



Narrative conversations alongside Interpreters:

A locally-grown outsider-witnessing practice

by Poh Lin Lee



Poh Lin is an Australian social worker who has been engaged in narrative practices for the past decade across a number of countries and contexts including providing torture and trauma counselling services on Christmas Island between 2011-2014 and continuing to work with people seeking asylum through a collaborative film project (2014-2017). Poh Lin is dedicated to creatively co-researching alternative practices in response to trauma, injustice and the operations of power that render people, families and communities limited in their possibilities for practices of life and expressions that reflect their values and commitments. Poh Lin is curious to explore the less visible practices that accompany key narrative ideas. She is also interested in crossing borders between different fields of practice and using diverse mediums of storytelling. Poh Lin is based in France and currently works freelance across a number of different countries and contexts in supervision, training, consultation, and therapeutic conversations. poh@narrativeimaginings.com

Abstract

In the context of providing counselling to people who are being held within mandatory immigration detention, this paper seeks to explore the possibilities and dilemmas of inviting people who act as interpreters to reposition as meaningful witnesses to asylum seekers' performances of preferred identity. These moments of witnessing, when offered in ways that attend to the complexities and dynamics of culture, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, education, ability and age, can contribute to the honouring and thickening of the alternative stories and robust identity claims of people seeking asylum, who are exploring ways to respond to multiple, ongoing injustices. This paper offers ideas for making visible practices of solidarity and shared cultural knowledges and understandings between people seeking asylum and people who interpret.

Key words: *asylum seekers, immigration detention centres, interpreters, outsider witness, preferred identity, narrative therapy*

There was an unsettling tingling just below the surface of my skin. I remember shifting in my seat in an attempt to compose myself. The feeling hadn't started as Sohayla¹ told me about the violence she was experiencing from her husband. Nor had it started when Sohayla shared with me how difficult it was within the detention centre to take action to keep her children safe and find some space away from her husband. It had started when Mahla, who was providing Persian/English interpretation on that particular day, turned to me mid-session and asked for information about domestic violence for a friend who was also in an unsafe situation.

I recall Sohayla looking at me carefully, perhaps trying to follow what was happening now that the conversation had entered a territory that she wasn't part of and a language she couldn't understand. I remember the tingling feeling spreading as I found myself and Mahla in the spotlight. This risked violating the very fragile and carefully constructed relationship of collaboration between Sohayla and myself that had been established over a number of conversations. I needed to offer a skilful response, but I didn't know what that response might be.

In those moments when we find ourselves challenged and without a clear path, we call on all that we have learnt, experienced, observed and thought in order to improvise. Although we have no way of knowing where our improvisations will take us, our foundational values and ethics become a compass to guide our tentative steps.

On this occasion, my response was shaped by concern that Mahla and I were now at the centre of the conversation and, from my perspective, at risk of isolating Sohayla. I wished to convey in my response an ethic of care for both women. I wanted to position myself as a member of this co-research team rather than its leader; to be on the lookout for insider knowledge rather than privileging professional ideas. With all these ideas swirling around, I found myself inviting Mahla to become a witness to Sohayla's testimony, and to her knowledge and skills.

As Mahla looked at me waiting for a response to her request for information, and Sohayla waited for an explanation about what had just transpired, I managed a response: 'Sohayla, as we were talking, I suspect something in your sharing reminded Mahla of a particular friend who she cares about, would you agree with that Mahla?' Sohayla looked curiously at Mahla as Mahla agreed. As the focus shifted away from me, and back to Sohayla and Mahla, the tingling sensation beneath my skin subsided a little.

'Also, Mahla has asked about domestic violence, perhaps in the hope of taking some helpful ideas back to her friend'. Again, I checked in with Mahla as I was saying this and,

with more relief, I saw Mahla nodding her head. I glimpsed how this conversation might unfold in ways that could enable both women to contribute to each other. With a little more confidence, I suggested that perhaps Sohayla might share some of her experiences about resisting violence and creatively finding safety. It was agreed that I would then ask Mahla about what most stood out to her in Sohayla's sharing, and how she might carry these ideas, with care, to her friend.

