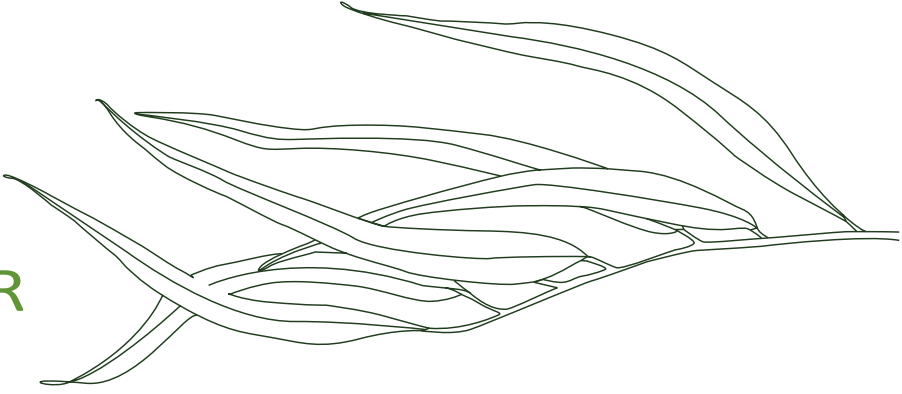




DEAR READER

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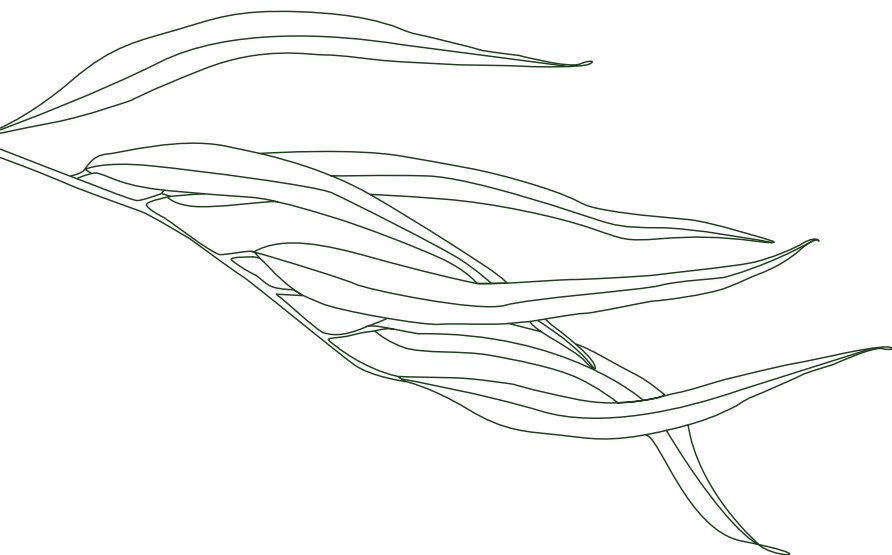
The Michael White Archive: New learnings from White's therapeutic practice in the realms of abuse and trauma

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Re-politicising the personal?

by Kelsi Semeschuk

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-membling practice (M. White, 1997d, 2007). Re-membling 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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