



# *Bridging the worlds of therapy & activism: Intersections, tensions & affinities*

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## AUTHOR

VIKKI REYNOLDS INTERVIEWED BY SEKNEH HAMMOUD-BECKETT

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Vikki Reynolds is a community activist, instructor and therapeutic supervisor. Her experience includes clinical supervision and therapy with refugees and survivors of torture, mental health and substance abuse counsellors, community activists, anti-violence counsellors, and working alongside transgender and queer communities. Vikki's published work addresses social justice and solidarity, resisting 'burnout', supervision, ethics, group work, substance misuse and 'trauma' and witnessing resistance to violence. (Vikki can be contacted at: [www.vikkireynolds.ca](http://www.vikkireynolds.ca))

Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett lives in Sydney, Australia, where she is part of the teaching team at Macquarie University's Social Health course. Sekneh enjoys working with people from diverse backgrounds and holds a position of curiosity from which to explore and honour people's creative acts of resistance. Sekneh is able to teach about narrative therapy in English and Arabic. She can be contacted c/o Dulwich Centre, where she is a faculty member. Email: [dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au](mailto:dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au), Mail: Hutt St P.O. Box 7192, Adelaide, South Australia, 5000.

In this brief interview Sekneh & Vikki reflect on the precarious but possible connections of social justice activism and therapy, particularly narrative therapy. They offer the usefulness of a socially just orientation to therapeutic work in terms of the sustainability of therapists, and as a resistance to burnout. They take a position for therapists to act as activists to work for socially just structural change. They suggest embracing activist traditions of solidarity and building 'solidarity teams' to shoulder us up collectively to resist the structures of injustice that are rooted in capitalist and neo-liberal politics which are the context of people's suffering and our work.

*Keywords: solidarity, activism, social justice, collective ethics, sustainability, spirituality*

**Sek:** My heart leapt at the chance to interview you Vikki. Before we begin, I'd like to offer a brief snapshot of my lived context. I was born in the South West of Sydney, the eldest of 6 children. We shared a father and mother who hold strongly to their Lebanese culture and Islamic faith. Both my father and mother are scholars but it was my grandmother who taught me the value of education, not in an institutional sense, but the learning from everyday local wisdoms and knowledge. I remember vividly my grandmother sewing garments for the local community market. Not being able to articulate a word of English, she would cleverly navigate the markets and request a fee for her work through a deck of cards she that carried with her. She would count the numbers of spades, hearts, diamonds and clubs to let people know exactly what her fee was. My grandmother would also recount stories of how she was forbidden to learn to read for the fear that she might write love letters to a potential suitor. Her childhood learning encompassed the recitation and rote learning of Quaranic verses. With a sense of pride in her voice, she would speak of her master plan. Surreptitiously at night, when everyone was asleep, she would light a candle and study the Quran diligently, breaking down the sounds of the printed words and writing the corresponding letters. My grandmother learned to write and continues to write on her identity as a woman. She demonstrated to me that we are not passive recipients of cultural and religious prescriptions – we are always responding to what we give value to.

My heart clings to these legacies. They are like a magic carpet for me to travel upon.

**Vik:** It's sweet to engage with you, Sekneh. While I don't mean to disappear our important differences of cultural location and the distinctions that are really important in our work, I felt an affinity (Day, 2004) connecting us in the moments you began to speak about your work in a keynote you gave at the narrative conference in Toronto. One affinity is the fact that we both identify as 'straight' or heterosexual in some loose way. We both supervise and work alongside queer, trans, gender variant and Two Spirit folks<sup>1</sup>, and hold related commitments in our struggles to do that work from our locations of privilege without being oppressive or colonising. Your article (Hammoud-Beckett, 2007) permissioning queer people to invite people into their lives and resist the Western colonising imperative to 'come out' of the closet speaks to an ethic of resistance we share.

I locate myself within my Irish Catholic culture and my extended loving family, including my queer/trans and

refugee family of choice. In Canada, I'm from settler culture (Ireland, England, and Newfoundland) and I have white skin privilege. I'm a woman from working-class folks, who has way too much education to sit easily with, and I'm a direct action activist informed by anarchism and anti-imperialism. I hold a decolonising and anti-oppression stance for all my paid and unpaid work. I'm married as an enactment of heterosexual privilege – meaning for immigration from times before activists won same-sex marriages in Canada. My partner and I have shouldered each other up and grown each other up for over 25 years, some-beautiful-thing I'm inordinately proud of and humbled by.

**Sek:** As a woman of colour working with gender and sexual diverse communities who are negotiating their cultures, spiritualities and religiosity, I am inspired by your notion of bridging the worlds of therapy and activism ... What acts as a solid foundation to transverse the space between activism and therapy? What is experienced when the bridge is built between these worlds? What happens if we notice a significant gap at this bridge – do we mind it, jump it, mend it? What have you noticed in your work in bridging this connection between the worlds of activism and therapy?