Even though both women were kind enough to give this a try, what followed was not a smooth conversation. I often had to backtrack, take back a question or offer it in a different way. On one occasion I had to confess that I had gone off track and become lost with my questions! Something about the ethics and values that accompanied us on this endeavour made up for my hastily improvised outsider-witnessing questions. By maintaining transparency when we did run into bumps and dead ends, these were met with good humour and a sense of collective effort. I didn't experience the uncomfortable tingling beneath my skin again. In my experience, we were women sharing, in solidarity, an issue of violence that affected all three of us in different ways. We were all in it together and it was clear that this demanded a collective response.

Through inviting the person who was interpreting the therapeutic conversation to take up a new position as a meaningful witness, I sought to leave behind the model of a 'sick' person receiving treatment from an 'expert' via a neutral 'interpreter'. I found myself, as a therapist, also repositioned in the work.

Context

Being escorted by the Australian Navy from the waters surrounding Australia to Christmas Island and being placed in one of two detention centres on Christmas Island, marks the end of a long, and often treacherous, journey that has been physically and emotionally demanding. It also marks the beginning of a new journey within the Australian immigration detention network. This part of the journey is characterised by restricted movement, constant political pressure to return to one's homeland, the well-documented, fast-emerging mental health concerns that arise from indefinite detention (Coffey, Kaplan, Sampson & Tucci, 2010), and the hopelessness and despair generated by these circumstances of ongoing trauma (Sehwal, 2014). The trauma I speak about here is in relation to diverse experiences of persecution, displacement and multiple losses of rights, people, land and possessions held precious. It includes the trauma associated with the journey to reach

Australia and the ongoing trauma of detention, which strips people, families and communities of dignity and autonomy.

People who interpret

Counselling work with people being held in detention centres involves working alongside interpreters. As a counselling agency, we are not given the option to request a particular interpreter; however, we may request an interpreter of a particular gender, or an interpreter who can address specific needs regarding language or dialect. There is often a different interpreter for each conversation with a person seeking asylum.

On Christmas Island, interpreters are employed on short contracts and divide their time between all the stakeholders. In a day, they might work with detention health services, Department of Immigration workers, police, detention centre operators, and our external counselling service. The types of conversations and agendas range dramatically, and interpreters are witness to asylum seekers sharing diverse narratives of their lives in ways that have differing effects and consequences such as the type of support they receive, medical care, if they will be housed with family members, if they can access legal services, whether their claims will be validated or whether they will face involuntary deportation.

Interpreters often come from the same or similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds as those seeking asylum. Some interpreters have themselves fled persecution. They are subject, at times, to similar experiences of discrimination within Australia and, more specifically, within the detention context. These conditions influence the ways we engage in counselling conversations that involve interpreters. There is a sense at times of responding to multiple injustices for multiple people. In addition, interpreters are required to work within strict guidelines that limit contact with 'clients' outside formal sessions. Although I understand that these guidelines are based on notions of 'professional conduct', I can't help but wonder whether the 'professional' separation of people who interpret and people who seek asylum is not a reflection of suspicion about possible alliances forming – a concern about encouraging a sense of connectedness or community. This invites us to consider Vikki Reynolds' question: 'How can we hold on to solidarity in political contexts that set us up against each other?' (Reynolds & Polanco, 2012, p. 19).

Multiple, ongoing injustices

Our collective knowledge of trauma has grown because of the wisdom generated by people in regions of the world that

have been affected by conflict and hostility. In considering ways to respond to those who seek asylum, it can be helpful to consider three significant understandings of trauma: trauma as multiple, trauma as ongoing, and trauma as something that people resist. Despite the usefulness of these understandings, we might also question the framing of people's experiences as trauma, and instead consider understandings related to social justice and human rights.

