1 Introduction

'I have to be frank, when I volunteered my story I was sceptical about what difference telling it could make. But now I am convinced'

This book aims to provide some small rebalancing. There are two ways we hope to achieve this. First, by providing accounts of social work from the point of view of the people who directly experience it. Practitioners do, at least, have portfolios to collect narratives of their experiences, but the people currently styled service users or self-advocates do not have this means of expression.

A second aspect of this rebalancing is the decision to collect narratives of *positive* experiences of social work. Direct accounts of people's experience of social work are unusual enough, narratives of positive experience are rarer still. We want to counter the public inquiry phenomenon; whoever heard of a public inquiry into what went spectacularly right? So, this book is based on the premise that we can learn as much, perhaps more, from what goes right as what goes wrong. Although it can be useful to learn from experiences that fall all too short of good practice (Malone et al., 2005), we believe that there is not a good balance, with students exposed to few if any specific examples of good practice. The recounting of a single example can have a powerful impact, as with Hingley-Jones' (2005) exploration of the emotional component of the parent – professional relationship with a child with autistic spectrum disorder. Lists of bullet-pointed principles of practice have their limitations, and exhortations to good practice in social work texts are not enough.

Of course, this book cannot claim to be representative in any way, since we do not know the prevalence of these kinds of positive experience of social work. However, we know through our own and others' direct experiences that the pictures presented in the public media and the professional literature neglect one of the realities; there is much unsung good practice.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of formal research into social work outcomes and aggregated statistical evidence, we hope this book

can play its part in contributing to the knowledge base. Although our role has been as much journalist as social researcher, we have been aware of our particular responsibilities as narrators in some of this process and have aimed to be accurate and respectful. The process of finding and recording these narratives is detailed later in the chapter.

Speaking up for social work

This book is an attempt to articulate the process of social work through an alliance of service user and professional, in telling social work stories and reflecting on them. Beresford and Croft (2004) are right that social work is unlikely to develop a more emancipatory role until social workers play a central role in its construction and gain support for that role by developing much closer partnerships and collaborations with service users and their organizations and movements. So, the book is a forum for service users and self-advocates to reflect on their encounters with social work and for practitioners and students to learn from these reflections. It is in the tradition of story-telling, similar to Lecroy's (2002) account of what makes up the 'dailyness' of the lives of social workers. Our book is less about the dailyness of service users' experience and more a gathering of their thoughts about the entirety of their encounter. For those listening to these stories, it becomes evident that what social workers do is at once simple and complex.

Social work is, rightly, a largely private affair, but with the consequence that it is largely invisible (Pithouse, 1998). This privacy prevents scrutiny and hides the learning and celebration that could be gained from wider knowledge of the positive benefits of social work. It also contrasts with the glare of publicity that surrounds those examples of social work that has gone terribly wrong. If we might move from sight to sound in this metaphor, the noise of bad practices is a cacophony that drowns the tranquillity of good practices and it prevents us from knowing what the true balance is between the two. You cannot measure the 'amount' of quiet behind the roar. So, to recount some positive experiences of social work is a way to search behind the roar, whether it is social workers' narratives (Cree, 2003) or the people they work with (Cree and Davis, 2007). We hope that the reflections of the many people in this book can help to articulate what social work is; and, for the wider community, this is a window on what actually goes on when people encounter social work. For students and practitioners it sheds light on how to achieve practice that is experienced positively.

It is reasonable to ask who the contributors to this book felt were 'the audience' and how this might have affected the way they constructed their stories. Is there a 'Hawthorn effect' here, in which the positive aspects of their experience are exaggerated because that is what the

story-teller knows the listener is expecting? We cannot know for sure, only that the contributors selected themselves because they felt strongly that they wanted to share their experiences *because* they were largely good. The desire for inclusion led one of the self-advocates in Chapter 9 to ask to tell his experiences of social work, even though they were generally negative, but this was, uniquely, the exception.

