Social Mindfulness

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Introduction

This zine explores the social side of our distress: the ways in which our individual struggles are *embedded* within our wider culture, within our organisations and communities, and within our interpersonal relationships.

Self-criticism is a key feature of most major *mental health problems* (depression, anxiety, psychotic experiences, addictions, etc.) It's also a major element of everyday forms of *suffering* (if we can even usefully distinguish these from mental health problems). Attending to the messages that we receive – and give out – at each of the different *social levels* of experience, we can see how these perpetuate self-criticism and distress in ourselves and others.

Outside-in and inside-out
The first part of the zine takes you through each level that we're talking about: wider societal structures, institutional and community systems, interpersonal dynamics, and intrapsychic conversations (the things that we say to ourselves). For each of these levels I've drawn a comic on the opposite page of what seems to be going on to me, and how I experience it, to illustrate what I'm talking about.
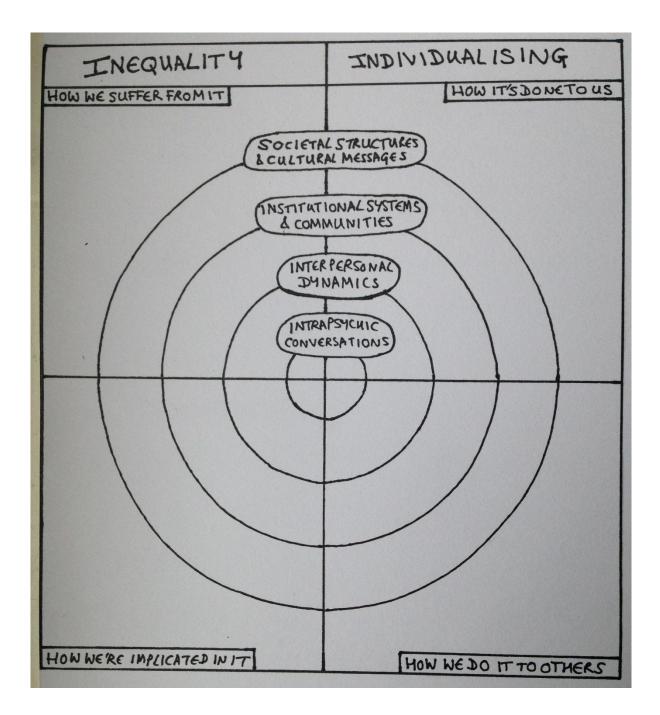
The second part of the zine takes you back through each level (from intrapsychic to cultural) inviting you to *notice* how it is for you, and to explore whether you can *cultivate kindness* – instead of criticism - within your own experiences, dynamics, systems, and structures. This is the approach that some of us have called *social mindfulness*.

Inequality and individualising
From the comics here you can see I've divided each box into four smaller boxes: the two on the left are about *inequality*, and the two on the right are about *individualising*. What I'm saying with this is that a big part of the problem at the moment is that we live in a time of great – some would say increasing – *inequality*. However, at the same time, we are encouraged to see all of our experiences – good and bad – as being down to ourselves as individuals. This is *individualising*. Our struggles are highly social (the result of inequalities and cultural messages) but we're told that they are our own fault as individuals. This tends to make us feel a lot worse. Also, we're expected to fix things as an individual which are often way beyond our power to fix, and so we end up feeling overwhelmed and helpless.

It's even more difficult than this because the inequalities that we *suffer* from are often the flip-side of inequalities that we *benefit* from. So it can be very hard to see them, because we feel bad about the things that we gain from them. Also we're afraid that changing them could make things even more difficult for us.

Similarly, at the same time that we are individualised by wider society and by the people in our lives, we also have a strong tendency to individualise other people ourselves. This is because we live in an individualistic culture and we can never step outside of that entirely. Again, this makes it very hard to step away from individualising, however much it hurts us.

INEQUALITY | INDIVIDUALISING

HOW WE SUFFER FROM IT | HOW IT'S DONE TO US

SOCIETAL STRUCTURES & CULTURAL MESSAGES

INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS & COMMUNITIES

INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS

INTRAPSYCHIC CONVERSATIONS

HOW WE'RE IMPLICATED IN IT | HOW WE DO IT TO OTHERS

Societal Structures and Cultural Messages

Inequality

At a societal level we know that social experiences such as poverty, discrimination, abuse and homelessness all take a great toll on mental health. Possibly the most consistent research finding in this area is the relationship between marginalisation and mental health. Women; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer people; and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people; all having higher rates of mental distress than the rest of the population. Most of us suffer from societal inequalities in one way or another, and this impacts on our well-being. We can see the result of inequalities going back generations when we compare the characteristics of those who have the most power and status to those who have the least.

