



Intersectional narrative practice with queer Muslim clients

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This paper aims to explore the way intersectional narrative practice offers rich descriptions of preferred storylines for queer Muslims in response to racism, sexism, heterosexual dominance and Islamophobia. Drawing on two original narrative practice examples with my queer Muslim clients, it outlines how intersectional narrative practice responds to the unique challenges Muslims face in navigating multiple systemic barriers (Crenshaw, 1989). In praxis I have intentionally incorporated different perspectives of cultural humility, feminism, unique-nuanced outcomes, the failure map, the queer art of failure, and collective narrative practices to reveal the nuances of care required in working with people and communities responding to systemic hardships. The outcomes of the practice examples demonstrate that Narrative Therapy and Community Work (NTCW) provides a framework for social justice and inclusive practices. The stories we tell and are told exist in a context that is shaped by broader sociopolitical discourses, and exploring shame and strength, failure and faith, loss and love through an intersectional narrative practice allows queer Muslims to grow and heal, grounded in their faith and family.

A version of this paper is forthcoming in *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. It is distributed here with permission from the journal publishers. Suggested citation:

Hammoud-Beckett, S. (in press). Intersectional narrative practice with queer Muslim clients. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. Retrieved from <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/courses/feminisms-narrative-therapy-and-narrative-practice>

Introduction: The personal, professional and political

The wound is the place where the Light enters you. (Rumi)

I am incredibly privileged to have been 'invited in' to explore the diverse voices of queer Muslims. In the 2016 census, Muslims accounted for 2.6% of the Australian population (ABS,2016) and yet there is a dearth of practitioners, research and resources that support sexuality, gender, and bodily diverse people from Muslim communities (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2018). Thus, the practice innovation discussed in this paper seeks to privilege the voices of queer Muslim communities that are overly policed and rarely heard (Kugle, 2014).

Personally, my work with sexuality, gender, and bodily diverse people is shaped by the love I have for my younger brother. Together we witnessed and experienced significant violent events in relation to the expectation that he needed to come out. As a result, I was propelled into narrative practice activism in responding to western standards of practice that can cause harm in espousing coming out as the only way to health and wellbeing. By sowing the seeds of love, we managed to discover safer ways to exist by way of inviting people to come in, rather than come out (Hammoud-Beckett, 2007). Coming out is a privileged position, a western construct, and some people I meet from Muslim backgrounds struggle with this concept. As Nonna and Aroosa stipulate 'it isn't for everyone...the reason we are not out to our families is complicated...why is being out a rite of passage? Why do people want to know if someone is out? What assumptions accompany this question?' (2018, p. 186).

Therapeutic conversations with Muslim and non-Muslim folks report the dichotomy of either being 'in the closet' or 'coming out' is limiting. These polarised positions can create pressure to perform a prescribed sexual and gender identity. I acknowledge the work done in the field of supporting and developing LGBT + communities has been invaluable, and the concept of 'coming out' has played a vital part in rendering universal human rights issues. I honour the importance of 'coming out' as a community concept. It has given voice and impetus to broader struggles to attain legal recognition and support services for communities in mostly Western contexts.

However, people who are navigating racism, Islamophobia, transphobia, homophobia, have asserted that the concept of coming out did not fit for them. To quote the philosopher Wittgenstein, who states 'the limits of language, are the limits of my world, I was inspired by

these young people to language a new term called 'Inviting People to Come In.' Via this process, people make a conscious selection of who they would like to share this precious information about their diverse sex, sexuality and gender, and 'welcome people in' to become a member of this special club of life. Accordingly, they are not coming out of a dark closet, they are inviting significant others into their treasure chest. This reframing reclaims a sense of agency (Hammoud-Beckett, 2007).

Professionally, I have witnessed the unconscionable consequences of coming out. Some people have endured exorcisms, spiritual healings, beatings, forced marriages, and being sent on religious pilgrimages. Others have been kicked out of home, or find health practitioners that do reparative therapies. Understandably, people experience significant mental health distress as a response. This is not because they are pathological. It is a response to the pain of discrimination which is unbearable. Experiencing this sort of exclusion, abuse and isolation, invariably some people will suffer (Reynolds, 2016). It is not their sexuality and gender that is addressed in intersectional narrative practice, but the pain and suffering, as well as the resilience and healing resulting from these discriminatory experiences.

Politically, Kitzinger and Perkins assert, 'experience is never raw; it is embedded in a social web of interpretation and reinterpretation' (1993, p.191). Social processes put people into social positions and categories. Within the same systems that seek to oppress, I have learnt via narrative practice, there is space for counter-narratives of resistance to emerge (Eidoo, 2018). This paper is underpinned with the premise of the 'personal is the political' as coined by Carol Hanisch in 1971 (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993, p. 183). And the 'political is the professional' as expressed by Cheryl White (personal communication, 2010). Thus, intersectional narrative practice embraces the personal, professional and political, and embodies a form of cultural humility in its engagement.



Figure 1. A photo of my mother, Mariam, and my brother, Mohammed

Intersectional narrative practice – Cultural humility

Join the community of saints and know the delight of your own Soul. Enter the ruins of your Heart and Learn the Meaning of Humility. (Rumi)

Dominguez (2017) writes about respectful ways to engage with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual people of colour (LGBTQIA-POC) as they represent diverse and intersectional identities. He notes the merits of cultural humility by reminding the service provider that assumptions of universal knowledge risk misconception and invalidation. The humble clinician avoids the statement “I understand,” and instead asks, “How might you help me to see?” (Dominguez, 2017, p.203).

Cultural humility invites me to attend to the intersections of my own power and privilege. It is an ethical stance that fits with my values and also corresponds with White and Epston’s claim, ‘We

would assume that we are always participating simultaneously in domains of power and knowledge. Thus we would endeavour to establish conditions that encourage us to critique our own practices formed in this domain' (1990, p.29). As we are seldom power free or neutral, my task is to invite rigour, and critique the implications of my role. I entertain the position of being a host in people's lives (Aman, 2006). Hospitality, *dyafa*, is considered a virtue in my Islamic heritage. This is of particular relevance in the way questions are hosted rather than imposed. Importantly, Freedman and Coombs suggest 'questions are not neutral, they are more open ended than statements. People can choose how to respond to a question, and when we genuinely listen to and value people's response, their ideas, not ours, stay at the centre of therapy' (1996, p.277). Hence, entertaining a position of host privileges people's lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe.

Resonantly, Heath asserts that in order to live an ethical life, she actively seeks 'to understand the ways in which I wield power, the places I hold unexamined privilege, the prejudices I have unthinkingly acquired' (2012, p.13). Heath's pertinent point indicates that our social connections tend to be with people who are fundamentally like-minded. We orbit around a common epistemological universe. Our solidarity is implied upon a shared condition, where we do not have to work too hard to find and negotiate shared identity spaces. With the current iteration, an accountability is required to examine the ways of not sleepwalking through life (Heron, 1996). This accountability invites practitioners to explore the accumulated effects of systematic sidelining of particular ideologies. As a response, the imaginative space as described by hooks (1991, 1996) is embraced. This allows practitioners to enter the realm of the unknown.

This may indeed require them to relinquish privilege and their acceptance of dominant ways of knowing as preparation for hearing different voices. The ability to be empathetic is rooted in our capacity to imagine. Imagination can enable us to understand fictive realities that in no way resemble where we are coming from...to enter realms of the unknown with no will to colonize or possess. (hooks, 1991, pp. 57-58)

When people are referred to me, there is a misconception that being from the same religious background, I might know better. I am transparent about my 'not knowing' position. This is an expression of cultural humility and specifically relates to the narrative practices of 'decentering the voice of the therapist' and bringing forward people's own assessments of life (M. White, 2011, p.3). Here is a practice example related to the above mentioned discussion:

Saba: I was referred to you because they said you get our culture and religion.

Sek: It is nice to have good references, however just because I live in an Aussie Lebanese Muslim context does not qualify me to understand your lived experience. I can imagine what it might be like, but I really do not know until you describe that forme. How does that sound?

Taking up the position of host supports my pursuit of accountable narrative practices, as I attempt to relinquish dominant ways of knowing, decentre my voice, and commit to being open to the realm of imagination. Moreover, this embodies the intersectional narrative practice of cultural humility.

Intersectional narrative practice – feminism

I finally understood what my grandmother meant. If I wasn't comfortable with myself, I would never be comfortable. (Marjane Satrapi)

My theoretical foundations rests on the brilliant work of Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), Black Feminism (Collins, 2000), Indigenous scholars (Moreton-Robinson, 2000) and Middle-Eastern academics (El Saadawi, 1983). They have rendered visible how privilege and power are unchallenged practices in mainstream society. Also they demonstrate the way gender, race, class and other factors intersect and overlap with one another. Cheryl White has been instrumental in bringing forward a feminist lens to narrative therapy. She proposes challenging taken for granted power structures, dominant heterosexist assumptions and politicising the concept of 'voice' by considering questions such as, 'whose body is this?', 'whose life is this?', 'whose story is this?' (2016, p.49). Arab journalist, Joumana Haddad makes a related claim, 'stories only happen to those who are able to tell them.' She reflects that as an Arab woman journalist, at times she is restricted from speaking her truth: 'it means that your life and your stories must be repressed, clamped down and encoded; rewritten to suit the vestal guardians of Arab chastity' (2010, p. 21). Intersectional narrative practice espouses the feminist ethic and builds upon a coalition of knowledge sources not only from NTCW but also innovates from wider sources. Accordingly, this offers the space for voices from the margins to be heard and assists in honouring culturally responsive understandings. Amina Wadud is the first woman to have led an Islamic prayer in the United States. In her readings of the sacred text, she stipulates, 'every reader interprets in the act of reading' (1999, p.94) and this is shaped by attitudes, experiences, memory, language and a certain perception of gender. Wadud further affirms, 'no interpretation is definitive. Words, particles, syntax of verses and their context are all part of the multi-layered interpretation process' (Wadud, 1999, p. 97). She contextualises that the Holy Quran

reflects the existing language and culture of seventh century Arabia. To highlight this point, one client said, 'the Quran is like a mirror, you read and interpret the Holy Book in a way that reflects your worldviews'. Here is another conversation with a client about the Quran:

Sarah: My family says in the Quran, I'm going to hell.

