

Revisiting Michael White analysis of women who experience violence.

Written by: Bren Balcombe

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Based on an excerpt in; Re authoring lives interviews and essays; Interview with Christopher McLean (White, 1995, p 92-93). Crediting Allan Wade (Response-based practice) for highlighting and providing original critique of the text.

This critique is based on one of the very few excerpts to be found in writing where Michael White has provided his analysis of violence. Sadly, with his passing there is little opportunity to re-consider this topic with him, although I would like to believe he would have taken up the following critique with much thoughtfulness.

In this author's opinion Narrative therapy approaches have been by and far the most preferred way of working with people when considering all of the available theoretical approaches. This opinion is based on several factors such as, Narratives focus on seeing problems as relational and in context, seeing the problem as the problem, and Narratives move away from pathologizing. Also favourable is Narratives client centred and therapist de-centring positions and the use of questions as its main form of therapeutic intervention.

Considering the extent of the use of violence in all its forms across so many situations in which people are seeking help it seems only prudent that all therapists should have a firm grasp on the operations of violence. Including knowledge that people tend to respond to and resist all forms of mistreatment and violation. Without a useful analysis of violence to guide therapists they are likely to fall into unhelpful narratives which end up in victim blaming, pathologizing, or mutualising victim survivors.

In an interview with Christopher Mclean (1995) Michael starts by critiquing mainstream psychology's for explanations of why women who have been abused enter relationships in which they end up again being abused. On reflection this is already a problematic conception of the problem. Michael states that women who are abused "*wind up*" (*obscure/passive language*) repeatedly in "*abusive relationships*" (*mutualised language*) due to a certain "*vulnerability*". Michael's conception of the origin or "birth" of this vulnerability also positions the person as passive/object.

Problematically, all the while criticising mainstream psychology, Michael's view promotes both *victim blaming* and an *internalising* of the problem. *Internalising* because 'vulnerability' here is an internal psychological attribute, e.g. *something about a person* and secondly, it completely bypasses that people are responding to, resisting, and anticipating mistreatment (e.g. an active/responsive view). Therefore, vulnerability is used here as something *about* the person that keeps them being abused (*which is victim blaming*). Michael goes on to say that this vulnerability is *born* of difficulties in the area of *discernment*, discernment between "*abuse from nurture, neglect from care, exploitation from love and so on.*" (p.93).

As a clinical practitioner who has spoken to people who have been mistreated, abused, and violated for over 20 years it is inconceivable to me that such a person exists. In fact, not one person I have ever spoken to in or outside of the counselling room has ever confessed to feeling okay with being mistreated even in the smallest of ways.

Therefore, pitching discernment in this way positions the persons *thinking (discernment) as deficient* and their responsiveness as non-existent. Further Michael states that,

when women are unable to discern abuse from nurture from the outset, then she is not able to attend to the “early warning signs” and “confront” and “seize upon the option of breaking the connection” (P.93).

On reflection, and with potentially thousands of interviews with people across many colleagues, I am unable to state even one case where it has been established that people are unable to *discern abuse from nurture from the outset*. This commentary likely draws from the idea that where abuse is common and widespread that it is normalised and accepted. While there are many circumstances where abuse is common and widespread it does not mean people are okay about it and if you consider asking them, their answers tends to highlight this.

Michaels states that victimised people (in this case women) don't see the so called 'red flags', which further supports a position of deficit, as they are rendered unable to discern *early warning signs*.

A rather valid criticism of the *red flag* proposition is that constitutively red flags are almost always a *retrospective* observation. Importantly it does not account for how the operations of power or violence actually work in the social world. For example, perpetrators often do not start out by using violence and regularly disguise their behaviour, especially initially, as they tend to know that behaving badly from the outset tends to put people off. Also, perpetrators tend to use a range of reasons for their behaviour to disguise or justify their actions as something other than the intentional use of violence.

We also know that perpetrators of violence carefully manufacture the circumstances in which they know they will be able to overcome a person's natural resistance to mistreatment and also unlikely to be held to account. This can be seen in the various ways of undermining and entrapping their victims through social isolation and other forms of coercive control over a period of time. All the while preserving a *public face* that portrays a caring, kind, and generous persona or conversely an unapproachable one. Perpetrators anticipate resistance which is also evident even in on-the-spot uses of violence, why else would a bank robber bring a gun to a bank robbery? (Coate & Wade, 2007)

We also know that perpetrators rely on social narrative and social responses that minimise, conceal, obscure, or mutualise violence e.g. calling rape sex, violence as a dispute or a violent relationship. Additionally, in the process of reducing the visibility of violence, either by the perpetrator or through social responses and narratives, it facilitates the reframing of victim's responses to violence as 'crazy' or pathological by psychological means. This is primarily because the end result is that only the victims' responses are left visible without the context of the violence they are responding to.

In this way victim survivors are less likely to be believed when they seek support. Also, as regularly witnessed in child protection and the legal systems, victims end up being blamed, pathologized, or held responsible (mutualising) for the violence. By not addressing the operations of power and violence women are often blamed for not preventing violence *failing to protect* or as Michael states to *“seize upon the option of breaking the connection”* which is the often quoted “why didn't she leave” commentary. Unfortunately, this also supports the perpetrator narrative in minimising, concealing, obscuring, or justifying perpetrator violence.

While it is now impossible for Michael to redress these concerns, it would be appreciated if other authors of Narrative therapy would engage in some thoughtful conversation in his absence and provide some alternative narrative to the legacy these views and literary positions.

References

Coates, L., & Wade, A. (2007). Language and violence: Analysis of four discursive operations. *Journal of Family Violence*. 22, 511-522.

White, Michael. (1995). *Re-authoring lives: interviews and essays* / by Michael White. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre