

## Less pain, more gain: Explorations of responses versus effects when working with the consequences of trauma

By Angel Yuen



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### Abstract

This paper describes a response-based narrative practice when working together with people who have experienced recurrent trauma. In particular, explorations of 'responses versus effects' are emphasised that assist in illuminating the possibilities for elevating personal agency by sharing a practice-based example and training exercise. Also a deconstruction of the 'No pain no gain' trauma healing discourse is presented and an alternative notion of 'Less pain, more gain' is suggested.

**Keywords:** narrative therapy, trauma, responses, school social work, double listening, deconstruction, discourse

What can be made possible when we are actively curious about how a person has responded to trauma, rather than only focusing on how they were affected by it? This question stems from the view that no-one is a passive recipient to trauma.

People always take steps in endeavouring to prevent the trauma they are subject to, and, when preventing this trauma is clearly impossible, they take steps to try to modify it in some way or to modify its effects on their lives. These steps contribute to the preservation of, and are founded upon, what people hold precious. Even in the face of overwhelming trauma, people take steps to try to protect and to preserve what they give value to. (White, 2006a, p. 28)

As a therapist and school social worker, I have learned from many who have lived through even the most unimaginable events that, regardless of the nature of the trauma, people *always respond*<sup>1</sup>!

Writing this paper has provided me with the meaningful opportunity to engage in explorations of *responses vs. effects*<sup>2</sup> in relation to work together with people who have experienced recurrent trauma. Over the past few years I have been on a deliberate path of 'discovering responses' and have had the privilege of witnessing and collecting numerous stories from children and young people (see Yuen, 2007b) men, women and groups (see Ncube, 2006) about their responses to traumatic experiences of abuse, violence, loss and oppression. Although these responses may often not be in relation to being able to prevent or stop the trauma, I have learned that there are still many small acts to be discovered. Some of these may include ways of protecting, acts of caring, skills of living, and acts of resistance. In extreme situations, these acts/actions might often be unnoticeable and negligible. Particularly with severe violence and abuse 'when open defiance is impractical or too dangerous, resistance is expressed indirectly and on the micro-level of social interaction' (Wade, 2007, p. 64).

Although physically not visible, a gesture, mental escape, determined thought or memory, or purposeful blank face, is nonetheless *doing* something. The smallest of responses when attributed with significance can ripple in ways we could never predict. Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin (2005) outlines specific micro-practices that assist in rendering significant meaning to the smallest of actions in relation to traumatic events. Janet Adams-Westcott and Cheryl Dobbins (1997), who are interested in ways that young people can escape the effects of sexual abuse, suggest ideas for therapeutic practice that assist those victimised to access their self-knowledge in rediscovering the steps taken in their past to push the effects out of their lives.

The opening question posed is also based on the narrative practice of double-listening, where we are interested in listening for more than one story (Denborough, Freedman, & White, 2008; White 2006a). Although people who have experienced trauma invariably respond, their concerns are often presented as a story of negative effects in statements such as 'I can't form trust in relationships' and 'I'm messed up.' Moreover, in the culture of therapy, victims are generally represented in a *language of effects* that conceals responses and resistance and represents victims as submissive (Wade, 2007). Consequently, in doubly-listening we are interested in not only listening to the first story that is brought to our attention regarding the impact and effects of trauma, but we are also intentionally on the lookout for a second story based on responses.

## **Discovering details of the responses to the trauma vs. discovering details of the trauma itself**

The following story of a woman, whom I shall call Susan, will offer an illustration of double listening with an emphasis on discovering the details of her responses to the childhood trauma she was subjected to. In our meeting, Susan surmised that the many years of witnessing severe violence, growing up with a parent with serious mental health difficulties, and suffering from the effects of sexual abuse, had led her to describe herself and her identity as 'damaged goods'. Worthlessness and Depression convinced her that she would never have any worthwhile effect on her own life or on the lives of others, and managed to erase her sense of agency during various times in her adult life.

In speaking with Susan about her childhood, I was interested in exploring the ways she responded during traumatic times, rather than seeking to learn exclusively about the effects and details of her childhood hardship. As Susan's *sense of herself*<sup>3</sup> had become so diminished, initially it was quite difficult for her to think that she had responded in any way as a child.

With helplessness in her voice she stared at me stating, 'I didn't do *anything* except stay in my room by myself to be alone in the dark crying, crying, crying a lot, until I finally cried myself to sleep'.