Sek: Would you be interested in hearing another Islamic scholar's perspective?

Sarah: Maybe. Depends on what they say?

Sek: Amina Wadud believes the interpretation of the Holy Quran is shaped by the reader, their gender, their attitudes and experiences. She believes no interpretation is definitive. What do you think about this understanding of the Holy text?

Sarah: That's interesting.

People from religious backgrounds often despair about the interpretations of religious texts in relation to folks with diverse bodies, genders and relationships. In this paper, I bring forward a diversity of perspectives to scaffold narrative questions with the intent of revisioning historical claims. Seeking diverse voices offers a platform to deconstruct and reconstruct the politics of experience shaped by patriarchy. In addition, via an analysis of power and resistance, freedom lies in our capacity to discover the historical links... and to resist the ways in which we have already been classified and identified by dominant discourses. This means discovering new ways of understanding ourselves and each other, refusing to accept dominant cultural characterisations of our practices and desires, and redefining them from within resistant cultures. (Sawicki 1988, p. 186)

Similarly, White pertinently claims,

The practices of narrative therapy ... not only contribute to an expansion of people's narrative resources, but also make it possible for them to alter their relationship with their own histories. This is not to re-frame or to change history by revisioning it, but to re-engage with personal history on new terms (2000, p. 36).

Overall, intersectional understandings expose political agendas and open space to write future scripts. It is important to note the way history is constructed, because 'the history of some is not the history of others' (Foucault, 1997, p.69). Sovereignty and free speech are used to the benefit of some, but not all. Certain political mechanisms continue to exclude and reject the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the ongoing effects of colonisation; Jews and

Anti-Semitism; Muslims and Islamophobia. In the face of the recent Islamophobia Christchurch attack, Arab-Australian academic Randa Abdul-Fattah (2019) resoundingly asserted,

We were told the borders would be patrolled by whiteness, not the indigenous owners of this land. Our mosques were vandalised, our hijabs ripped off our heads, our leaders seduced into accepting we needed to be spied on, racialised and marked as a suspect community at-risk of 'radicalisation' via countering violent extremism programmes.

We told you the threat is still white supremacy. You ignored us and said: "Accept Australian values or go back to where you came from."

Intersectional narrative practice privileges a feminist framework and examines the historical narratives that have a potent force in shaping the past and present. It invites people to engage and mould their unique outcomes in the face of these inherited intersectional forces.

Intersectional narrative practice – Unique nuanced outcome

Culture and education are the lethal weapons against all kinds of fundamentalism. (Marjane Satrapi)

A major theme in my work is the relationship and responses to hegemonic societal forces. There is a complex negotiation in attempting to find ways to belong within intersectional identities, albeit in the context of people with diverse bodies, genders and relationships, their families, religion, culture and the broader Australian society. Echoing the findings of the Young and Queer Report, some young people of faith and colour spoke 'about not coming out to their families for fear of being rejected. This further enhanced their feelings of isolation and shame' (Clerke & Scott, 2019, p.26).

In developing intersectional narrative practice, I have discovered the importance of not oversimplifying the problem as being related to just culture and religion. Parents and carers worry for their children regardless of religion or culture. Other factors such as class, patriarchy and poverty impact on people's lives. Reducing concerns to religious and cultural issues pushes people to defend their beliefs, and find ways to justify degrading people of diverse genders and sexualities out of respect for their religion. Consequently, this shapes conversations into a polarised debate. Space to explore becomes limited rather than nuanced. Nuances offer flexibility for unique outcomes to emerge. This point is reinforced by Whitaker who claims, 'treating Islam, rather than social attitudes, as the main obstacle minimises the help for reform and gives fuel to those on both sides of the divide who favour a clash of civilisation approach' (2011, p.125).

Thus, my intersectional narrative practice is anchored by the main premise of NTCW, 'The person, community, faith, religion is not the problem; The problem is the problem' (White & Epston, 1990). Vociferously, Kugle states,

What does Islam say about (trans) homosexuals? ... Islam has no voice at all. Only Muslims have voices. Only they speak in the name of Islam, and Muslims speak from distinct and political (predominantly patriarchal) contexts that shape how they practise and represent their religious tradition. Islam is a complex tradition with many variations, internal contradictions, and creative ambiguities. (2010, pp. 20-21)

In my praxis, I have leaned on the work of Halberstam who provides a theoretical framework in understanding the force of hegemony,

the term for a multilayered system by which a dominant group achieves power not through coercion but through the production of an interlocking system of ideas which persuades people of the rightness of any given set of often contradictory ideas and perspectives. (2011, p. 17)

Therefore, if people are not submitting to these dominant social attitudes, they often experience a sense of failure. White also identifies this sense of personal failure, drawing on Foucault's analysis of modern power,

traditional systems of power operate through moral judgement (as an outcome of which it is determined that people's actions are either right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral) and through structures of coercion, modern systems of power encourage people to actively participate in the judgement of their own and each other's lives according to socially constructed norms. (2004, p. 168)

Queer Theory consolidates these points and highlights the way categories of normal are produced and maintained in our communities. This is conveyed in *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam (2011) argues that failure can be recruited as a prolific adventure to deconstruct alternatives to conformity. Accordingly, Halberstam (2011) notes success is usually measured by heteronormative and patriarchal standards, thus failing to live up to these standards can offer creative ways of existing and navigating the world.

Similarly, White states that navigating personal failure can provide people 'avenues for exploratory journeys into other territories of their lives in which their acts of refusal (or acts that might be so constructed) of modern power might be identified and become richly known' (2004, p. 175). Within intersectional narrative practice the nuances are illuminated in the face of hegemonic and rigid storylines. Therefore, not only is the attention on the act of refusal, there is also space to embrace the 'utility of failure... By way of getting lost over finding our way' (Halberstam, 2011, p.15-16). And

that ‘Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world’ (Halberstam 2011, p. 2-3).

In the transcript below, I offer an example of intersectional narrative practice, in practice. I present the implementation of the praxis as being subtle, innovative and radical. The transcript is an excerpt of a conversation with Sami, 30 years old and identifying as a POC and a trans- man. Due to a chronic illness, medical transitioning is not an option. There has been significant grief in relation to not being able to transition, and a sense of not fitting in with their Arabic family. The conversation draws upon Michael White’s failure map (in bold) in order to scaffold our conversation. It also intersects with other narrative practices and introduces Halberstam’s (2011) ‘utility in failure’ idea. The therapeutic conversation reveals how failure is a resource for unique and nuanced outcomes.

Table 1. Concepts drawn on for intersectional narrative practice

Concepts from White (2004, pp. 194–200), Halberstam (2014)	Examples of Sekneh translating the concepts into praxis
Offering hospitality, <i>dyafa</i>, in questions	Sek: I am incredibly grateful to people who grant me permission to share their stories. If at any stage during this interview you would like me to stop, can you please indicate this to me?
Negotiation of power: De-centred practice Cultural Humility practice	<p>Sami: Of course.</p> <p>Sek: Is there any preferred ways of letting me know?</p> <p>Sami: I’ll ask you to stop recording.</p> <p>Sek: OK great. Is there anything else that might be helpful for me to do at that time?</p> <p>Sami: Not sure, not really.</p> <p>Sek: I am hoping this therapeutic process is honouring your experience and if at any stage the process is not helpful, are you able to alert me to that?</p>

	<p>Sami: Of course. I appreciate you checking in in this way.</p> <p>Sek: Is it OK I ask, what is it you appreciate about the checking in process?</p> <p>Sami: It feels like you care.</p> <p>Sek: This sense of care, what effect do you think it might have on our conversation?</p> <p>Sami: I don't know. Maybe I feel more comfortable in talking and sharing.</p> <p>Sek: At any stage if the questions or this therapeutic process shift from care, please let me know?</p> <p>Sami: For sure.</p> <p>Sek: OK I'm going to delve into some questions now. In our previous conversations, we have explored what it means to be gender fluid and from a Muslim background. As we've explored, most of our communities lay a great deal on socially approved codes of behaviour, and at times diversity is given far less space. There is this requirement to conform, and it is policed and reinforced through institutions, not just Muslim communities but it is also evident in western discourse too. However Sami you have talked at length about the power of shaming and how it evokes a sense of not feeling worthy or good enough. How do you think this practice of shaming recruits people into measuring their worth?</p> <p>Sami: Well you know, it's the messages we are bombarded with. You need to act masculine and feminine enough to be accepted.</p> <p>If you don't fulfil this role, then you are seen as an anomaly. Even though I get this intellectually, I still feel hurt when my family say I'm a horrible daughter and to dress properly or to grow my hair. I hate the feeling of hurting my family. I really appreciate their dedication to family in the midst of all of this. I never want to let them down. I want to be there for them but they won't let me unless I present in a particular way. I feel ashamed and have failed in my role as their eldest child.</p>
<p>Failure: Structured by questions that are revealing</p>	<p>Sek: I am sorry to hear about the hurt and shame this causes you Sami. When these comments are expressed Sami,</p>