In the context of those seeking asylum and held in mandatory immigration detention centres, we need to understand trauma as resulting from multiple experiences, as distinct from the traditional notion of PTSD arising from a single event. We also need to understand trauma as ongoing, rather than having occurred in the past:

What our people experience is not 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD). The trauma is not past, it is not 'post', it is continuing. We deal with what we have come to call Continuing Traumatic Stress Disorder (CTSD). More than 80% of our clients suffer from multiple traumas. It is not one single act of trauma that we experience and then try to recover from. For many individuals and families, events occur on a regular basis, if not on a daily basis, that remind them of past traumas. (Sehwal, 2014, p. 8)

As Dr Rita Giacaman (2014) has eloquently pointed out, the dominant Western medical response to trauma has been diagnosis and medication. In the context of multiple, ongoing trauma, 'diagnosis and treatment' often directly reduces people's connection to the local, cultural and family practices that help them to endure and sustain. For people seeking asylum, the idea of displacement is central: displacement from home, from land, from community, from family, from body, from faith/spirituality and identity. This central theme of displacement requires thoughtful consideration of the ways we, as counsellors or workers, practice. By offering a gentle focus on ideas of connection, belonging, and the telling and re-telling of the multiple stories that shape life and identity, we can invite restorative sustenance, moment by moment (Lee, 2013).

No-one is a passive recipient of trauma ... even in the face of overwhelming trauma, people take steps to try to protect and to preserve what they give value to. (White, 2004, p. 4)

White's insight shifts our focus from interventions that seek to support people in 'healing' from traumatic events, to conversations that make visible the ways in which people are responding to injustices and sustaining their identities, relationships, commitments and ethics. Through co-research, this knowledge and know-how about resistance

can be richly described using performance, witnessing (Reynolds, Bahman, Hammoud-Beckett, Sanders & Haworth, 2014) and definitional ceremonies.

Social justice and human rights narratives are central to understanding stories of personal resistance within histories and legacies of persecution and hardship.

Throughout the process of offering healing and psychotherapy, we also try to notice when people are making a stand for other people's human rights. There might be examples in their own family. These examples might only consist of small remarks, or statements, but if people are indicating a respect for the human rights of others, then we try to notice this and acknowledge it. These are openings to different stories of identity, stories of values and stories of agency. There are also ways of linking their small contributions to the small contributions of others. (Rasras, 2014, p. 7)

Human rights narratives invite people to consider their own skills and knowledges and the ways in which they influence the lives of others. In honouring those contributions to the lives of others, stories of identity in relationship to family and community are reclaimed and told in ways that reduce the effects of trauma and increase the accessibility and influence of alternative and sustaining stories.

We might pause and give thought to reframing trauma as injustice. In the occupied territories of Palestine, trauma medications have formed stockpiles: 'it's not medication we need. We don't want medication, we want you to advocate for social justice' (Giacaman, 2014). Perhaps by regarding people as having experienced multiple, ongoing injustices, rather than trauma, we might turn the spotlight back on the operations of power that cause people to be persecuted, discriminated against and divided based on their status or citizenship (Walia, 2014). This could further ground our therapeutic work in social justice and human rights narratives.

Finding witnesses

Dominant discourses of control shape the detention environment and culture and seek to influence health care provision. These discourses limit opportunities for outsider-witnessing practices (White, 2005, 2007) which acknowledge resistances to injustice and create possibilities for collective engagement. Through practices of externalising that acknowledge the effects of trauma and also seek out moments where there has been an act or intention in response, preferred stories of identity emerge,

tentatively and faltering. These alternative stories are fragile and delicate and may dissolve back into dominant stories of trauma if they are not echoed and offered opportunities to be performed, re-enacted, witnessed, and responded to.

Finding possible platforms and audiences is difficult in the detention setting. Often people are away from family, friends and significant figures. Lateral violence (Wingard, 2010) creates disruption and deters people from forming connections, developing a sense of community or identifying common ground with others in detention. The constant movement of people and the systemic challenges for continuity of counselling further reduce opportunities for planning, organising and offering outsider-witnessing experiences.

