The Zone of Fabulousness
connection, collective care
people we work alongside

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The Zone of Fabulousness: A person-centred approach to “Burnout”

This work offers an alternative approach to understanding the ways we as workers are harmed in the work, and our collective resistance to these harms, that is different from vicarious trauma or burnout. Instead of looking at workers’ traumatic symptoms we look at how we treat people we work alongside (persons), and if we are able to create relationships of respect and dignity. Are we in staff-centred teams, or person-centred teams? If so, how are persons at the centre of all we do? As workers, are we responding to the heart-breaking work with disconnection where we are moving too far away from persons, taken with negativity and moving into cynicism. Or are we moving in too close, with heroic posturing, becoming enmeshed and enacting transgressions of intimacy and ‘specialness’? If we are able to hold persons at the centre of our work and care, and stay with connection, resisting disconnection and enmeshment, we are more able to resist burnout and create collective sustainability. The Zone of Fabulousness is the space of connection, where persons are at the centre, we are connected as workers in our collective ethics with collective care (as opposed to self-care), the bringers of a believed-in hope as an ethical obligation, collaborative and creative, messy, imperfect but accountable, and shouldering each other up.

Where I am standing: Decolonising and unsettling

While my aim is to enact justice-doing and decolonisation in all of my paid and unpaid work, I am immersed in the ongoing work of unsettling myself as a white settler (Reynolds & Hammoud-Beckett, 2018). Tuck and Yang (2012) teach that decolonisation is not a metaphor, and means commitments to indigenous governance and land return. I aim to be directed in all my activist work and organising by indigenous people (Manuel & Derrickson, 2015).

Resisting burnout with justice-doing

Resisting burnout with justice-doing reflects an activist position for staying alive in our work (Reynolds, 2011a). Ideas of vicarious trauma are based in ways persons’ pain infects us with hopelessness, yet often persons inform, transform, provoke and educate us. The harms in our work are most often from structures that are oppressive and do not allow for the resources and practices needed to respond to human suffering with dignity. Four decades of neo-liberalism, the destruction of the social net of care, and mean-spirited and hate-filled politics must be understood as the context of our work and inextricably linked to our struggles for sustainability as workers. Our resistance to these contexts of structural oppression and horror is to enact our collective ethics which are the values that drew us to this work and the fabric of the solidarity that can hold us together in acts of collective care. Self-care is a required, but limited response. Self-care is essential so that we can de-centre ourselves as workers, and truly hold the person at the centre of our care. Working against our ethics leads to spiritual pain or ethical pain, and workers have taught me across decades that spiritual pain is a better way to understand the harms workers experience than burnout. If we can enact collective care, as opposed to only self-care, sustainability becomes possible, and we can act in solidarity as activists to change the social context, and shoulder each other up in resistance to the dark spaces of our work.

From a justice-doing lens ‘Vicarious Trauma’ inventory measures are more accurately revealed as measures of the privileged locations of practitioners. Workers with more access to power and life choices can measure up as more professional, more ‘mentally well’. I believe a better measure
Resisting vicarious trauma with justice-doing in ways that centre the

Enmeshment

When workers enact enmeshment, we move in too close and transgress the boundaries of persons. We position ourselves as heroes, moving outside of what is humanly possible. Heroic posturing leads to isolation in efforts to hide actions we know will invite critique. We create ‘special’ relationships with persons, not unique, lovely, generative, connective relationships. ‘Special’ relationships replicate the conditions of sexual abuse, and are a threat to the safety of the community. Sexual abuse is most often not a stranger jumping out from a bush with a knife, but usually happens in intentional, well nurtured exploitative relationships. For example, a young person is required to go with their uncle in his car, even though they know he is going to abuse them and then buy them ice cream, under the guise of a ‘special’ relationship. Whenever we replicate special relationships, we replicate these conditions, which ruptures the safety of the community.

Workers enacting enmeshment say things like: “I’m the only one that cares. I’m the only one that really gets it,” situating ourselves as saviours. We are taken with guilt, but also righteousness, and full of should’. “You know, what this organisation should do is they should be doin’ this. You should be doin’ that. Everybody should be doin’ that.” We feel incompetent, thinking we are personally responsible for fixing persons’ lives. We abandon our teams, work in isolation, setting the team up with inconsistencies and special favours. We also set persons up, because they are then required to join in these transgressive, precarious and scary special relationships. Enmeshment can lead to workers losing their jobs because they convince themselves it is reasonable and required to do things like taking persons home. Enmeshment leads to transgression and intrusion, losing our collective ethics that centre persons and the collective responsibility of our teams.