<p>of the expectations, norms and standards that people believe they have failed to adequately reproduce in their acts of living. These are the expectations, norms and standards that make it possible for people to conclude that they are inadequate, insufficient, incompetent, useless.</p>	<p>what do you speculate is doing the measuring?</p> <p>Sami: Our traditions, Sek. You know our cultural traditions are like ongoing peer pressure from our ancestors. And our parents are just followers.</p>
<p>Responses to failure: The actions that people have initiated in their efforts to address these failures and inadequacies – actions taken in relation to one’s own life and one’s relationships in efforts to measure up, to meet these expectations, norms and standards. These questions encourage people to describe these actions, which often take the form of extraordinary psychological gymnastics. In response to these questions, people usually provide an account of a range of operations, processes, programs, methods, procedures, measures, regimens and treatments that are taken up in the disciplining of one’s self and of one’s relationships.</p>	<p>Sek: That’s interesting, I have never heard that before. What is the effect of this peer pressure on you, on our family and broader community?</p> <p>Sami: Well like you said earlier, it’s about conforming to these scripts...</p> <p>Sek: And what do you speculate is the consequence of not conforming to these scripts?</p> <p>Sami: I know it first hand, its rejection and shame. [Pause] It’s not gonna change anytime soon.</p>
<p>Externalising shame: persisting enquiry without judgement or expecting an answer</p>	<p>Sek: A dear friend introduced me to a wonderful article by Aunty Barb and Kerry. It’s about people working in community at a crisis support service. Shame has impacted women by not allowing them to speak. So they decided to have a matin front of the building and with big bold letters have written - Shame Mat. Before women enter the crisis service, they wipe the shame away. They leave it at the door. What do you think about this idea of</p>

	<p>wiping the shame away? What would be made more possible if it was left at the door?</p> <p>Sami: So much. But it's not going to happen, Sek.</p> <p>Sek: Rejection, Shame, does this also have an impact on our families too?</p> <p>Sami: Well yes, if their children are seen as 'not normal', then they have failed as parents.</p>
<p>Scaffolding letters: nuanced outcome</p>	<p>Sek: Can we experiment with an idea? I'm going to write down the letters of SHAME. If we were to break down shame, what would each letter represent?</p> <p>Sami: S is for it being a survival</p> <p>H is for it fkn hurts</p> <p>A is for the ongoing anxiety</p> <p>M is for its manipulation</p> <p>E is for the entrapment I feel.</p> <p>Sek: We can workshop each word. Let's start with S. I might be off the mark, but in some way, is this shame like a survival response? That is to survive within the community? They (our family) police themselves and us in order to avoid rejection or being socially outcaste?</p> <p>Sami: Yes that's true. It's interesting to think about this parallel process.</p> <p>Sek: What's this understanding about the parallel process make possible in relating with your family?</p> <p>Sami: I get they are hurting too. We are all hurting.</p>
<p>Unity in failure: Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world (Halberstam 2011, pp. 2-3).</p>	<p>Sek: As you navigate this hurt, shame and rejection, have you discovered surprising ways of being in the world?</p> <p>Sami: I never knew about my capacity to love despite feeling hurt and rejected. As you know, I still reach out to my family and remind them, just because I don't look and dress the way they like, I am still their child. I still want a relationship with them even though I don't measure up to their expectations. The H, hurt.</p>

<p>Unique outcomes: reclaiming stories that sit outside dominant constructions</p>	<p>Sek: Hurt. It's interesting to hear that our parents' expectations are inherited from their ancestors. Like a form of peer pressure as you named it. In your experience, what fuels this capacity to love and have a relationship with them, despite the hurt and peer pressure and despite the sense of not meeting expectations?</p> <p>Sami: I can see my family are struggling too. I am questioning their gender expectations and the way we must present to the world. I get that. I suppose I'm asking them to understand I'm not into the traditional Muslim script or being defined to one gender. But I am not going to let that delete all that we have shared together. That's my fuel for loving them in the face of hurt.</p> <p>Sek: I'm curious Sami, if you are saying the same thing but from different perspectives, what is created within the spaces in between? I think I'm trying to say, what are the points of connection? Or the fluidity rather than rigidity in the relationship.</p> <p>Sami: Love. I think we are grieving as our life is not a traditional Muslim family.</p> <p>Sek: Is this grief, an act of love?</p> <p>Sami: Yes. Because we all want to be accepted.</p>
<p>Ethical substance: Questions that invite people to define what it is that is expressed in the steps that they have taken in establishing a platform for these refusals. This inquiry is identifying of those aspects of life that people judge to be of primary relevance in regard to how they lead their lives, and for which they experience a degree of responsibility to manage well. The questions of this category of inquiry encourage people to identify these aspects of life</p>	<p>Sek: I've expressed before, in ancient Persia there were 83 different definitions for love, what kind of love is being defined in the face of hurt and shame? If love could speak, what would it say to the hurt and shame?</p> <p>Sami: If love could speak?</p> <p>Sek: Yes. What would love say to hurt and shame?</p>

<p>in 'experience-near' terms.</p>	
<p>Mode of subjectification (system of rules/body of values and principles): Structured by questions about what it is that people refer to as a guide to them in the management and expression of whatever it is that they consider to be of primary ethical relevance in their lives</p>	<p>Sami: Love would say to shame, please give us a break.</p> <p>It would say to my parents. Sami invited you in to their life because they wanted you to be part of it.</p> <p>Love would say to me – you were courageous in telling your religious family but be patient because they are scared and isolated and they are scared from being shamed. But I don't have to be the target of that either.</p>
<p>Experience-near naming</p>	<p>Sek: What would you name this kind of love?</p> <p>Sami: Acceptance-Love.</p>
<p>Asceticism (self- and relationship-forming activities): Structured by questions about what it is that people refer to as a guide to them in the management and expression of whatever it is that they consider to be of primary ethical relevance in their lives</p>	<p>Sek: Do you have a picture on your phone that might represent acceptance-love?</p> <p>Sami: This is my family at our recent Eid festival. In the backyard around the table. Lots of food with the little ones, the next generation.</p> <p>Sek: That's a beautiful image of acceptance-love. What would you want the next generation to know about navigating cultural and family expectations, particularly if they are gender diverse?</p>
<p>Telos: Structured by questions about people's goals for their lives, about what they are aspiring to in their efforts to act in an ethical way, about the desired end states of their lives.</p>	<p>Sami: I would want them to know that I accept them wholeheartedly. They need to understand they might not get full acceptance from all family members. And their gender and sexuality is one part of them and not the whole of them. If they want to stay with their family, they have to find the points that they connect with and find other tribes for the other parts of our identities.</p> <p>Sek: What might acceptance-love say to shame when it tries to get in the way of how you see yourself and the way it pushes your family around?</p> <p>Sami: Love would say to shame, you are there to police us so we don't question. Hah that's interesting. I've never seen shame like an external force trying to police me and my</p>

	<p>parents.</p> <p>Sek: Exposing shame in this way, and seeing its agenda, how might you respond when it makes itself known to you?</p> <p>Sami: Give it acceptance-love. First and foremost, it's acceptance of myself. That is my protection.</p>
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Intersectional narrative practice – A reflection

Raise your words, not voice. It is rain that grows flowers, not thunder. (Rumi)

Of profound significance to intersectional narrative practice is externalisation. It exposes socio-political discourses of family, cultural and gender scripts, and supports respectful ways of navigating intersectional experiences. As Freire articulates, the significance of unveiling oppression by examining the broader sociopolitical context is because it 'is not a natural event but a social, historical, political, economic event' (1999, p. 38). Externalisation is a political not a clinical act (Finlayson, 2016). It is an antidote to the internalised and pathological understandings of the person, their family or religion. Externalisation protects the conversation from being recruited into dividing practices, objectifying and disordering people and communities, and measuring people against normalising judgements (White, 2007).

Listening deconstructively (Freedman & Coombs, 1996), that is, to hear about people's lived experiences, and to honour their preferred ways of being, is paramount to cultural humility. Narratively, there is an acknowledgement of 'how powerful words can be' (Burnside, 2009, p.5) in shaping meaning and narratives (Bruner, 1990). The practice of experience-near naming promotes a fluid rather than a rigid sense of self. Henceforth, constructing words into questions as opposed to interpretations and statements facilitates intersectional narrative therapeutic conversations. Thus, therapy is tailored in response to the answers, co-partnerships develop, and insider knowledges are privileged. This practice results in conversations that invite people to see their lives from a number of perspectives.

In the conversation with Sami, they were invited to define the experience of 'shame.' By way of breaking 'shame' down letter by letter, a diversity of its descriptions emerged. This novel practice also served to visually deconstruct shame even further. Ongoing conversations with Sami provided richer descriptions of the S, the survival in shame. It functioned by way of inviting Sami in some

context to stay quiet, or hide, or avert conversations and other people's gaze. Thus shame served to lessen the chance of any threat and was also understood as keeping Sami safe. Therapeutically, exposing shame in this way allowed us to analyse the way it served to silence and disempower, whilst at the same time it seeks to protect. Externalisation dismantles hegemonic views and begins to craft one of many narratives. This was a unique- nuanced outcome of understanding the role of shame.

