An Alternative to the Narrative of Burnout in Social Work: Or, how a couple of us stay alive in this work

Andrea Vollans

Master of Social Work, University of British Columbia

Abstract

This qualitative research project explores how social workers can sustain a sense of ongoing aliveness in their work, offering an alternative to dominant burnout narratives. Using a feminist methodological framework, I have combined my autoethnography with a semi-structured interview with a long-time colleague. Rather than positioning burnout as an individual failure to cope, this research centres the moral and political complexities of practicing social justice within systems that often produce harm.

Rooted in the work of Richardson & Reynolds, and drawing on theories of moral injury, radical care, and activist sustainability, I ask: What are the aliving practices that can help social workers stay connected to themselves, each other, and their values in the face of structural violence and injustice? Thematic analysis of field notes, transcripts, and reflective writing revealed key themes including a shared sense of purpose and politicized passion; the protective and generative role of connection with colleagues and communities; and the role of language and theory in building collective meaning and resistance.

The findings suggest that social workers resist burnout not through a focus on individual self-care, but also through collective practices of meaning-making, solidarity, and ethical accountability. These aliving practices function as both a buffer against moral pain and a site of ongoing resistance and relationship. Rather than asking "How do we avoid burning out?" this study reframes the question to: "What keeps us alive in this work?"

This project contributes to the growing body of research that challenges depoliticized understandings of burnout in social work and foregrounds collective, relational, and justice-oriented strategies for sustainability. It is intended as a starting point for those seeking to stay ethically and emotionally engaged in social (justice) work over time.

Keywords:

burnout; aliveness; autoethnography; reflective practice; structural violence; emotional labour; social work ethics

Introduction

The Thomas Theorem states that "Situations that are defined as real are real in their consequences" (Thomas Theorem, n.d.). I have been told more times than I can count that working with domestic violence survivors, precariously statused people, and people from targeted and oppressed groups under neoliberalism would burn me out. I believed these words until I came upon Vikki Reynolds's work, which offered a different perspective, namely, that "[w]e're not 'burning out', we're resisting being blown up! The problems that my clients face, and I work alongside aren't in me, they are in the unjust world in which we all live and work." (2009, p. 6).

Burnout, as a concept, has been around since at least 1981, when Herbert Freudenberger wrote his book, *Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement* (Freudenberger, 1981). Over the years, frontline workers and academics have identified high rates of burnout among social workers (Schaufeli et al., 2009, p. 205). Many of these discussions present burnout as being caused by the work and seek modalities to prevent that harm (Demerouti et al., 2021). Few comment on the strengths of social workers, the transformational power of being in relationship with others, or working towards shared liberation as a path of "on-going aliveness" in this work (Reynolds, 2009, p. 6) and maintaining "a spirited presence" (Richardson et al., 2017, p. 3). Reynolds fills this gap in the research by suggesting that working alongside those suffering injustice does not harm us, but rather the injustice we witness that harms us (Reynolds, 2009, 2011, 2012).

This is not to say that burnout is not a serious issue that profoundly affects a number of workers. However, the term is a broad net that often catches feelings and actions that are not identified in common burnout models. Currently, in the Venn diagram of what causes workers to leave the work, burnout is a giant circle with circles of wages, challenging work cultures, and lifestyle choices (Ravalier et al, 2022). However, it is critical that we address other issues causing social workers to leave the field, such as moral injury and moral distress.

In client work, social work has moved from a problem-focused model towards a strengths-based approach as a best practice for clients (Caiels, 2021). This approach recognizes the inherent capacity of our clients, as well as their unique skillsets, and empowers them to resolve obstacles in their way. How can social workers harness responses to moral pain as a form of resistance to the narrative of burnout, often caused by systemic factors that permeate our field, and could addressing those systemic issues be the resolution/revolution we need?

