this practice to Vikki Reynolds' (2011) solidarity teams, which in some ways historicise solidarity across generations.

Interestingly, a missed opportunity for collective historicising was highlighted by another practitioner. Pointing to the moment in the Domain when Michael White, speaking to a group of practitioners, offered questions that could highlight the steps a woman had taken to be able to break from intergenerational family traditions of gender:

I think it's very important that she doesn't get acclimatised. I mean she's got herself deacclimatised to violence and sexual assault and she's done a wonderful job of extracting herself from that, and I'd really like to talk with her more about how she did that. Because that's amazing. I mean she's achieved enough in this lifetime, and I would be talking with her about that, you know: 'that you've done something that no other, I doubt that any other generation, any other generation in your family has done. I expect that what's happened is that each generation has replicated the lifestyle of the last. And what you've done is you've done something: you've broken with that tradition, and in a sense, your daughters have a future that they could never have had and they have a future that no-one in your family could've had, or the family that came before that could've had ... and so you've really done enough in this lifetime already, and I'd like to understand more about how you did that'. (Michael White, as quoted in the Domain)

In response to this transcript, Manja Visschedijk proposed:

It's kind of like he's separating her from the women who went before her – as being able to do something they couldn't do – break with those traditions ... At another time, Michael might have asked what those women contributed that made it possible for her to make a step they couldn't take ... how she's standing on their shoulders. (Manja Visschedijk)

As a result of the focus group discussions, a number of practitioners spoke of a wish to explore further possibilities for collective historicising / historicising solidarity across generations.

8. Creating collective projects as a way of engaging with feminist critique of individualising of therapy

This final theme focuses on the significance of therapeutic conversations not being separated from collective projects, and how this relates to a feminist critique of the hazards of therapy in relation to individualising social problems. A particularly interesting perspective was offered by Carla Galaz, an autonomous feminist from Chile:

I have been into different [feminist] collectives and ... encounters³⁵ with women. In Latin America there's a big movement of women and we have built strong connections and there's a sense of trust within the movement. (Carla Galaz)

Carla spoke about how participating in the Latin American feminist movement provided a context in which she and many others had been able to share and speak about the 'injustices that we have gone through in our lives'. She spoke of how significant it can be when experiences of personal injustice are transformed as part of a social movement:

When you're building feminist connections and you're starting to work with other women and sharing your experience and starting to be open about your experiences [with other women] ... I view this as an anti-misogynist act ... because when society is telling you not to speak with other women, not to trust other women, to be jealous of the other, and in that sense, putting us against each other, then the idea of speaking of our experiences and saying things to each other like, 'I have been through this, how is it for you?' it leads to practices that are anti-misogynist because we are offering ourselves that experience of talking and sharing our knowledges and supporting each other.

And when, that [personal experience of injustice] has been solved or responded to within the group ... then I think that has a power that I wouldn't necessarily say is *therapeutic*, but it brings some sort of relief and freedom and trust, and that is healing in a certain way. So, to trust another woman again and to see another

³⁵ In reviewing her words, Carla Galaz wanted to clarify the following: 'Some people might not understand what I mean by "encounters" (translation of 'Encuentro'). In the Feminist Movement in Latin America, there have been feminist and lesbian "encounters" held, which include occasions when large groups of women meet together for one or several days to discuss politics and the direction of the feminist movement' (Carla Galaz, October 28th, 2022)

woman from other [non-patriarchal] eyes, not as my enemy but from a person that I can trust, that can offer a particular type of support or healing ...

So, there's so much more that happens when you have a sense of being in a collective with other women; it's not just you sharing things that you've experienced, instead it's like, 'okay I feel lighter because I shared my load with all these women, and now I know that there are other women that have had the same experience as me, and that makes me feel better'.

It's not just that. Like, when women get together and they organise themselves and they actually put themselves in the streets, they become political agents, which is quite a challenge to all this [patriarchal] history of trying to put women in the kitchen and [keep them isolated] in their houses. So when you go out, you share your experience, and you see you have common points. That's what I see consciousness raising doing. (Carla Galaz)

Carla described how, until recently, psychologists and therapists would not have been trusted by those in the Latin American feminist movement: 'Women had distrusted those [psychotherapeutic] spaces for a long time, because of how pathologising they experienced them to be, and so there has been a lot of questioning and mistrust of those spaces'.

This, however, is gradually changing because of the development of feminist psychology:

Women started seeking psychologists and trusting psychology again, because there were women psychologists and there were feminist women psychologists. (Carla Galaz)

This development of a feminist psychology, and women within the movement turning to feminist psychologists with their personal experiences of injustice and hardship, is complicated. Carla made links to the critiques by English lesbian feminist psychologist Celia Kitzinger:

Celia Kitzinger ... in the book [(Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993)] ... she's not making so much a critique of traditional psychology; she's making a critique of how feminist psychology has actually done a disservice to the collectiveness among women. So, women don't go to those consciousness raising [groups] anymore because they have their feminist psychologists that are listening to their problems now ... In this way, one-on-one therapy can be a disservice to communities and to the networks of women. (Carla Galaz)

Carla also relayed other aspects of the critique by Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins (1993) in relation to the effect of feminist psychology on the lesbian feminist movement: women turning to therapists rather than friends with emotional distress; taking up psychologising language rather than political terms for their experiences; and how in this process the impetus and possibilities of collective action are diminished. Carla reported that she believed this was now starting to happen in Chile.