How the book was written

The book is inspired by the desire to give voice to service users and to help practitioners and students to learn from experiences of social work that are, by and large, positive. What is clear is that even when service users are participating, such as developing and delivering social work education, it is usually via the invitation of the professionals, who largely set the agenda. An approach that seeks to challenge this is both time-consuming and unpredictable and it relies on the emergence of trust through a process where the professionals let go of power.

A parallel influence was the emerging literature on service user involvement, that revealed the tendency for professionals to appropriate service users' knowledge and reframe it as their own (Beresford and Croft, 2004). We wanted the process of telling the story, and how it was told (written by the service user or through the authors) to be empowering rather than expropriating (Johnston and Hatton, 2003). The book contains accounts written by service users themselves and others that were documented through conversation (Murphy et al., 2001). It was important that each person chose their particular method. All the contributors knew that the guiding principle was the fact that they had a generally positive story to tell in terms of their experience of social work.

Finding the stories in this book has been serendipitous. Although the plan called for a range of people across the UK, from a variety of backgrounds and in different circumstances, the reality has been more opportunistic. The process has been what researchers term 'snowballing'; we set several balls rolling and hoped they would pick up people who wanted to participate along the way. For example, SCIE's Partners Council of service users, carers and self-advocates was a very helpful starting point. For a variety of reasons, numerous leads ended in cul-de-sacs; even so, these journeys were invariably interesting and worthwhile.

Once tentative contact had been made with people who had expressed interest in telling their story, we introduced the broad purpose of the book as a way of painting a picture of social work and, by focusing on experiences that were generally positive, helping this and future generations of social workers to learn about good practice. As well as the opportunity to tell their stories, people also expressed

pleasure at being able to contribute to improving experiences for future others.

In addition to discussing the purpose of the book, we made sure that people were confident that their anonymity would be protected. This confidentiality included the knowledge that what was said would not affect the services that were being received. These issues of privacy were more important to some contributors than to others, though everyone enjoyed choosing the name they would like to be known by in the book.

We had considered the ethical dimensions to this project at some length, gaining independent review and consultation. The questions that helped us to test ethical concerns focused on the motivation for writing the book and whether this format was the most effective way of meeting the objectives of the book, both of which we have discussed in this introduction and in the Preface.

We met the person wherever they suggested they would feel most comfortable and suggested options for how the story might be recounted. A big decision for each service user was whether to write the story themselves or have the authors act as journalist. Julia and Leone chose to recount their own stories, Julia by writing it herself and Leone by transposing from an audio cassette. Two young people who had experienced local authority care also decided to write their story after the conversation, but the moment passed and their story with it. The authors and the contributors signed an agreement which was clear that contributors could withdraw their story at any stage up to publication. It was acknowledged that the telling of personal stories may revisit painful life experiences and we asked participants to think about this and discussed access to personal support, should they need this.

In general we suggested a preference for making notes during our conversations rather than using tape recordings, though Leone asked for a tape so that her story could be transposed directly. This method relied on us writing up the conversation promptly and making a draft available to the person soon after, so that the conversation was still fresh in the mind. For those who could not read, supporters were primed to receive and read out the drafts. Some people were happy that the draft captured what they had said very well, others came back with suggestions for some changes, including things that had come to mind after the conversation. For example, Mrs Corbett decided she wanted to use a different name for her husband.

The arrangements for the self-advocates' chapter were different, in that both authors participated together in the group story-telling, then met separately with individuals to hear their stories. Every member of the group and their supporters had access to the draft of the group's story, whilst the privacy of individual stories was maintained.

Story and narrative

If the story is the events and the narrative is the telling of the events, then this book is about both. In describing the process of narration above, we can see that the construction of each person's story was a collaboration between the service users and the authors. The conversations were guided by a purpose, in this case to explore a generally positive experience of social work, how it had been positive and why. Perhaps the notion of *encounter* best combines the sense of the events and also the telling of them, for in the process of recounting events, the service users were also reflecting on these experiences and, to some extent, re-constructing them.