When cultures are fragmented and in serious disarray, proper audiences may be hard to find. Natural occasions may not be offered and then they must be artificially invented. (Myerhoff, 1982, p. 105)

My curiosity about engaging interpreters as witnesses was sparked by instances in which people working as interpreters shifted position from being 'neutral translators of words' to being 'meaningful witnesses' to people's testimonies. I found myself witnessing relationships forming and shaping between the person who was interpreting and the person seeking asylum. The signs of this shift were sometimes so subtle that it was not until after the conversation that I recognised their significance – a change in body language, a smile, a nod, an increase in attention or enthusiasm, a softening, an opening. At other times, the shift was overt, and I was compelled to offer an outsider-witnessing scaffold of sorts. This repositioning often caught me by surprise, and I wanted to be ready to respond and take hold before it dispersed like mist and was again overtaken by discourses of professionalism and neutrality.

Inviting the knowledge and witnessing of people who interpret

In writing about the culture of psychotherapy, Michael White captured the rigid structures of professionalism and their influence on determining what is and what isn't 'legitimate' knowledge with regard to practice: 'local or folk knowledges that have been generated in a person's history are marginalised, often disqualified, and displaced by the formal and expert knowledges of the professional disciplines' (1997, p. 3). Similar discourses dismiss the knowledge of interpreters, rendering them mere 'tools' to translate words from one language to another. A symptom of the politics of the detention environment is to deny interpreters

their identity and stories of life. It is almost as if they are expected to be a 'blank page' in each conversation. It seems to me that an abundance of insider knowledge (Epston, 2014) is made off limits by the politics of power within the detention system. I began to wonder what might happen if we invited and gave value to the local knowledges of interpreters. Could collaborations between people seeking asylum, people who interpret and counsellors provide new foundations for therapeutic conversations?

In the context of detention, people seeking asylum are encouraged to perform their trauma and its effects, reflecting a culture that links sickness to validity. This culture supports the idea that Australia's asylum seeker policies are based on individual worth, which can be proved through the performance of trauma (Walia, 2014). This determines which stories are given priority and the insistent demands to perform and re-perform stories of hopelessness, helplessness and despair, which serve to further separate people from their identities and distance them from their skills and knowledges, reducing their 'capacity to endure' (Giacaman, 2014).

With a commitment to providing an alternative territory to that of detention, I found myself actively inviting interpreters to be an audience to performances of identity that were incongruent with despair, hopelessness and helplessness. In this way, performances of preferred self, dignity and wellness emerged and were echoed, amplified and celebrated by the presence of these meaningful witnesses.

Locally-grown outsider-witnessing practices

Definitional ceremonies deal with the problems of invisibility and marginality; they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one's terms, garnering witnesses to one's worth, vitality and being. (Myerhoff, 1986, p. 267)

The outsider-witness practices that Michael White (2005, 2007) described introduce a number of therapeutic possibilities that I have found to be of significance to the journeys undertaken by those seeking asylum. These include ideas regarding identity formation through relationship, the thickening of preferred stories of identity, enabling contribution and co-research into insider knowledges. However, the detention setting made the more formal process of outsider witnessing and definitional ceremony challenging. Given the constraints, I initially considered outsider witnessing to be impossible. However, time and time again, through the generosity of the asylum

seekers and interpreters I worked with, the ongoing privilege of having a minimum of three people in the room for each conversation was brought to my attention. Through some spontaneous experiences that could be described within the ideas of outsider witnessing, I realised this could no longer be overlooked for fear of not 'setting it up according to the theory' and the process of adapting or co-creating began collaboratively.

When I think of these locally-grown outsider-witnessing practices, I do not think of a shiny fruit from a big chain supermarket. I imagine a unique piece of fruit, perhaps straight from the plant, with spots and imperfections, but with smell and taste and character. Developing these outsider-witnessing moments with people seeking asylum and people who interpret was similarly bumpy but enriching. Having met with people from many different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, I am cautious in writing not to place everyone in some homogenous community. I wish, rather, to explore this work with a strong focus on shared themes or common ground (Bracho, 2000) that can be further clarified and diversified. There has been a diversity of entry points to witnessing opportunities, and a number of different types of narratively influenced conversations have been witnessed and responded to.