Another example of intersectional narrative practice through this transcript is the exploration of failure discourses as they make evident intersectional challenges. Although people choose to work with me, I understand they have the right not to trust me. Sami, like others, often declared that they and their families were failing at life and relationships. Therefore, therapy was expected to fail too. This conversation with Sami used White's (2004) failure map and embraced Halberstam's 'utility in failure' as an 'ambulatory journey through the unplanned, the unexpected, the improvised, and the surprising' (2012, pp. 2-3). When the question was posed to Sami: 'As you navigate this hurt, shame and rejection, have you discovered surprising ways of being in the world?' we discovered despair was also an expression of love. Love was externalised and given a platform to speak to shame. Honouring intersectional definitions of love, the question drew upon ancient Persian understanding of diverse love to scaffold a question:

Sek: What would you name this kind of love?

Sami: Acceptance-Love

Sek: Do you have a picture on your phone that might represent acceptance-love?

Sami: This is my family at our recent Eid festival. In the backyard around the table. Lots of food with the little ones, the next generation.

Sek: That's a beautiful image of acceptance-love. What would you want the next generation to know about navigating cultural and family expectations, particularly if they are gender diverse?

This particular excerpt from the transcript shows an exploration of ways to create richer descriptions via recruiting images and a re-remembering inquiry. The re-remembering question canvassed a multi-voiced experience of identity and contributed to a sense of being knowledgeable about their life. It also provided a basis for Sami to develop specific proposals about how they might proceed from hereon (White, 2007). Intersectional narrative practice attempts to dismantle rigid

understanding about oneself and one's communities, and seeks to find sites of knowledge and skills. This offers an enquiry into ways in which Sami's wisdom might offer ongoing contributions to future generations. In addition, to further enrich Sami's declaration of acceptance-love, they were asked to find a photo on their phone to reflect this kind of love. This served to create a diverse way of languaging experiences, a practice supported by M. White who states,

Evoking positive images of life and identity that often present to the person in metaphorical and visual forms. As these images build in these conversations, they have the potential to set off reverberations into the history of the persons experiences of life. (2011, p. 128)

Interestingly, Shah recognises 'alternative pedagogies are part of a wider response by some Muslims towards the politicised spotlight on Islam, particularly regarding gender and sexuality' (2016, p.308). The work with Sami embraced diverse narrative practices, thus providing alternative pedagogies for culturally respectful ways to navigate Sami's intersectional experiences.

Thus far I have provided an example of my work in an individual context. Next I will describe intersectional narrative practices in a group setting.

Intersectional narrative practice: The collective spirit

Every story is us. (Rumi)

The foundation of my group work draws upon Denborough's (2008) Collective Narrative Practice (and the success of the Life Saving Tips project as a response to the Cronulla race riots). The premise of this gathering was to explore,

How can we respond to stories of social suffering in ways that not only alleviate individual sorrow, but also enable and sustain local social action to address the broader injustices, violence and abuses in our varying contexts? (Denborough, 2011, p. 53)

In the spirit of hospitality, *dyafa*, a meal is usually provided. In a recent group of queer Muslims, two participants were transparent about feelings of discomfort and declined to offer their names. This was steadfastly respected. Others resolutely protested they had no interest in participating. I was also given definitive instructions not to audio record the gathering. At the outset, I was clear with my intentions to the gathering that all diverse ways of being and participating were welcome. Conspicuously, rapport is not rushed.

As a practice of accountability, the name of the group, “Salam”, was examined. Initially, the name was selected as it is a universal Islamic formal greeting that signifies peace. However, I promptly learnt that this name was not resonant. A young man proclaimed: ‘with the hand that offered him Salam, the other hand offered him a slap.’ Respectfully, the name was dropped.

Guiding my actions is Tuck and Yang’s (2014) advocacy for the ‘generative no’ in the circulation and production of knowledge. The authors interrogate the context of research, ‘Who gets to know? Who gets known? Where knowledge is kept, and kept legitimated? What knowledge is desirable? Who profits? Who loses/pays/gives something away? Who is coerced, empowered, appointed to give away knowledge?’ (2014, p. 812). They proclaim, ‘Refusal makes space for recognition, and for reciprocity. Refusal turns the gaze back upon power, specifically the colonial modalities of knowing persons as bodies to be differentially counted, violated, saved, and put to work’ (2014, p. 817). I intentionally now fine tune my listening to the ‘no’ in the pursuit of **kNOwledge**.

Thus, intersectional narrative practice embraces an act of refusal as a generative stance.

Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to wield a genuine curiosity and recruit externalisation.

For instance, the young woman, Ali, who declined to offer her name also declared at the outset, ‘I am going to rage.’ I curiously responded, ‘Thank you for letting us know about this rage. What might we need to understand about its presence today?’

Ali: How would you feel if the love of your life was forced to get married? She is having to live with a man she doesn’t truly love. It’s legalised rape!

Sek: It sounds like the rage has earned its right to be present, how might we honour it, while at the same time honouring this as a safe-ish space?

Accordingly, I hold with respect the stance of **resiSTANCE**. Contextually, Eltahawy, as cited in Hussein, states that Muslim women are trapped in a ‘double bind of racism and misogyny’ (2016, p.114). Muslim women speaking or writing against their own community in relation to sexism may be seen as feeding Islamophobia, whilst remaining silent is seen as being complicit with sexism. ‘Women in this bind are often punished whichever choice they make’ (Hussein, 2016, p. 114). Add homophobia and transphobia and the bind multiplies. Subsequently queer Muslims face compounding intersectional challenges (Rahman & Valliani, 2016). Arguably, this intersectional understanding allowed me to understand and contextualise the rage, whilst safeguarding the space

for it to be generative, and to develop a consensus of ethics. This was in the hope of not replicating the fear that is often experienced outside the room.

Consensus of ethics

People were acknowledged for their leap of faith in taking up the invitation to participate in the group. In a 'world full of whispers' (Kassisieh & Hammoud, 2013, p. 129) queer Muslims remain justifiably wary of the external gaze, that ever-present possibility of surveillance from the government or extended families, and the omnipresent fear of being outed. Therefore, it was paramount to co-develop group understandings in order to ensure a confidential and respectful context.

As part of the group process, people were invited to reflect on - what does a safe-enough context mean to you? (Reynolds, 2014). I articulated that we can never foolproof safety. With humour, I reassured participants that mind reading was not my forte. Feedback was encouraged as pivotal in defining the process. Please see Appendix 1 for the culmination of ideas borne from the initial meeting. It serves as a living document and is read at the beginning of each gathering. Also, Islamic informed ice-breaker activities are included.

Honouring intersectional storylines along with storylines of skills and knowledges

Embracing feminism can assist in honouring culturally responsive knowledge of queer Muslims from their specific histories and locations. The Skill, Values and Story Cards – developed by Ola El-Hassan and Lobna Yassine in collaboration with Muslim Youth (<https://dulwichcentre.com.au/cards/>) were used for their cultural significance. The cards were spread out on the floor and other surfaces. Out of respect, cards that make reference to the Holy Quran or the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH and his progeny) were placed on a small table.