Social work often interacts and intersects with the formal legal system, and those doing the work know the gross limitations of our legal system. Those of us who work in this area also know that very few people are voluntarily subject to the legal system or want to seek remedies through it. For example, our clients may be (a) be involuntarily detained under mental health legislation, (b) need to seek protective orders from an abusive spouse, (c) have to respond to the state's attempts to apprehend their child, (d) lose capacity to govern their own affairs, or (e) have a chain of events, often out of their control, that lead them to being incarcerated. As a result, we often see people at one of the worst times of their lives. In some cases, legal social workers (like advocates) and related professionals can help clients to access limited remedies that, with luck, will give them more dignity or control over their own lives and perhaps even some comfort. The problem of injustice in the legal system and through all forms of social work is real and causes pain, but what is also real is our strengths and resilience.

As the Thomas Theorem (Oxford Reference, n.d) makes clear, the narratives we tell ourselves are important. If you believe something is true, it is very likely to feel true. How much of burnout is caused because of the persistent narrative that this work harms us, and could we create a new narrative that this work transforms us? Could we instead recognize that social workers all have strengths in our work? And using a strengths-based focus (just as we would with clients), could we apply that to ourselves and our colleagues, which could help us to remain alive in this work?

Literature Review

> "Burnout was recognized as an important social problem by practitioners long before it became a focus of systematic study by researchers. Thus, it was more of a 'grassroots' phenomenon, grounded in the realities of people's experiences in the workplace, rather than a topic derived from a scholarly theory and empirical studies" (Maslach et al., 1998).

In 1981, Freudenberger first defined "burnout" as "someone in a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward." (Freudenberger, 1981, p. 13). Since then, there have been significant contributions in social work towards both clarifying burnout, but also classifying related concepts like secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue (McFadden, et al., 2014), and disengagement (Travis, et al, 2015). One of the most cited models is the Maslach Burnout Inventory, first created by Maslach and Jackson in 1981 which identified the "key characteristics" of burnout as including "an overwhelming exhaustion; feelings of frustration, anger, and cynicism; and a sense of ineffectiveness and failure", observing that burnout, as an experience, "impairs both personal and social functioning" (Masalach et al., 1981; Masalach et al., 1998). Brenner (2020) identified four models of burnout to assess and begin treating burnout, including the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and identified common factors among these models, including: a work stressor, feeling emotional exhaustion, and experiencing depersonalization, which in most models, results in reduced personal accomplishment. These models also appear to have a perspective that burnout is something happening within the individual as a response to the work, not caused by broader systemic factors.

Situating burnout as a phenomenon caused by an individual is problematic because, as Reynolds (2011) writes, "individualized accusations of burnout levies against workers which invisibilise and obscure the contexts of social injustice we work in" (p. 29). Indeed, by making burnout a problem of the worker (i.e., how we, as workers, respond to pain), distress becomes an

individualized diagnosis of burnout that demands an equally individualized response of self-care, work-life balance, and sometimes even leave from work.

Using the concept of burnout to classify a person's suffering can also obscure the cause of the problem. On this point, Ian Hacking writes that medicalized classifications are scientific "engines of discovery but also engines for making up people" (2006). Measuring burnout pathologizes a shared human experience, and that out of pathology becomes a path to recovery. If you understand your experience of burnout through a pathological lens, then the next step is to seek recovery to cure this condition. Research suggests, however, that this diagnosis does not necessarily lead to recovery or a cure, beyond, perhaps, a 6-month reprieve from the symptoms (Awa et al., 2010, p. 189).

When we accept burnout as an individual illness, we are unable to access adequate or effective remedies. As Demerouti et al. write, "[m]ost interventions published today focus on stress reduction among individuals who suffer from burnout, through relaxation, mindfulness, and cognitive behavioural therapy" and although these "interventions" act as "symptom control and stress relief," they "do not remove the causes of burnout" and are not "effective solutions for burnout" (2021, p. 689). Over a decade prior, Maslach and Goldberg offered similar caution, noting that "aside from their intrinsic health merits, [wellness programs] only reduce burnout temporarily and fail to prevent stress-related problems from occurring" (1998, p. 67). It seems that despite social work moving towards a strengths-based approach when working with clients, it is clear that the strategies offered to social workers themselves are antiquated, offering a problem-focused approach instead of a strengths-based perspective (Hall et al., 2019, p. 1).