With gentle persistence in attempting to discover how she may have responded, I asked if there was anything comforting in her room. Susan then began to share how she surrounded herself with several of her stuffed animals in her bed to comfort herself. The following conversation with Susan about her responses was transcribed from a video recording:

Susan: I remember the yelling and cussing and slamming doors happened all the time. But when it got really bad my father would break chairs, hit my mom, and put holes in the walls. I would take all of the stuffed animals that were surrounding me and I would hide them under the covers and then I would close my bedroom door even though I was afraid of the dark. I guess because I could hear everything, I didn't want them to hear because it was really loud. Sometimes I would wrap them up in a blanket.

A: Do you remember why you wrapped your stuffed animals up?

Susan: I'm not sure. I guess because I felt more secure with a blanket around me, that I wanted them to feel more secure too. I couldn't sleep without a blanket, so maybe I felt they shouldn't have to sleep without one ...

A: How did you wrap them?

Susan: (using her hands to demonstrate) I used to fold a little blanket around them and wrapped them nice and tight ... you know, like little babies.

A: So you didn't want them to hear the yelling and hitting, or for them to be scared when you were a little girl? Do you think that they could feel that from you ... wanting to help them through those scary times?

Susan: I don't think I really thought of that. I just did it.

A: You just did it?

Susan: I guess it was natural ... you know.

A: This might seem a bit strange for me to ask you, but what do you think your stuffed animals thought about how you did things like hide them under the covers, or wrap them up, so that they did not have to hear the violence? What would they think of that little girl doing those things for them?

Susan: They'd think I was protective of them.

A: ... and is that something that they would appreciate, not appreciate, or something in-between?

Susan: I'd like to think they'd appreciate it.

A: Have there been other times in your life where you've wanted to protect someone from difficult times or help them to not be afraid?

With this question an opening was created to learn about a history of events where Susan protected her mother during her father's rages.

Susan: I was always there for my mom when he was yelling at her and when he got really angry. I would, you know, stand in the middle between him and her and sometimes say 'Dad, STOP! Leave her alone!' ...'cause I knew he was going to hit her or something like that. As much as I was afraid of him, I didn't like to leave her alone with him because he used to go crazy! She wasn't very strong and would cry a lot and she would be shaking or things like that. I was protective of my mom because when I was growing up she always had nervous breakdowns.

A: So you made sure you were always there for your mom so she wouldn't get hurt ... and you never left her alone. What do you think that meant to her?... If she was here right now with us and I could ask her what it meant to her, what do you think she would say?

Susan: I think she would say that it meant a lot to her.

A: Is that a good thing for you to think of ... that it probably meant a lot to your mom that you were always there for her?

Susan: *Yeah*.

A: And what might it tell me about the kind of person you are ... that you didn't want your mom to be alone, that you protected her in many ways, and that you were always there for her?

Susan: I don't know ... I guess I just cared a lot.

Learning about Susan's acts of protection and more significantly her intentions in her actions (i.e.: wrapping her stuffed animals tight in blankets to help them feel secure, closing the door so they did not have to hear the loud shouting and hitting, and hiding them under the covers so they would not be scared) provided an entry point to an identity story of *caring for others*. As Susan's responses and skills of protecting her mother were rendered visible, further links were made to her value of caring and 'always being there' for her mother during times when she was in and out of hospital. The stories of difficulties Susan faced while growing up with a mother with serious mental health difficulties were acknowledged as well as her skills and knowledges in responding to the hardship (Dulwich Centre Project, 2008; Pluznick & Kis-Sines, 2008; Russell, 2007;).

Susan traced back to other times of taking care of her mother throughout her childhood. These times included being the only one of her siblings to visit her in hospital, providing comfort by listening, and *never* leaving her mother alone during her most vulnerable periods. As this second story of caring grew, Susan made a connection of this value with current actions that involved protecting her own daughter from her husband's harshness and putdowns. With this recognition it became known that her skills of protection were founded upon holding the lives and wellbeing of both her children precious. 'I would do *anything* to make sure my children don't feel badly about themselves!'

Identifying what Susan gave value to in life and discovering the details of her responses to trauma (rather than discovering the details of her trauma) seemed to be awakening of her sense of agency. Had Susan not engaged in an exploration of how she responded (or about the meaning of her responses) I would not have continued to pursue this line of therapeutic inquiry. Response-based conversations are just one of many narrative practices that may create a pathway to a preferred story when working with people who have experienced trauma (see Denborough, 2006). When I asked Susan whether it was significant or not significant to co-discover her skills of protectiveness and to know more fully about her caring for others, she responded, 'Yeah it's significant.' When I enquired as to why this was significant to her, Susan thoughtfully replied, 'Maybe I'm seeing that I'm not such a bad person after all and that I do have some good points'.

