Final Draft

Setting an Intention for Decolonizing Practice and Justice-Doing:

Social Justice Activism in Community Work and Therapy

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The work of this writing is to set an intention for an un-settling and decolonizing practice, especially for settler workers. I'm offering an entrance into a stance where we work to deliver justice to people and to do more than simply not oppress people. There is an invitation to take up the activist project to transform the social contexts in which suffering and oppression occur and to do this in ways led by Indigenous people and accountable to the communities we serve.

CRSJ Counselling Concepts Illustrated
• Allyship • Anti-oppressive stance • Colonialism/colonization • Colonial relationship • Ethical practice • Global social justice • Justice-doing • Locus of control/responsibility • Psycholonization • Risk of pathologizing • Social change • Social justice action/activism • Trauma

Decolonizing and Unsettling: Unceded Ancestral Lands and Territories

I need to start by positioning myself in relationships of accountability to Indigenous people and the land on which I am standing and where my community work takes place. As an activist and therapist I work to bridge the worlds of social justice activism with community work. My people are Irish, Newfoundland, and English folks, and I am a white settler with heterosexual and cisgender privilege. Although my aim and commitment is to be decolonizing in all of my paid and unpaid work, I am still immersed in the on-going work of un-settling myself as a white settler. Tuck and Yang (2012) teach that decolonizing practice is not a metaphor; it means commitments to Indigenous governance and land return. I aim to be directed in all my activism, community work, and organizing by Indigenous people (Walia, 2012), and this practice is informed by activist community teachings and practices (Manuel & Derrickson, 2015).

Indigenous warrior Gord Hill (2010) offers an analysis of colonization as invasion, occupation, genocide, and assimilation. Recently, yet another Canadian Prime Minister apologized for one tactic of assimilation, specifically residential schools, offering no acknowledgment of genocide, "which served the purpose of earth rape/resource extraction and theft, and a land grab" (C. Richardson, personal communication, June 16, 2018). The Prime Minister delivered nothing in terms of what Indigenous nations have demanded for accountability. As a nation, Canada is now lowering the bar from decolonizing to *reconciliation*, which is more palpable to power holders as it requires less moral courage, less accountability, and less work in terms of returning stolen land and resources. Shame. You don't reconcile genocide: You stop it.

Settlers have to set intentions to stay implicated in the ongoing colonization and genocide of Indigenous people. As a white settler, my privilege makes it easy to abdicate my collective responsibility and to leave or ignore anti-imperial and anticolonial struggles. Accountability and ethics require that Indigenous activists and scholars are the voices that inform both settler and other non-Indigenous activists and that we resist centring Eurocentric voices that speak for, or about, Indigenous knowledges. The critical analysis by Indigenous scholars Glen Coulthard (2014), who identifies as Yellowknives Dene, and Pam Palmater (2015), who identifies as Mi'kmaq from the Eel River Bar First Nation, on Indigenous governance and Indigenous

Nationhood provides a crucial frame for a decolonizing praxis. Indigenous Professor Sarah Hunt (2016), who identifies as Kwagiulth from Tsaxis, has provided an analysis that encompasses the inter-relatedness of violence, justice, resistance, self-determination, and decolonization. These Indigenous activists and scholars, and many others, inform and transform my work and engagement with activism and daily life. I believe the voices of white settlers like myself are required in the dialogue, but primarily to resist the power of white supremacists, and at the invitation and direction of Indigenous people, and people who identify as Black, people of colour, and racialized people. Accountability in these dialogues is hard work that requires moral courage and is founded on reciprocal relationships across privilege. As a white activist, I expect to perform my trustworthiness continually, and I do not assume I am trustworthy based on past solidarity work, though I'm told that it helps.

In relation to community work and therapy, decolonizing praxis refers to an intention for centring the wisdom and experience of Indigenous people in resistance to the colonial project of Eurocentric psychology practices that subjugate Indigenous people and reframe their resistance and responses to oppression as symptoms of mental illness and pathology. Taking up this work requires a particular ethical and activist stance that obliges us, as community workers and therapists, not only to resist pathologizing Indigenous people, but also to take on and transform both psychology itself and the social structures of colonial oppression. This requires resisting the erasure of the word, *violence*, in our profession, and naming the violence of colonization and all structural oppressions, and contesting the depoliticized and medicalized language of *trauma*. A decolonizing and justice-doing informed analysis generates practices of witnessing resistance to violence (Reynolds, 'Bahman,' Hammoud-Beckett, Sanders, & Haworth, 2014; Richardson & Wade, 2008) that demonstrate a commitment to centring Indigenous peoples in their own healing journeys (Dupuis-Rossi & Reynolds, in press).