Inviting people who interpret to become outsider witnesses adds extra layers to an already multilayered area of ethics and power relationships. There can be dual or multiple process occurring simultaneously. This has led me to consider the ways in which class, culture, gender, age, ability and education influence the relationship between myself and the person seeking asylum, as well as the ways in which the interpreter engages with the person seeking asylum and the counsellor. Being attentive is one thing; responding when there are issues relating to power occurring right in the moment requires considerable care and thoughtfulness. I'm alert to times when an operation of power is palpable in the room and take steps towards declining invitations to join with ideas that are underpinned by moral judgement, advice giving, comparison or diagnosis, to name a few. For example, there have been times when, mid-conversation, the person who is interpreting may offer 'all he needs to do is ...'. In these moments, I'm invited to join in advice giving. In declining this invitation, I seek to draw on absent but implicit values. I respond with something like, 'I'm wondering if you are offering this advice according to some sense of care and concern for ...'. I wish to extend care and adhere to cultural social etiquette, and at the same time to remain influential in order to move the conversation away from advice giving. I am alert to the significant power interpreters can hold through language, class, culture and gender, and seek ways of responding that retain everyone's sense of dignity and also ensure that the person who is

sharing the intimacy of their stories is held at the centre with respect and safety.

I quickly realised that when working cross-linguistically, I could not replicate the outsider-witnessing questions I had read and used in English. I have been learning to convey concepts, ideas and principles through short, concise statements and questions. At times when I cannot rely solely on the spoken word to communicate, I find my head filling with images and I am attentive to any metaphor that might act as a bridge to a territory of shared understanding. Co-researching with people who seek asylum and people who interpret has opened my world up to a different way of thinking about narrative therapy. My focus has shifted from developing literary questions to considering ways that I might convey narrative ideas by offering it as a framework. I seek to use imagery, landscapes, descriptions, local stories, poems and songs offered by asylum seekers and interpreters to decorate these narrative scaffolds (Abu-Rayyan, 2009). This seems to contribute to a territory of shared understanding; a rich tapestry of meaning that can be explored, negotiated and attributed. These images and metaphors offer gentle, creative entry points contributing to islands of safety. They are familiar resting places from which stories of suffering can be shared in tolerable, safe ways.

It has been important to find culturally appropriate ways of framing outsider-witnessing questions. During my time learning and co-researching with people seeking asylum, I have been inducted into knowledges of cultural context, particularly regarding the dance of social etiquette and 'relationships of respect'. A direct question requesting that someone evaluate or judge the 'effectiveness' or 'helpfulness' of counselling, or 'whether they are improving', makes for an awkward moment and elicits a culturally sanctioned polite response of 'yes, very good', 'yes, better'. These types of direct questions, including asking in front of an interpreter whether the interpreter is understanding them or speaks the same dialect, or whether they are feeling comfortable, are actually asking the person to break their cultural practices regarding relationships of respect. To display disrespect or cause something perceived as an insult weighs heavily on people's hearts and tears at the fabric of community and society. Direct questions or requests to voice complaint or disagreement reinforce the power of 'professionals' who hold the status of 'expert'. In the context of fleeing persecution and seeking asylum, to disagree or cause a perceived insult can have very serious consequences for a person's safety, the safety of their family, access to work and study, and other aspects of daily life.

The way in which I offer questions is multilayered and considers different ideas concurrently. I am conscious

that there are two audiences to each question: the person seeking asylum, and the person interpreting. This is further complicated when the interpreter is also acting as an outsider witness. A slow and gentle pace is essential in order to be transparent and to explain the thinking behind a question before asking the question. marcela polanco (2013) clearly outlined the method she has adopted for passing narrative practices through the critical viewpoint of her culture and language before translating back into English, to give a sense of what has occurred in the transformation. I have attempted to adopt a similar rhythm in conversations.

Poh: Explains a proposed narrative question and my intentions in asking it (**decolonial stance**). Allows space for questions about the question (**cultural agency**). Seeks agreement to *try* the question or a preference to move on to something else (**decolonial stance**).

