Collaborative storytelling in residential social work: Revisiting our shared past.

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Abstract:

In the hope that it may be of use to others, this short article introduces a journey of reflection and discovery that we are currently engaged in, from two very different perspectives. Both of us have first-hand experience of the Edinburgh voluntary organisation, The Guild of Service for Women (later Family Care and now Birthlink), one of us as a former social worker and the other as someone who grew up in residential care. We first met online almost two years ago and, since that time, we have been working together on our shared past in a process of co-inquiry, learning much about social work and childcare from the 1940s onwards. We have also been learning about ourselves and about some of the other people involved in our stories. Our main 'take-home' message is that the history of social work and childcare belongs to all of us. Furthermore, there is much to be gained from stepping outside the boxes (real and imagined) that constrain us and beginning to truly listen to each other's stories.

Introduction

Our story begins with an email sent during the first Covid-19 'lockdown', when Bob wrote to Viv to say that he had read her PhD thesis online and that it had changed how he thought about his childhood growing up in residential care. His email marked the beginning of a journey of discovery which goes back more than 30 years since the PhD was completed, and more than 70 years since Bob first arrived at Edzell Lodge children's home as a two-year-old in 1946. We will now relate the story of our work together since then – we call this a co-inquiry – before drawing some conclusions for social work history research and storytelling practice in the future. But first, we will introduce Edzell Lodge and ourselves.

Edzell Lodge

Edzell Lodge children's home was opened in 1946 in a large house in the leafy Inverleith district of Edinburgh, Scotland, opposite the Royal Botanic Gardens and next to Inverleith Park with its playing fields, allotments, and skating pond. That the home was opened at this time was due to a generous donation by two upper middle-class Edinburgh sisters; the Guild of Service for Women (hereafter, the Guild of Service) had been on the lookout for a suitable venue for a children's home since the early 1940s, and Edzell Lodge was, for the committee and its organising secretary, Miss Kay Stewart, quite literally a gift from heaven. The Guild of Service (formerly the National Vigilance Association [NVA], Eastern Division) was a social work agency with its roots in the social purity movement, saving women and girls from 'the terrible wickedness and cruelty of the white slave trade' (Cree, 1995 p13). In the early years of the twentieth century, the NVA's activities in Edinburgh included working at railway stations and the docks, where unaccompanied young women travellers were befriended by NVA workers and volunteers and taken to what were considered safe lodgings and employment.

During the Second World War, the Guild of Service and other moral welfare organisations turned their attention to the increasing number of unplanned pregnancies and the social problem of 'unmarried mothers' – women who had no family support that would allow them to bring up their 'illegitimate' babies. The 1941 formation of the Scottish Committee (later, Council) for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (SCUMC) demonstrates this concern, as a range of agencies sought to provide support for these women, though not, at this time, through adoption. On the contrary, it was widely believed that helping a mother to keep her child would encourage her sense of responsibility and, at the same time, reduce the likelihood of her having any more unplanned pregnancies (Ashley, 1995). And so, the Guild of Service's aspiration was to open a children's home in which children of unmarried mothers would live until their birth mothers were able to offer them a home; if necessary, this would be throughout their childhoods. Mothers (and occasionally, fathers) were expected to pay towards their children's care and to visit them regularly.

This account is a very different one to the current dominant narrative around unmarried mothers and what is today described as 'forced adoption'. The Guild of Service (under Miss Stewart's leadership) was one of the organisations that argued *against* adoption for many years; although adoption was legalised in Scotland in 1930, the agency did not become an adoption society in its own right until 1954, at which point Miss Stewart left and a new 'professional' social work discourse gained prominence. In examining the agency's history, it is very clear that this shift in direction brought with it gains and losses along the way (see Cree, 1993, 1995).

Viv and Bob

Viv was a social worker at Family Care (now Birthlink) from the early 1980s until the early 1990s, working mainly with what were then described as 'single parents'. When she learned about the agency's history in the NVA and Guild of Service, she was hooked, and began a PhD in which this agency's story became a case-study for exploring the history of social work in Scotland more broadly. By the time the PhD thesis was completed in late 1992, she had begun work as a lecturer in social work at the University of Edinburgh, and since then, she has enjoyed working with students and writing and researching, often with history at the core of her work. As Professor Emerita, she remains an active researcher and writer.