However we also benefit from inequality because much of our own comfort is linked to other people being less comfortable than us: less well-paid, in less pleasant work, and often facing greater risks to their health and well-being. We're in relative comfort because our family - going back generations – has clearly been healthy, wealthy, and safe enough to produce us. And we also know that our comfort is putting the planet, and many of the others who occupy it, at risk, but it is very hard to face up to that fact.
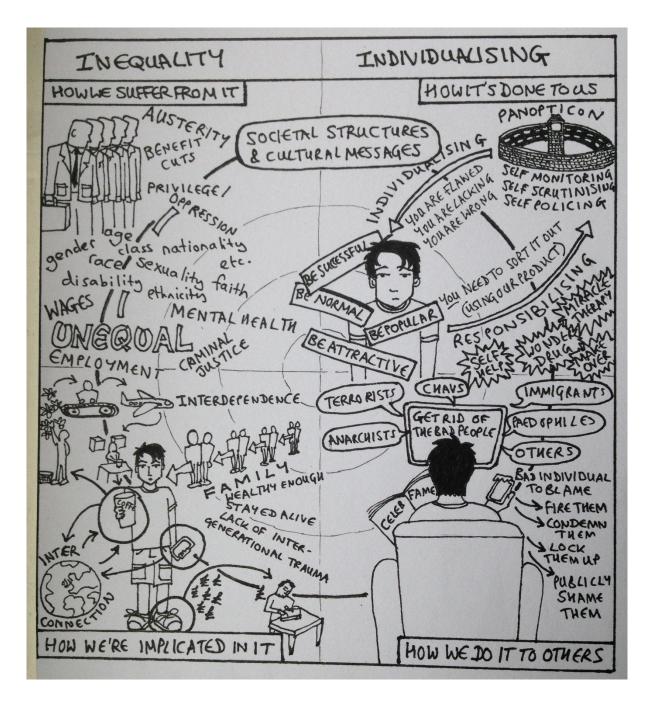
Individualising

The philosopher, Michel Foucault, used the Panopticon prison to illustrate contemporary culture. There is a tower in the middle of the prison, and cells all around an outer circle, so that a guard in the centre could – at any time – be looking into your cell. Because of this, prisoners begin to monitor their own behaviour without a guard even being necessary.

Our society works this way because we're encouraged to scrutinise and police ourselves at all times: to self-improve, to work on ourselves, and to present a positive and successful self to the world. This is linked to consumerism which is all about seeing ourselves as lacking and needing something to fill that lack. Advertising, and many other forms of media, create fears (e.g. we might look bad, be out of date, or be a failure) and then offer products to allay those fears (e.g. beauty products, the latest fashion, recipes for success).

We're also encouraged to individualise other people, scapegoating certain groups or individuals for all of society's ills (crime, unemployment, abuse, etc.). Think about recent media stories about inequalities such as race, gender, class, or sexuality. Frequently these stories focus on something outrageous that one individual has said or done. We demonise that person and publicly shame them. This seems to enable us to avoid having the harder conversations about the issues that the story *should* be highlighting, or recognising our own role in sustaining inequalities and hurting others.

So you can see that we're often encouraged to individualise things which are actually social problems, including our own suffering. This exacerbates our distress and means that we may well look in all the wrong directions when we try to address it.

For more see: rewritingtherules.wordpress.com/2011/10/16/mental-health-beyond-the-1-in-4

INEQUALITY | INDIVIDUALISING

HOW WE SUFFER FROM IT | HOW IT'S DONE TO US

AUSTERITY
BENEFIT CUTS
PRIVILEGE/OPPRESSION
age gender class nationality etc.
race/ sexuality
disability ethnicity faith
WAGES
UNEQUAL
EMPLOYMENT CRIMINAL JUSTICE
MENTAL HEALTH

SOCIETAL STRUCTURES & CULTURAL MESSAGES

PANOPTICON

INDIVIDUALISING
YOU ARE FLAWED
YOU ARE LACKING
YOU ARE WRONG

SELF MONITORING
SELF SCRUTINISING
SELF POLICING

BE SUCCESSFUL
BE NORMAL
BE POPULAR
BE ATTRACTIVE

YOU NEED TO SORT IT OUT (USING OUR PRODUCT)