Borrowing from Edwards et al., a strengths-based approach in clinical social work focuses on "empowerment, capacity, and capability" (2023, p. 2). Developing a similar framework for social workers encountering challenges in their work could enable us to harness worker capacity, improve worker capability, and support workers in becoming empowered to respond to those symptoms of harm, rather than insisting that the work harms the individual worker as a means to address the pain that workers feel. Put differently, instead of focusing on problems with the work

and suggesting the client's existence hurts us, we could instead attend to the internal resilience and passion that I suspect most social workers come to this work with. We could then encourage workers to find practices to continue to harness that resilience and passion.

An emancipatory approach could also use more precise language to accurately capture and respond to the experiences of social workers. It is evident that while the concept of burnout may have some utility for addressing specific types of harms social workers experience, research suggests that other concepts like "moral injury" and "moral distress" may better reflect the systemic causes of harms social workers are subjected to in their work (Weinberg, 2009; Lynch et al., 2016; Thibodeau et al., 2024). Moral injury occurs when we know what the "moral" course of action is, but it is nearly impossible to take that action – often due to institutional (systemic) factors (Houle et al., 2024; Reamer, 2022). According to Haight et al., a moral injury is caused by "witnessing, failing to stop, or perpetrating immoral acts" (2016, p. 192).

Moral distress is the repetition of morally injurious actions (der Kuip, 2016, 2020, 2024; Lev, 2024). It is thus unsurprising that moral injury and distress occurs in social work, as "social work [as a profession] is afraid of complex risk decisions in case things go wrong", so social workers often "practice defensively in order to show that they have 'done things right' (as opposed to having 'done the right things')" (Fenton et al., 2017, p. 5).

Lev offers an alternative perspective to conventional burnout approaches and may offer a better response to conventional individualized notions of burnout. She says that social workers' characteristics "including moral awareness, moral commitment, moral sensitivity, moral autonomy, moral judgment, and moral competency" (2024, p. 793) may be the antidote to moral distress. Lev found that "moral distress can also spark positive moral action" (2024, p. 792) and "may motivate them to act according to their moral obligations" (2024, p. 793). Reynolds (2012) offers a slightly different position and suggests that,

> "If we are able to enact our ethics, we can be sustained in the work. When we are not able to enact our ethics, we experience spiritual or ethical pain. This spiritual pain is a

discrepancy between what feels respectful, humane, generative, and working in contexts that call us to violate the very beliefs and ethics that brought us to community work. This spiritual pain can be a resource to us, letting us know we are transgressing our ethics. It calls for attention and repair" (p. 21-22).

This perspective suggests that the feelings and experiences we categorize as burnout may instead be moral injury, spiritual pain, or ethical pain. By focusing on the individual suffering, we are letting the systemic social failures that are ultimately responsible for our pain off the hook. Accordingly, by moving away from the burnout social narrative, we can encourage Reynold's "ongoing aliveness" and Richardson et al.'s "spirited presence" in the work.

"Anyone can slay a dragon... but try waking up every morning and loving the world all over again. That's what takes a real hero." ― Brian Andreas (2006).

Methodology

When colleagues suggest they are experiencing "burnout," rarely do they display emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment as suggested in the burnout models as identified by Brenner above (2020). Often, they appear quite the opposite, and I see them as the people pushing to do more and to do better. When I talk with workers, how they present themselves frequently reflects *as pain in the core of the self*, as articulated by Reynolds (2009, 2011, 2012), Lev (2024), Haight et al. (2016), and Fenton et al. (2017).

Given the limited literature available on this topic, I set out to do an autoethnography combined with a semi-structured interview. Because of the small scope, this qualitative research used an inductive thematic data analysis approach.

My approach to this research comes from my work. I am not burning out. And I know colleagues of mine who feel similarly. I aimed to capture two of us who provide legal social work as advocates, working with quite different populations to identify commonalities and differences.