Bob lived in Edzell Lodge and later Margaret Cottage (both Guild of Service children's homes) from 1946 until he left to go to Edinburgh University in 1962, graduating with 'honours' in History in 1966. He became part of the latter-day Scottish diaspora, taking up an overseas development post in East Africa. His career since then has spanned UK and international settings within the public, private, voluntary, and higher education sectors; he also undertook a DPhil on facilitating learning through writing and conversation (MacKenzie, 2005). Bob retained contact with his mother throughout his life, albeit intermittently. She died in 1985, aged 69.

What is most striking about Viv and Bob's stories is our shared love of learning and writing. Although working in very different disciplinary fields, and coming from very different starting points, we have more in common than that which divides us, and we see it as a great privilege to work together on our shared past.

Our approach to working together

It seems contrary to everything we believe to introduce our approach as 'methodology' (or even 'Methodology'), as if we had selected a specific approach from a range of alternatives in some objective way, and as if the approach we chose was somehow separate from what we actually did. In reality, lots of different theories and concepts contributed to the approach we took to our work together; additionally, all were (and are) intimately connected to how we see and experience each other and the world of which we are a part. Reflexivity reminds us that we are all implicated in the research and writing we undertake; there is no such thing as 'insider' or 'outsider' research (see Breen, 2007; Etherington, 2004). Of course, mainstream academic research and writing often claim otherwise. As early as 1960, Sir Peter Medawar posed the question, 'Is the scientific paper a fraud?' He pointed out that through the conventions of article-writing, mistakes are concealed, and discrepancies smoothed over, creating the illusion that science is somehow less messy, unpredictable, and contradictory

than is the case in practice. So it is with some humility that we now attempt to outline the big ideas that have impacted our approach to working together.

At its simplest, we have been involved in a reflexive programme of excavating the past and then recording it, in the sure belief that all types of knowledge claims (including memories) are social processes; they are socially constructed, and because of this, the process by which they are co-created, and the context within which they are located, matter. Foucault's (1972) idea of historical research as a kind of archaeology helps us further. Foucault prompts us to examine 'discourses' (understood as ideas and practices) as things in themselves, not seeking to resolve any contradictions, but instead, understanding that continuity and change can, and do, exist side by side. More specifically, we have drawn on theories of learning, storytelling/narrative, action research and curating as ways of understanding and explaining our roles and identities as we work together.

Learning theory

Writing and learning are both exercises in imagining. Learning theory assumes that humans are social creatures who, unless constrained by circumstances, are constantly involved in a process of learning: we learn from past experiences and from current challenges, from others and through self-reflection, from reading, writing, music, dance, and from everything around and within us. Learning is an active process in which 'learners strive for understanding and competence on the basis of their general experience' (Cust, 1995, p. 280). Motivation is intrinsic to learning, as we seek to make sense of the world (Piaget, 1972; Rogers, 1969). This is why memory is so unreliable and uncertain; we change the stories that we tell ourselves based on new understandings; 'old knowledge is always revised, reorganised and even reinterpreted in order to reconcile it with new input (Cust, 1995, p. 281). Adults who have grown up in residential care often reach a point in their lives when they seek to make sense of their childhood experiences, and as Malcolm Knowles (1984) argues, adults learn best experientially and through problem solving, when they are ready to do so. This is exactly the moment we have found ourselves in.

Action research

Action research starts from the premise that research should be carried out 'with' rather than 'on' people. It sees learning as a cyclical process, beginning with a stage of reflection, followed by an action stage in which ideas are tested out in practice. In a third stage (itself a second action phase), experiences of stages one and two can lead to new fields of inquiry. By the fourth stage, co-researchers reflect on what they have learned in stages two and three (Reason, 1995). From this perspective, Bob's decision to send the first email was prompted by a period of reflection which many of us experienced when normal

life stopped during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our first communication (through email and then on Zoom) might be seen as stage two, while our first writing together became stage three. Stage four takes us back to reflection, and the cycle begins all over again, as we learn about our past through co-inquiry (Heron, 1996). Of course, the real world is less tidy than this – there is a great deal of going round in circles and messiness along the way – the learning cycle is rarely as straightforward as implied herein.

Curating

In our writing together, we have made use of the notion of 'curation' as a way of conceptualising what we are doing together (Cree & MacKenzie, in press). Drawn from a museum and art gallery context, it 'places multiple artifacts in dialogue with each other, instantiates them around a complex set of themes, elicits multiple meanings from related artifacts and narratives, and promotes questions as often as answers' (Persohn, 2021, p. 21). This seems to us a helpful way of explaining Viv's role, as she has had the main responsibility for gathering together the various bits of our project and facilitating the stories that the former children's home residents (Bob, Rose and Doug) have wished to share.

Methods

Our co-inquiry began with an email invitation and a response. We will now outline what happened next, as we have built our shared understandings through reading, researching, meeting online and in person, and, of course, writing.

Reading

Viv's PhD, now digitised by the University of Edinburgh, was the trigger to our work together. In it, Viv introduced Bob to subjects that he was not familiar with, including the professionalisation of social work and the influence of 'psy' discourse on social work practice in the 1950s and 1960s. She also introduced him to authors whose work he knew, but had not studied in any depth, including Michel Foucault (1972, 1977). It was Foucault's ideas that helped Bob to see differently what he had experienced as competing discourses in his childhood and upbringing in the children's home. For his part, Bob then shared his own redacted case record with Viv, as well as the transcript of an interview that had been conducted with him some years previously by another researcher. He also shared a letter which he had earlier received from his mother about her early memories and experiences, written at his request. And Bob introduced Viv to his own subject – management learning – and specifically his DPhil on the topic of 'explication', that is, the process of analysing and developing an idea or principle in detail through writing about it (much as we are doing now).

Over the last two years, Viv and Bob have literally bombarded each other with anything they had found interesting. This included writing we have done ourselves, and also writing from a very wide range of academic and non-academic backgrounds. Through this, we have built an extensive library of resources and references to which we can now turn for support for our ideas and discussions.

Researching

We began by applying for and gaining ethical approval for our collaborative research from the University of Edinburgh's School of Social Science Research Ethics team. As part of this, a former colleague at the University of Edinburgh, who also had experience of working (as a volunteer) at Birthlink, agreed to be contactable should any of the former residents wish to do so. So far, this has not proved necessary, but he has remained interested in, and committed to, our enquiry.

Our project has involved different research methods over our time together. Viv has carried out archival documentary research (examining Guild of Service minute books, records and annual reports) and genealogical research, exploring the family histories of Bob and, with their permission, two other former Edzell Lodge residents, Rose and Doug. She has also conducted interviews online and in person with Bob, Doug and Rose. In all of this activity, her role has been that of researcher and former social worker; meanwhile Bob's role has been more complicated, because he has been researcher and research participant/respondent at the same time. This dual role has necessitated exploration and care on our parts: care in our relationship with each other and in our relationship with others, including Rose and Doug. We have also met with current social workers and the acting CEO of Birthlink and presented our emerging findings at two conferences.

Meeting and dialogue

Since our first email contact in 2021, we have met online on approximately a monthly basis. We began by recording our Zoom meetings, in the expectation that these recordings might form an integral part of our ongoing work. In fact, that has not proved to be the case. Instead, Viv has relied on a scrappy notebook, recording Bob's words verbatim during our meetings together, and writing up observations and flashes of inspiration (sometimes in the middle of the night) ever since. She is now on her third blue A4 notebook. These notes, and Bob's annotations on draft papers, seem to do the job just as well as a fully transcribed recording of our meetings. We also met once in a coffee shop in Edinburgh six months into our journey, later in Southampton (where Bob lives), and more recently in Milan and Stirling. We enjoy talking with each other and

sharing stories of our lives, but mostly, the focus in our meetings has been the sense-making we have been doing through our writing.

Writing

As will be clear by now, it is in co-writing that all of our co-enquiry (and indeed all of our learning) has come together. The process of writing and storytelling has been episodic and has stretched over time. Surfacing a publishable story inevitably involves several acts of partnership; it rarely happens in one fell swoop, and this extended time span needs to be factored in. Nevertheless, the process, laboured as it has been at times, has allowed for further negotiation and reflection along the way.

We began, at Bob's suggestion, by writing our autobiographies for each other to read. Since then, we have written two journal articles and delivered two conference presentations together. Up to now, Viv has taken the lead in writing first drafts of articles and conference outputs, with social work academics and practitioners as our intended audience; for his own part, Bob has been kept busy responding to Viv's drafts and bringing his own insights and experience to the writing. Our next article will be led by Bob, this time for a 'learning' journal.

Conclusion

We began by suggesting that we have been engaged in a shared journey of discovery, about social work, about childcare and about ourselves. That journey continues, as we look to our future writing and to drawing Doug and Rose further into our process of co-inquiry. Over time, we have become less concerned with artefacts of the past (Viv's PhD and Bob's casefile) and more concerned with the present, and within this, our shared relationship. We hope that others will take courage from our story and feel able to engage in their own exploration of their past in social work, from whatever standpoint they are coming from, and alongside whichever 'critical friends' (MacKenzie, 2015) are available to support them on that journey.

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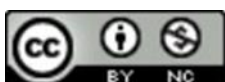
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