

Narrative Practices Adelaide Conversation

Rob Hall
Narrator

Maggie Carey & Shona Russell
Interviewers

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DRAFT

***Maggie:** Rob, this conversation is a chance for us to catch up around your work with men in responding to men who use violence in their relationships. This is a starting point. Michael had an intention to share some thoughts and ideas with you around the work [that you and Alan do] but this didn't have a chance to happen. Right now, we'd like to think about some of your work ...*

Rob: Michael had an interest in this work for a long, long time. He always used to say this, even before we became close friends. As we became close, he had me review a couple of articles around these issues. When he set up his centre [Adelaide Narrative Therapy Centre¹ in 2008 and invited us to join him] he made it really clear that he wanted to talk more and share more. Michael had clearly done a lot of thinking about this work.² We were looking forward to developing these ideas together and that was very exciting for me – and for my colleague Alan Jenkins, because Alan has been pivotal in the developing this work.³ I don't know how that conversation would have gone but I was certainly really looking forward to having the chance to develop it with Michael – but still we move on ...

Historical Considerations

***Shona:** I'd be interested in hearing about those articles that Michael asked you to review. Do you remember what they were? What was the edge of interest back then?*

Rob: There were three things that Michael consulted with me about. One of them was an article that someone else had written that he asked me to give feedback on. Another was around the idea of Men's Ways of Being.⁴ He consulted with me around a whole

¹ Now known as Narrative Practices Adelaide

² Michael appreciated Alan's contribution and referred to it in workshops and writing.

³ See Jenkins, A., (1990) *Invitations to Responsibility* and Jenkins, A., (2009) *Becoming Ethical*

⁴ Michael White *Men's Culture, the Men's Movement, and the Constitution of Men's Lives* 1996 in *Men's Ways of Being* Edited by Christopher McLean, Maggie Carey and Cheryl White. Pages 163-193, Westview Press, USA

presentation about that. And then, of course, around accountability, he was really interested in developing this idea.

I think Michael's interest was from the start of 1980 when we⁵ first began running men's groups. He had sort of a watching brief on what we were doing and the concepts we were working with. Not having the confidence to write myself, I later put [this in] an article called "work in progress."

The Notion of Responsibility

Shona: Is it okay to pause? I think there are already some interesting things you are speaking about. Rob, you talked about the 1980s and the concepts emerging in the men's groups you were doing. Would you be willing to reflect a bit on some of those concepts, and the history of those?

Rob: Probably the most powerful concept back then – which is still [a] very helpful and viable concept today – is the notion of responsibility. I remember when I was working for a crisis counselling service and we were very aware that part of the job was to help women get to safe housing or shelter. There wasn't any counselling for men at all back then. In conversation as workers, it was brought out that women were bearing the burden and responsibility of living with men [and] violence. There were no expectations of men to do anything about their behaviour in many respects. So we started to experiment with a process that would take men into a place where they carried some of the responsibility.

Some of the notions of responsibility could become quite simplistic. [For example,] an idea of a man taking responsibility could be seen as [him] being prepared to wear his punishment, to take on punishment; whereas, in conversations with Alan the notion of Responsibility grew to a much more complex and helpful understanding.

Michael was interested in that notion not only from the point of view of individual responsibility, but the notion [such] that men as a group needed to think about their contribution to social ideas or cultural ideas that make the male gender the dominant force, the group that finds ways of subjugating others – women and children in particular.

Some of the conversations we had back then were about men taking responsibility for helping men [to] take responsibility for the violence they were using, the abuse that they were committing.

Michael contributed lots to the work in a whole range of ways including in the early articles that he wrote,⁶ about providing counselling for men and being prepared not go

⁵ A group of counselors who had formed into an Action Group to address the issue of men's violence. These groups are still around today in different forms.

⁶ "The Conjoint Therapy Of Men Who Are Violent And The Women With Whom They Live" p101-105 in Selected Papers Michael White, Dulwich Centre Publications, 1998.

"Deconstruction and Therapy", 1991, *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, No3

too fast. One of things that Michael was interested in – and of course Alan has written about too⁷ – was the idea that we had to go at the pace that the man could go at. It was less a “doing to” process. He saw that we had a responsibility to work with the men. Of course that's integral to Michael's whole approach, and his work.