If there is agreement to try the question:

Poh: offers a narrative question

Interpreter: offers the question in the person's language

Asylum seeker: responds to interpreter's phrasing of Poh's question

Interpreter: paraphrases person's response in English

Poh: offers 'my understanding' of what the interpreter has offered as the person's answer to the translated narrative question (**decolonial stance**)

Interpreter: paraphrases Poh's understanding in the person's language

Asylum seeker: offers corrections, additions or other teachings in response (**cultural agency**).

This rhythm allows space and time for the person who is interpreting to understand in a way that helps them to walk alongside me, figuratively speaking. I have found this contributes to establishing common ground and shared understandings. The pace also offers many exit points from the unfolding line of enquiry.

Gender and age

Negotiating the gender space was a significant project of co-research. By taking a respectfully curious position, I encouraged people seeking asylum and people who interpret to teach me about how they situate themselves in relationship to my gender. I imagined that adopting a

decolonising stance and remaining decentred and influential contributed to a context in which many people started telling me, 'you remind me of my sister/niece/daughter/aunty', or, 'it felt like I was speaking to a family member'. Reflecting on these comments I began to think about how my being positioned culturally and socially as a female family member may give value or social validity to the counselling context as a confiding and confidential space. I certainly did not seek to take on the role of family member, but rather saw myself as being 'associated with'. This blended wonderfully with the 'club of life' metaphor, and contributed to the intimacy that occurs in the counselling setting despite being of different genders and not belonging to the same family.

I sought also to keep the people who were not present – partners, wives, husbands – metaphorically present with the intention of accountability and respect. This was influenced by my previous work with people affected by family and domestic violence. I believe there is a responsibility to honour those connections and situate myself in respect to established and important relationships. If there was a sense of starting to replace existing relationships, that would be a sign that the counselling relationship was moving in a direction counter to what I seek to create in collaboration. In addition, when I accepted the familial positions being bestowed upon me and made reference to my position in later conversations, the response was often filled with delight, joy and warmth, indicating a connection with something familiar and known.

However, I have noticed that when the invitation does not come from the person seeking asylum, but rather the person who is interpreting, it creates a different context – one in which issues of power relationships can arise. In those situations it appears to create the conditions for people who interpret to step into roles of advice giving or judgement, which significantly undermine the person's narrative and performance of self. Relationships with interpreters can be much more closely linked to asylum seekers' own experiences, as distinct from relationships with me, as someone positioned outside the person's culture. This brings forth considerations of safety and much thoughtfulness about what we are asking when we invite people who interpret to reposition as a meaningful witness.

An invitation to take tea

I recall a conversation with Ali centred on his concerns for the safety of loved ones in Afghanistan. The mood was sombre and Ali had barely looked up while talking. Amir was providing interpretation and I had not worked alongside him before. As is often the case when working with a new

interpreter in an intimate setting like counselling, I was aware of being watched by Amir and had a sense of him carefully checking the types of questions I was offering to Ali. When I was new to these experiences of becoming acquainted with interpreters, I often grappled with the voice of failure about my 'professionalism' and 'ability'. Over time, I became more comfortable with the process of interpreters getting to know me within therapeutic conversations. While I was first and foremost present with Ali, I also noticed the ways in which Amir offered his interpretations, and his posture in relation to Ali and myself. I stayed curious about the ways in which Ali and Amir were engaging, and the ways in which the three of us were interacting collectively. I am not interested in 'interpreting' or 'analysing' such expressions, but rather in being attentive to the ways they influence the types of questions I offer or prompt me to enquire further about an expression. I am on the lookout for moments of congruence and 'joining with' (collectively or individually). I find it useful to stay alert to and decline invitations to ideas and thoughts that polarise these relationship dynamics, and instead to find ways to respond to any direction that arises.