RESPONSIBILISING
SELF HELP
WONDER DRUG
MIRACLE THERAPY
MAKE OVER

INTERDEPENDENCE

TERRORISTS
ANARCHISTS
CHAVS
GET RID OF THE BAD PEOPLE
IMMIGRANTS
PAEDOPHILES
OTHERS

FAMILY
WEALTHY ENOUGH
STAYED ALIVE
LACK OF INTER-GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

INTER CONNECTION

COFFEE

CELEB FAME

BAD INDIVIDUAL TO BLAME
FIRE THEM
CONDEMN THEM
LOCK THEM UP
PUBLICLY SHAME THEM

HOW WE'RE IMPLICATED IN IT | HOW WE DO IT TO OTHERS

Institutional Systems and Communities

We probably experience these things most in the spaces that we occupy on an everyday basis, whether this is in a workplace; another institutional setting such as a hospital or prison; or in our communities or family or friendship networks. I've focused on organisations in my example but similar things apply in those other contexts.

Inequality
We suffer from inequalities in these kinds of settings because there are often barriers in place to us reaching the highest – and most highly valued – places in the hierarchy. The people who reach leadership roles are generally the most privileged, and they have a tendency to maintain a status quo which best suits other people like them: even if they are not consciously aiming to do this. It is easy to see this in the statistics about the kinds of people who reach the top of every profession, and who are most celebrated in our culture.

However, we also benefit from inequalities because we often wouldn't be in the relatively comfortable places we're in if it wasn't for other people being less comfortable, and having their input valued less highly than our own.

Similar inequalities operate within communities. For example, the people who end up leading and organising things often fail to reflect the things that we would want to prioritise. However we may well also find ourselves – and the spaces we occupy – criticised for not being inclusive enough of those who are more marginalised than we are.
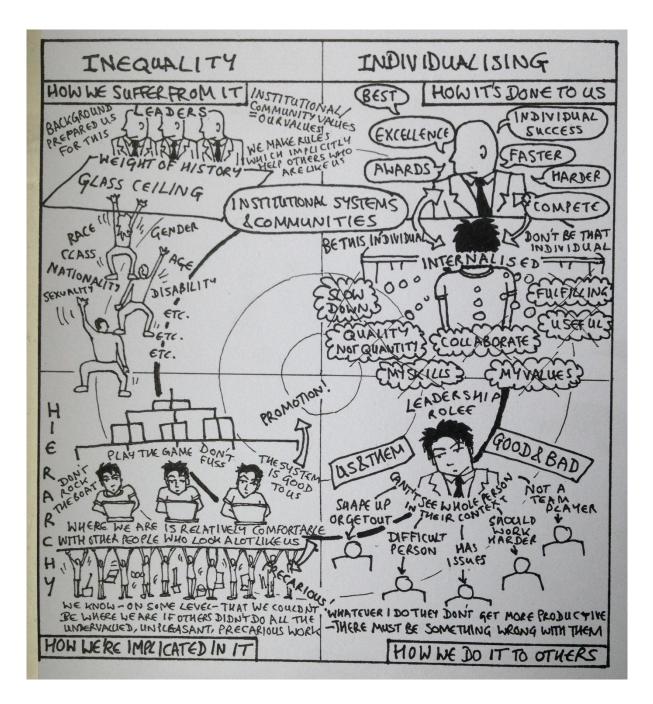
Individualising
Institutional systems are generally highly individualised: focused on getting the individual to internalise institutional values and to be as productive as possible in relation to these. In my example I struggle with the fact that the ways of working which feel like the best fit for me, and the most potentially helpful to others, can feel like a poor fit with the ways in which the kinds of institutions I am in measure 'success' or 'excellence'.

However, we may well find – as we take on more leadership or managerial roles ourselves or go for promotions – that we can't help but invest in the culture and systems around us. It would be extremely hard to occupy those roles and do otherwise. In a fast-paced workplace where people feel precarious and are driven to produce more and more, it becomes very easy to individualise 'difficult people' who are not 'pulling their weight', rather than seeing the whole person in their context, and the structural forces and cultural processes that are no doubt in play.

Similarly, in community settings we may also feel encouraged to become an individual leader, role-model, or award-winner, by the ways in which people are rewarded and valued in our communities. At the same time, when we get into those roles it is easy to start to dismiss anybody who is critical of us, or who has different priorities to our own.