Autoethnography

Using the work of Cooper et al. (2021) and the work of Bosanquet (2024), I set out to write an autoethnography of my own experience of "ongoing aliveness" in the work (Reynolds, 2009; Richardson et al., 2017). The autoethnography was based on Cooper et al.'s suggestion that my research question was about my "own lived experience that [I was] interested in exploring." I then wrote out a narrative asking the question, "what are my 'aliving' practices?" I started this narrative in October 2024 and completed it in early January 2025, returning regularly to update and refine it. I chose the word "aliving practices" as a foundation for writing my autoethnography, using Reynolds' concept of "ongoing aliveness" (2009), and Richardson et al.'s article "Here we are, amazingly alive," which is built on the poetry of Bud Osborne.

I wanted to seek the practices or experiences that were present in the moments of that "aliveness," as such I verbed the word aliveness to aliving to better seek to describe the action I was taking in that moment when I am at my most useful, most connected, most generative, and most alive and feel my "spirited presence" (Richardson, et al., 2017). As Ashaheed says, "Definition is a commentary on meaning" (2013), and so I often look for the word that most closely relates to my concept and build from it.

Based on Cooper, et al.'s suggestion to record memos, "access external data", and "list major events or experiences" (2021, p. 9), I reviewed my ethical stance paper and searched old emails using terms like "sustainability", "Reynolds", "Vikki", and "burnout" to look for past thoughts on this topic. I also reviewed early iterations of trainings I have done each semester for law students since fall 2016 on "sustainability in law" to look for changes in my thoughts or my approaches.

When I found my autoethnography felt flat, Bosanquet (2024) offered a feminist analysis of autoethnography that more closely aligned with my practices. She recommended "thoughtful citation practices", "reflect[ing] on [my] own positionality and consider the influences of the context in which they are researching", and exploring "how reflexivity might influence research

processes in [my] context?" With these in mind, I reviewed and revised my written narrative to draw in more of myself.

Semi-structured interview

I also reached out to a colleague of mine, "Sarah", Sarah has worked for about 20 years in nonprofit social justice organizations and foundations, including 8 years in a nonprofit legal clinic, initially as an advocate and then in more senior positions, including policy and leadership. I met Sarah through a solidarity group, which is a place of "relationships of respect and dignity and create cultures of accountability, appreciation, and critique to catch each other when we experience zone slippage and offer ethical critiques that bring us back to fabulousness" (Reynolds, 2019). I chose Sarah because I was inspired from the first time I met her, as I watched her navigate the tensions of doing good legal work and doing justice. I chose Sarah specifically because we both have a legal social work focus in our work, and I hoped that the similarities would provide definitive points over overlap as compared to others from our solidarity group that provide counselling, management, or healthcare.

I did an autoethnography with a semi-structured interview using the framework by Harris (2019). Harris's structure has five protocols: (1) creating notes, (2) writing field notes, (3) "create[ing] self-reflexive meaning based on the epiphanies that are uncovered", (4) conducting the semi-structured interview, conducting the analysis, and then (5) editing the report (p. 5). I diverged slightly from Harris by employing a session of member-checking with my colleague to look for additional insights and remove any sensitive contributions.

The interview was conducted via Zoom and recorded externally. The interview lasted about an hour. I used an interview guide to gather information about terms like burnout, but also terms like moral injury and distress. I asked my colleague about the frameworks she uses in remaining alive, and in particular the solidarity group, which we both share.

I returned to member check with Sarah about five weeks later, also on Zoom, after the coding was completed, and I had compiled a rough draft of the findings so far. This process was based on the work of McKim (2023) who suggests once the findings have been drafted, we should ask the participant "to provide input" to help benefit "the final product" (McKim, 2023, p. 46). I gave Sarah a draft of my findings a few days before we met. When we met, I asked her four questions based on the recommendations of McKim.

- "What do you think of the findings so far?",
- "Were you surprised by any of the findings?",
- "Were there any points you want to expand on?", and
- "Were there any points you disagreed with or want removed?"

Sarah was inquisitive about my opening paragraph of the findings; specifically, she was curious why I thought we had started with two different questions. I offered for her to review the coded interview transcript and autoethnography together.