In sharing the story of Susan's responses I hope to not give the impression that I steer away from the facts or events of the trauma. It's just that in my therapeutic practice over the years I have understood from some people consulting with me that delving into the specifics of the abuse, violence, devastating losses or injustices can be 'too painful', 'exhausting', 'very difficult' or fear-invoking. Subsequently my concern overall is that if a person's life is continuing to be defined by a disabling trauma story, an inquiry into only the effects could trap them in the immediacy of their past distressing events (White, 2006). Thus it remains crucially important in my work to do whatever possible to avoid re-traumatisation of the people consulting with me about their experiences of trauma.

## **Deconstructing the 'No pain, no gain!' discourse**

As much as I am mindful and cautious of not overly enquiring about the particularities of the trauma, I have found that many people are themselves influenced by the discourses within the culture of psychotherapy which encourage one to 'tell the details' and effects of the trauma.<sup>4</sup> This was apparent with Susan who, earlier in the same conversation, began telling me about the sexual abuse she was subjected to by multiple perpetrators throughout her childhood. Without prompting she began to share what she had barely spoken of before. As I wanted to ensure that she was not vulnerable to re-traumatisation on account of speaking of the historical abuse, I was conscious of checking how the conversation was going for her. In response Susan at first said, 'I'm fine', and proceeded in her telling of the trauma story. However, further into the conversation, I re-checked how she was and Susan stated that remembering the abuse and talking about who was involved in sexually offending her as a little girl was 'really hard and draining' and 'makes my head ache'. At this point in the conversation, I assured Susan that it was not necessary from my perspective for her to recount the details of the abuse, particularly if it was contributing to any sense of desolation or upset for her. This proved to be quite a relief to Susan who was uncertain whether she could continue the traumatic recollection.

In my practice I am continually somewhat perplexed, yet at the same time not completely surprised, by some individuals' need to tell me the details of their trauma, even though it may bring on a heightened sense of distress for them. With curiosity I therefore asked Susan what had influenced her to explicitly tell me about the events surrounding the sexual abuse. In addition, I was interested in learning what at first had compelled her to tell me that she was fine. She responded with, *'I just thought that maybe in order to start feeling better that it had to get worse first. I thought because I have never talked about this with anyone ever before, that I needed to tell you and 'finally get it out'. And that it was all just part of the therapy process'*.

Susan's thoughts and explanation were not unfamiliar to me as I have heard similar sentiments such as, 'I thought I was supposed to dig deep in order to resolve my abuse?' or, 'As they say...*no pain no gain*'! Since such taken-for-granted understandings of the trauma healing process are taken on by those suffering from long-term consequences of trauma, I am left with a desire to encourage them to consider an alternative notion of '*Less pain, more gain*'! Furthermore, the latter notion supports me to continually and actively be involved in therapeutic conversations that aim to create a safe territory of identity for the person to stand in before they give voice to their experiences of trauma. Thus in potential later conversations, people can experience relief from distress of the trauma by speaking about what has been otherwise unspeakable.

Michael White (2006a, 2006b) strongly emphasises the importance of creating a safe territory of identity for people to give expressions to their experiences of trauma. For instance, when Susan was standing in a territory of identity as a caring, compassionate woman who would do anything to protect those precious to her, versus a territory of identity of worthlessness and damaged, it would be more possible (and safer) for her to talk about her past trauma without reliving it.

## A training exercise

As I have become increasingly interested and active in 'discovering responses' to trauma, I have begun to invite participants in narrative workshops, as well as therapists and community workers in general, to consider an exploration of *effects vs. responses* to trauma. As a practical way of engaging practitioners in such an exercise, I have them read and contrast two lists (see over the page).