One of the questions Michael would ask was around: “What was the intervention or conversation with men doing? Would they be opening up options for men or closing them off?”

I'm really aware that in the early work that I did, there was very much a sense of giving men lectures. At University people stood in front of the class and gave lectures, and I reflected that in my counselling work. Sometimes, as Alan pointed out in one of his earlier articles, you could get a sense of feeling really good about yourself because you were giving a lecture to someone about how they should live their life and be more respectful to women. Both Alan and Michael were very attuned to the idea that this was in fact not contributing to men challenging their own ways of being. It was contributing to a sanction that was really not being very helpful at all.

That sort of understanding was instrumental in Alan writing his book *Invitations to Responsibility* (1990) and in taking what he calls an *Invitational Approach*. So in the intention of the work, Michael would say that one could be “looking for [a] preferred story.” A question he might ask is: “Has there been times when you've acted against your better judgment?” This is inviting the man to think clearly about what's important to him rather than what I, as therapist, or us socially, would be thinking; having the man engage with his intentions for his life, and his preferred story.

(12'30”)

Maggie: *So the complex understanding of responsibility is one of the early considerations with men. Were there other strong things like responsibility that come to mind?*

Rob: Yes, Alan and a number of us worked together to articulate and document these things in some detail. What became clear to us, besides the practical considerations around ensuring people's safety, was that if we are inviting someone to take responsibility for their behaviour then we needed to take responsibility for the way we did that, putting the responsibility on us and the climate that we create.

It was very tempting to behave in disrespectful ways as a therapist – to get on the moral high ground and put someone down. By appreciating that you're wanting someone to

“*The Externalizing Of The Problem And The Re-Authoring Of Lives And Relationships*” p5-28 in Selected Papers Michael White 1998

Re-Authoring Lives: Interviews and Essays, Dulwich Centre Publications 1995

“A conversation about Accountability” p155-171 *Interviewer Christopher McLean*.

⁷ Jenkins, A., “*Therapy for Abuse or Therapy as Abuse*” in Power and Politics in Practice, Dulwich Centre Newsletter, 1994, No 1. p11-19, and also Jenkins, A., (1990) *Invitations to Responsibility* and Jenkins, A., (2009) *Becoming Ethical*

develop respectful ways of relating, then how you relate to them is really important. This notion of respect, what shape it took, and how we invited men to consider respect and respectful ways of relating was very important.

Notions of fairness are very important – how can we not take account of a man's own understandings or experiences? I guess this stands out much more with children or juveniles. How can we ask somebody to behave in a way, to take responsibility or to be respectful when the adults in their lives haven't shown them that respect nor been accountable for the violence they have perpetrated on the young person? Here is a level of unfairness. Or if as a society or community, the justice system has not been fair, then you're running a risk of asking too much of somebody, [of] overloading them so that they are not in a position to take responsibility for what they have done and they will close down. Fairness is another concept – Alan has really articulated this very well around working with adolescences.⁸

Another concept important in a whole range of ways is a particular understanding about accountability.

Maggie & Shona: Do you want to say a little more about the notion of accountability and your experience of your thinking about that? But before you go into that, we are interested in when you started talking about the 1980s, you talked about the concept and notion of fairness and responsibility and broadening these out. Where are we time-wise now?

Rob: In his later work, the notions Michael talked about and that Alan speaks of started to come together – as parallel ways of looking at Men's violence that had potential for exciting and more comprehensive ways of understanding and working. Alan has been looking at the concept of Deleuze's Becoming⁹ and Ethics as opposed to a morality,¹⁰ now continuing things that we were working on in the 1980s but with a much more rich and complete understanding. And so the nuances are easier to identify and appreciate.

Michael looked at the work of Vygotsky and social understandings of learning – the concept of scaffolding,¹¹ which offers so much in this area.

(19'21")

Opportunities to Other Views of Self

⁸ See Jenkins, A., "The Politics of Intervention" in Current Perspectives: Working With Sexually Aggressive Youth and With Sexual Behavior Problems, Edited by Robert E. Longo and David S Prescott, 2005, (Chapter 5 p143-165), NEARI PRESS

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990

¹⁰ Daniel W Smith, "Deleuze and the question of Desire: Toward an immanent theory of ethics", Parrhesia, Number 2, 2007, pp. 66-78.