**Vik:** I think it's important to remember that while there are connections between activism and therapy, and certainly it's possible to have a spirit of social justice alive in our therapeutic work, there are really important differences as well. Direct action activism cannot be collapsed onto narrative therapy, or any other kind of therapy, really, simply because the therapist holds an ethic of justice-doing. The fact that narrative therapy aspires to doing justice is why I am connected into this community of practice – but again what matters is how we enact this ethic, what we do in practice, not what claims we make. Therapy and activism are very different projects. This is not to say there's not politics in the work and that social services work is not an important part of the diversity of tactics to improve the actual lives of people. But I think it's important to acknowledge the limitations of therapy as an act of justice-doing.

Psychotherapy has much to answer for in terms of siding with oppression, and serving as a tool for social control that maintains oppressive structures of power – both state power and interpersonal power. As a form of therapy, narrative therapy carries certain traditions from the histories of therapy as a grand public and professional project, and cannot be separated from this. Certainly the structure of individualised one-to-one therapy, which is not unique to narrative therapy, is problematic in terms

of the potential and reality for accommodating people to oppression and contributing to the cult of individualism. Also, I believe narrative therapists may be too quick to deconstruct power and name it without taking on the social project of transforming the societies in which we live. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith says in *De-colonizing Methodologies*, deconstruction is a useful idea, 'but it does not prevent someone from dying' (1999, pp.3).

A therapeutic engagement with social justice is imperative, I believe, but never enough, as we need to participate in direct actions as activists to change the social context in which the privatisation of pain occurs. And by the privatisation of pain I mean, for example, the criminalization of homelessness, and of course, the totalising pathologising of people that constructs, if you will, spoiled identities (Goffman, 1963) such as 'insane', 'addict' or damaged.

That said, I am trained and work as a narrative therapist and find these practices and theories can align with my ethical stance for justice-doing. I think Michael White and David Epston's radical work that situated narrative therapy as grounded in resistance against putting the problem inside the person, or locating people as problems has been profoundly useful for me (Epston, 1988; White & Epston, 1990). This understanding from narrative therapy that the person is not the problem, well, basically it's an understanding I couldn't work without.

At times we need to honour the tension between therapy and activism and allow and welcome space between them as connected but distinct projects. For me activism and therapy recursively inform each other, and a spirit of solidarity is required to stay amazingly alive in both.

**Sek:** The adverb 'amazingly' added to alive invited a spring in my step. What was the intention and origin of its use?

**Vik:** 'Amazingly Alive' is the title of a poem by a community-based activist Bud Osborne. The first line reads, 'Here we are, amazingly alive, against long odds and left for dead ...' (1999, pp.7). I'm inspired by his lifework because he has suffered and continues to resist, and works and lives in marginalised and oppressed locations. His words speak to the communities of the Downtown Eastside, the poorest communities in Canada outside of Aboriginal reserves. He articulates the connection, community and joint action in resistance to oppression that is ever-present in the Downtown Eastside. You know, we're expected to burnout when we work in these kinds

of locations and our clients are often accused of burning us out because they are too hard to work with, because they suffer too much, and they'll break our hearts and we need to quit. Bud's poetry brings forward these counter-stories of fabulous small acts of revolutionary love, kindness, sharing and building networked communities (Lacey, 2005) that inspire me in my work. He articulates the transformations and contributions people from the Downtown Eastside bring to my life, entirely outside of any formula for burnout.

**Sek:** In the spirit of 'staying amazingly alive' you highlight that it is not something done alone. What are the steps work places can adopt to cultivate it? Where might we discover what keeps us alive and well, particularly when we might be up against toxic systems?

**Vik:** Well, I think you're onto it Sekneh, the problems are structural, and the systems are not just flawed they're working perfectly for capitalism and for exploitation. You know it's a fact that money does not make money in a capitalist structure. Other people labour to make money, often brown people in the Global South, and they are not paid that money: often people in the Global North profit. Sampson, an anthropologist who informed narrative ideas, took a bold position about this as the construction of people from marginalised identities as 'serviceable others', who can be exploited, subjugated, and oppressed to maintain the power of the dominant classes (1993, pp. 142). I think basically we have to understand global capitalism and neoliberal politics in order to put up any kind of resistance, and for our own sustainability. Once we understand the context we're in it's easy not to blame our clients for hurting us or to blame ourselves for falling short of delivering justice in systems that are working exactly as they were meant to work – to exploit people who are marginalised and oppressed for the benefit of privileged others.