This all relates to the aspect of the Domain in which Michael White is speaking with Pam:

I really liked ... the way Michael worked around Pam's initiatives, and how he guided her to name it as a project [of lightening the load]. And how he used that to then take further steps to link Pam to other people who could have an influence on her life, and be with her in her efforts to take steps out of the abuse. And like, using that idea of having a project and then asking her, 'Who else could contribute to the project?' (Carla Galaz)

Carla understood this through a lens of feminist politics:

I think that's something that Michael did to translate ... a feminist way of bringing justice ... by linking women's experiences. And it's also a way to remain decentred. It was as if Michael was saying: 'I'm not the one who's going to offer everything on this process, but there are other people who have knowledges around this and that can offer support' ... And so, I think this can help women who are taking steps towards autonomy, and I don't know how you say it in English [Carla clarified that this particular transcript, in which Pam's project of 'lightening the load' was named and made visible, provided significant learning for her, and this was learning] not just [from] Michael White, that's me [also] learning from Pam how she made it through ... Michael White just named it and helped her name it and put words and expand this project ... and I saw it as Michael saying: 'Okay, this doesn't have to be ... an individual project. Who would you like to invite to this project?' (Carla Galaz)

Carla linked this development of collective projects in therapy to what has more recently been named collective narrative practice (Denborough, 2008), and how this, in turn, is an attempt to respond to Kitzinger's critiques.

I don't know if Michael White ... provided an account of ... how powerful that [project-making] can be. I think David Denborough went a little bit further with that idea, like how linking women's experiences, or people's experiences from a particular community, can lead to political action ... In this way, I think collective narrative practice has taken things a step further from Michael White's work.

It's not like we can just discard therapy, but ... the question that was raised by David Denborough [is] how can therapy contribute to social movements, and not ... [as] Kitzinger ... pointed at ... [continue] harming social movements and psychologising and pathologising our experiences? (Carla Galaz)

Carla went on to name how 'seeking outsider-witness practice with women who have had a similar experience'; 'encouraging women to listen to other's experience or to share their experience with others'; 'linking women's lives historically'; 'creating contexts for women to be listening to each other, thinking and creating together' and generating projects around which people can take some action can counteract:

What psychology has done to our relationships ... it's the experience of collectiveness that we have been cut off [from by individualising and psychologising] ... so putting the historical perspective, and linking ... to other women brings back that sense of collectiveness. (Carla Galaz)

Other focus group participants also spoke of their wish to create contexts for collective projects to emerge from therapy conversations as a way of engaging with feminist critique of individualising of therapy.

Carla reported that this has already made a difference to her practice. Referring to a recent therapeutic conversation she said:

At the end [of the conversation], I invited her to consider the idea of us doing a project together, and I have no idea what that's going to be ... but we're going to have a conversation on Friday, and I invited her by saying: 'let's do a project together'... So we will see how that goes. (Carla Galaz)

Domain-specific commentary

on Narrative practice as a way of attending to gender politics and a refusal to separate practices of abuse/violence from power

Re-politicising the personal?

At the same time as engaging with Michael White's archive in relation to narrative therapy responses to abuse, I also immersed myself in the writings of Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins (1993), especially their critique of the influence of psychology on the feminist movement, and its effects of personalising the political:

Psychological interpretations serve: (1) to personalise the political, translating social, economic, and ecological concerns into individual psychological matters; (2) to foster revolution 'from within' at the expense of political change in the outside world; (3) that insofar as it aims uncritically to 'validate women's experiences,' it ignores the social and political factors which shape experience; and (4) that the concept of 'empowerment' depends upon a radical split between the 'personal' and the 'political.' In sum, it is concluded that feminist acknowledgement that the personal really is political means rejecting psychology. (Kitzinger, 1993, p. 487)

If this critique is to be taken seriously, then as a feminist narrative practitioner, I wish to ask how and whether narrative practices can refuse this depoliticisation, and instead contribute to a re-politicisation of the personal.

There was one transcript of Michael White's work that seemed particularly relevant in relation to a commitment to a form of therapy that doesn't depoliticise emotional experience. This involved the story of a woman whose experiences of life as a woman, and as a mother, had been pathologised over the years. She had been in and out of mental health facilities, and had attempted to take her own life at various points. She was being seen as a weak person because she kept giving in to her son who repeatedly took money from her. Her male partner was very harsh with the son and kept kicking him out of their shared home. The woman was finding this whole scenario intolerable.