In training workshops, after participants have read through both lists, I ask them to have a conversation with the person next to them about any differences they may have noticed between the 'effects list' and the 'responses list'. In addition, they are asked to reflect further on the lists from the position of the person who has experienced trauma, and also in their own roles as therapists or community workers. After each person has had the opportunity to share their thoughts with another person, we meet back as a large group to have a discussion about their thoughts and learnings.

| EFFECTS - IMPACT  | RESPONSES  |
|---|--|
| <p>How did/do you feel?</p> <p>How were/are you affected?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I felt scared</li> <li>• I blame myself</li> <li>• I'm always anxious and depressed</li> <li>• I'm damaged</li> <li>• There was nothing I could do to stop the abuse</li> <li>• I was terrified</li> <li>• I can't form trust in relationships</li> <li>• Others take advantage of me ... I'm a doormat</li> <li>• I feel worthless</li> <li>• I married another version of my abusive father</li> <li>• I feel empty</li> </ul> | <p>How did you respond?</p> <p>What did you do?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I hid under the bed when I was scared</li> <li>• I protected my little sisters from having to hear our mom being hurt</li> <li>• I made up an imaginary friend and she helped me to not think of how horrible my life was (she distracted me)</li> <li>• I thought of a perfect hiding place in the crawl space</li> <li>• I immerse myself in books</li> <li>• I talk to my cat</li> <li>• I would never hurt another person</li> <li>• I stand up for others being mistreated</li> <li>• I pretended I agreed with what she said ... but inside my head I knew what she was saying was wrong</li> </ul> |

Here I have summarised some of the feedback to this small exercise from various workshops:

- When I read the 'effects list' I felt a sense of helplessness. Focusing on the responses helps me to 'not feel stuck' in the hopelessness of the trauma.
- When you ask a person how they responded, it has them realising that they actually 'did do' something.
- As a child and youth worker I am thinking of the smaller kids that I see who would find the question, 'How did you feel?' a bit vague and hard to answer. But I think it would easier and a bit more concrete for children to be able to answer, 'What did you do?'
- Well I guess one could answer, 'I was really terrified, depressed, anxious'... but then what? Asking about effects feels more pathologising, where it somehow seems much more hopeful and positive when you give attention to how the person responds.
- The experiences of responses create a richer identity which includes what the person values in life. This can give a different perspective with traumatic memories as well as a newfound sense of how to proceed with life.

A counsellor already familiar with and using a response-based approach in her own work, wrote the following story:

I was once working with a young woman who was dealing with the effects of horrific trauma resulting from childhood sexual abuse. When we focussed on how she responded (rather than how she was affected), she was surprised at all of her actions ... some of which included attempting to fight back physically, pretending to be asleep, and choosing when she would return home in order to avoid 'alone time' with the

offender. She was particularly struck by the response-based questions as, in previous therapy experiences, the language that was used more often with her had emphasised that the abuse was 'not her fault'. Her interpretation of such statements was that she didn't do anything to try to stop the abuse and that she was therefore passive. By exploring and thickening her responses, a second story was developed –one where she held strong values of protecting herself and her mother and where she also had made choices for herself during difficult times. In re-engaging with her history, she realised that her responses over time had considerably helped her and her mother in the eventual escape from the abuse. I continue to remember this young woman who touched me as I witnessed her beginning to value as well as view herself as a competent and caring person, as opposed to being a young woman who was 'messed up' because of her past trauma.

Another counsellor who took part in the exercise more personally, wrote the following reflection:

When I was five years old my father died. Following his death I felt like I would never be safe again and that the world was a cold and uncaring place. My mother was quite depressed and our family was very isolated. I was terrified that she would die too and that I would become an orphan. As far as how I was affected, I suffered from tremendous anxiety, terror, nightmares, stomach aches, and insomnia.

One of the ways I responded was by getting lost in vampire stories. I shared the supernatural fear and fun with my sisters where together we would watch every vampire movie and read any vampire book to be found. When I focus on remembering 'what I did to respond' to the emptiness and terror, I experience again the joy and fun that I derived from my obsession with vampires as well as the tight bond I shared with my sisters. As I reflect on this today, I am reminded of the source of comfort that came with the vampire stories. Vampires are powerful, delightfully scary and most importantly IMMORTAL! When I moved away from home, I took one of the prized books with me. Years later I found that my little sister had written me a loving note within the pages of the book – another testament to the early comfort, love and relief we were able to give to one another through our hardest times.

I hope that sharing the exercise within this paper may spark the interest of counsellors and community workers themselves (who are involved in trauma work) to engage in conversations with one another professionally and/or personally about *effects versus responses*. To reiterate what has been mentioned previously, my intention is not to suggest an avoidance of effects altogether but rather to highlight the possible hazards of such single-storied conversations. More significantly, an objective of the exercise is to illuminate the possibilities for elevating personal agency (White, 2007) as a result of response-based inquiries.