My autoethnography was written alongside the development of the questions, but before the interview.

Ethics

I obtained ethics approval from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board through the Research Information Systems at the University of British Columbia. Obtaining ethics approval required a human ethics application, which included: (1) a draft consent form, (2) a certificate of completion for the Course on Research Ethics based on the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2: CORE 2022) through the Panel on Research Ethics, (3) a draft introductory email, and (4) the interview guide I planned to use.

Generalizability

Research conducted in this format (i.e., through a joint autoethnography with a semi-structured interview) does not create easily generalizable results, but it still makes a valuable contribution to a topic like *burnout/aliveness* in the work. Indeed, rather than identifying "causality and effectiveness", which is often the goal of positivist research methods, as Witkin identifies, "[an] autoethnography's goals are more aligned with sensitization, conscientization, thick description, illumination, connection, and social change" (2022). Given that there is already vast positivist data on the topic of social worker burnout, and this massive time and research investment has not yet addressed the cause of burnout in social work, this analysis by Witkin suggests that an autoethnographic analysis may uncover insights that could offer a new analysis to benefit social work practitioners' practices.

Autoethnographies also enable a "hope [,,,] that readers' own rich stories merge with those that we have shared here, stimulating further critical reflection that includes and welcomes an important emotional element and impacts their own teaching, learning and practice" (Jensen-Hart, et al., 2010). The creation of "hope" through this process suggests that the very act of conducting research in this format could also potentially address to attrition of social workers, or at the very least, create hope among those who remain in this work.

According to the Canadian Association of Social Workers, approximately 45% of social workers are leaving the profession due to what is commonly referred to as burnout (Brief to the Standing Committee on Health, 2022). If conventional approaches are not serving us, perhaps it is time to try something different. This could involve seeking a broader understanding of how the work impacts workers and how we respond to those issues.

This research asks if, instead of a festering narrative that this work, and even our clients themselves, harm us, is there instead a way to practice this work that nourishes us? Are there aliving practices that Sarah and I share that may help others maintain a *spirited connection* to

themselves and to others by doing this work? How do we, as social workers, remain alive and connected in the face of systemic injustice and moral injury or distress?

Discussion

My interview was with Sarah, a legal advocacy veteran with about two decades of non-profit experience. There is a connected approach between the key points of our "aliveness" in this work (Reynolds, 2009). For both Sarah and I, there is a passion/purpose we carry in the work we do. Both of us identified challenges in feeling disconnected from others, which contributed to the struggle in the work. Connecting with each other, and the solidarity group, however, built important points of connection between us. It also gave us language/theory to articulate and centre our moral pain, or what Vikki Reynolds defines as "spiritual pain" (2011, p. 30). We articulated how the systems we work in cause us pain, and our desire for systemic remedies to address the root causes of that pain. From a strengths-based perspective, we have intrinsic capacity and skills, but we require connection for those strengths to be recognized to feel what Edwards would call "empowered", but I would call "emboldened" to make the changes we need in the work. To be effective, we must remain in service to clients to be able to keep understanding the systemic issues at play. By being able to maintain this equilibrium, we can have more hope, resilience and "ongoing aliveness" (Reynolds, 2009).

Passion/Purpose

When I first reviewed the transcript from my interview and my autoethnography, I felt as though I had asked two totally different questions. Through the process of re-reading and coding, however, I realized that we had much in common in our approaches, although our linguistic presentation differs. Sarah has "passion," "drive," and "fire." She best articulates this by defining the concept of aliveness as "this passion and drive […] That makes us wake up every day and do this, [we] think about this when we're not at work, [… or] talking to people about it when we're not at work, [we] get excited about new strategies or ideas or collaborations.

Whereas I say, "being purposeful is an aliving practice" which I state is " a preciseness of purpose", and "justice-doing contextual intimacy". I do not know if my approach is more stoic or pragmatic, but my purpose comes out of finding ways to do the work that others overlook, and of seeing things that others miss. I am not here by accident – I have knowledge that gives me purpose. These are coded together because it is this passion/purpose that drives us to do this work and makes any other path an impossibility. This is the only thing we want to do. This may be speaking to Lev's "moral awareness, [and] moral commitment" that she suggests "promotes moral action" and "reduces moral distress" (2024, p. 793).

