Systemic Therapy as Transformative Practice

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Introduction

This writing illustrates the practice of Living Supervision Interviews (Reynolds 2014a), which is one of many Supervision of Solidarity (Reynolds 2010a) practices that follow from our commitments to an ethical stance of justice-doing in supervision, therapy, and community work. This stance aims to support practice that is both decolonising and resists replicating oppression and dominance (Reynolds & Polanco 2012). We outline the theoretical understandings and ethical positioning that have evoked the Living Supervision Interview, which is informed by activist practices of witnessing, intersectionality, anti-racist feminism, queer theory, social construction approaches to language, and systemic, collaborative, and narrative therapies. Some of the purposes this practice can serve in supervision are offered. We also include a fictionalised re-telling of a compilation of Living Supervision Interviews to evoke the spirit of the practice.

The experiences of Living Supervision we are illustrating are situated at the intersections of gender accountability with women and gender variant clients who are marginalised in relation to poverty, survival sex work, men’s violence, substance misuse, and precarious housing. We will be writing from our locations as supervisor and therapist in these conversations, and will make public our intentions and experiences of the practice.

Despite our best intentions and commitment to training, we learn our work on the backs of clients. Our most trustworthy and useful “supervision” comes from our clients. Living Supervision aims to centre the client as the expert on the therapeutic relationship, and, in this work context, to provide one structure of accountability for men therapists working with women and gender variant clients who have experienced men’s violence. The witnessing supervisor attends to two co-existing
ethical centres for this practice, meaning that they hold the client at the centre, but are also simultaneously responsible to hold space for the care and mentoring of the therapist.

Notes on inclusivity
We embrace inclusive queer-informed language that contests the gender binary of he/she, because language that reinforces gender binaries renders transgender and gender variant people invisible (Butler 1990). We therefore use “they”, “their”, and “them” in both the third person singular and plural throughout this writing, unless a specific person’s preferred pronoun is known. This is a resistance against the erasure (Namaste 2000) of subordinated identities and knowledges. In an effort to not replicate a binary of transgender and cisgender as two categories of women, in this writing we do not differentiate or name if women are gender variant or cisgender, as all involved self-identified as women.

A supervision of solidarity & hopeful scepticism
A Supervision of Solidarity evolved in response to the contexts of injustice and marginalisation in which Vikki was supervising therapists and community workers. A Supervision of Solidarity speaks to an ethical positioning for justice-doing in therapeutic supervision informed by activism, and thus is profoundly collaborative. Vikki supervises therapists who work amidst structures of injustice where death is ever-near, alongside people whose experiences of marginalisation are extreme, and whose suffering is unconscionable. In these contexts of structural oppression, scarce resources, and abundant need, workers struggle to practice in line with their ethics, and to respond to the suffering of clients. Losing clients to suicide and violent death is a reality, and experiences of being overwhelmed are common. As the supervisor she needed to respond to the desperation, risk, and isolation experienced by clients, as well as the spiritual pain held by therapists who can experience working in contexts of injustice as shovelling water. The creation of the Living Supervision Interview was Vikki’s response to these reflexive supervision questions:

- How can I help therapists be more accompanied and less alone when working with clients who have a finger-hold on dignity, and are suffering experiences of social and political injustice and exploitation?
- How can I make myself more available to therapists struggling with despair, paralysis, or feelings of incompetence, in the face of grave problems?
• How can I assist therapists to create a sense of belonging within a community of others who work in accord with our collective ethics, embrace a spirit of solidarity, and see our collective work as justice-doing?

Living Supervision Interviews are one of a number of practices that emerged from the ethics of a Supervision of Solidarity. Living Supervision is a response to the ethical requirement for accountable supervision informed by a stance for hopeful scepticism in supervision. While the supervisor is hopeful the therapist is enacting their collective ethics for justice-doing in practice, they are also sceptical. This stance of hopeful scepticism is informed by Kvale (1996) and Ricoeur’s (1970) hermeneutics of suspicion. The Living Supervision Interview is a way of doing supervision in which the supervisor is invited into the therapeutic relationship of the client and therapist. This practice is connected to a rich history of innovative supervisory practices that bring families and professionals together, beginning with the Milan Team in Italy (Boscolo et al, 1987), and including Andersen (1991) in Norway, also Madigan (1991) in Canada, amongst others (Anderson & Jensen 2007; Reynolds 2010a).