In Michael's conversation with this couple, instead of focusing on the woman, Michael asked a lot of questions about the man's background, about the history that had shaped the ways in which he was responding to his stepson, and his expressions of anger. It turned out that he came from a military background, and he spoke of how his father had recruited him into a certain type of masculinity. The conversation became a

deconstruction of his history of masculinity and the effects of these ways of being a man on his female partner and her son.

This shift away from the woman being seen as a problem, and towards the gaze being directed at dominant forms of masculinity, enabled the woman's most recent act of harming herself to be reauthored. It was no longer pathologised. Her expressions of suffering were seen as knowledgeable and as reflective of certain treasured values. Her partner eventually named her most recent attempt to take her life as a turning point for him as a man, to change how he was. This story of practice was very significant to me. It demonstrated a way of being as a therapist in a therapeutic session that was an expression of gender politics, one that fitted for me with a re-politicising of the personal.

Kitzinger and Perkins (1993) argued that 'When psychology simply "validates" particular emotions, it removes them from an ethical and political framework' (1993, p. 493). But in this example, a woman's emotional distress was not simply 'validated'. It was responded to in a particular way that relocated the focus of action and responsibility for change.

Reading Kitzinger and Perkins (1993) while engaging with the archive also drew my attention to other ways in which feminist understandings in the early 1990s were influencing narrative practice at that time.

Linking women with women who have come before

Because patriarchal culture works hard to separate women, I have also been drawn to the examples of practice within Michael White's archive in which he seems to have worked hard to connect women's lives. I kept noticing that White was asking questions that I hadn't quite heard before. Like, 'Were there women in your life, or in your history, that were able to do what you've done?' He was consistently asking about the history of mothers, or grandmothers, or aunts or sisters. There were many examples of White asking about women who had gone before: 'What did they do?' or 'How did they either lay the foundation for you?' or 'How did you learn to be different than they were able to be at their time?' And so on.

This seems more than a re-memembering practice (M. White, 1997d, 2007). Re-memembering often focuses on a relationship between two individuals. This seemed

deliberately informed by feminist understandings. In conversation with my principal supervisor, we wondered if ‘collective historicising’ might be an appropriate term for this linking of women across history.

There were other examples too, especially in circumstances of childhood sexual abuse, where Michael White was working hard to link these young women who had experienced the abuse with their mothers, and to keep that connection strong; to look at ways that they both might have been affected by practices of control or manipulation or abuse.

Naming projects and locating these in history and politics

As well as linking women with those who have come before, I noticed how particular ‘social projects’ were named within therapy conversations and what this enabled.

One of the conversations began with a woman questioning herself, ‘Am I being too quick to anger, or too sensitive to these younger boys [nephews] that I’m raising, because of my own experience of abuse?’ This was being seen as a personal, internalised problem, as being ‘too sensitive’.

But this conversation then zoomed out. The woman talked about working to undo what men had done in her family in terms of sexual abuse, and wanting to teach the younger generations of men who she’s raising how to do things differently, but then also grappling with her own experiences. She spoke about how sometimes this felt like too much, and she had to put it down for a while.

White asked about stories of women before her, or women in her family. He asked whether they would be interested in joining in such a project. She said, ‘Not really’, but then some friends were named who might eventually join the project. Inviting the possibility of others to join her in her efforts, somehow made this a tangible broader social project that linked her efforts with those of other women in history.

Crucially, White also asked about whether the nephews could be invited into this project:

I just figure that as young men, I just wondered if they [the nephews] would be interested in playing a part to undo what men have done, um ... I don’t mean putting any special responsibilities on their shoulders, or whatever [The woman: Yeah ... yeah, that’s an interesting] ... and what difference would it make to you if

you experience young men playing a part to undo what men have done... to mend what men have tried to break?

The naming of a 'project' in this way that locates it in history and politics, seems to give some potential for the redistribution of responsibility to redress patriarchal harms.

In these sorts of conversations, the woman is not positioned as being 'too sensitive' or needing to be 'fixed' or 'healed'. The idea of a project, instead, implies action: small steps over time that can be strung together and can make a difference. And I think more than that, the idea of a project suggests to me that there's more than one person involved. Some of these social projects, like those for gender justice, are not going to be completed any time soon, but we can be joined in them and thus 'less weary' as the woman concerned described.

If we are to take seriously the feminist critique of psychology and therapy and how they routinely depoliticise the personal, then perhaps our tasks include re-politicising the personal; looking for opportunities for collective historicising; being open to the naming of projects; and where relevant, redistributing responsibility.

In the course of holding the 37 focus groups, an unexpected development took place. It became clear that practitioners in these discussions were taking very different orientations to the past, and in particular to Michael White's earlier work. This, in itself, seems very relevant to the field of narrative therapy and community work. The next chapter is a further personal commentary about this overarching theme of 'Different ways of engaging with history'.

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