For more see: rewritingtherules.wordpress.com/2012/03/03/happiness

Interpersonal Dynamics

So how does this play out on an interpersonal level, in our everyday relationships? It seems to me that this is often where it's at its most insidious because we are generally unlikely to think about the power dynamics that play out through our relationships, or about the ways that individualising happens with our friends, family, partners, colleagues, etc.

Inequality

Each person sits within a complex, and unique, network of intersecting power dynamics. When we think about the ways in which our gender intersects with our age, with our race, with our body type, with our geographical location, with the generation we grew up in, etc. etc. etc. we can start to get a sense of some of this complexity.

Whenever we interact with another person all of these intersections are in play, although we're probably more aware of some than others. In this comic I've illustrated how we're often more aware of dynamics where we're in a less powerful position than those where we're in a more powerful position. For example, a white woman going to a movie might notice how few female characters there are, but might fail to notice that most characters are white.
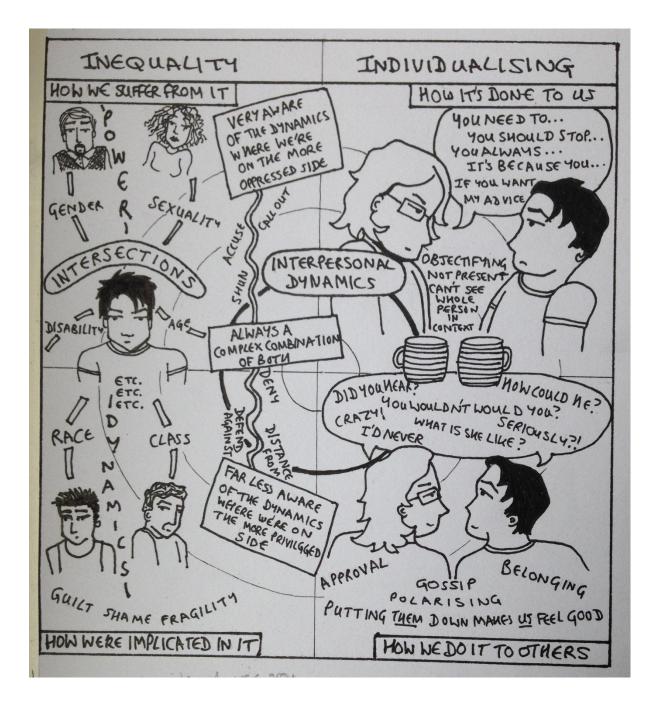
These kinds of inequalities play out in all kinds of ways in our relationships. For example, we may feel that we have less freedom or power in relationships with those who are in a more powerful position than us. We may deny, or fail to see, those things with those who are in a less powerful position. Also, of course, in any relationship there will be some intersections where we're in the more powerful position, some where we're in the less powerful position, and some where it's unclear, or varies according to context. However, we might prefer not to look at these dynamics very closely given how painful – and threatening – they often feel.

Individualising

At an interpersonal level we're generally dealing with another individual, so it's particularly easy from them – and us - to individualise. Also, the people in our lives may well want what's best for us and – being in no position to change the world around us – endeavour to make *us* change our behaviour in order that we might have an easier time of it. An example would be a parent who, on hearing that their child has been robbed or bullied, tries to figure out what the *child* could have done differently in order to avoid that happening. Unfortunately, of course, this is another way of individualising something which is largely out of that person's control, and it often disempowers them and makes them feel worse about themselves.

I've used the word *objectifying* here because when we individualise people we tend to view them as a thing, or object, for ourselves, rather than seeing all that they are from their perspective. We're trying to get them to be more like us, or more like we want them to be, rather than appreciating them for what they actually are. And we're generally not seeing their social context – which is a huge part of why they are being the way that they are being. Individualising is also something that bonds us with other people. When we gossip we often go through all the individuals who we know and judge them as inferior to us, and to our way of doing things. It connects 'us' in opposition to 'them' and we feel belonging and approval.

For more see: rewritingtherules.wordpress.com/2012/07/04/privilege-oppression-conflict-compassion

Intrapsychic Conversations

Finally we can see how our internal conversations, on an intrapsychic level, echo all of the social levels that we've considered. As I've mentioned, most of us have this kind of babble going on underneath our everyday experience most of the time, and often it is self-critical. This is one reason why it can be very hard for people who go on a silent retreat for the first time: they finally realise just how much this is a constant backdrop to their lives: so familiar that they don't usually even notice it.

Of course, those of us with high levels of mental distress are often painfully aware of this self-criticism. It can become so loud that it's virtually impossible to block out; or we can only shut it down with certain behaviours or substances which interfere with our lives; or it starts to be experienced as an external critical voice which we hear telling us these things.

Key features of these internal conversations are that they *individualise* us: blaming us for all of our struggles, and failing to take account of any social elements such as *inequality*. They also often involve comparisons against others who we similarly *objectify*: either we imagine that everyone else is fine (because all we see is their outside surface) and wonder why we can't measure up. Or we compare ourselves to other people we know are struggling more than us and use this as a stick to beat ourselves with because we refuse to take our own problems as seriously as theirs. Finally, we relate to others in ways which either hide our own struggles, so that we become an unrealistic point of comparison for them. Or we lash out and blame them in an attempt to escape our self-blame and self-criticism for a while, but this only alienates us even further.

I often think of self-criticism as being *turned in* because we are so focused on monitoring ourselves and judging how we measure up. It is also *tuned out* because we're painfully aware of how imagined other people – or wider society – are seeing us.

When we experience self-criticism and related distress we tend to look for internal solutions to address this because: (1) these feel like internal states, (2) we've been taught to internalise things, and (3) this is almost entirely what is on offer to us, in the form of self-help, individual-focused therapies, and medications. But, as we've seen, *the psychological is cultural, the individual is social,* and *the personal is political.* The four levels we've explored are *inextricably* linked and cannot be teased apart. Focusing at this individual level without also addressing our social dynamics, systems and structures can only go so far. It's likely that we'll continue to experience self-monitoring and self-policing if we're not aware of the dynamics, systems and structures that keep it in place, and if we haven't engaged with our relationships with all four levels. At worst, seeking an internal solution and finding that it is of limited – or no - help can end up providing even *more* fuel for self-criticism.

For more see: rewritingtherules.wordpress.com/2012/05/17/tuning-out-turning-in-turning-out-tuning-in
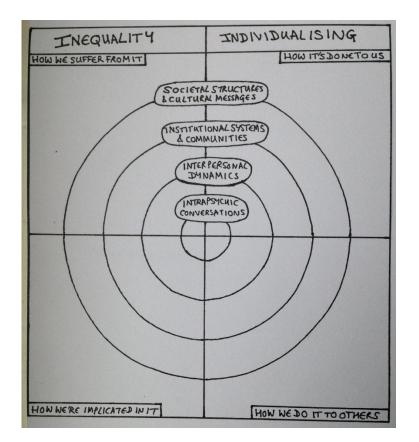
Practice: Inside Out

For the rest of the zine I want to take you in reverse through the four levels that we've considered. I invite you to do the following for each of them:

- Notice how it is for you in terms of inequalities and individualising.
- Cultivate kindness for yourself and all the others (i.e. everyone) who are enmeshed in these dynamics, systems, and structures.

I'm not putting this forward as any kind of solution or quick fix to what are – clearly –major cultural issues! However, this approach might help you to find kinder ways of engaging with them yourselves, or open up potential for alternative dynamics, systems and structures. I hope it will also give you a sense of relief that feeling this way is *understandable, normal*, and very much *not your fault*, given the social context we're all in.

You can do this as a meditation: spending five minutes or so at each level just trying to notice how it is for you, and imagining sending out kindness. This is a bit like the Buddhist loving-kindness, or compassion, meditations where we try to cultivate these qualities with ourselves, then for other people, and then for the whole world.

Alternatively I've included blank versions of the comics here so that you can scribble on words or images which relate to your own experiences of each of them. You might like to reflect on how you could try to do things differently at each level, whilst remembering how challenging that is because we can never step outside of culture. You can keep coming back to these questions at different times in your life.

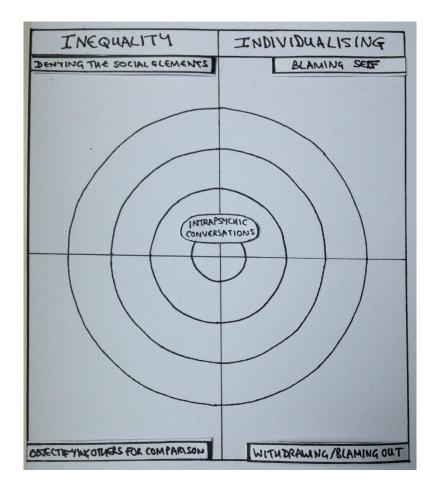# Intrapsychic Conversations

Noticing

Instead of *tuning out* to all the messages you receive about what it is to be a good, successful, acceptable individual and comparing yourself against them, try *tuning in* to your own experience. Can you sit quietly and notice the thoughts that bubble up, and the feelings that attach to them? Notice which ones are more or less difficult to let go of. Which feel particularly sticky to you? Try not to judge yourself for having these thoughts – we all do. What is it like to just observe them without judging them or following them?

Kindness

Once you've noticed like this for a while, try sending kindness to the person who is criticising themselves in these ways If you struggle to be kind with yourself, you might remember that everybody else does this too (no matter what they look like on the surface). Maybe pick somebody you care about (a friend, loved one, even a fictional character) and send kindness to them in their moments of self-criticism.

Remind them that there are so many reasons that things are hard for them: all the inequalities in their lives, and the harsh messages they receive from their wider culture, institutions, and other people. Encourage them (you) to go a bit easier on themselves (yourself).
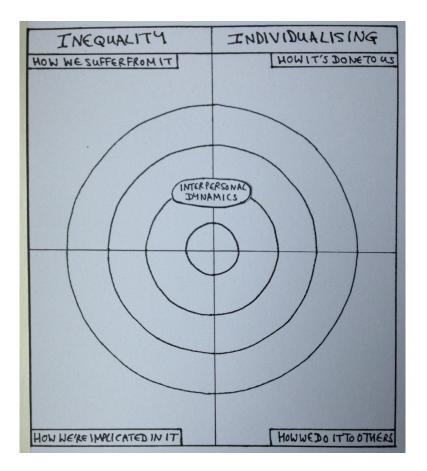
Interpersonal Dynamics

Noticing

Notice how you tend to relate to other people, perhaps as objects to compare yourself against, or as things to be judged to make you feel a little bit better about yourself. Again, try not to blame yourself for doing this. Just notice how it is for you. Think about relationships where you feel individualised, or ones where you're particularly draw into individualising others. What seems to be going on there?

Kindness

Instead of *turning inwards* to yourself, try *turning outwards* towards others, recognising that they're embroiled in these same kinds of struggles. Can you recognise this as something that actually connects you with them? Can you send a brief moment of kindness to the friend who suffers like you do, to the colleague who you usually gossip with, to the stranger who seems to have it all sorted, or to the 'difficult person' who always makes you feel small. They're all enmeshed in these dynamics too.

Can you feel kindness for both those who are in less powerful positions in your dynamics and those who are in more powerful positions? Can you go easy on yourself if this is too difficult?
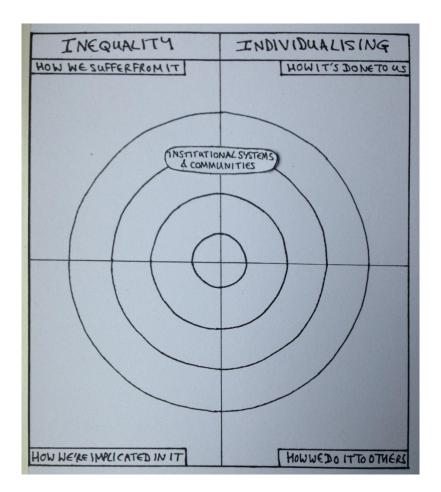
Institutional Systems and Communities

Noticing
Consider the institutional systems and communities that you spend your everyday life in. What are the main ones? Spend some time tuning in and noticing the inequalities those systems are grounded in, and the ways in which individualising happens within them. What is your position in all of that?

Kindness
Again use this noticing as a way of connecting to all of the others who are enmeshed in that system with you. Send out some kindness to them all. Might there be some kinder, gentler, or more collaborative, ways in which you could work together? Can you creatively engage with your position in the system?

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Societal Structures and Cultural Messages

Noticing

Finally notice the wider level of societal structures and cultural messages. What is your position in relation to social inequalities? Which do you suffer/benefit from? Which of the individualising messages about how a 'successful' self should be do you feel most strongly?

Kindness

Again, use these observations to connect with all the other people (i.e. everyone) who is enmeshed within this tangled situation that we find ourselves in: struggling with inequalities and simultaneously benefiting from them; suffering because of the social climate, but blaming ourselves for it; drawn into individualising even when that is the very thing that is hurting us so much, and it gets in the way of seeing clearly what is going on.

Might there be kinder spaces that we can open up in our lives where we explore different ways of doing things – at least some of the time: on an individual, interpersonal, community, or wider social level? What might these look like?

For more see: rewritingtherules.wordpress.com/2014/12/04/dealing-with-the-tough-stuff-the-value-of-noticing