Living Supervision allows the supervisor to witness the therapist’s actual work, and not rely solely on self-reports, which allows confidence that the supervisor has a more embodied understanding of the therapist’s capacities, skills, and struggles. By their nature, gaps in the work cannot be seen, and the practice of Living Supervision aims to reveal and repair what is unattended to, mis-taken (McCarthy & Byrne 1988), ineffective, harmful, or frankly unethical in the therapist’s practice. This articulation of the Living Supervision interview is informed by the writings on “living practice” of Gail Simon (2010) who describes herself as a UK-based lesbian systemic supervisor:

_I have noticed the amazement and confusion for trainees, supervisees and other systemically inclined colleagues as they explore the spontaneous and innovative practices arising out of systemic therapy. Through supervision, people seem to become more curious as to what the relationship is between dominant organisational values and systemic practice and between systemic and other therapeutic ways of working...My own experiences of belonging to oppressed and marginalised groups, theoretically, professionally and politically, have influenced my inclination to work with people to create theory out of their lived experiences and develop theory-in-the-moment as a transient, living way of being._

(Simon 2010, p.309)
Living supervision interview practice examples

The following two examples of the Living Supervision Interview involve counsellors working on a team in a multidisciplinary primary health care clinic located in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, the poorest off-reserve area in Canada. Clients struggle against multiple oppressions including, homelessness, colonisation and racism, the criminalisation of poverty and suffering, and struggles with substance misuse and mental wellness (Boyd & Kerr 2015). This stance for supervision is informed by inclusive feminism (hooks 2000). This writing draws on examples of this supervision practice that centre accountability for two men therapists, Andrew Larcombe and Dale Wagner, working ostensibly as Addiction and Mental Health Counsellors with women and transgender clients who have experienced men’s violence.

The names of clients have been changed and identifying details have been obscured in the following composite re-tellings to serve confidentiality and to structure safety. We acknowledge the ethical messiness of obscuring the names and identities of clients who helped shape this work, while naming the practitioners involved. This speaks to the lack of safety for clients and the mechanisms that elevate practitioners as the knowledge holders and creators while silencing and subsuming the contributions of clients. A consistent use of pseudonyms would smooth over this discomfort, but would also mask important differences in access to power that were made public by engaging messy practice (Reynolds 2014b).

In this context of Living Supervision the supervisor has a conversation with the man therapist, and the client, the woman, who has suffered men’s violence. The man therapist is in a listening position and the supervisor interviews the woman client. We are inquiring about the therapeutic relationship, and the supervisor asks how the therapeutic relationship has been useful, the ways it has not been useful, and what qualities the therapist brings to the work that the woman speaks of as useful to her. These questions inform this line of inquiry:

- Denise, has your work with Andrew been useful to you? In what ways? What do you think you have contributed to this usefulness? What has it taken for you to show up in these useful ways?
- How has Andrew been useful to you? Are there ways that Andrew could be more useful? Is there anything he has done that is less useful, maybe not useful?
• What has it taken for you as a woman who has experienced violence from men to be willing and able to enter into a helping relationship with a man? What does this willingness and these qualities say about you? Is this something you have known about yourself, or is this a new way of thinking of yourself? What is the history of these qualities? Where in your life did you learn these qualities?

• What are you having to resist in order to do this work with a man therapist? What might this resistance mean about you and how your life might be different?

• What difference might this respectful relationship you describe with a man make in your life? Is this a unique experience, or are there other men who might be part of a “culture of accountable men” (Reynolds 2002, 2014a) that you know? How might having these different relationships with men be useful to you in the future?

The woman client is asked to take a listening position, and the man therapist is then interviewed about the relationship, asking what the woman has brought to make it useful, acknowledging that our clients make us better therapists if we are open to listening to their responses in conversation. The therapist is asked about his hopes for the woman, and for any lived experience he has witnessed that shoulders up these hopes. The therapist is asked about his responses to the woman’s conversation and what meaning it holds for him, allowing space for the therapist to acknowledge the “supervision”, expertise and critique offered by the client. The inquiry might include these questions:

• Andrew, how has Denise contributed to the working relationship and what qualities has she brought to the work? Can you remember a specific time she was most useful, maybe helping you correct bad questions, or helping you pick up on the most useful pieces of the conversation?

• Denise described your relationship as respectful, and that this is a new experience for her with a man. Have you been intentionally trying to be respectful of Denise? What practices have you been doing to try to enact respect for her? Why?