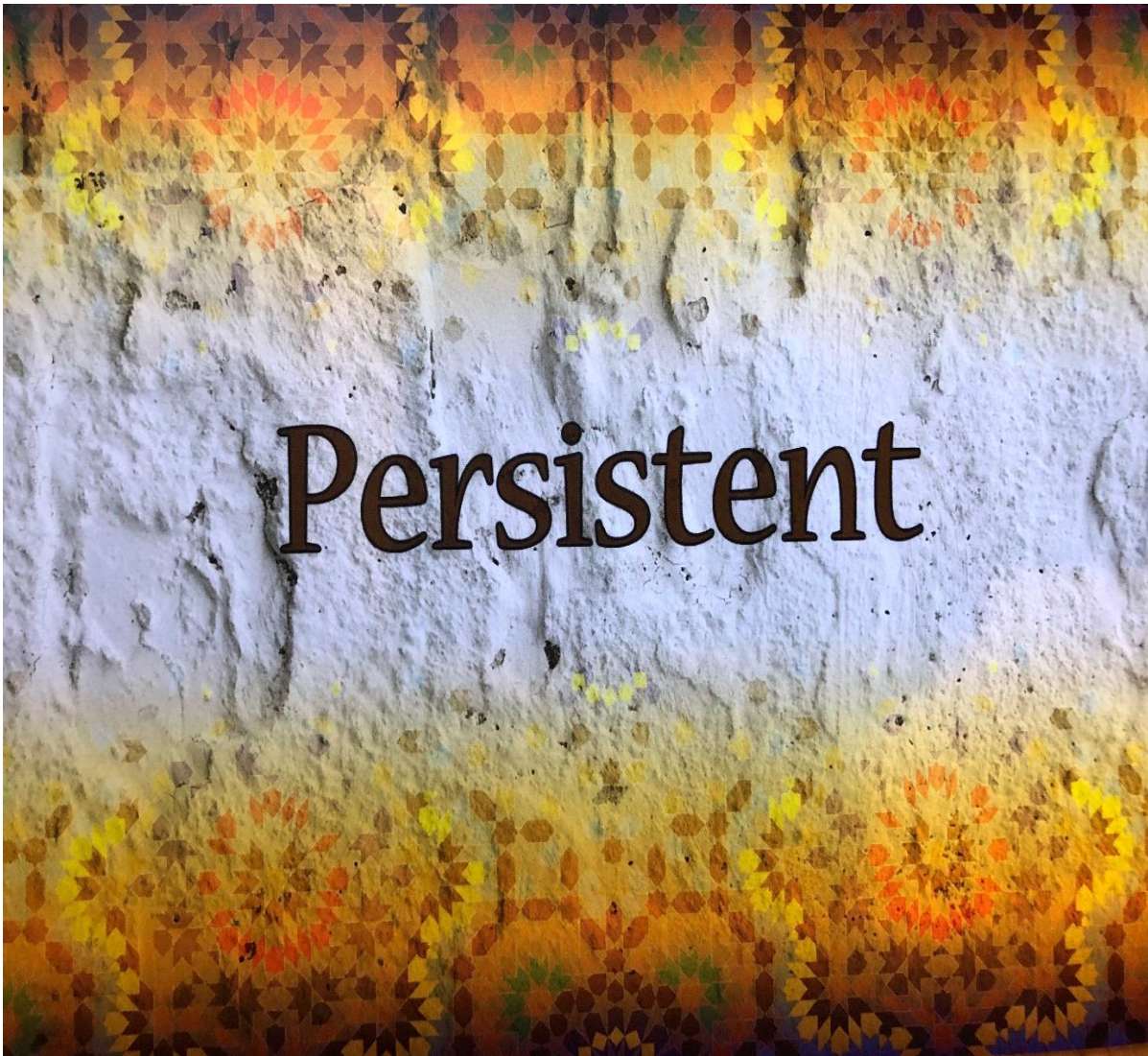


Figure 2. Example of one of the Skills, Values and Story Cards

Participants were invited to pick up a card that connected them to a skill, and how they used this particular skill during hard times. In addition, it was conveyed to participants they were welcome to explore the questions on the back of the card.

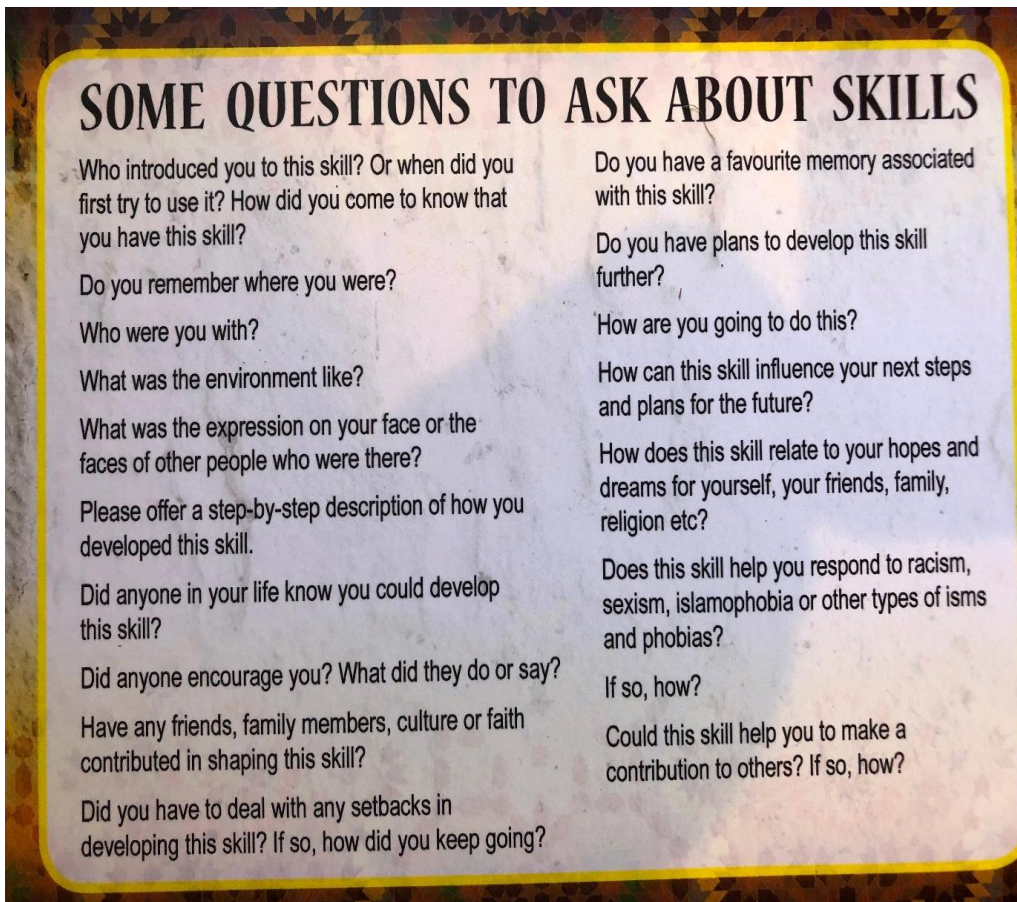


Figure 3. Example of some of the questions offered on the Skills, Values and Story Cards

If the cards were not resonant, a menu of possibilities was provided:

Please go through your phone and choose a photo that is linked to this skill, or go through your music playlist and select a song, or think of a special piece of jewellery, dua, prayer, book, poetry, dance that connects you with this skill.

In selecting this process, I drew on the concept of visual narrativity (Denborough, 2018). It offers richer descriptions of preferred storylines from other sources such as pictures, symbols, drawings and images linked to the skill. At times images can spark further curiosity and generate a synergy between word-image story telling (Denborough, 2018).

Collective narrative documentation methodology (Denborough 2008) was utilised to democratise knowledge and expand upon narrative intersectional practice specific to queer Muslim experiences. The process involves creating a document that is double-storied. It juxtaposes the stories of intersectional challenges along with the skills and know-how of responding to these terrains. The

process involves asking about four themes to generate rich material adapted from Denborough's (2008) collective narrative practices.

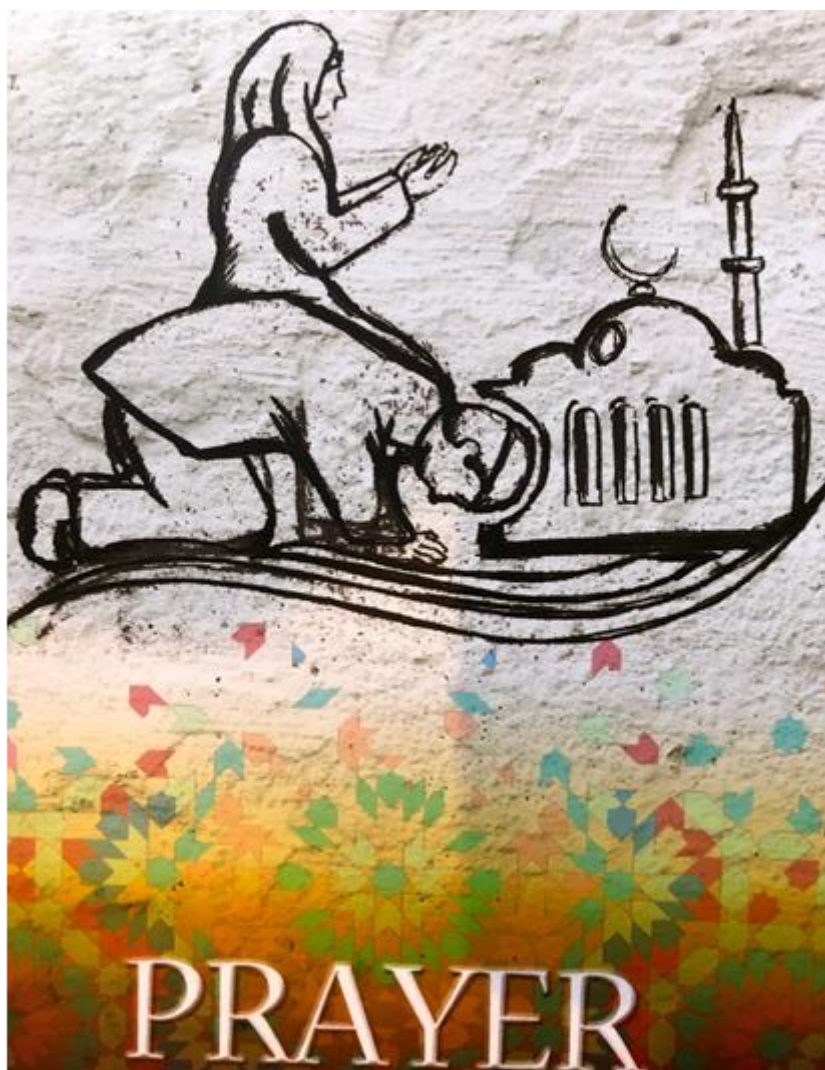


Figure 4. Example of one of the images on the Skills, Values and Story Cards

Please choose a card from the Skills Values and Story Cards or an image on your phone that might highlight skills of navigating hard times. (Visual Narrativity)

Please describe how this skill helps you navigate hard times. This might be something you do, or something other people do, or something you believe, or think is important.

If we were to think of your life like a book, what name would you give this chapter that highlights the skill of getting through hard times?