¹¹ Michael White, "Scaffolding Conversations" in Maps of Narrative Therapy p 263-290, 2007, WW Norton & Company NY.

Maggie: Can you say more about these understandings around ethical becoming and of scaffolding? What are your thoughts about how you see these notions contributing to your work with men?

Rob: This is very exciting. Along with Alan's notion of becoming ethical,¹² living with violence brings with it certain understandings of yourself and others. You are subjugating the other, you are not taking care of the other, you're engaged in practices of selfishness and power over. By engaging with ethics, part of which involves looking for the *stutter*¹³ or *hiccup*¹⁴ in the discourse of violence, opens up an opportunity to engage with something that is really important to the person you're working with. It's helping them to engage with the notion of co-construction or co-authoring that is so important here. If in our conversation with someone, we just focused on their capacity to be violent and we didn't find the *hiccup*, we would be contributing to their dominant story about themselves or how we see them.

But if you can ask a question that invites them to consider what's important to them, how they want to live their lives [Michael might ask about things that they give value to], then you have an opportunity to connect with something that's very important to the person.

Deleuze drew this distinction between “ethics” of a person’s understanding or commitment, things that they give value to, with “morality” as what a community might impose as an idea about how people should live. By engaging a person in consideration of their own ethics – for them to make a discovery of ethical considerations – you are then helping them develop a position from which they can begin to examine their own values, from a critical perspective rather than just taking them for granted.

If a man has an idea of *being a father* and doing the best by his children then he can appreciate, or compare, or consider why he might want to take a notion or ethic of caring. If, in therapy, the person is able to explore that, commit to that as something they really do give value [to], then you are in a position to ask them whether their violence or abusive behaviour fits with that *ethic of caring*.

That question becomes an opening up rather than asking a question of judgment and closing down an opportunity for ethical consideration. It's a question where the man might begin to see for himself how he wants to live. I think all of the complexity with that is so much an opening up for people rather than a feeling like they are inadequate by not living up to what society wants. It's more about engaging with what they want for themselves.

¹² See Jenkins, A., (2009) *Becoming Ethical*

¹³ Inna Semetsky, “*An Unconscious Subject of Deleuze and Guattari*”, Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University Wednesday 17 September 2003, <http://arts.monash.edu.au/cclcs/research/papers/unconscious-subject.pdf> , 20.4.2010

¹⁴ I continued to use the word *hiccup* instead of *stutter* in this interview when the notion of *stutter* would have done as I believed I was emphasising the counsellors skill in noticing the stutter and responding to the potential significance of it.

Co-construction

(25'9")

Shona: Can I just ask you to pause for a sec? I don't want to interrupt you, Rob. You said you are personally very excited about this, about looking for the Hiccup. I wonder if you could you say a little more about how this has been exciting for you? What difference is this doing for you in your work?

Rob: It's changing the position of the counsellor quite dramatically, giving much more weight to the whole notion of co-authoring or co-constructing. It's placing the client's intentions central rather than having the sense that what I [as therapist] give value to [is central]. The relationship between you and the person you're working with is much more collaborative rather than going back to that sense of being done to. By staying with that ethic and giving value to that, the person develops a deeper appreciation of what that can mean [here the scaffolding map is a helpful guide]. When the person leaves counselling, they have something they can always call on, rather than having a sense of having picked up a skill which might drop off. It's about taking on a different way of being, a way of being that fits more with who and how they want to be in their lives.

There's much more sense of the client having what Michael would call personal agency.¹⁵ This brings the therapeutic work around addressing violence into that position where the client feels less done to and more pursuing something they would want for their lives, for their identity, for their family and for society.

Scaffolding provides a very helpful framework where a person can explore values. The principle is outlined in a dramatic way when you look at adolescents being told they need to take responsibility. "Responsibility" for an adolescent can become just something that people tell them they should be doing.

Maggie: It is a common phrase, isn't it: "If only they took responsibility."