Disconnection

Burnout can also show up as workers enacting disconnection and moving too far away from persons. As workers, we start to disconnect and detach. This does not usually lead to us losing our jobs, but coasting along the fringes of what has plausible deniability. We experience diminished empathy, and alarmingly, and at times astonishingly, situate ourselves as the victims of our jobs, organisations and other individuals. As workers, we disconnect from our own bodies, emotions, persons and teams. When taken with disconnection, we police other workers. We do not have broken hearts because we do not bring our hearts to work. When a person dies and you are crying, an embodied emotional experience, a disconnected worker slams you on the back and says, “If you’re gonna cry every time someone dies, you’re never gonna make it here”. To which my response is, “If I don’t cry every time I’m involved in a person’s death, I’ve lost my humanity”. We side with cynicism, and claim we are merely devil’s advocates while the barrage of negativity and negative judgement encourages the staff to organise around their own struggles with each other. Cynicism does not require that workers only reject innovation or working harder: we have to squash everybody else, steal the hope of fellow workers, and take everybody out at the knees. New workers come in with innovation and energy saying, “Look, I think this is what we’re gonna do. I think we’re gonna start new groups, I think we need to see a lot more people”. Disconnected workers cut those folks off saying, “Listen, here – everything you’ve thought of we’ve thought of. Everything you wanna try we’ve tried. None of it works. Go ahead with your idea”. Meanwhile, everybody else quietly bemoans the interaction as audience not participants: “Oh no, there they go again” like they are merely unkind. It is not unkind, or a personality problem: it is bullying hidden behind cynicism. When we disconnect, we start to situate ourselves as martyrs of the work, construct staff-centred teams, mitigate and mutualise bullying and massive negativity, and persons are lost.

Connection: The Zone of Fabulousness

When we get harmed in the work, responding to the spiritual pain of being unable to do justice with persons, we can either get enmeshed and way too close to persons, or we get disconnected and too far away. We need to prioritise being person-centred teams not staff-centred teams. We want to be in the Zone of Fabulousness
— because we are fabulous. Fabulousness happens when we enact collective ethics, and are collaborative, innovative, and justice-doing. We can be heartbroken, but as workers we are not the centre of the heartbreak.
We understand that this is not our tragedy (Heather Gilmore, personal communication, December 1, 2015). We resist disconnection and enmeshment, enacting fluidity from queer theory where we move into and away from the work, like a dance. We co-create spaces where imperfection and need engender creativity. We can be messy with each other (Reynolds, 2014a). But it is also hope-filled, embracing our ethical obligation to be the bringers of hope, seeing a believed-in hope as an ethical stance; a “relational hope as something that happens in the space between us, rather than inside of me or you...” (Lizette Nolte, personal communication, April 13, 2018).

We are connected to ourselves, our emotions, our bodies, our team members, and persons. In the Zone of Fabulousness we enact our collective ethics, shoulder up the team, engage collective accountability and respond with collective care versus self-care. We envision our work as useful and possible, and the person is at the centre.

**Zone slippage**

One necessary assumption I make for my work as a clinical supervisor is the belief that no one came into this work to hurt people. It may not be an accurate assumption, but it is a useful assumption without which I could not work. From this analysis I see workers who slip into disconnection or enmeshment or workers we have let down. As fellow workers we witness these folks slipping, yet we side with the politics of politeness, gossip, and lack the moral courage to offer critique, smoothing over ethical issues. Collective care and collective ethics require that we offer critique when we witness peers slipping. As workers, we do not simply become enmeshed or disconnected. I think of this as zone slippage, where we are in the Zone of Fabulousness and then we get exhausted, dishheartened, broken-hearted, spiritually painsed, and we slip into enmeshment, or disconnection. We need to consider what we are thinking, feeling, and doing that lets us know we are leaving the Zone of Fabulousness. When I start to get overwhelmed, tired, broken-hearted, I move towards disconnection. When I am talking to co-workers, I start to think, “Damn, would they just get to the point? Could they just shut up?” When I start getting impatient, I know I am leaving the Zone of Fabulousness, moving towards disconnection. When I slip towards enmeshment, I get heart-broken about one person, and I want to do things for them I could never do for others. Or I want our whole team to reorganise around somebody at the cost of the relational community.