Social Justice Activism and Community Work and Therapy: Precarious Affinities

The possible connections of social justice activism and community work are hopeful yet precarious. Direct action activism cannot be collapsed onto other kinds of community work simply because the worker holds an ethic of justice-doing. What matters is how we enact this ethic, what we do in practice, not what claims we make, which connects to my stance of hopeful

skepticism. When workers tell me they are about justice-doing I am hopeful that they are, but sceptical that our practices may fall short of the claims to ethics we make.

Therapy is limited as an act of justice-doing. Psychotherapy, in particular, 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, imperialist and state power, as well as interpersonal power (Reynolds & Hammoud-Beckett, 2018). There are certain traditions from the histories of therapy as a grand public and professional project that cannot be separated from this. The structure of individualised one-to-one therapy is problematic in terms of the potential and reality for accommodating people to oppression and contributing to individualism. Also, I believe that therapists and community workers from many traditions 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 said in *De-colonizing Methodologies*, deconstruction is a useful idea, "but it does not prevent someone from dying" (1999, p. 3).

We Cannot Fight Oppression with Oppression

Community Work is overtly political, and activist practitioners resist neutrality or objectivity and the dictates of professionalism that could silence our dissent and activism, which aims to resist and transform the contexts of oppression that promote the horrors of suffering. Justice-doing requires resisting accommodating people to privatized lives of oppression and suffering. As workers committed to justice-doing, and taking on oppression on all fronts, we need to challenge critically our professions violent and abusive language, which hides structural violence under the neutral and outcome-informed language of the usual suspects: addiction, mental illness, and trauma. This comfortable psychology-speak centres our inquiry on the individual's brokenness, while hiding structural violence, such as: legislative poverty, developer-created homelessness, on-going colonial violence, racism, white supremacy, the prison industrial complex (Maynard, 2017), cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and rape culture. One reflexive question I continually puzzle with is: "How am I attending to power in this moment, in this interaction, with this person?"

I resist attempts to invisibilize marginalized people by supporting an ethic of belonging, which requires relationships of dignity and respect that can tether lost others to the planet and to each

other. This requires doing the hard work of resisting the professional imperative to tell people how to live. Instead we work towards enacting the ethical principle of autonomy, which means trusting people with their own lives and, often, getting ourselves out of the way.

We cannot fight oppression with oppression (Munro, Reynolds, & Townsend, 2017). As Crenshaw (1995) taught, we must continually and fluidly attend to the intersectionality of domains of identity connected to both power and disadvantage. Ideas of diversity and inclusion, although useful, are also limiting and are being problematized and transformed by communities of resistance and by activists with marginalized voices (Ahmed, 2012). The structural inequities that promote suffering demand complex collective responses. Charity requires rich people to help poor people: Justice requires that we all restructure society, taking on oppression on all fronts, which will benefit everyone. As trans activist Dean Spade (2011) suggests with hope, regarding structural challenges facing the trans community: "These challenges are potential starting points for a trans politics that openly opposes liberal and neoliberal agendas and finds solidarity with other struggles articulated by the forgotten, the inconceivable, the spectacularised and the unimaginable" (p. 33).

Trauma, Addiction, and Mental Illness: The "Usual Suspects"

Trauma, as conceptualized and defined by the mainstream field of psychology, is a medicalized term that obscures violence and human suffering. The language of trauma invisiblizes the violence of colonialism and other structural oppressions, such as legislative poverty. It locates our interest as workers in symptoms and diagnoses that are personalized, individuated, and constructed as the responsibility of the person, as if their personal strengths or resiliency are the issue, as opposed to structural oppression. This medicalized approach invites a scientific distancing, an objectivity, and a disconnected professionalism, which stops us from mapping the privileges of practitioners onto the oppression and suffering of people we hope to serve. This professional distancing abdicates our collective responsibility both to change the social structures that make these oppressions and suffering possible and to change the social context in which the *privatization of pain* occurs. And by the privatization of pain I mean, for example, the criminalization of homelessness, and of course, the totalizing pathologizing terminology that constructs damaged people and spoiled identities (Goffman, 1963) such as: *insane*, *addict*, and

traumatized. Experiences defined as trauma are often better understood as exploitation and oppression rooted in the political inequities of our unjust societies.