Rob: They [the adolescent] can say, "I need to take responsibility" but it's a meaningless concept. The young person doesn't have any experience of it. Michael's map of scaffolding provides a clear indication of how you might have a young person explore the concept and appreciate it more. It has more of a chance to become a *Principle of Meaning* by the steps that Michael talks about in "Scaffolding".¹⁶

We also understand that as people begin to work with these ideas of safety, respect, fairness and accountability, their understanding becomes richer and they can bring these ideas more and more into their lives. In counselling with someone [who] faces a complex situation that they handle with responsibility or accountability, then you can build on that. So the concept is being scaffolded to become more integral to that person. It also leaves

¹⁵ Michael White "Re-Authoring Conversations" in *Maps of Narrative Practice* pp.61-128, particularly p103

¹⁶ Michael White "Scaffolding Conversations" in *Maps of Narrative Therapy* pp 263-290, 2007, WW Norton & Company NY.

you with the option of not necessarily being stuck with the principles or labels that we would have imposed. Their understanding of accountability might be something different.

Lines of Flight

(31' 40")

Maggie: Rob, you started talking about your excitement about the parallel process that you saw, the coming together of ways of thinking around the work that Alan had and Michael had around the becoming ethical and around the scaffolding – how these could come together to fit in the work, and contribute to the work. I wonder if you could just say a little bit more about the becoming ethical side of things. You said that with men you look for a stutter in the thinking or in the capacity for violence and discourses about men and the use of violence. I'd like to hear about the thinking that has you looking for that, and that links with this idea about becoming.

Rob: What has been really inspirational is reading theory and philosophy and then being part of these developments in action – in the therapy room. For example seeing Deleuze's notion of "*Lines of Flight*."¹⁷ A conversation could be heading in one direction and then something unusual would occur and you could find yourself heading out in a whole completely different direction, a whole different line of flight.

Back to notions around discourses and ways of living: There's a sense that people are living and being in a way that's consistent with the discourse and that is unquestioned. I recently heard the notion of being pre-reflective¹⁸ – I think that is quite a good notion. People haven't had a chance to think about what their behaviour means or what their thinking even means for themselves or others.

People often come to counselling with a clear idea about the problem, or a clear idea about who has got the problem. They might want to explain their violence; they have thought about it long and hard and they will have a story to go with the explanation. But the story is one that will most likely fit with the dominant discourse – which they needed to take control of, to help sort things out – or that [other] people are being unreasonable.

But sometimes there might be a *hiccup* in that story [a point that contradicts their explanation]. They might say: "Maybe I took things too far." Now that's a *hiccup* in the discourse and it presents an opportunity, a potential for a *line of flight*, a crack where "the

¹⁷ John Winslade, "*Tracing Lines of Flight: Implications of the Work of Gilles Deleuze for Narrative Practice*", in *Family Process* Vol. 48, September, 2009.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 2004.

¹⁸ p105 in Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas*, State University of New York Press, 2002.

light can come in”,¹⁹ a direct challenge to what’s accepted and taken for granted in the discourse.

So the challenge for the counsellor is to be alert to that potential and also to appreciate the significance of the *stutter* as a disruption to the discourse. In a way, that’s a resistance to the discourse,²⁰ that’s an opening. But [we need] to be prepared to work with the scaffolding notion, the caution is to not jump in to tell the person “this is the best thing they’ve ever said in their whole lives” and go straight into the options its opening up for them. The task is to find ways that are respectful and engaging so that the meaning of this development is something they can become appreciative of.

Probably the simplest way to describe this is by example [one that a lot of people would have experienced or even hear from friends]: people will tell stories of their life and how they don’t want to be cruel to their children or to their partner. They will talk about having fallen into this trap of being violent, and maybe seeing that their parents are to blame. They will describe themselves in particular ways: “Well I had no option, I am a violent person” or “my parents behaved in this way.” Then questions might be asked that have them look their history. People will often come up with a time in their lives where they didn’t appreciate what their parents did. Sometimes as a child they made a decision that they would *not be violent*. There again is another opening – that is another place where they can challenge their own understanding of what they really stand for in their lives and what they are committed to.

Shona: *Rob, can we pause? I don't want to lose something. When you are talking about a crack where the light can come in, your whole face lit up. You had this look of light on your face. What is happening in that moment in the work?*

Rob: Often a discourse around violence, abuse and controlling others is such a narrow and limiting way of living. It’s so hurtful to others and [this hurt] often has men themselves – people who are violent or abusive to others – feel pretty terrible about themselves. And so when these cracks appear or these openings become available, it’s a real potential for someone to take a different path in their relationship to their family, their children, their partner and also to themselves. I guess there is a sense of discovery and creativity, rather than just reacting to things in what Michael would say “a known and familiar way.”²¹ It’s about making discoveries about life; engaging with life in ways

¹⁹ Leonard Cohen’s song, *Anthem*. He sings: “There is a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.”

²⁰ Inna Viriasova, “*The Problem Of Freedom In The Works Of Michel Foucault*” sourced in CEU Political Science Journal (CEU Political Science Journal), issue: 05 / 2006, page 6275, www.cceol.com. Foucault M (1994) *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (ed Rabinow, P) Translated by Hurley R and others, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Volume one, Penguin Books, England.

²¹ See White, M., 2002, *Maps of Narrative Practice*

that are far more energetic and enthusiastic and creative – and also, inevitably what this means to the person/people they are in contact with is lovely too.

Openings to Let the Light Shine In

(39'10")

***Shona and Maggie:** I'm very interested in your description of opening, potential, discovery and creativity. Can you say something about what the therapists have to orientate them selves toward to listen for these, to hear for these or find these? What do you have to believe about the people that you are working with in order to look for these cracks, and to find them, and to let the light shine in? What sort of understandings or beliefs about people?*

Rob: That's interesting isn't it? In a simplistic way, that is something that comes from my own family – the belief is that any of us could end up behaving in ways that we regret – or that are hurtful. One of the things we are very careful about in the training that we do is to not create an “us” and “them” understanding of people. “Us” as good, healthy, ethical people and “them” as being *othered*. That is something that is a value that goes back to my family and that I have always held.

***Shona:** Would you say a little more about that? As you are reflecting on a value that you held that you said goes back to your family, did you just pick that up? Or were there particular teachings. Or was it something quite clear that came from your family? Observations? How did you get onto it?*

Rob: I think it was more just observation from my parents, the way they related to others and the way they talked about others. They were always very respectful and would tell stories, I guess, that involved how people would find themselves in circumstances where they were behaving badly and talk about how possible it was for others to do that. Going way back now, it was very tempting to take a judgmental position against German people after the Second World War and the Japanese and so forth. When films – that were around those times – would take those attitudes, my parents would talk with me afterwards about how silly those ideas were. There are a whole lot of ways, but I'm just remembering that.

(42'39)

***Shona:** Did that awaken something in you? It's just so interesting that you are talking about looking for entry points into discourses that can be very narrowing, limiting and totalizing, and then the story you just shared was about your parents doing just the same – questioning into a totalizing account of people's identity. Is it no coincidence that you find yourself committed to this work for 30 years?*

Rob: [laughter]. Yeah you are probably right. You are asking what would be helpful to be aware of when you are in that conversation with somebody. I guess it is being aware of what abuse means for people, what it produces, what way of living it has for people who experience abuse.

To be alert to that and to the shape that those discourses take, help us to see when there is a challenge to that discourse, when there is an opening, or a potential to be breaking free of that discourse. It's quite interesting because, where someone has behaved in uncaring ways and hasn't placed caring as central in their lives – then you are engaging with them and they are starting to talk about the abuse they have perpetrated, and they are doing [this] in a caring way, it can seem that what you are doing might be hurtful, or unfair. But I think in order for *caring* to really mean something; to stay with that person, and be acknowledging of their experience, to help them with that journey of discovery of what caring can entail.

So when a father talks about having hurt their child's mother and they are prepared also to look through the child's eyes and what that can mean, rather than run from that, to be prepared to explore what that really means. To find ways to explore what that really means is helping that person have a more complete, thorough, rich, thick understanding of what caring entails.

And so the conversations you have with someone can be quite sad and moving but at the same time, very helpful. The work that Alan has done and written about in terms of shame and the meaning of shame as a window of opportunity is very, very helpful in dealing with this issue of violence and abuse.²² If you look at understandings of violence and understandings of abuse, particularly the ones that we look at – abuse is to not take account of the other; abuse is treating whatever is going on in your own mind, or whatever feeling you have as the highest priority, and to not consider the other person at all.²³

So the antidote to that is to start to consider *other* and to really engage with what things mean for the other person; to have a very deep understanding and appreciation of that. When a man says, "*Well, my kid is behaving badly, having a tantrum. Of course I hit him. What else could I do?*" That is a sad question because it is a locked-in response. That is a discourse of "*no other options.*" There are a million options, a million things you could do differently rather than hit. That excitement around the break from that discourse is potentially stepping into a whole different way of being. What does it mean for that child to have a father to not stay stuck in that way, to discover what caring means? What does that open up for the family? Even if unfortunately they can't stay together because of the history of violence and abuse, this work does not necessarily have a goal of reconnecting. There is work around restitution and doing what you can to heal. But it isn't predicated [up]on someone getting back together – certainly not living together.

²² Alan Jenkins "*Discovering Integrity: Working With Shame Without Shaming Young People Who Have Abused*" in *Current Perspectives: Working With Sexually Aggressive Youth and With Sexual Behavior Problems*, Edited by Robert E. Longo and David S Prescott, 2005 NEARI PRESS (Chapter & page 419-442

²³ Alan Jenkins *Becoming Ethical* p 4-10

Men's Ways of Being

(49'54)

Shona: Earlier on here you were speaking about the men's groups that started in the 1980s, and the concepts that were emerging at that time. One of the things that you were working out was that women were bearing responsibility, and then there started to be a shift in thinking about notions of responsibility that might invite men to consider the impact of their actions on women and children and people they care about. In your work, when you are considering these histories of violence and abuse, I wonder if you could say something about how you take account of the experience of people who have been harmed through the action of the men that you're working with?

Rob: If it's okay, it's good to look at the history of that. One of the things that we decided very early on in this work was that we would – I suppose you might say – work as a team. We formed an action group that involved people coming from a range of work in this area of domestic violence. We had someone from a women's shelter who was part of the action group. We had people who did ongoing counselling with women who had fled and were not necessarily going back to their partners. We had people working with men. And so in some ways we were really fortunate in South Australia because a number of women's services encouraged men [male workers] to work with men who were using violence.

Simplistically, the idea that we took up was around men taking responsibility, men helping men with men's violence. But the risk that we ran was having that work be isolated from services for women, or to be cut off. There were a lot of understandings around, about how counselling *should* work, back in those days it was meant to work always in privacy almost like a confession. So if someone talked with their counsellor the level of confidentiality was pretty intense. The counsellors did this individual work with someone and didn't consult with anybody about it. The work with men who were abusive had the potential to go down that path.

Culturally, what was worrying about men working with men was this could in fact be continuing men's culture. Back in those days many clubs didn't have women in them. For example, service clubs like Rotary or the Lions. Men had male-only spaces and in Australia men dominated the pubs or bars. The idea was that only men's conversations would happen there and men's ways of being would be exhibited. Michael refers back to this time in his own life in that article "Keeping the Faith", when he talks about his own lived experience of this culture.²⁴

There was a risk that we could *psychologize* – do I mean *pathologize*? – people in this way and have the work disconnected from its politics. But through the rapport [that] women's services had with the establishing services for men and when men's and women's workers started working together we found we had shared understandings – and

²⁴ See interview with Michael White by Duvall, J. & Young, K., (2009) *Keeping the Faith, A Conversation with Michael White*, in *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, Vol 28, no. 1 pp. 1-18.

we found the work with women and children informed the work with men [and vice versa].

Partnerships in Accountability

(55'04)

Maggie: Was that by chance that the work was informing each other? Were there particular relationships or partnerships that you established at that point?

Rob: This is where I'm coming from my experience and other people would have a different experience. From my point of view [it made a difference] setting up the action group to have a range of services with both genders mixed together in the services. And then deciding to do the training together made a difference. Together we would talk about what training we would want to offer around working with men, and the women's shelter workers would talk about what training they would want to offer around their work with women. Out of those conversations grew a broader understanding. Then the notion that was very helpful for both [just looking at it simplistically] was that if women understood that there was a place where men could go, then the women didn't feel the need to be as responsible for looking after him.²⁵

There was a very strong sense back then that it was women's job to look after the emotional wellbeing of the family. The common culture was really strong on that and advertising on TV and articles in the media would promote this. One of the things that I think women working with women appreciated was that by us working with men they could talk to women and say: "Hey look, now's your chance to consider what you want. How important is safety to you? How important is your children's safety to you? He can be looked after." I think that was one of the really solid but basic interplays between the two.

