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Narrative

Michael White
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the **psychotherapist**

Chapters 1 and 2 provide a historical and personal perspective to 'hearing voices' and their possible function; to give voice to 'unspeakable' disempowering experiences, such as childhood abuse, and how, nonetheless, people can, literally, dramatically regain control of their lives.

These ideas are further explored in chapters 3 and 4, which include a useful examination of the models of 'madness' and healing through the dramatic repertoire, and in Chapter 7, case studies illustrate how this might be achieved in a non-threatening and empowering manner with even the most vulnerable clients.

Several other chapters comprise in-depth explorations of individual and group work which include illuminating pieces of dialogue between the author and his clients. The last two chapters explain what clients find helpful and the constituents of good practice.

Even if therapists aren't encouraged, as Casson hopes, to utilise psychodrama and dramatherapy in their practice, they will almost certainly find his book a valuable and inspiring resource.

Rosalind Hewitt
Psychosexual Therapist
UKCP Registrant

Profiles of influential psychotherapists

The Psychotherapist hopes to run more profiles of eminent and influential psychotherapists and their work. Both figures from the past and those working today are important.

Suggestions of individuals for profiling are welcomed, please send these, and/or offers to assist in the preparation of profiles, to Jude Cohen-Phillips, Managing Editor,
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Michael White

Innovative psychotherapist. Born December 29th 1948. Died 4th April 2008

Michael White, one of the most distinguished and innovative psychotherapists of his generation, has died aged 59 having suffered a cardiac arrest. Co-originator of what has become known as 'Narrative Therapy', alongside his colleague David Epston, Michael had a quiet and unassuming way about him, a dry wit and a knack for putting people, particularly children, at their ease.

I first came across him in his home-town of Adelaide, South Australia, where he was putting up signs for a conference at which he was 'keynote' speaker.

"I've come all the way from the UK" I volunteered, "to hear what Michael White has to say".

"Lets hope he turns up then." He replied, explaining that this mattered much less to him, since he only lived around the corner.

Later, after hearing the keynote address, I felt a hand on my shoulder; "Well, thank God I didn't have to travel too far to hear that lot." he said, grinning broadly.

Michael lived and worked in Adelaide all his life. Both he and his work have become substantially significant in the

fields of counselling, psychotherapy and, in particular, family therapy and community work. Michael's workshop tours across the world and the later international narrative therapy conferences organised by the Dulwich Centre attracted hundreds of participants. He was a compelling speaker with an irreverent sense of humour who was able to get complex ideas across to large groups of people who were quite unfamiliar with them.

On the advice of a careers teacher, when he left school he worked in a draughtsman's office, which he hated. He regularly joked that that was the last time he ever took professional advice about his career. He later entered the University of South Australia to study social work, going on to become a family therapist. He met his future wife, Cheryl whilst they were both still students. They later had one daughter, Penny.

Even during his initial training as a social worker Michael found himself questioning the wisdom and relevance of many established therapeutic practices, which seemed to him often to provide opportunities for people in difficulty to experience a sense of further failure in their lives. He set about thinking outside

the 'psychological box', that had it seemed to him, largely ignored both the context and cultural discourses that human interactions both constituted and were constituted by.

This explicitly 'outside the box' attitude did not always endear him to the established authorities within family therapy or counselling in Australia but, undaunted, Michael and Cheryl White set up and co-directed the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide for 25 years, from 1983-2008. Here Michael practised family therapy and developed his ideas, whilst Cheryl developed Dulwich Centre Publications, which became a resource for disseminating narrative therapy literature, and host to a variety of international and local conferences, gatherings and projects.

Reading eclectically, Michael brought together the diverse work of thinkers such as the French poststructuralist Michel Foucault, the North American anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff and the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, as he developed his ideas about therapeutic practice. Together with other family therapists particularly his friend and colleague David Epston from New Zealand, Michael began to develop what was first described as 'linking lives therapy', a relational and social way of working that later came to be known as "Narrative Therapy".