Please share a story of a time when this special value, belief, skill or knowledge has made a difference to you or to others?

Please speak about the history of this skill, value or belief. How did you learn this? Who did you learn it from? Or who did you learn it with? (If it is a significant other, do you have a photo of that person?)

Is this linked in some way to any particular groups, family, communities or cultural religious histories of which you are a part?

A participant nominates to discuss their unique way of responding to intersectional challenges. They reflect on the history, traditions and special people who have helped shape this unique skill.

Additionally, painting a picture with words around the metaphors and imagery was included. Each person was given an opportunity to name the theme that was generated from the discussion. They could appoint the name of the skill on the card (e.g. Faith), or choose another name resonant for them (e.g. Reclaiming). Furthermore, in honouring a co-partnership, participants were asked how they would like their words presented (e.g. in a poem or letter).

In addition, a conscious effort was made to privilege the 'skill of silence' (Denborough, 2008, p. 30). Analogous to music, the rest moments are just as significant as the notes. Silence gives the sounds their meaning and facilitates discernment. Pauses and slowing the process in therapeutic conversations is an act of hospitality. People are offered space after the questions were posed in order for richer descriptions to emerge.

Fellow participants were invited to listen with (modified) outsider witness questions (OSW) on a gratitude card. The card was developed adapting Chilsa's (2012) healing methodologies. In the context of research, she writes about generating healing via practices of 'love (engage and seek understanding), compassion (activism), reciprocity (shifting the boundary between the researcher and the researched), ritual and gratitude' (2012, pp. 277-278).

Agency is further inspired through the practice of circulating preferred accounts of identity. Often problems have an ability to humiliate and disempower the person. However, people experience respect when they feel they have contributed to the lives of others: 'when we explore a person's evolving relationship with a problem, we evoke their competence and strength in relation to it, and identify virtuous rather than vicious cycles' (Lobovits, Maisel, & Freeman, 1995, p.244). The offering of a gratitude card underpins a healing methodology and intends to promote virtuous rather than vicious cycles.

In the practice of OSW, only the categories of inquiry, ‘resonance and katharsis’ (White, 2007) were included on the card, while describing the image and embodiment was not. This was shaped by a previous experience when a group member evoked the image of the ocean and tragically the person being interviewed had lost a loved one to a drowning incident. In order to minimise this risk, and as part of intersectional narrative practice, OSW practice was re- designed. This was intended to safeguard against group members eliciting images not being resonant to the person at the centre of the discussion.

In the filling in of the gratitude card. I invited group members to hold curiosity and a tentativeness, to rescue words verbatim, to give no advice, nor offer applause (Morgan, 2000). It was also advised that if they begin to experience overwhelming emotions as they listened to the person being interviewed, there was an option to colour-in the mural design on the front of the card.



Figure 5. Image on the front of the Gratitude Card

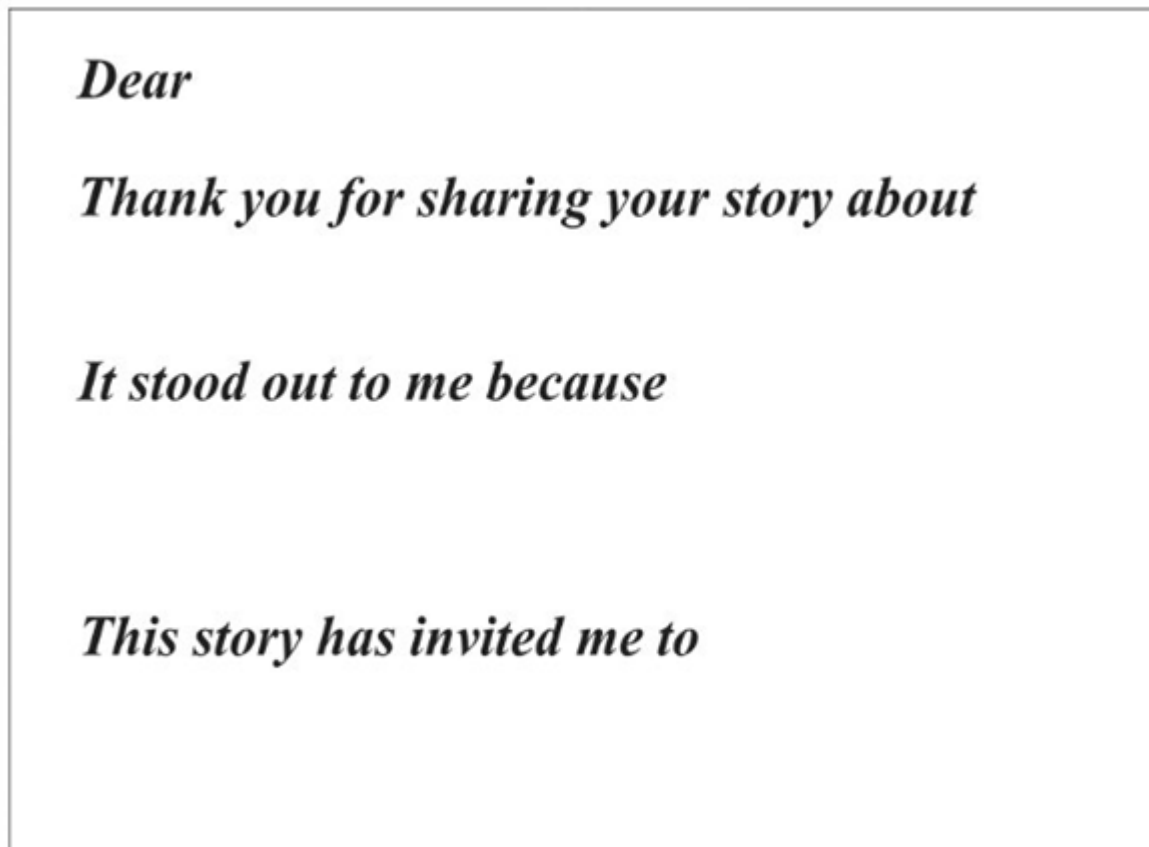


Figure 6. Questions on the back of the Gratitude Card

After each interview, I typed up my notes and sent them back to the person in order to check if the writing captured their experiences. Below are excerpts about some of the skills and knowledge that sustain queer Muslims in response to racism, sexism, heterosexual dominance and Islamophobia.

We are different, but the same

My skill is through knowing I am not just my sexuality. When my family say things about my sexuality, I say to them, 'you know you have a sexuality too.' I remind them our sexuality is not just a sexual act. I say to them it is like our eye colours, you didn't choose it. All the colours make us unique, they are different, but the same. Reading about my religion has helped me understand and in the Holy Quran it says we all come from the diversity of our tongues and our colours. This is my strength when people don't understand me.

Reclaiming

When I'm at the Mosque, I'm Muslim. When I'm at queer events, I'm trans.
When I'm at Uni, I'm a student,
When I'm with my family, I'm their son.
I reclaim and celebrate the sum of me.

I belong, where I stand

I told my friend I don't belong. She said, wherever you are, you belong. I said to my friend, I feel like I have to work doubly hard to get half as far in life. She said, half is better than where we

first started. I said to my friend, I am a failure at life. She said, sometimes it takes a good fail to know where we stand. Yes, my glass is half empty but I'm lucky I even have a cup!

Don't force the issue

It has helped me to think of this coming out journey with my family like being in a cocoon. If you continue to force open the cocoon and the butterfly is not ready, it struggles. In its own time and pace, it manages to find its own way out of the enclosure. When it does happen, it expands its wings, illuminates its colour and hopefully flies. This analogy has helped me deal with my family. I don't force the issue, like I don't like being forced.

Radical hospitality

Whenever I feel rejected, I invite the people I love for a meal. I learnt this from my grandma. When our racist neighbours would throw rubbish over the fence, my grandma would pick it up. On Eid, she would knock on their door and still give them sweets. I personally would have given their rubbish back. If they would swear at us when we parked in the driveway, my dad would always wave and smile. He would also mow their lawn out of neighbourliness. My family reminds me in the face of hate, always return love. They would say quotes from our religion like treat people how you want to be treated. So when I'm hating on myself or someone is hating on me, I offer hospitality.

Silence is the most eloquent reply

My safety is silence. I learnt this the hard way. My mum taught me this. She said the Prophet said if you argue with ignorance, you lose. If you argue with a wise person, you learn. Before I tell people about my sexuality, I wait and see if there is going to be give and take in a conversation. If I hear disrespect, I decide to be silent. I just don't think they're worth my time.

Life-saving support

I honestly could not have survived without my therapist. She comes from our culture and religion. I didn't have to do all that explaining. She just got it. Her face did not contort when I talked about my family and she did not make me hate them. She also taught me about coming in instead of coming out. I felt safer learning this. I knew she was there for me and she was my first experience of a Muslim accepting me. I told her this, when my heart did not want to work no more, she resuscitated it. I have a partner now and we both go to see my counsellor. Finding someone from my religion to accept me was life saving.

Who is normal?

I keep hearing be normal. Who is normal? Is it someone I have to meet? The definition of normal is based on our religious texts. I wonder how we consider other definitions of normal too? For example, homosexuality is no longer considered a mental illness by the medical profession. As time changes so do our understandings. My parents always profess to me - Allah says we must move with the times.