Also we learnt that by keeping the connection or being accountable for the work we were doing meant that the focus stayed on the issues of violence. Just to offer another simplistic understanding – when you do individual work with a man, probably because of his shame and embarrassment, he will generally offer a minimized description of the violence that he perpetrated. In fact, he might even be very keen to get back with his partner so he will offer descriptions about dealing with complex issues in new and exciting ways that are non-violent.

In the early work, this would be taken as read [truth]. With some men whose partners had left them and where the police would be in touch with the woman because they knew what shelter she was in, there was always the temptation to let the woman know this man is "really sorry" for what he has done. So there is always a temptation to help the man deal with this and to take on board what he had said. But often when we checked with the men's partners they would say that the violence hadn't stopped or the violence had taken

²⁵ Hall, R.(2001) *Chapter: Pitfalls and Challenges* in Camilleri, P., & Pease, B., (eds), 2001 *Working with Men in Human Services*

a different shape and there were still methods of control and power over. Even at a very fundamental level, being accountable offered something important to the work with men.

Tracing the History of the Work Being Accountable (59'36)

Shona: Can I just ask something? Can you trace the history of the work being accountable back to that time historically, and when do you locate that?

Rob: These were practices we engaged with but we didn't have a word for it. It was only when we came across the work called "Just therapy" of the Family Centre in New Zealand, particularly Charles Waldegrave and Kiwi Tamasese,²⁶ where they took the general notion of accountability and they turned that on its head. The general notion of Accountability is quite hierarchical, where people with lesser power are accountable for their actions, behaviour or spending, to people higher up in organizations or in status. They turned it on its head. Just Therapy [the Family Centre in New Zealand] suggested that people of the dominant culture should take on being accountable to people of the non-dominant culture.

I think that what that offered was so extraordinary. One of the things that was a concern [and still is, but more easily identifiable] was that the position of power and status that men held in society compared to women – women's workers and women in general. One of the things that this notion of accountability did was that it offered a way to challenge the power imbalance and to invite a different consideration. So when Dallas Colley and I were asked to put together a workshop around working with men to take account of that, we talked about what had been very significant in our own understandings and our work and the term [accountability] seemed to really to fit.²⁷

One of the things that we wanted to add was that we had a sense that there was a risk with an inverted sense of accountability that women could end up bearing the responsibility for the directions that the men's counselling took or that the counselling of a particular man would take. To give an example of that: If men didn't do any work with men around violence until they consulted women and then they just did what women told them, then really you have just inverted the power hierarchy. What we were looking for, and what we know Charles and Kiwi would want, is a genuine engagement with the ideas.

So we talked about *accountability in partnership* where there is the option for the potential to move to a much more equal power relationship. Also we found that this process of accountability meant that something new and creative could be generated. If male workers were working at what they were doing – coming up with programs and so forth – and consulted with women, the women might challenge them about some of those ideas. That challenge rather than being seen as a putdown, a denigration, or a judgment

²⁶ See Waldegrave and Tamasese (1993) and Hall, R. (2001) *Chapter: Pitfalls and Challenges* in Camilleri, P., & Pease, B., (eds), 2001 *Working with Men in Human Services*

²⁷ Hall, R., (1996) Partnership Accountability, in C. McLean, M. Carey and C White (ed.) *Men's Ways of Being*, pp. 51 – 62. Colorado: Westview Press.

Dallas Colley is a colleague who discussed and worked on these understandings.

was seen as a *hiccup* that could be gone over, gone through, worked around. Then men needed to take responsibility for their thinking it through, rather than leave that to women, and then get back together with women and talk more about their ideas.

What we found were new and exciting ways of working became available. A lot of men's groups in Adelaide are now run co-jointly with men and women for a whole lot of reasons. One of the things that have made that possible is having that understanding of accountability. I think that understanding of accountability applies to many other areas of work.

(64'56")

Shona: You mean that putting Partnerships along side with the notion of accountability?

Rob: Yeah and also I think it applies and has the potential to offer something in other positions of power differentials. That idea of accountability at that political level is one thing. The other thing is around the work with men itself – if you work with your client and you are not contemplating what that work means for the people who have been subjugated to men's violence, then I think you are running a risk. One of the things we need to keep in mind is the experience of people who have been hurt.

This is probably put clearest if a man gets to a point where he is interested to take into account the violence he has done, and he wants to consult with his partner about this; it's very tempting as a counsellor to be so enthused about the realizations someone has made, that you end up wanting the partner to be responsive to what the man is offering. The risk of that, of course, is that you are once again putting his intentions, or his needs or his wants ahead of where she might be at. Being accountable means that you really want to check where she is at and to check in a way that isn't coercive or intrusive. So if there is a space where she would express an interest at some point in wanting to understand what he has realized then you would want to establish a way to make contact with her around that. What might be appropriate is to consult with the person [women's worker] she is consulting with, and that person who is trusted and respected by her, asks if she still wants or is ready for it. Also what she might need before she felt able to take this on board – if she was interested?

So I think that notion of accountability has many parts to it, as well as the social part. At some level for men to hold their behaviour accountable to the community is a fair and helpful thing. I've had clients who have faced being sentenced to jail and they've said, interestingly enough, that this has helped them to appreciate the significance of what they've done. In being hurtful to a child, [clients have appreciated] they've not only contributed to hurting that child, but they have also contributed to a social climate where children are made more vulnerable, to creating a social climate where abuse seems more inevitable. Other people aren't in the position to offer the help they know that is needed, often because of the suspicion [of that helping role] that is raised by that man's treatment

of the children.²⁸ So yeah, that notion of accountability to community is a very helpful one.

Recent Considerations on Accountability

(69'33)

Shona: I know your considerations of accountability have such a long history. Could you say if there have been any recent developments, considerations or thoughts around this notion of accountability?

Rob: For me, it is something I am still exploring. I am aware sometimes the way I have taught accountability in the past has promoted a sense of judgment or has promoted a sense of failure or not living up to expectations.

Shona: On whose part?

Rob: The way I used to teach [accountability] was that I would be inviting men to consider what women's concerns might be around men working with men, which I think is a very helpful and worthwhile consideration. Then I would have women in a caucus to reflect on that. Sometimes that was really wonderful because women would really respect the effort that men had gone to, to appreciate what women's concerns would be. But sometimes it created a climate where men felt judged by women, and women felt like they needed to be in that position of judging, and in a sense they did. Often, rather than a sense of partnership growing from the experience, there would be a sense of distancing: women feeling that men hadn't measured up, and they felt let down by what men had said or done. Men would feel distanced too, feel judged, hurt and confused by what had happened.

Now the idea is still really helpful. But the way of teaching and helping to bring that idea into an experience – that was not helpful. And so, lately I've been revisiting Michael's understandings around creating climates where people can talk about experiences and understandings, but taking a position of curiosity rather than judgment. I've been experimenting with ways of teaching or talking about accountability, and giving people an experience of that, that steps more into a place of shared experience and curiosity rather than judgment. Outsider witness practices,²⁹ I think, are a good example of that and can offer a critique that is more from a position of respect and appreciation, rather than of judgment and having a sense a being put down.

Shona: Is this something you are still working on?

Rob: Very much so – still exploring. I think all of these concepts will be worked on and developed and probably taken over by other younger people, and change shape, become really exciting and directly important to them. So yeah, I'm really looking to watch this unfold, as I have over these years ...

²⁸ Sonja Bar-Am when editing this asked this point be repeated and include: "That any abuse is a further contribution to a social climate where abuse seems inevitable"

²⁹ See White, M., 2002, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, ibid

Shona: It sounds like from what you've said that these concepts that started back in the 1980s still hold relevance, and you have got a picture in your mind that you and others will continue to find relevance but in new ways?

Rob: Yeah. I think that has happened in other areas of the work. In the work that we've done around working with families where abuse of children has happened; working with mothers who have been violent; working in a multiplicity of places where these concepts have a much broader applicability than I originally thought. Also, not to just stay wedded to those because I think other people might come along. Like some of the work that we are doing around working with Aboriginal people, I can appreciate whole new concepts that might develop from that work, and that should be really quite lovely.

Maggie: That sounds like a good conversation for another day, doesn't it?

Shona: One that I would be interested in exploring.

Rob: [laughter] And participating in!

Maggie: Okay, should we wind it up for today?

Rob: Yeah. Thank you for your interest and your questions.

Shona: It's been fascinating to hear. Very much an ongoing conversation, I'm very much looking forward for more, Rob.

Rob: Okay.

Maggie: Thank you!

(75'18")

Further Reading

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