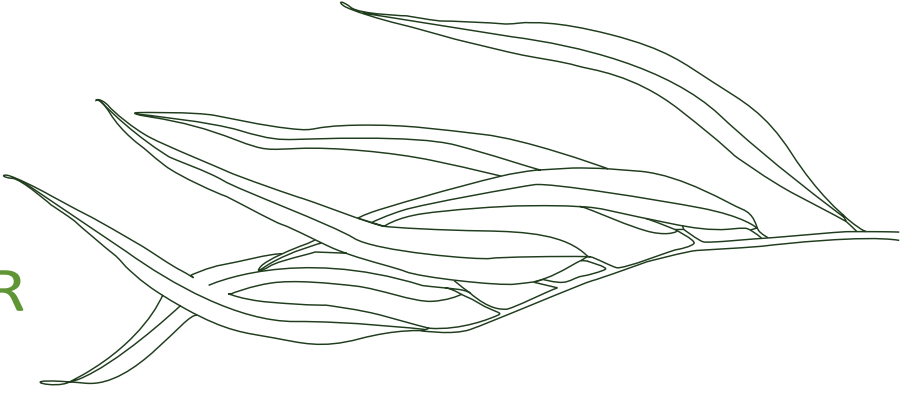




DEAR READER

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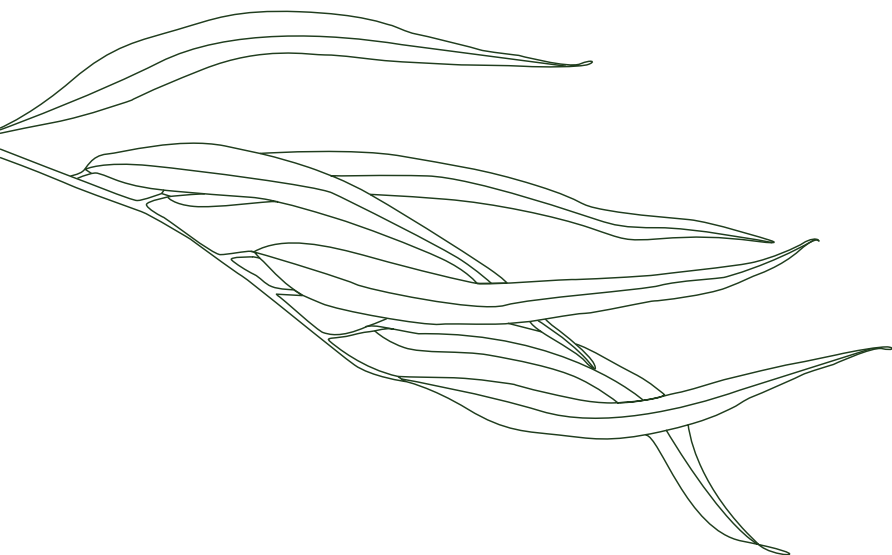
The Michael White Archive: New learnings from White's therapeutic practice in the realms of abuse and trauma

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8. GENERAL COMMENTARY: DIFFERENT WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH HISTORY

Something unexpected occurred during this research. As I was going through the initial process of selecting videos from the archive to focus on in the Domains, I first narrowed the parameters to only include videos that involved considerations of abuse and trauma, and then selected videos that included elements of practice that I didn't believe had been fully explained in Michael White's written work – or at least were new to me. This was in accord with the theory-building case study approach that guided this project.

I then proceeded to write up the Domain documents. Interestingly, at this point I wasn't focusing on which periods of Michael White's work I was drawing on; I was equally interested in videos from any year or decade. As it turned out, the earliest example I selected was from 1987 and the latest was from 2006. Then, during the practitioner focus groups, something interesting and unexpected occurred. In some focus groups, some practitioners took issue, or critiqued, or had questions about some of Michael White's practices in the earlier work, comparing these to his later work and at times saying things like: 'I don't see Michael in this work.'

At first this rocked me, especially as some of the people saying this were very experienced narrative therapy teachers who had known Michael White personally. After one of those focus group conversations, self-doubt came to visit and I found myself thinking, 'I chose these transcripts because they were fascinating to me, but maybe I don't know enough about narrative practice to be doing this research, because these people who know narrative practice very well don't agree or don't think that these are

good examples of Michael's work. So, what am I getting wrong? What am I missing?' Yes, self-doubt came to visit quite forcefully.

And yet, I also realised that these responses of not-recognising certain practices as 'the narrative practice we know' came in relation to moments when Michael White was seen as being more 'centred' or more 'politically influential', and these were precisely the moments in the transcripts that I had most appreciated.

After banishing self-doubt, I realised that this might in fact indicate a need for further articulation in relation to what it means to be decentred and influential as narrative practitioners (and therefore a relevant area of focus for a theory-building case study).

I also realised there was further meaning to be made in relation to how some of the more experienced practitioners were articulating their feedback. In response to some of the passages within transcripts in which White was being more 'centred' or 'politically influential', I would hear comments such as, 'You know, he *evolved* that idea' or 'He probably wouldn't do that in his later work'³⁶.

In re-listening to these sorts of comments, I realised that some of those in the focus groups adhered to the idea that Michael White's work had *progressed*: that his later work was more refined than his earlier work. Their comments represented a 'progress narrative', if you like.

And yet, this perspective wasn't held across the board. I also noticed a difference between people who had known White, and those who hadn't known White and who were maybe younger and had learned narrative practice at a different time. These practitioners seemed to be orientating to the older transcripts differently. There was one moment that crystalised this for me. When some older and more experienced practitioners were critiquing a particular transcript because they didn't see it as fitting with White's later work, one younger practitioner spoke out:

³⁶ It is very important to me that these comments (re differing views from practitioners in the focus groups), do not devalue, in any way, the immense contributions that all of the practitioners in the focus groups made to this research project. I hold immense respect for every single one of these practitioners and I am indebted to them for their willingness to rigorously engage with the Domains and candidly provide their reflections and viewpoints. In the section: 'Limitations of this research' (Chapter 9), I provide a critical reflection on my role as facilitator of the *practitioner focus groups*.

Isn't that the point of Kelsi's research? To find instances in Michael's work where he was doing something that she didn't read about in the writings, to try and understand what he was doing, and to articulate it in some way, and to see if it fits with current practice or not, in order to expand on current understandings? (Zan Maeder)

This *expansive* orientation to the older transcripts I had selected seemed resonant with the theory-building case study approach.

It also seemed to fit with the sentiment expressed by Michael White and David Epston in the introduction to a collection of their papers entitled *Experience, contradiction, narrative and imagination* (Epston & M. White, 1992):

... We have been steadfast in our refusal to name our work in any consistent manner. We do not identify with any particular 'school' of family therapy, and are strongly opposed to the idea of our own contribution being named as a school. We believe that such a naming would only subtract from our freedom to further explore various ideas and practices, and that it would make it difficult for others to recognize their own unique contributions to developments in this work, which we regard to be an 'open book'.

There is another reason to resist such naming. With regard to ideas and practices, we do not believe that we are in any one place at a particular point in time, and rarely in particular places for very long. In making this observation, we are not suggesting that the developments in our work are sharply discontinuous – they are not. Nor are we suggesting that our values and our commitments are varying – they are not. And we are definitely not arguing for forms of eclecticism – which we eschew. However, we are drawing attention to the fact that one of the aspects associated with this work that is of central importance to us is the spirit of adventure. We aim to preserve this spirit, and know that if we accomplish this our work will continue to evolve in ways that are enriching to our lives, and to the lives of those persons who seek our help.

