

## Reflections by Navid Zamani

On AFTA Keynote 2019 Vikki Reynolds PhD RCC

Justice-Doing with each other: Doing Dignity and respect amidst the darkness of our work

At the time of this writing, Ivanka Trump (daughter of President Trump) is traveling around the globe with the message of “empowering women” to “enter the workforce” (Lu, 2019), displaying the well-rehearsed image of the United States’ as an altruistic, feminist entity that wants to ensure gender equality globally. 50 million dollars has been dedicated to this endeavor, alongside the 693 billion dollar military budget that funds other forms of imperialist policy in the very same communities and regions (according to the Department of Defense’s 2019 Fiscal year budget). Trump continues a practice employed by past administrations of using social issues (such as gender inequality) to expand influence in regions such as Guatemala, the Middle East, and North Africa (McKinnon, 2016). For those with an eye attuned to these politics, these threads of imperialism and capitalism are obvious and egregious. Vikki’s keynote at the American Family Therapy Academy’s (AFTA) annual conference in Oakland highlighted important distinctions between colonialism and neo-colonialism, the role of the settler on settled land, and the practice of family therapy in the landscape of activism. And in these considerations, I found myself in a familiar mental dialogue. Are my intentions of promoting social justice and accountability of those in power similarly shrouded in legacies of interlocking oppressions (capitalism, racism, sexism, imperialism, colonialism, etc.)? Am I any different from Ivanka Trump? And given my social and geographic location, the answer tends to be yes. Yet, do my intentions and tensions with these systems render my work and its effects as helpful? Am I “doing justice”?

In the critical complexity required by Reynolds’ framework, it is “yes” and “no.” In her keynote, Reynolds offered a community of mental health practitioners some thoughts on “doing justice” that are distinct from what tends to discursively dominate the ivory tower of academia. The critical distinction resides in those who are *doing* activist work, without the privilege of writing within a narrow academic culture. Vikki invited the audience to seek points of connection and hold onto points of departure from her ideas. Here, I’m hoping to mention some of my own points of connection and departure, but mainly the questions of my own work that were raised in my witnessing of her framework of ideas. There is nothing simple or reductionist about the framework; they necessarily require complexity and nuance.

My own life and professional work are complex, unclear, and resistant to broad principles or generalized understandings. I am the son of Iranian immigrants who were displaced to the US due to a history of British and US imperialism and capitalist hunger. My family is also privileged to be part of the Muslim-majority in Iran, largely avoiding the mass killings that occurred during the 1979 regime change at the hands of Islamic revolutionaries. My father’s work with an American company allowed him a route to the US, and a safer life not available to the rest of my family. My family members left behind continue to be subjected to both an oppressive regime and US foreign policy. I now live in and am propped up by the same systems and industries that have displaced my family. I own a home in San Diego, I put money into a 401K, and a large percentage of my taxes go to funding the military-industrial complex.

My professional world harbors similar tensions. I hold a license as a Marriage and Family Therapist; I am trained in a particular Western practice of healing and psychology. In this role, I work with Middle Eastern refugee families who are experiencing domestic violence and are often trapped in a punitive legal system that attends more closely to liability and accountability than family healing. When it comes to my participation with these systems, Reynolds' statement in the presentation in regards to her simultaneous participation in and resistance to these systems is fitting: "No I won't, but yes I will" (Reynolds' AFTA presentation).

My work with Middle Eastern men who are mandated to a 52-week domestic violence rehabilitation program is a territory fraught with these tensions. The group (myself, the clients, the court stipulations) is nestled between the gaze of the American court systems (both criminal and family), the narratives of law enforcement, and required typologies of psychology (i.e. naming "abnormal" behaviors and personality disorders). Vikki's distinction that "colonialism is always about land" is important here, as these men are caught squarely in the jaws of neo-colonialism. Their reality is viscerally shaped by these philosophies and practices, and located within the settled lands to which they have been displaced. And, these men are both the oppressed and the oppressor. The purveyors of patriarchy, and recipients of harm. As Bouteldja (2017) relates, "We especially know that our men are just as oppressed as us in different ways." My world resists clear boundaries. I am a "person of color" in academia; I am "White" in relation to the refugee communities I work with. "Whiteness is not a genetic question; it is a matter of power" (Bouteldja, 2017).

Even in this writing, I feel the tensions of concluding what I am saying; constructing a succinct and clear ending that settles my confusions. Like writing about colonialism in English, where my thinking and perception of the world is colored by a language of trade and conquest, concluding my thoughts seems to falsify the never-ending tensions that I navigate. As I listened to Reynolds' talk, I found myself swimming, and at times floating, in questions and paradoxical ideas and social locations. I am in settled land, and unsure what unsettling this land means for me. Practices of neo-colonialism are carried out by Iranian therapists in shaping our community's experiences through Western psychology. I regularly work with oppressive US systems to try and "do justice" with the families for whom I work. I listen to the sorrows of men who have subjugated their family to patriarchal terrorism.

The tentative and ongoing practices in my "doing justice" have emerged from these tensions and complex territories. I am guided by a relational ethics that prioritizes connection and listening without an exoneration of harm and accountability (Jenkins, 2009). I value a curiosity that prizes the liminality of experience, and does not seek to typify or broadly evaluate the outcomes. I attempt to track the "becoming" of our identities, and strongly resonate with a notion shared by Vikki that she learned from the men she worked with who sat on death row: "People are so much more than the worst thing they have ever done". In this tracking, I am also carefully naming the values that are important to me, and naming the systems in which I am in resistance. And most importantly, I am connected to people who support these efforts, the ends and the means, and share a similar set of ethics in supporting my accountability. To be clear, these practices do not protect me from doing harm, but they hopefully allow for accountability to harm done.

These are practices that I have yet to see in our broader leadership, and until they become apparent, I will continue to resist power that subjugates. I intend to continue to use my

privilege in this world to further the agendas of those without similar access to power, even at the risk of my own peril. And in my endeavors, my hope is that my community will caution me, and if necessary, stop me, if and when I become the Ivanka Trump of my social locations.

## References

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