## Growing stories of hope from responses

So far I have included examples of responses in relation to historical traumatic experience. In my individual, family, group and school encounters, many of my conversations are also with those who are currently living with and experiencing profoundly difficult circumstances in their daily life. For instance, I meet with several children, young people and families who are living in severe poverty where familial and community violence (and hence sometimes death and loss), marginalisation, and issues with substance use, may be a part of the everyday stress and struggle to survive. Despair and anguish are often nearby. Additionally, the trauma of ongoing racism is prevalent and relevant in my work in schools in the multicultural context of Toronto (see Yuen, 2007a). Yet I've come to know that, even when people are sunk in the depths of

hopelessness and despair, '*small acts of living* occur and everyday resistance to many forms of oppression' exist (Wade, 1997). Although it's not within the scope of this short piece to write significantly about the use of narrative therapy and collective practices (Denborough, 2008) with regard to the effects of and responses to the trauma of oppression, I hope to share detailed accounts of this work in a subsequent paper.

As small acts and responses to trauma are elicited, we can embark together with people on explorations that begin to restore and/or develop their own sense of agency. Hence I am left wondering how we can grow what might at first seem the smallest of responses into preferred stories of hopes, values, resistance, love and connection, initiatives, skills, and so on. For example:

- A woman abused by her partner who pretends to agree with him that she's at fault but mentally holds onto her own position can be understood as an act of resistance.
- A four-year-old boy subject to physical abuse by multiple perpetrators who comforts a dog (also being abused) may be a clue to his caring side and loving big brother qualities (see Yuen, 2007b, pp. 9–13).
- A young man despairing in poverty who writes poetry during times of hopelessness may through his written words lead us to his expression and value of 'women and children being the only treasures'.
- A prisoner being tortured who is suffering immensely but does not let his interrogator see it and instead shows that he does not care, may be emblematic of a preservation of dignity.

As we can see, even one response could be a gateway to rich second story development.

## Concluding thoughts

I have endeavoured to suggest an alternative notion of 'Less pain, more gain!' to counter the familiar 'No pain, no gain!' trauma healing discourse. I have always held the position that no person needs to be re-traumatised when speaking of what they have been through. With this belief I have found that discovering people's multiple *responses to trauma* has been most helpful in providing them with an alternative and safe territory of identity to stand in. In this context, space is opened up to speak about the unspeakable ... that is, if the person themselves so wishes.

To conclude, I will now return to the beginning question of what could be made possible if we were to place greater emphasis on responses, rather than solely focusing on the effects and impact of the trauma on people's lives. A response perhaps likely to be unnoticed or rendered insignificant could (with care and attentiveness) turn out to be a small gem of hope among the person's skills in living, cherished values, clever initiatives, and preferred ways of being. The task in our roles as counsellors, therapists and community workers may require us to search for and co-discover responses, ask meaning-making questions and remain ever-curious in order to unearth the hidden gems.

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## Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge the June 2006 participants of the workshop entitled 'Narrative Approaches to working with children' in Nablus, Palestine, as it was their stories of skills and knowledges that touched my work and life in a way that had me truly understanding that people subjected to recurrent trauma always respond (see Denborough, 2008 pp. 32–36 Dealing with life under occupation: The special skills and knowledges that sustain the workers of Nablus).
2. My growing interest in explorations of *responses vs. effects* has been influenced by Linda Coates, Nick Todd and Allan Wade who have been working on a response-based approach to therapeutic interviewing (see Wade, 2007, p. 67) Together they have developed a table that I have found useful titled "Contrasting Representations" of responses versus effects (See Wade, 2005, pp. 12–13).
3. When a person has been through recurrent trauma their *sense of myself* can be so diminished it can become very difficult for them to give any account to what they value in life. In my work with people who have been subject to multiple and recurrent trauma, 'one of the primary considerations is to restore the valued sense of who they are: the preferred sense of identity or personhood that Michael White refers to as a *sense of myself*' (White, 2006, p. 27)
4. In the area of work with women who were sexually abused as children Amanda Kamsler (1991) discusses some of the problematic aspects of the 'traditional' cultural stories about the long-term effects on women. Since the early 1990s Kamsler's paper has made a significant contribution to non-pathologising ideas in and approaches to working with sexual abuse. Although revolutionary thoughts at the time, I am saddened that, almost two decades later, we continue to be challenged by existing dominant stories.

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