Michael White proposed that people perceive and communicate their lives and relationships, including their problems, as continuing 'stories.' Through selective memory many significant details are forgotten or seen as irrelevant. Narrative therapists encourage the recall and exploration of the 'missing' significant details, assisting people to develop novel and more nuanced understandings of the events of their lives, to redefine their sense of who they were, and to envisage a broader range of possible futures for themselves. Michael himself never ceased to be fascinated by all forms of inquiry that helped people to become re-engaged with neglected aspects of their lives and identities; a process which he often described, after Bourdieu, as the 'exoticising' of people's lives.

Throughout the 1980s Michael and David Epston published prolifically, which created widespread interest in their developing thinking and practice. This led to Norton publishing the influential *Narrative Means To Therapeutic Ends* in 1990, which was to be translated into many languages and established their worldwide influence well beyond the horizons of family therapy, across the helping professions.

Between 1990 and the recent publication of his second book for Norton *Maps of Narrative Practice*, Michael published a prolific series of essays, articles and books, mainly through Dulwich Centre Publications, clarifying and expanding on his ideas, including: *Narratives of Therapists Lives*, *Reflections on Narrative Practice* and *Narrative Practice and Exotic Lives: Resurrecting Diversity in Everyday Life*.

His work has become synonymous with ideas of 'externalising' problems and with the phrase 'the person is not the problem-the problem is the problem', now a ubiquitous catch-phrase amongst a range of therapeutic approaches, but his contribution to therapeutic innovation has been far more extensive. Notions of the 'absent but implicit' - traces of alternative stories contained within the 'problem saturated' accounts that people told and ways of helping people discover and identify the points of entry to those stories- were amongst the many ideas he was wanting to write about more extensively, just before he died.

He had a profound sense of social justice and regularly used the proceeds from workshops in more affluent parts of the world to fund projects in less privileged areas, such as Ramallah and Rwanda, as well as engaging with many community projects with the indigenous peoples of Australia, towards whom he felt a passionate responsibility and debt. He had recently been delighted both that John Howard had been finally ousted as Prime Minister of Australia and that Kevin Rudd had formally apologised to the aboriginal 'stolen generations' in February this year.

During the last 20 years of his life Michael established a working pattern of spending

one third of the year travelling abroad, delivering workshops and training intensives, and the other two thirds of the year back home in Australia, writing and continuing with his work.

He was a man of great energy who loved the Australian way of life. He had a pilot's licence and regularly flew Piper and Cessna small planes. He had also acquired something of a reputation for recklessness (which he rather enjoyed and did nothing to dispel), whether on mountain bikes, in small planes, in fast cars or even go-karts.

Michael and his wife, Cheryl, separated in 2007. At the beginning of 2008, Michael left the Dulwich Centre and set up a new initiative, the Adelaide Narrative Therapy Centre, with characteristic vivacity and enthusiasm.

Just before he died so unexpectedly, he was discussing his new interest in the work of the philosopher Deleuze and its implications and applications for therapy. Who knows where this 'line of flight' might have taken, indeed, might yet take our therapeutic endeavours?

Michael White's work and life was suffused both with immense seriousness of purpose and a mischievous and infectious sense of humour.

He is survived by his own close-knit family in Adelaide, including his daughter Penni and his mother, Joan, his partner Sarah, and a worldwide network of therapy and community work practitioners. He will be sorely missed.

Michael White. Innovative psychotherapist. Born December 29th 1948. Died 4th April 2008

Jane Speedy and Martin Payne

Biography

Jane Speedy is Reader in Narrative and Collaborative Inquiry at the University of Bristol and author of *Narrative Inquiry and Psychotherapy*, Palgrave/Macmillan, 2008

Martin Payne is an independent counsellor and author of *Narrative Therapy: an introduction for counsellors*, Sage publications, 2006.