**We cannot keep ourselves fabulous: Cultures of critique, collective care and solidarity teams**

Self-care is often prescribed as the antidote to burnout, but it is individualised, positions workers as damaged and does not respond to the social determinants of health and contexts of social injustice in which persons suffer and workers struggle. Collective care invites us to shoulder each other up, work in solidarity, see our sustainability as a collective project and acknowledge that we are not going to stay with sustainability and be useful across the long haul individually. As individual workers, we cannot keep ourselves fabulous: we are meant to do this work together, and our sustainability is inextricably linked to our collective care. Solidarity teams (Reynolds, 2011b) can be a useful practice for folks to intentionally structure support and decide who and what holds them up, sustains them, and how to access this heart-felt and spirited connection in responding to the darkness in our work and the heartbreak of unnecessary politicalised deaths of vulnerable and oppressed people. We need to create relationships of respect and dignity and create cultures of accountability, appreciation and critique, to catch each other when we experience zone slippage, and offer ethical critique that brings us back to Fabulousness (Reynolds, 2014b). Despite discomfort, we engage moral courage and offer critique to bring workers back to Fabulousness because, “we owe each other a terrible loyalty” (Janice Abbott, personal communication, January 8, 2012).

**Conclusion**

The Zone of Fabulousness is a frame to consider how we are centring persons, enacting collective ethics and fostering collective sustainability while working in contexts of social injustice, mean-spirited politics and oppression. How are we centring persons? How are we enacting connection; being collaborative, creative, messy, and imperfect? How are we connected to our bodies, emotions, the sacred, justice-doing, each other, and communities of struggle?

What is going on for workers in terms of ‘vicariously traumatic experiences’ might be better understood as acts of resistance and reasonable responses to politically desperate situations, and not symptoms of mental unwellness. When the measure is mental wellness, which is always influenced by privilege, more-privileged workers will often be evaluated as more professional, having better self-care, boundaries, and more resilience against burnout. I am humbled by community workers, who – despite struggling to do justice in harsh contexts of exploitation, oppression, and being broken-hearted – are able to show up, shoulder each other up, and hold other people at the centre: That is the Zone of Fabulousness.
Holding onto hope in the midst of austerity: A staff response to serial cuts and restructuring of a CAMHS

Elizabeth Boyd

I remember in 2014 the first feeling of shock hearing that the trust intended to delete all the heads of discipline posts (systemic psychotherapy, child psychotherapy, nursing and psychology) in the CAMHS. I was working in as a systemic psychotherapist. This was a significant departure from the structure I’d grown up with in CAMHS, and it represented a simultaneous loss of core and senior staff. It seemed unbearable as a prospect. It followed losses of other highly-valued staff in the preceding years including 8b family therapists, social workers, and educational psychologists. Each year, we worried about further cuts, so the period was laced with continuous anxiety about loss of staff. When deletion of the heads of disciplines and a move to a ‘functional leadership model’ was announced, I felt a sense of debilitating powerlessness.

The consultation

The directorate produced a report outlining the rationale for the proposed new structure. Everyone was invited to respond, and these responses were to be considered as part of the consultation. Initially, there was scepticism about the process; however, I decided to respond, and this decision was important in terms of my personal management of the stress the events provoked and the profound ways it changed the future of our service.

I first helped collate a response to the consultation from the discipline of family therapy, then a collective clinic response. I also submitted an individual reply. I have reflected on what prompted the layers of response I made and realised it related to a personal journey of ‘voice entitlement’ (Boyd, 2010). I needed to feel I had used all possibilities available to ‘voice’ my objections to the changes proposed.

A colleague, Liz Bodcote, child and adolescent psychotherapist, organised a meeting, which brought together a large group of staff interested in challenging the process. We noted the irony of being referred to in the trust report as the ‘non-affected’ staff group because our jobs weren’t directly at risk. The assumption that because we weren’t losing our job meant we were unaffected seemed a gross oversimplification. It denied the impact on staff of losing senior colleagues. Apart from the personal loss of relationships, it was the anticipation of suddenly working without experienced and trusted colleagues alongside us. This group became known as the ‘non-affected staff group’. It was spearheaded by Liz and, in this process, we developed a strong bond of allegiance attributable to the shared feelings about the situation and a desire to be active in our response.

After the consultation had finished, the trust implemented the revised new structure. We achieved two small victories: an additional senior post of clinical team lead and an agreement that discipline leads would be identified from the remaining workforce. Essentially though, the plan hadn’t significantly changed, and we lost all heads of discipline posts.