What will be the direction of this evolution? It could be tempting to make pronouncements about this. But these would be too hard to live by. And besides, our sense is that most of the "discoveries" that have played a significant part in the development of our practices ... have been made after the fact (in response to unique outcomes in our work with families), with theoretical considerations assisting us to explore and to extend the limits of these practices. We acknowledge the fact that it is always so much easier to be 'wise' in hindsight than in foresight.

... We hope that you will then join us in adventure. (M. White & Epston, 1992, pp. 7–9)

This above quote seems to offer some support for an orientation to Michael White's archive that challenges the idea that people's work 'improves' in a linear way (a 'progress narrative'), and instead seeks more 'discoveries'. In turn, this seems to fit with the post structuralist feminist conception of archives: of not seeing an archive as a static thing to solidify the present (or current theory), but as a way of continuously engaging with history in ways that expand or complicate current understandings.

Understanding practices in historical and political context

A further feminist orientation to archives is to understand archival material in its historical and political contexts. When I was questioning myself about why I had selected transcripts that demonstrated Michael White practicing in more 'politically influential' ways, I sought out Cheryl White to try to understand more fully the political context that may have been influencing him at that time.

In particular, I spoke with Cheryl White about a video in which Michael White implored an uncle to remember the sexual abuse that his niece had been reporting, and which he said he could not recall. The ways White practiced in that session were seen by some older practitioners as too centred to truly represent the ethics of narrative therapy as they knew them. At the same time, the transcript was seen by a younger feminist colleague as epitomising what she understood to be Michael White's ethics:

I had an image of Michael standing right next to the child, Lacey, and Michael was refusing to walk away from the child. He was standing with her. It was an act of solidarity. It was an act of support. It was an act of believing the uncle would find it within himself to value something about the powerful effects of remembering the harm that he'd done to Lacey's future wellbeing, and her current wellbeing. So I felt like Michael's ethics came across more strongly than ever in that moment by being so dogged. (Jo Allen)

When I spoke with Cheryl White about this, one of the things she suggested was that we watch together a documentary called *Brazen hussies* (Dwyer, 2020), which is an archival project of a different kind. It features archival footage and interviews from the Australian women's liberation movement during the 1960s. As we watched, Cheryl would pause the video and we would talk together about how the feminisms of the 1970s and 1980s had shaped conversations in family therapy and later narrative therapy.

These conversations about the feminist political context of the videos in the Michael White Archive took place during the same period of time that I was undertaking the

focus group discussions. The reason I am mentioning these conversations here is because, if we move away from any notion of a ‘progress narrative’ of Michael White’s work; and if we wish to learn from instances of his work from the archives that are not fully explained in his writings; and if we wish to explore how these instances can influence work in the present; then locating and understanding practices in their contemporaneous sociopolitical context becomes all the more necessary.

Through my conversations with Cheryl White and immersion in earlier feminist action, I gained a different appreciation of why White may have been more ‘centred’ or ‘politically influential’ in the 1980s and 1990s – and how this may have been linked to the feminist challenges of the time.

I had gone from ‘freaking out’, thinking I’d picked all the ‘worst transcripts’, to realising that this was the point of this research project. The examples of Michael White being differently ‘centred’ had stood out for a reason. Yes, White was doing something a bit differently, and perhaps this didn’t quite fit with later descriptions of his work. And that’s exactly what we were looking for.

In order to try to understand this, a wider orientation was required: an orientation to the sociopolitical contexts of the times when the videos were recorded. This involved reading and watching films, and also seeking out intergenerational conversations with people who would be able to richly convey the feminist consciousness of the times. This was an ‘embodied’ learning.

When I began this archival research, I had no idea that different ways of engaging with history would become such a key element. Avoiding a ‘progress narrative’ about Michael White’s work, and instead trying to increasingly understand the particular social and political contexts of the times in which he was working across his career (especially in relation to gender politics), has meant I have been engaged in a particular sort of reflexive historical exploration. It’s my hope that this double-focus makes it more possible to support the development of forms of narrative practice that are particularly relevant to today’s political context.

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