Disconnection & Connection

In very different ways, Sarah and I identified responses to disconnection as an important part of our understandings of how we come to this work. While Sarah reported that when she first moved to British Columbia and was talking to new people, she felt like she could not talk to others about their work, there was no shared sense of passion or drive, and she was concerned about some "people who seem just disconnected from the work". In contrast, I felt/feel chronically misunderstood about how I engage with theory and practice because "I am always imagining the many ways that I may be heard or misheard, understood or misunderstood, and respond with immediacy to those pieces."

During our member checking reflection, Sarah and I both saw that the issues and connections we see in a social justice framework, as crucial to understanding the world around us, are often not as important to others. In my work, I have found that "connecting with others' experiences and finding shared places to grow together is an essential part of being alive in the work for me." Whereas Sarah suggested, we both "needed to be around people who care and thought that social justice is the most important thing." This was a powerful discussion between Sarah and me during the member checking, where we both questioned why more people do not share this perspective with us, the importance and vitality of thinking about oppression and acting on it.

We both came to our solidarity group seeking help because we felt overwhelmed by what we were seeing in our work, and had no safe outlet of people who understood what we were seeing and could hear us. Sarah was describing working with highly suicidal incarcerated individuals, and I was working within domestic violence legal systems. Both are areas of work without any sense of fairness or justice. We both had found our way to Vikki Reynolds (myself through her articles, Sarah connected with her directly), whose work is highlighted in the literature review for this article, but there is a theoretical framework our work builds on from the work of Reynolds – that it is the systems that oppress our clients, and it is witnessing that oppression that causes us pain; by addressing the systems we liberate our clients (and ourselves) and relieve the pain.

It could be argued that our commonalities come from this shared engagement and moral perspective. However, Lev suggests that "moral sensitivity, moral autonomy, moral judgement, and moral competency" may be able to address the issues of moral distress (2024, p. 793). Sarah specifically stated that being able to articulate our experiences with a group of people we do not work with, and those we could be vulnerable with, was one of the key facets that made the solidarity group useful. This connection with others outside the work gives us more autonomy than workplaces may be able to afford; and may mitigate against desensitization of those aspects of the work that cause moral injury.

Language/Theory as liberation

> "I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away." – bell hooks (1991).

Both Sarah and I use the terms like "language" and "theory", but not always in the same ways. When I talk about these terms, it comes from a deep desire to unify and create liberatory frameworks that will inform my work and practices. When understanding the theoretical

framework that I bring to my relationships, a part of my aliving practices was seeking "theoretical connections – textual connections," in which I describe foundational authors and theories like the Thomas Theorem, Gilligans' Care Ethics, and Kant's Categorical Imperative. But in these, I am trying "to develop theories of understanding how the world is actually (not) working." My search for theory is often seeking a unifying analysis, like Audre Lorde's quote "for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences" (Popova, 2017). This quote is true in a variety of contexts in my life. It is true among friends at a coffee shop, learning more about each other, just as it is also true within the context of a Freirian community organizing event. I have also been able to apply it when working one-on-one with survivors of family violence to find a solution to their situation.

When talking about language and theory, Sarah talked most about doing the work "in the way that is aligned with ethics and values". In the member checking session, Sarah found that there are two parts of "theory" to unpack. The first part to unpack is an understanding of the structural framework of injustice in our society that she brings into the work. The second part requires a responsive theoretical framework to address how we show up in this work.

The contrast between our positions provides ways to consider theory and language as extensions of our values and ethics (i.e., "the analysis") in relation to the work. Sarah and I spent much of the member checking session unpacking the "theory as liberation" section of these findings. Where I see much of my analysis as unifying, like starting with a ball of blue playdoh and gradually adding red and blue pieces as it vacillates between shades of purple, periwinkle, fuchsia, Sarah identified that the pieces she gathers are "slotted into other theoretical frameworks" that were "aligned, but different."

As I understood Sarah, she suggests that the theory to her is a critical analysis of how our systems harm people. And then when moral pain arises, having a critical framework of response helps her to be in service to clients in a way that is aligned with her values and morals. During

our member checking session, she stated that she has "an analysis of oppression, and marginalization, and power […] as a concept, but [she doesn't] know what that [looks] like in practice". She opined that she needs opportunities "to map [her analysis] onto the existing way that the work happens, and the way that [her] organization function[s]." Sarah added that working alongside others provides her with practical and concrete responses to work with people who are suffering from injustice and oppression.

Together, it seems that much of the heart of the work we do is the *why* of the work. The frameworks/theories provide us with ways to understand the moral pain and how to create responses rooted in critical theories and frameworks that attend to our clients in ways that are aligned with our values, morals, and ethics. We carry not just the critical analysis of the injustice of the world that we know to be true, that we can organize around, but theory also provides us with a framework of relationships with clients as mutual liberation.

Moral pain & our responses

Sarah said, "Well… I definitely tried to work all the time, and that didn't work because it still didn't solve the problems and it didn't save people."

One important way in which this research differs from conventional research is on the topics of burnout and moral injury. We both have experienced moral injury and disconnection (neither of us really identified burnout as a serious issue). What I found interesting in the coding is that neither of us (even when given the opportunity) belaboured the point, Sarah suggested that she has "moral investment" in her clients cases and some other people "don't have the same heartbreak […] because [they] don't have the same investment, or tie, or pull in the first place"; however, that was why she sought out the solidarity group.

In reviewing the transcript and autoethnography, I found that we do not center on *how tough the work is*. In our member checking session, Sarah expanded this point, saying, "If it were easy, it

wouldn't be important." We are both blunt about the hardships we have seen, but we do not talk about those hardships as harming ourselves or impacting our lives in other ways.

Sarah disclosed a particular experience of moral injury when she was "talking to people in solitary confinement who were suicidal all the time." She described feeling like "this is such a deep, deep darkness and I can't fix this and like… fuck." But her focus was not on the hurting she was feeling, but rather she wanted to figure out how to fix this because it was "so unbelievably urgent." For Sarah, sharing experiences with others in our solidarity group allows her to respond to her moral pain, and in doing so, allows her to continue serving her clients. I had similar experiences, often feeling "complicit in harm" because I supported survivors in an unjust legal system, but also found the solidarity group as an important part of "untangling" the feelings of complicity.

What I called burnout (but in hindsight was likely moral injury) came early in my career, and reading Reynolds' *Resisting Burnout with Justice-Doing*, and in particular, the principle of having a "do-able job description" (2011), I realized that I was not burning out. I had thought my job was to solve people's problems, and once I understood that it was to be alongside them, my feelings, which I called burnout, dissipated. More recent issues of moral injury are less injurious. One of my key tactics when my moral principles are challenged is to spend time with my ethical stance and identify and refine the words in an effort to help me to articulate those pieces of me that are interwoven in my work, what is being stirred up, what is fighting back against the injustice that is happening in this moment in my work.

Being in service to others

Being useful to others is what makes the theory meaningful. Just as collecting money to set it on fire makes no sense, having knowledge and a framework for understanding the suffering of the world is an extremely valuable resource that cannot go to waste. Sarah best articulates this when she was trying to understand how to deliver on her "relationships to [her] clients, [her]

obligations to them, and how to be responsible for the things that [she has] the power to deliver," which helped her to better understand her role.

Both Sarah and I discussed how we approach this work to help others, and how the act of helping others is a driving force behind much of what we do. Neither of us, however, uses language that may be considered *saviourism*, instead it seemed that much of our discussions – particularly in the member checking session – was centred on co-liberation or as Maori Elder Lilla Watson (on behalf of her community at the 1985 United Nations Decade for Women Conference in Nairobi), stated "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together" (Wikipedia, 2025).

As a part of this desire of co-liberation, I wrote about my "love" of ensuring "that people are heard, and making sure that people have the language to speak and to hear diverse voices" and that it is important to learn "language to attend to others [as] an aliving practice" in my work.

Sarah and I do not do this work to help *others* or to feel better about ourselves; it is about making a just world for all of us. Being in service to others allows us to enact our values, morals, and ethics in a concrete and practical way.

> "Shallow solidarity is based on the logic of exchange—You show up for me, and I will show up for you. But deep solidarity is rooted in recognition—I show up for you, because I see you as part of me. Your liberation is bound up in my own."
> (Kaur, 2020, p. 82)

Systemic work

An underlying theme that we both spoke about is systemic work as a response to moral injury. Both Sarah and I have done immense systemic work and movement to change the systems that oppress those we serve. Sarah engaged in litigation development, particularly with the federal Human Rights Commission and Tribunal, with a "goal of systemic remedies", but also "on

behalf of an individual client whose experience represented something systemic" and enabled them to "push for systemic reform." My work primarily involved creating materials to support those who needed them, which were then used to train and support others. I was also able to help get a systemic piece of litigation going forward that resulted in a $29M investment into Legal Aid for domestic violence survivors (Attorney General of BC, 2024).

Sarah articulated that she likes the way systemic work "pulls the curtain back on the structural stuff" and "makes apparent the systems and structures that are behind everything" and similarly, "I am always thinking about patterns and connections" and because of that the public legal education & information work I do are all written "at discrete areas of intersection" such as precariously statused mothers, a legal rights guide for people who are unexpectedly pregnant outside of a long term relationship, and litigation abuse. I identified that "it is aliving work to change the systems in a variety of ways."

While not explicitly stated by myself or Sarah, what we identify as systemic work may fit within the construct of witnessing in our work. In activist witnessing, when one sees the suffering of another, that person assumes responsibility for the suffering, and has a moral obligation to speak the truth of that suffering in an effort to advance "moral, political, or legal action" (Ristovska, 2018, p. 216). Our work in advancing systemic change, rooted in the analysis of seeing the suffering of those who are targeted and oppressed, falls within a witnessing paradigm that promotes justice and actions that are aligned with our morals, values, and ethics.

Conclusion

I would urge us to move beyond conventional discussions of burnout and treating all feelings that hurt us from a general blanket of burnout and related concepts with individual responses like changing our schedules, work-life balance, cognitive therapies, and general themes of relaxation and taking care of our health and instead look to how to be alive and connected to this work. We can adapt the paradigm of a strengths-based approach to ourselves as workers. How do we look

at our own capacity and skills to become more empowered/emboldened? This approach would respond to pain by exploring workers' passion or purpose with the language or theory they use in understanding their work, how they experience and respond to moral pain, and how they may find connection in being in service to clients, to move forward on systemic work to address the suffering they see. While some workers may experience burnout, I suspect many are experiencing moral injury and distress, and mislabeling themselves as burnt out (as I did) due to the lack of a readily available alternative social narrative. Sarah's and my experiences suggest that we can build capacity and uncover the skills in ourselves by exploring these questions and the other issues that cause us pain in the work.

I know that Sarah and I are not alone; there were a few other people in our solidarity group I could have called on to do this semi-structured interview with, and I suspect it would have yielded similar but also slightly different results because of the various workplaces, client contexts, and social locations we hold. More research should be done to uncover how individual workers engage in constructs of "moral awareness, moral commitment, moral sensitivity, moral autonomy, moral judgment, and moral competency" (Lev, 2024, p. 793) at the individual level.

Until research catches up, I hope that anyone who may stumble upon this asks themselves if they are emotionally exhausted, depersonalized, and lacking in feelings of competency with work, or if they are just aching for justice. While there is an endless array of workshops, workbooks, and workplace consultants who can address the former issues – we may have to explore in our teams, in our people, in those we love, how it is when we feel most alive in our work. I hope that Sarah and I are able to provide you with questions to start your journey.

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Ethics Approval

The University of British Columbia Ethics Board granted ethics certification for this study.

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