The problems people suffer are structural, not located in the person; and the systems are not just flawed; they're working perfectly for capitalism and for exploitation. Under capitalism people say that money makes money; it doesn't. People labour to make money; and these labourers are often marginalized and racialized people in the Global South, and they are not paid their fair share while, often, privileged people in the Global North profit. Sampson (1993), an anthropologist who informed narrative therapy ideas, took a bold position about this naming the construction of people from marginalized identities as a means of creating "serviceable others," (p. 142) who can be exploited, subjugated, and oppressed to maintain the power of the dominant classes. Understanding global capitalism and neoliberal politics is required to resist replicating oppression and for our own sustainability.

Meeting People Where They Are At: Making Sense and Seeking Safety

Succinctly, I believe our work requires us, no matter our professional qualifications or job titles, to create relationships of dignity and respect across differences of privilege and to meet people where they are at in the world. It is the task of the worker to build a bridge across the differences of power between us and to meet the person where they are at. From this dignifying relationship, we invite people to take responsibility where they have actual choices and access to power available to them, but not for the debilitating oppression, violence, and marginalization they have experienced or the social context that continues and promotes such suffering. We collaborate with people and assist them in making any changes they prefer to make to alter their relationship to suffering. As community workers enacting justice-doing we are further required to use our specific social locations and access to power to work to change the social contexts in which suffering and structural violence occurs.

There are two useful assumptions I find imperative in moving an ethical stance of justice-doing into practice. I believe that if we are able to meet people where they are at in the world two understandings become available to us:

1. People's behaviour makes sense.

2. People want safety.

These assumptions invite me to resist diagnosing people's behaviour and responses as symptoms of mental illness, and to resist seeing people as being unsafe and not trustworthy with their own lives. Here I'm informed by Janice Abbott (personal communication, January 3, 2018) the CEO of ATIRA Women's Resource Society, who says, "There is nothing wrong with women that not being assaulted, raped and murdered, and not being afraid of being assaulted, raped and murdered will not cure." Instead of seeing women as self-defeating and putting their children at risk, we look for how a woman's responses make sense and how women are trying to keep their children safe, especially in ways that aren't recognizable to agents of the state, which often structurally holds mothers responsible for men's violent behaviour. Seeing women in context also requires we acknowledge that the missing and murdered women in Canada are disproportionally Indigenous and that this is tied to the rape of the earth as resource extraction and as an enactment of ongoing colonization (Hunt, 2016). A complex analysis helps us resist locating political violence as personal poor judgment. It requires that we do more than respond to this person's suffering; rather, we engage as activists to work collectively to transform the structural violence that creates the conditions in which these horrors occur.

When we create relationships of respect and dignity we truly meet people where they are, and people's acts of resistance become visible, inviting a witnessing of their intelligence, strength, and courage. We don't diagnose people as mentally ill, and we don't accuse them of being self-defeating, but enter their world where their yearning for dignity and safety (Gerlach, Browne, & Elliot, 2017) become known to us.

Embracing the Messy and Resisting Perfection and White Supremacy

I intentionally describe my work as an anti-perfection project. This is partially because we have not delivered on a just society and can't envision justice in any quantifiable absolute way. Language will expand and make more room for possibilities of liberatory practice in response to ongoing activism and resistance from marginalized communities. Engaging a purposefully messy and imperfect process is informed by queer theory, anti-authoritarian theory, and direct action activism, where we aim to respond to all oppression in the moment with justice-doing. As activists, when a shelter person is being harassed by people with power, or any arm of

institutionalized policing, we do not call for a committee, organise a meeting, and engage in long discussions about what would be an appropriate and perfect action to take. Instead, we respond to the oppression, in the moment, with action. This requires a tolerance for being imperfect, which is a resistance to the perfection held up and required by white supremacy and our professions' requirement that we be experts. Later we can reflect on our actions, make necessary repairs, and strategize about what might be more appropriate actions for the future. This approach requires community-wide relationships of enough-trust and moral courage to take action. This is significantly different from responding to transgressions from a frame of rules; it requires that we collectively resist the perfection that white supremacy assigns to white folks, which steals from people who are racialized and marginalized. It requires that we take positions, defy neutrality, and have the moral courage to face up to some of the consequences of imperfect actions.

An engagement with social justice is imperative for community work, I believe, but never, in itself, adequate. We need also to embrace activist traditions to resist and transform the structures of injustice that are rooted in colonial, capitalist, neoliberal, and mean-spirited politics, all of which create the contexts of people's suffering and our work.

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