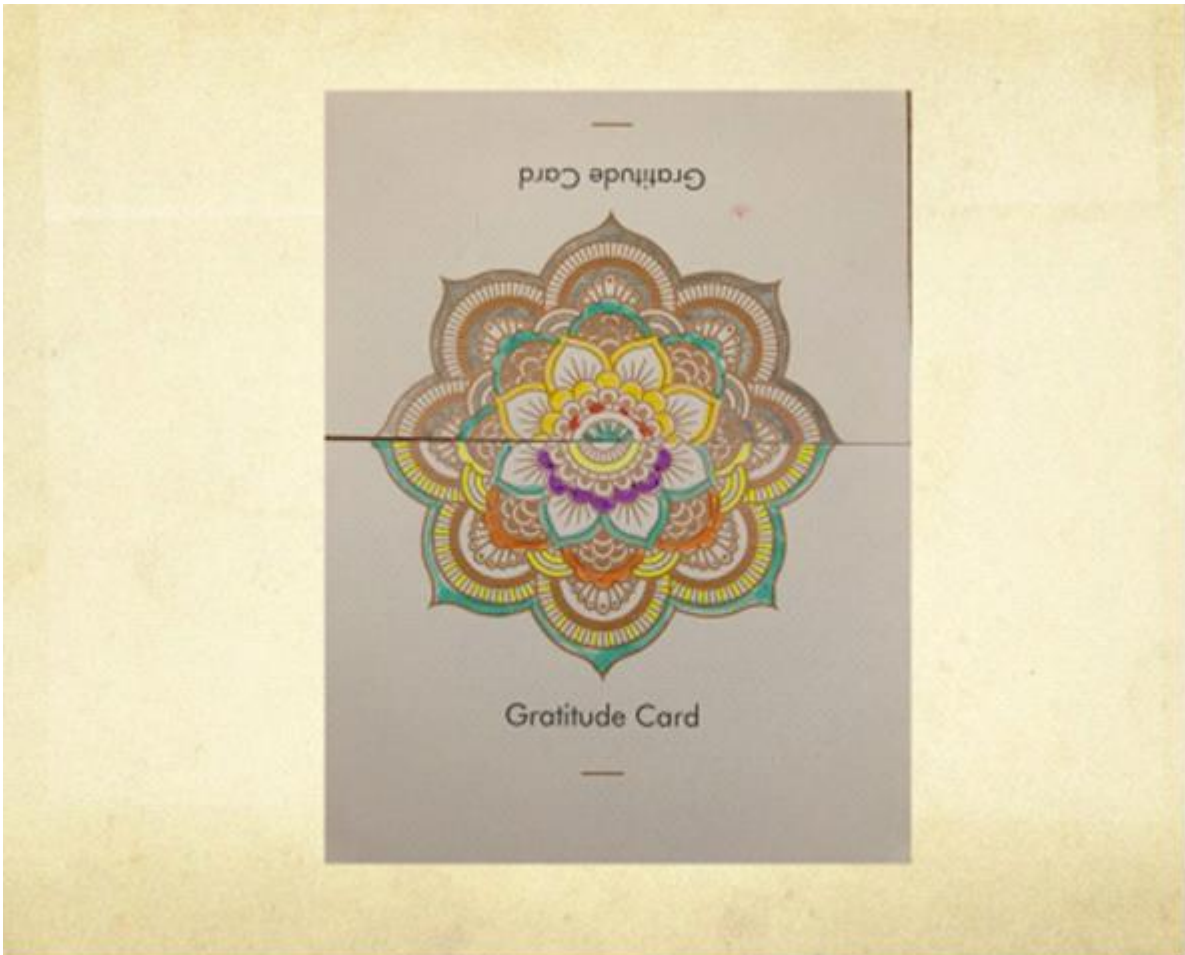


Figure 7. Example of the front of the Gratitude Card as coloured-in during the gathering

Below are examples of what people transcribed on their gratitude cards during witnessing the interviews. This also served as a prompt to offer richer storylines when invited to re-tell their experiences.

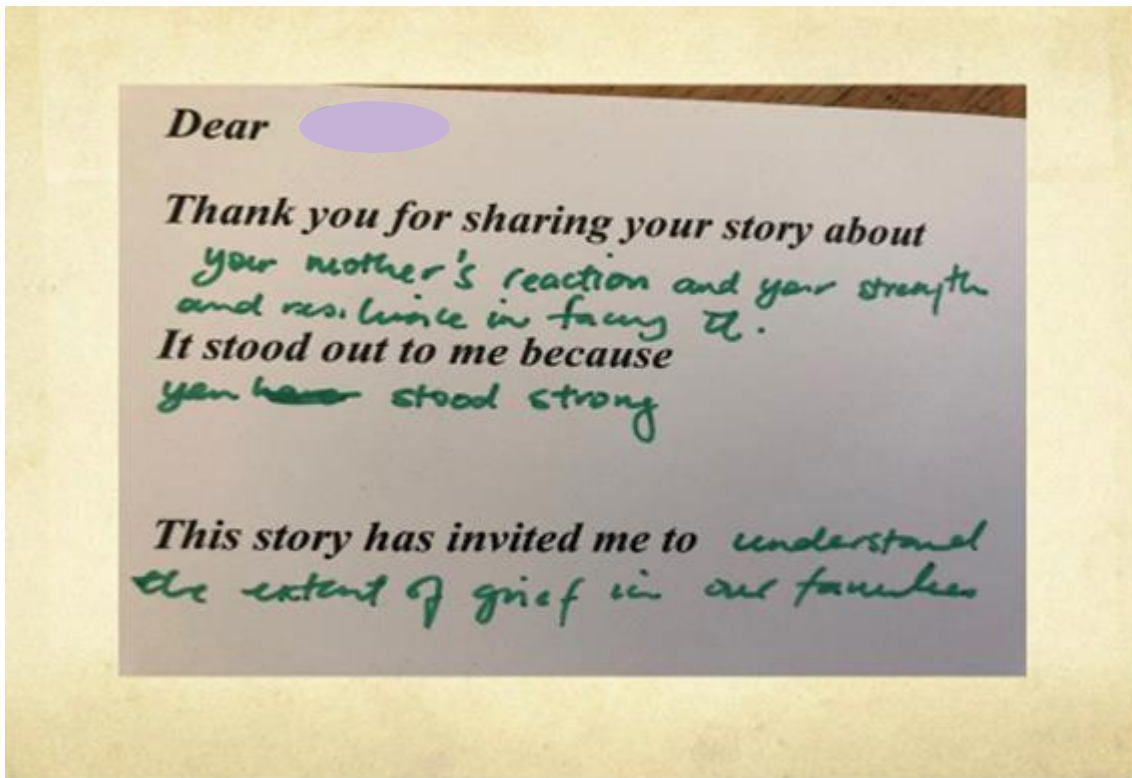


Figure 8. Example of responses on the back of the Gratitude Card

Closing the gathering

Through the tellings and re-tellings, these gatherings generated a sense of communitas. Denborough cites Turner to describe a 'shared unity among individuals, who are going through similar experiences' (2008, p.41). Evident through these groups was queer Muslims' unique intersectional experiences, and of particular significance was reclaiming a sense of individuality from hegemonic views. Individuality was not defined in the western sense of privileging the needs of the individual over the needs of the group but culturally re-defined as a declaration of agency and carving out one's path. Accordingly, the collective space was able to acknowledge these intersectional challenges whilst honouring the diversity of their unique skills.

To conclude the gathering, I asked - *what stood out to you from joining the gathering?* Comments included:

I appreciate the space to reconcile a side of myself that I don't usually have the opportunity to do so.

If you can make it from Syria, I can make it in Sydney.

I was scared I was going to feel worse with people feeling hopeless. Instead I am feeling hopeful.

It was good to see older LGBT people in the group. There is an idea this is a young generation issue.

I've been there and it's great to reflect on how far I've come.

On the agenda for future gatherings is writing letters to our ancestors, re-discovering multi-storied accounts of our history, making more space for intergenerational honouring, and enabling contributions to future generations navigating intersectional challenges.

Conclusion

Intersectional narrative practice can attend to the unique challenges queer Muslims face navigating multiple systemic barriers. 'Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and that all oppressions work together in producing injustice' (Collins, 2000, p. 18). As a result, in praxis I have intentionally incorporated different perspectives of cultural humility, feminism, unique-nuanced outcomes, the failure map, the queer art of failure, collective narrative practices and other voices to reveal the nuances of care required in working with people and communities responding to systemic hardships.

In conclusion, this paper intended to demonstrate innovative intersectional narrative practice in both individual and collective spheres highlighting that queer experiences are not on a level playing field. These practices offer opportunities for rich descriptions of preferred storylines in response to racism, sexism, heterosexual dominance and Islamophobia. This creative and collaborative work supported my clients to build upon a coalition of diverse knowledge sources and explore ways of carving their own healing paths.

In the current context where Muslims are overly policed and rarely heard, through this process of intersectional narrative practice, my queer Muslim community were heard. They were heard.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Land on which I write. I pay my respect to the Elders, both past, present and emerging. I bear witness and honour their diversity, strength and resilience. As an Australian-Lebanese woman of Islamic heritage, I live on stolen land, a land that was never

ceded, a land that belongs to Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. My work is in the context of a nation that was built on a history of genocide, and the ongoing impact of colonisation.

I pay my respect to people with diverse bodies, genders and relationships who continue to struggle in the pursuit of justice and have created pathways for me to do this work.

I also wish to acknowledge Cheryl White, who introduced me to the different languages feminism speaks. I am here today as a result of her activism.