• What do you think it takes for Denise, who has experienced violence from men, to work with a man therapist? What might this say about her? Have you witnessed any qualities or ways of being of Denise’s that amplify your hope for her to make the changes she wants in her life?
• How can you invite Denise to let you know if you do anything she experiences as disrespectful? What can you do to let Denise know that you are open and willing to hear her critique and act upon it?

• Did you hear anything else from Denise in this conversation that is useful to you, or news to you? How will you take direction from Denise’s conversation in the work ahead?

Andrew and Denise’s Living Supervision Interview

Andrew is a mental health counsellor who has training as a psychiatric nurse and extensive experience in the Downtown Eastside. In our supervisory conversation, Andrew brought forward his concerns about the safety of a woman client. Denise spoke with Andrew of her ongoing struggles with cocaine, and of men who would buy her cocaine in exchange for sex. Andrew and Denise had created enough-safety (Bird, 2004, 2006; Reynolds 2010b) in their therapeutic relationship to address the exploitation and risk Denise suffers in her relationships with men. At this time Denise was in a relationship with an older man who had some money. Andrew was concerned about the exploitation and real danger that Denise was alluding to in her conversations with him. Andrew was consulting with Vikki, his therapeutic supervisor, to invite accountability and have someone standing alongside him as he and Denise navigated her difficult and potentially dangerous situation.

Vikki suggested that Andrew consult with Denise about the possibility of all three of them participating in a Living Supervision Interview. The purpose of the Living Supervision Interview was to have an inquiry into the relationship between Andrew and Denise, and to witness and promote the safety and usefulness of their work together with the purpose of trying to help them collaboratively address suffering and structure safety. While Andrew is at the centre of Vikki’s supervision, care of Denise holds the centre for both Andrew and Vikki. Andrew spoke with Denise, who agreed to participate in the Living Supervision Interview. On several occasions Andrew introduced Vikki to Denise. There were some false starts, but Andrew and Vikki backed off and slowed down, wanting to move at Denise’s pace. We were prepared to abandon the idea altogether if this was not of use for her.

The Living Supervision Interview began with Denise and Vikki in conversation, and with Andrew in a listening position. Denise and Vikki discussed risk and safety in relationship to men and cocaine, and brought forward much of her knowing of how to stay safe, which she had lost
track of under the influence of cocaine. We made some plans for safety, including awareness of women shelters which Denise has accessed in the past. We also discussed fear as a resource. Being afraid in the moment or ahead of time was more useful to Denise than being afraid later. Denise brought forward stories of the usefulness of the counselling relationship with Andrew. When Vikki asked about Andrew’s ways of being, Denise spoke animatedly and was specific about Andrew’s compassion, his ability to be very present with her, and his ability to understand her. This was especially important because Denise carried many stories about being a person who did not make common sense.

Vikki then interviewed Andrew about the meanings he gave to witnessing Denise’s conversation. Denise was in a listening position, situated as a witness to her own conversation. Andrew spoke of his respect for Denise and the lowering of his own anxiety as she spoke more about what she knew about her history of resistance, staying safe, and experiencing fear. Vikki asked Andrew what kept his hope alive for Denise and what kept him continually committed to his work alongside her. He spoke of her continued resistances and the many small successes in their work together. The asking of this question in Denise’s presence created an opportunity for her to be witnessed by Andrew. Denise has extensive histories of suffering oppression and men’s violence. Vikki’s presence in the conversation, as a woman and as an ally, allowed Andrew to say things that he would not have said alone in a room with Denise. The presence of the supervisor allowed for enough-safety in the conversation for Andrew to be more of the counsellor that he aspires to be. The conversation also invited Vikki as the witnessing supervisor to be a witness to both Denise’s life and Andrews’s qualities as a counsellor.

**The therapist’s reflections**

Andrew reflected in writing upon this re-telling, and has offered Vikki this response in his own voice:

*The Living Supervision Interview allowed you to bring out into the open the strength of the relationship Denise and I have with each other. By witnessing Denise’s experience of being in a non-oppressive relationship with a man, an exception to the many exploitative relationships that she has experienced, you enabled us both to openly acknowledge that we had a good working relationship based on trust. Without you as an interlocutor — and your gender was important here because as a woman in a patriarchal society you can speak to male oppression in a way that I can’t — I don’t*
think that I alone would’ve been able to examine the gendered dynamics of negotiating trust with Denise. Much of our conversation revolved around how negotiating boundaries has made our counselling relationship safe. Your line of questioning about safety and relationships with men brought some great moments where we were able to confirm Denise’s acts of resistance (Wade, 1997; Reynolds, 2010b). We talked at length about boundary setting as an insurance policy in anticipation of risk, and as an act of resistance in situations of immediate threat.

The next week I asked you to join us again, without prior planning but with Denise’s permission, because Denise reported a violent incident where she was the victim of a man. I remember feeling somewhat overwhelmed by her news and I felt a bit stuck as to what to suggest. You came in and your questions of me in front of Denise helped me get unstuck. I think that the issue of gender was important here too. She was fearful and I think that having another woman in the room was important for me, and hopefully for her, because it added an element of solidarity to the support that I was able to provide. By this I mean that as Denise was the victim of an act of male violence you were able to open up a conversation about safety that I alone might not have been able to.

Peace, Andrew

Dale and Shelley’s Living Supervision Interview

Dale is an addictions counsellor on the same counselling team as Andrew in the Downtown Eastside clinic, and has extensive experience in residential treatment settings. In a supervision consultation, Dale spoke of his concerns about the ability of men counsellors working in the realm of substance misuse to work alongside women and gender variant persons who had experienced sexualised violence and oppression from men.

Like Dale, many of the men that Vikki supervises are concerned about their ability to be accountable-enough to work with women and gender variant persons who have experienced violence by men. We would be very discomforted if men counsellors were not concerned about their ability to be accountable-enough alongside women in these situations. We also believe that, at times, great opportunities could be lost if women clients are not given the opportunity to have a respectful and dignified relationship with a man counsellor. Men need to work hard to position
themselves accountably in relationship to men’s violence. However, we do not believe that any woman counsellor is necessarily better than any man counsellor. Humility and real-time feminist-informed supervision are extremely important across the spectrum of gender for the therapist and client. In particular, Dale was talking about his work with a woman client, Shelley, who had been brutalised by men both in the past and recently. Vikki felt there was a great resource available to Shelley in working alongside a man counsellor who held an intention of gender accountability. Part of the intention of this interview for Vikki as the witnessing supervisor was to place Dale’s intention of accountability to women in front of a woman client (Reynolds, 2010c).

In our Living Supervision Interview, Vikki began by consulting with Shelley around her counselling relationship with Dale. Shelley spoke of the respect and dignity that she experienced. We had a rich conversation about the possibilities of Shelley being in one relationship with one specific man where she believed it was unlikely that she would be sexualised, propositioned, oppressed, subjected to a man’s evaluation of her body, or disrespected in a gendered way. Shelley talked about this as being a very different experience from her life and let Vikki in on a thumbnail sketch of her previous experiences with men. This included both what she referred to as “sex work” and sexualised violence. When Vikki asked her what was present in her relationship with Dale, she spoke of respect and some new hope for her that there was a small possibility of some men behaving towards her in a different way than she had experienced in the past. We talked about her knowings in relationship with men and how she did not want to let go of any of that, while she also held onto the small hope that some things may be different in the future with some men.

Vikki then interviewed Dale about what he had witnessed in Shelley’s interview, and Shelley was in a listening space. He spoke to Shelley holding on to hope of some future relationships with men that would be safe-enough, and the meaning that held for him. He spoke of the qualities that Shelley brought to their counselling relationship and her ability to trust him enough to even speak with him given that he is a man. When Vikki asked Dale what kept his hopes alive for Shelley, he recounted some profound stories of resistance. These stories spoke of her strength and her ability to stand up to men’s power by using her intelligence and life experience.

In this Living Supervision Interview, Vikki declined the invitation to put Dale upon a pedestal for being an accountable man, which he did not
want and would have been extremely discomforted by. Instead we witnessed Shelley’s ability to work alongside a man given her wisdom about the way many men have been with her in her life. As the witnessing supervisor, Vikki was available as a witness to Shelley’s ongoing resistance and wisdom. Dale was also witnessed as a safe-enough man at this time, in this particular counselling relationship with Shelley. The Living Supervision Interview provided a structure and some safety for this conversation to occur. Without this structure Dale would have been limited for being inside of the relationship and also for speaking the questions from his position as a man.