Ali's body had a rigidity to it, a posture that brought to my mind an image of the walls of a dam holding the enormous weight of a river. Ali was describing a sense of helplessness made worse by the restrictive detention environment that always sought to limit his opportunities to take action. At some stage in the conversation, Ali paused to ask for the air-conditioning to be lowered as he was feeling faint due to fasting. I had limited knowledge about fasting and asked Ali if it was currently Ramadan or whether he was engaging in another practice of fasting. I was also aware of Amir shifting in his seat in a way that made me wonder if he was concerned about where I was headed with my question. On reflection, this illustrates the generous trust that both asylum seekers and interpreters afford me as I navigate cautiously between the worlds of narrative practice and people's own worlds of culture, language and meaning. I also consider expressions of concern or caution from people who interpret as reflections of practices of colonisation and persecution that they may have been subject to. Moment by moment, I demonstrate in my words, expressions and actions that I am seeking to adopt a position that does not replicate those harmful power relations.

Ali shared that he had decided to continue fasting after Ramadan as a way of staying connected to his family's plight and to demonstrate to Allah the strength of his love for his family and his prayer for them to be safe. At this point in the conversation, I noticed Amir sit forward. I sensed that his curiosity had been sparked. Other signs that alerted me to his increased engagement were that, as I asked questions that invited a richer description of the

practice of fasting, especially about how Ali came to the decision to continue fasting past Ramadan, Amir began nodding and affirming Ali's responses. In return, Ali began to make more eye contact with Amir, perhaps curious at his apparent enthusiasm and affirmation. To be clear, I did not see Amir's actions in congruence with ideas of approval, but more as an appreciation for Ali's descriptions of his actions and the unfolding meaning he was attributing to them. Ali spoke about fasting as a way of demonstrating his faith and devotion. He said that it gave him a sense of 'giving something' that was within his current means. As Amir interpreted Ali's words to me, he briefly placed his hand on his chest, a gesture that sparked my curiosity. Seeing Amir's gesture in the context of the exchange gave me the confidence to invite Amir to take up a new position as a meaningful witness to Amir's story.

I spoke to Ali: 'Ali, as you were speaking, I noticed Amir place his hand on his chest. Would it be okay with you if I asked Amir if he would feel comfortable to share with us what stood out for him as you were speaking? If Amir feels okay to respond I will then check in with you about your experience. If at any stage it starts feeling a bit strange or awkward, we could always pause and take time for a cup of tea.' It wasn't the most eloquent question and I did not offer it as one long sentence. A more accurate description of the purposeful and slow performance would be: 'Ali, as you were speaking, I noticed Amir placing his hand on his chest' (at the same time I placed my hand on my chest, echoing the gesture). Amir (perhaps slightly surprised that the focus had turned to him) shared my words with Ali, repeating the gesture. As Ali was listening he echoed the gesture back to Amir. Then, as the thick description of the gesture surrounded us and before it could dissipate, I asked, 'Would it be okay for you if I ask Amir if he would feel comfortable to share with us what stood out for him as you were speaking?' I received a yes in response with expressions of the body that brought to my mind the image of tentatively stepping inside a jungle: sort of curious and sort of hesitant. I went on not in response to the verbal yes but more so to the expressions of Ali and Amir. 'If Amir feels okay to respond I will then check in with you about your experience. If at any stage it starts feeling a bit strange or awkward we could always pause and take time for a cup of tea.' I received a smile in response to the offer of tea and following that laughter as Amir interpreted these words to Ali. After all, we had entered into a new territory with interest and trepidation, and, by evoking the image of tea, a familiar cultural practice, we found ourselves on safe and common ground. We were ready to try out a locally grown type of outsider witnessing.

Before we go on, I want to take a moment to describe the thinking that guided the way I offered this idea of outsider witnessing. I was aware that I needed to offer multiple

invitations to two people simultaneously. As my question to Ali would first pass to Amir, I wanted to give Amir notice of the direction I was thinking about taking. I wanted to avoid asking Amir directly for two reasons: because a conversation between myself and the interpreter in front of a person without that particular language would be highly disrespectful and harmful to the relational ethics I seek to be guided by. And, from the same position of valuing an ethic of collaboration, I didn't want Amir to feel obliged to agree. I wanted to convey to Ali the ways in which I would be taking care to ensure this possible direction in our conversation held his safety and comfort at the centre. It was important that I break down the question into smaller offerings as both the pace and the gentle introduction would prevent Ali 'being taken by surprise' (an experience full of risk in the presence of trauma) and would offer many opportunities to exit the unfolding scaffolding.