My gratitude, beyond words is expressed to the following people Johnella Bird, Liz Murrigan, Vicki Reynolds, Rebecca Howe, Abigail Thomas and David Denborough. Your contributions to my work and life sing through these pages.

This paper is dedicated to Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, Our Pioneer in living and loving diversity.

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Appendix 1

Thank you, Shookran for your attendance on Wednesday night.

It is such a privilege to share this unique space with all of you, and to feel our unity in the diversity of struggles and loving transformative action.

We heard ways people are navigating homophobia, transphobia, sexism and racism. It was evident you all did not want these hardships to creep into the room. Below are our negotiated group understandings in order to create a safe-enough context.

Please add more ideas/practices as this will continue to expand as we go. What does a safe-enough context mean to you?

- Word of mouth recommendation from trusted people makes the group feel safe enough
Reassuring to know I am not on my own
- Use my intuition, a gut feeling
- Hold curiosity and an open mindedness
Be tentative when speaking to others
Acceptance of diversity
- Confidentiality is paramount
- Let people speak without interrupting
Speak from our own experiences
- No matter how big or little our experience is, it is valid
Be mindful when you are talking - give and take
- Be compassionate by being acknowledging and attentive
Listen and respond positively
- What can be done if discomfort is experienced in the group? Ideas included:
- have a break, cup of tea, engage in humour, notice my self-talk, wriggle my toes to feel grounded - sole therapy, take deep breaths, gentle tapping, and reassess what belongs to me and to the group in order to broaden my perspective.

I look forward to our next meeting with WelCOMING IN stories.

With kindness,

Sekneh

Culturally resonant ice-breaker activities

Following our meal, ice-breaker activities with Islamic symbolism and narrative questions were employed.

For example, symbolically, open hands represent a prayer offering. The fingers are reflective of a practice called Subha. Each crease on the finger serves to count a prayer recitation.

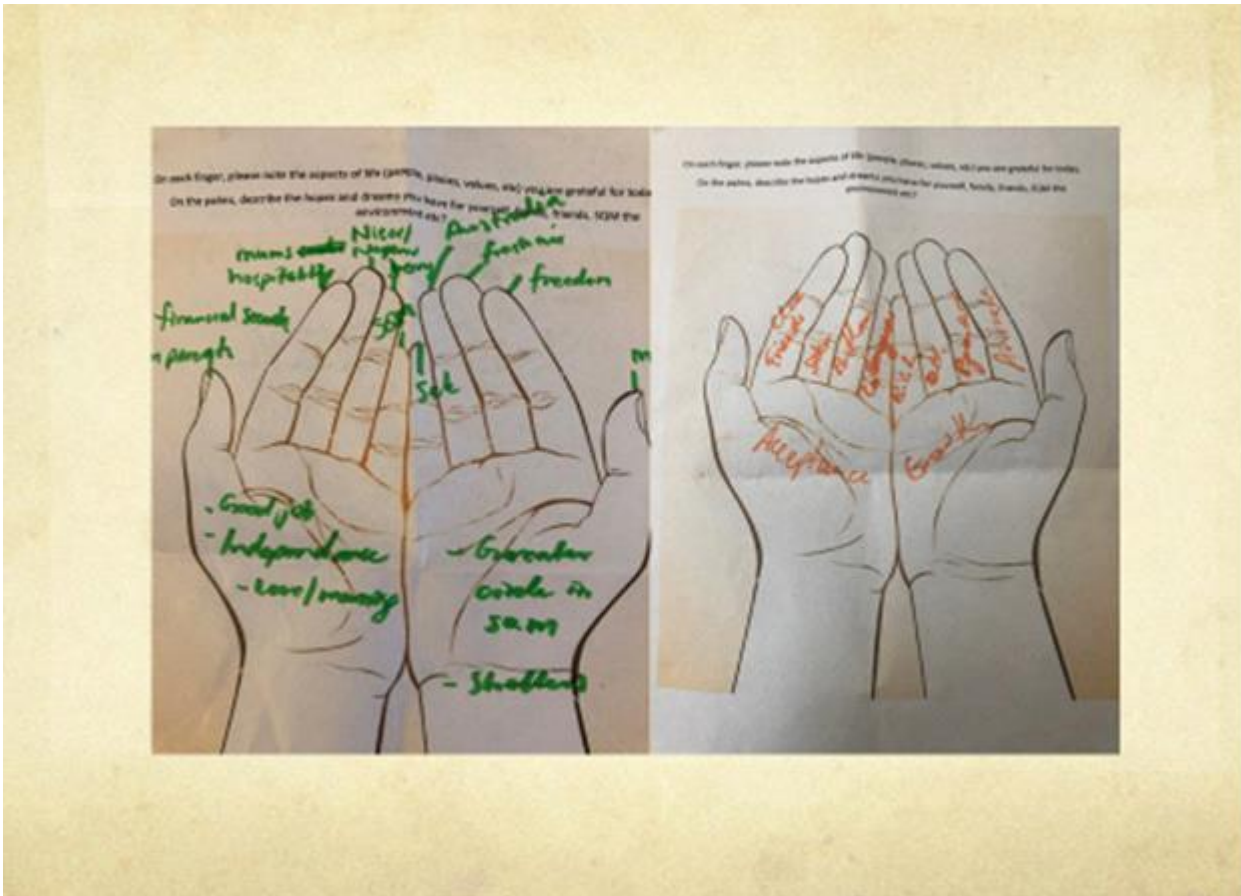


Figure 9. Example of the open hands ice-breaker activity

The question asked:

On each finger, please note the aspects of life (people, places, values, etc.) you are grateful for today.

On the palms, describe the hopes and dreams you have for yourself, family, friends, Queer Muslims, the environment etc.?

Another activity included the Islamic symbol of the crescent and moon.

The Crescent (means progress and sign of the time due to Islam being based on a lunar calendar) and the Star (means light and knowledge – each point of the star also symbolises the 5 pillars of Islam).

The moon and stars shine when the sun goes down, on the 5 points of the star, name the aspects of your life that help you shine?

The crescent moon illuminates progress, what parts of your life are changing or you hope continue to change?

In the star and moon, write who and what might support you as you navigate these changing tides?

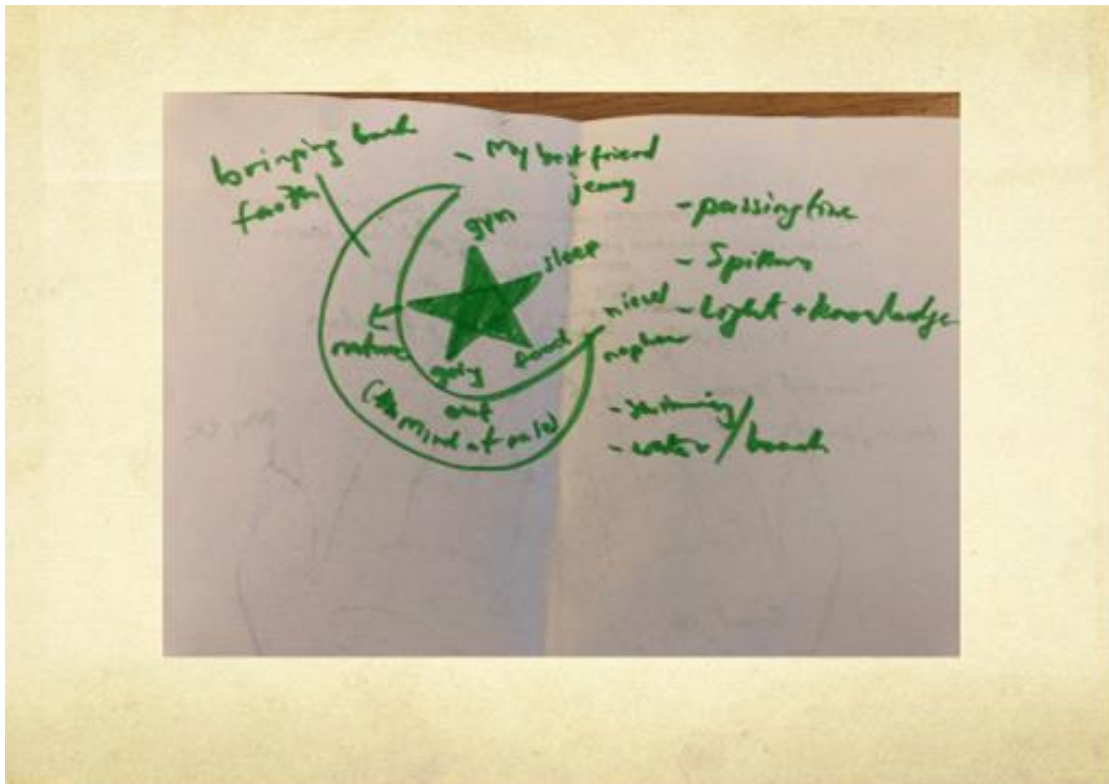


Figure 10. Example of the crescent star ice-breaker activity

In the spirit of sharing, participants were invited to volunteer their responses. Or someone else could read it out for them.

A version of this paper is forthcoming in *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. It is distributed here with permission from the journal publishers. Suggested citation:

Hammoud-Beckett, S. (in press). Intersectional narrative practice with queer Muslim clients. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. Retrieved from <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/courses/feminisms-narrative-therapy-and-narrative-practice>