The therapist’s reflections
Dale reflected on this re-telling of this Living Supervision Interview, and this is written in his voice:

The consideration of engaging in a Living Supervision Interview was initially a discomforting one, as I was hesitant to be so vulnerable. However, this was precisely where I needed help and why I had raised my concerns about my work with Shelley in our individual supervision. By participating in this process I sought to be less alone in the concerns that I held about my work with Shelley as she was a strong woman who had faced horrors that were foreign to my life’s experience – mostly committed by people of my gender. She had developed ways of relating (particularly with men) that reflected this hard won wisdom. I was acutely aware of the need for our counselling relationship to be safe-enough. It was difficult to open up a dialogue with Shelley about our counselling relationship, particularly because it had the potential of replicating her previous negative experiences with men – namely that I would be seen as just another guy wanting something. The Living Supervision Interview allowed a safe means of putting our relationship on the table for discussion. In response, Shelley spoke positively about her experience of safety and being respected. While I didn’t need to hear this to continue engaging in a respectful manner (although it was confirming), it seems that it gave Shelley explicit permission to talk about our relationship. More than permission, it gave Shelley an experience of doing so with my supervisor there to witness and affirm the value of her perspective.

This reflection reminds me of the power of this experience and renews my desire to look for opportunities to offer the Living
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Supervision Interview experience to my team, as I am now in a supervisor role.

Cheers, Dale

Uses of the Living Supervision Interview

The Living Supervision Interview can be of use when the therapist is not sure how to respond, when the therapist wants to watch the supervisor conduct interviews in specific domains (such as responses to violence), or when individual supervision consultations reveal qualities and honouring of the client that they are not aware of, as these consultations occur in the absence of the client. This practice attempts to invite accountability as it allows the client’s evaluation, critique, and concerns about the therapist’s work to be heard and witnessed directly by the supervisor. The Living Supervision Interview has also been of use when the therapeutic relationship has turned a preferred corner, an obstacle has been overcome, or there are qualities of the client that the therapist hopes to amplify by inviting the supervisor to witness. This practice creates reflexive space (Burnham 1993) for the client to witness the supervisor witnessing them.

Preparation work: Fostering a culture of critique

Part of the preparation for the practice of the Living Supervision Interview is the co-creation of dignifying supervisory relationships and fostering a culture of critique (Reynolds, 2014c), in which hard questions and inconsistencies can be spoken. A Supervision of Solidarity resists smoothing over the spiritual pain that is experienced when our therapeutic practice is not in accord with our ethics for justice-doing. Rather it invites a solidarity that says, “I will walk alongside you as you struggle towards ethics, and I am also not perfect”. This stance allows more vulnerability and invites accountability, rather than requiring therapists to continually present a fixed story of their competency.

Structuring safety for these relationships relies on pre-existing points of connection, solidarity, and ethical fit. The following questions aim to structure safety and create safe-enough relationships from which to build dignifying supervisory relationships that promote a culture of critique:

- What do I need to understand in order to respect you, make space for you, and not transgress against you in our supervisory relationship?
Supervisory relationships grounded in solidarity serve to dignify therapists and foster the moral courage required to be vulnerable, open to critique, and resist engaging in supervision with a static defence against negative judgments. Shouldering-up the dignity of the therapist resources the supervisory relationship to hold in a tension any transgression against ethics alongside the supervisor’s witnessing across time of the therapist’s relationship with competency.

These relationships of solidarity assist therapists to hold close the spiritual pain that reminds them of their ethical stance and commitments for social justice, and invites them to engage with discomfort as a useful and perhaps necessary (Kumashiro 2004) component of accountability.

Conclusions

These examples of the Living Supervision Interview have fluid structures and formations. Having a witness from outside visit and interview from a different location holds the relationship between client and therapist at the centre. Practitioners are invited to re-configure, re-theorise, and re-create this work in order for the practice to be of use in different contexts.

In the spirit of systemic practice, Living Supervision is an emergent practice evoked by enacting the ethics of a Supervision of Solidarity. Living Supervision is a response to the ethical requirement of the supervisor to enter the work of the practitioner, and not rely solely on therapists’ self-reporting. In the context of this writing the practice was a response to our collective desire, as supervisor and therapists, to resist enacting dominance, and replicating oppression with women and gender variant persons struggling in the context of precarious lives (Butler 2004). We are committed to the ethical principle of autonomy, and activist traditions of critiquing and dismantling hierarchy and dominance in the delivery of therapy. These commitments invited us to look for practical, specific, and material ways to address power and centre the voices of women and gender variant clients, specifically in relation to their role in directing the kinds of service they want. In this understanding of voice we are informed by radical Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1970), who teaches that in liberatory dialogue the person’s voice must not just be heard, but it must be responded to accountably, and not be dismissed.
Dedication

We learn our work off of the backs of clients: This writing is dedicated to these teachers.

This writing took place on Indigenous land which has never been surrendered.

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References