Amir responded first to me and then, when invited by me, to Ali. Amir said that as Ali was talking he was reminded of a time in his life when his family had engaged in fasting outside of the time of Ramadan, during a difficult period where a family member had been detained. I recall feeling deeply moved by Amir's sharing, that he had taken up the invitation and been very open about his experiences. This experience highlighted for me the dangers as well as the loss of positioning people who interpret as 'neutral translators of words' who, under the guise of professionalism, are rendered impersonal and invisible. Amir's sharing brought to the foreground the concurrent narratives unfolding in this adaptation of outsider-witnessing practices, which require careful and close attention. As Amir was speaking, I was very focused on maintaining a gentle, yet firm, influence on the conversation.

When working with interpreters, I have moments to pause, reflect and consider while my words are being relayed. I considered Michael White's caution that outsider witnesses should not become central. I needed to find ways to hold Ali's story at the centre. 'Was there an expression or word or image that Ali shared that caught your attention and reminded you of your own family practices of fasting?' Amir responded that he was interested in what Ali had said about how the practice of fasting was like giving of oneself, and it reminded him of how he had also felt purposeful in the act of fasting and how it provided a sense of 'togetherness' with his family. Amir began another story at this point, but I respectfully interrupted and offered back a summary of what Amir had shared as a way of slowing down and giving space for reflection and consideration. I hoped to hold Amir and Ali's shared experience in the space as an acknowledgement of the legacies of their skills and knowledges for taking action in the face of helplessness and despair. My summary was echoed in Amir's interpretation to

Ali – this practice of preventing words from slipping by. In the echoing, amplification occurs and meaning can be more richly attributed.

I offered Amir one last question, 'In what you heard Ali speak about, did it give you a clue or idea as to what it is that Ali might give value to?' To be honest, Amir looked at me blankly and I apologised for the clumsy question and tried again. 'As Ali was speaking and you heard about his decision and practice of fasting outside Ramadan, can you think about what that says about what Ali values or holds precious?' Amir shared that he thought Ali's story showed his determination to find a way to keep giving to his family. When I asked Amir about what this course of action might say about what is precious to Ali, Amir told me it was obvious – love and care for family. When Ali heard this he joined with Amir in looking at me with an 'isn't it obvious' expression! That expression and moment were very precious to me, as I thrive in the position of being taught insider knowledge and having confirmation that the process of co-research is well under way.

I could have continued to find out a little bit about what Amir might suppose Ali's family would make of his practice of fasting, or to consider images or metaphors, but I have noticed that working alongside interpreters really extends the length of a conversation and, with these three or four questions, most of the session time had passed. I wanted to avoid rushing and decided at that point to turn to Ali to enquire about what it had been like for him to hear Amir's reflections.

I couldn't help but notice a slight change in the atmosphere. An image came to my mind of the three of us moving from sitting formally in a counselling room, each on our own separate chair, to sitting together on a blanket (a patchwork of multiple colours and designs) in the countryside. Perhaps this was a reflection of the relationship forming in those

moments. Ali shared that hearing from Amir had made him think more about his practice of fasting and how it was his way to take action in such a restrictive environment. Ali also said that it meant a lot to him to hear Amir notice his dedication to and love of his family. The conversation had made him feel closer to his family. He felt less alone.

On this day I witnessed a small and frail seed of an alternative story grow and blossom through the practice of repositioning a person who interprets as a meaningful witness. This conversation uncovered insider knowledge and a common ground from which experiences of solidarity, collective cultural/family practices and dignity could be performed and witnessed.

Ali and I continued to meet for a number of weeks following this conversation but we didn't have the opportunity to meet with Amir again. Interestingly, Amir nevertheless remained a presence and an honoured guest in Ali's 'club of life'. He was often mentioned with a smile when we did actually pause to take tea. This alerted me to the legacies that even the briefest of encounters can have in the stories of people's lives.

Note

¹ Pseudonym names are used throughout this paper.

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