In terms of creating cultures of sustainability, the work is relational. What is required is solidarity, just as it is in the work of social justice activism and social movements. When I go into organisations like RainCity Housing in the Downtown Eastside, with folks who are working in the belly-of-the-beast inside a homeless city, sustainability is hard to imagine, create, or hold onto. Our city tripled homelessness since we signed the bid for the 2010 Olympics, amidst government and corporate claims that getting the Olympics would help end homelessness. These housing workers are taking that issue full on as the context for all of their work. I begin with helping shelter workers and supportive housing workers articulate their collective ethics, values, things they hold close and sacred,

the beliefs without which they could not engage in the work. I invite them to articulate these collective ethics together; to commit to them, to struggle over what they mean, and what they're committing to. Then we can work to keep our practices in line with the collective ethics we hold, and therein lies our sustainability. I think what hurts us is when we engage in social control, exploitation, or work that transgresses our collective ethics. Building relationships based on solidarity, pre-existing points of unity and heartfelt commitments to an ethics of resistance, an ethic of justice-doing, is our path out of despair, hopelessness and what gets called burnout (Reynolds, 2011a; 2010a).

Of course, when I talk about solidarity I'm talking about the sacred, and my own spirituality as a liberation theology informed Irish Catholic (who is in full resistance against the governance of my church and fully embracing the Holy Spirit and the hope of my faith community). You know the Just Therapy folks talk about liberation, belonging and the sacred as being required for a justice-based therapy and that's what I'm about (Waldegrave & Tamasese, 1993).

I also invite people to build Solidarity Teams (see box below) – this may include people who are not at work but important in other domains of our lives like our families and allies, people who are not alive, such as Che Guevara, people you haven't met like Vandana Shiva or Steve Earle. I invite people to build a team of folks who will nurture them, support them, remind them of their ethics, call them to account, and work in complex and imperfect alliances with them. And I invite workers to think about ways to people-the-room (Reynolds, 2011b) with these folks when they're taken with despair. Solidarity Team members can meet up in real time and be of use to each other; permissioning each other to share struggles, heartbreak and joy in our work.

*Sek:* Vikki thanks for sharing these ideas with me. I feel they are a gift for our community and the people we meet.

## CREATING OUR SOLIDARITY TEAMS

(Reynolds, 2011b)

1. Who would you invite to be on your Solidarity Team?
2. What qualities do they hold which qualify them to be on your Solidarity Team?

3. What qualities, resources, ideas, and collective ethics connect you with this person/these folks (individually and as a group)?
4. What is your history of solidarity with these folks?
5. How will you invite these folks onto your Solidarity Team?
6. What are the expectations and responsibilities of this position as a Solidarity Team member?
7. How will you embrace Solidarity Team members with whom you have no physical contact, such as mentors who have passed on, your grandmother, a former hockey coach. Or people whom you have not met – Neil Young, Emma Goldman...
8. How might you access your Solidarity Team in your work? When might you invite particular members to be in solidarity with you? When might you have the whole team? Are there times when you would not invite a particular member into a conversation with you?
9. In what circumstances will you invite the spirit of members of your Solidarity Team, and when might you actually invite another person to a conversation, or make physical contact with a person?
10. Consider your relationship with a particular Solidarity Team member. How will being in solidarity with this team member make it possible for you to be of use to clients, and more in line with your ethics? If I were to ask this Solidarity Team member about their particular experiences and knowings of your relationships with ethics, how would they respond? If I were to ask this Solidarity Team member how you have been in solidarity with them, how would they respond?
11. How will you hold yourself accountable to the members of your Solidarity Team? How will you catch them up on their usefulness to you and to clients, for moments they cannot know about? What difference will belonging in this Solidarity Team make:
  - For you?
  - For the people you've invited to be in solidarity with you?
  - For the people you work alongside?

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## NOTES

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I. Queer has been adopted by groups of people I work with as an umbrella term for some people who do not identify as strictly heterosexual. I use this term to speak of lesbian, gay, bisexual, Two-Spirit, and queer identified people, acknowledging that this is a problematic term for many reasons (Fassinger & Arsenau, 2007). People who I work alongside who identify as Two-Spirit refer to their cultural location as Indigenous people who do not identify as heterosexual: Two-Spirit refers to rich cultural knowings as well. People I work alongside who identify as queer may be in any of these groups, but primarily identify outside of heterosexual normativity, which refers to discourses which promote heterosexuality as normal. People who identify as transgender or trans do not identify strictly with the gender they were assigned to at birth, and may transition culturally, socially and/or physically to a gender in which they feel more congruent, which could be something other than male or female (Nataf, 1996; Devon McFarlane, personal communication, 2011). Many people do not identify their gender in any way, and others identify as gender variant, gender non-conforming or gender queer, meaning something different than trans and outside of the normative gender binary (Janelle Kelly, personal communication, 2011). All of these terms are problematic, contested and evolving. I am using these terms for clarity and because groups of folks I work alongside have settled on this imperfect phrasing for now (Reynolds, 2010b).

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