An interesting aspect of the building of the book is the fact that, though the focus of each person's story is themselves, it also centres on someone who is not in the room – the social worker (or student social worker in some cases). For the authors, it also concerned an abstract process, that of *social working* (Carter et al., 1995). At one time in the planning of the book, we considered having conversations with each of the social workers, where possible and only, of course, with the service user's permission. This would give another perspective on each of the stories. However, in writing the book, we came to feel that the social workers' stories were not necessary and could threaten to blunt the service users' accounts. Like a person in a play who is often referred to but never appears, it was felt better for the social worker to remain off-stage, someone left to the reader's imagination. In this way we can imagine the social worker in this book as a collectivity rather than a series of different individuals.

Of course, the act of recounting the social work story is a re-construction of that story. 'An understanding and analysis of narratives and the role they play in the politics of people's lives, at macro and micro levels, can be used effectively in changing the politics of situations. The process of change can be characterised quite simply as one of narrative recon-struction' (Fook, 2002: 135). Just as people's life stories can be recov-ered through social work itself (and life scripts challenged as a consequence), so their stories *of* social work were reconstructed through these conversations (Solas, 1995). Indeed, we could not have guessed the full potential of this process until the events recounted in the Epilogue to the final chapter (see page 134).

Children's story-telling is rather different from adults and none of the stories in this book are directly from children, though one (Leone, Chapter 6) concerns her time as a child and others (the families) report on children's experiences of their social workers. No doubt there are similarities between what adults find positive in their experience of social work and what children do, but there are likely to be important

distinctions, too (Horwath, 2001). Certainly, doing research with children requires different methods of communication to enable self-expression (Fraser et al., 2004; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003; Lewis et al., 2004; Thomas and O'Kane, 2000). For example, children's stories may best be expressed through their drawings (Coates, 2004) and we are pleased to reproduce two of these in this book (see Chapter 10). The issues and ethics of consent are also different with children, though they are increasingly seen as their own experts (Williams, 2006). There are organisations which provide a platform for children and young people's experiences (e.g. A National Voice[1]; Young Minds[2]) and some studies have documented positive experiences. The comment of one child, that social workers were 'there for you if you needed them to be' (Aubrey and Dahl, 2006: 33) is repeated by many of the adults and young people in this book.

As noted, we wished to include examples of positive experiences of social work in the widest range of settings, but the serendipitous nature of our contacts means that some settings must await a future volume. Sometimes people's circumstances changed, such as the woman who wanted to tell the story of her successful transition from home to residential care and her positive encounter with social work, but who became too ill to tell her story. By no means all the people's stories are about voluntary engagement with social work (Humerah, for example, has experienced numerous compulsory admissions to psychiatric care), and it is natural to wonder whether positive experiences of social work are more likely to be confined to contacts with service users on a voluntary, helping basis. What about the experiences where social work polices the boundaries of society, such as immigration controls (Humphries, 2004)? More of these kinds of story must also await a further volume.

What is also missing is any judgement about how commonplace these positive experiences are. There is no claim that the book is representative and there has been no attempt to sample, other than to include stories from as wide a range of people as possible. However, the face of social work that we described earlier and in the Preface (from the media, from government inquiries and even from social work texts) is not representative either. The book is inspired precisely by the desire to achieve some rebalancing; it is not intended to suggest that all or most social work is experienced in the ways recounted in this book. We cannot know how typical or unusual these kinds of encounter are.

With some exceptions (notably Julia and Leone), context is relatively absent from these stories. In focusing on the detail of the encounter with

[1] www.anationalvoice.org
[2] www.youngminds.org.uk

social work we lose some of the background (though see Chapter 11 for more discussion of this). Since we take as our starting point the individual encounter it is not surprising that the frame for the discussion of good practice begins at this interpersonal level. However, social work is not just an interpersonal process. It requires a critical knowledge of political, social, legal, professional and organisational contexts and these might not be apparent in the interpersonal encounter of social worker and service user. Like the one-ninth of the iceberg that is visible, are there eight-ninths of good practice that the explorations in this book fail to bring to light? We cannot know, but hope that the reader will agree that even this supposedly exposed part of practice is in urgent need of more visibility.

We hope that the sharp relief of the stories is not too remote from context, but we aim to counter-balance those texts that are overwhelmingly concerned with abstracted contexts and are blurred around the detail. Returning to the notion of choreography referred to in the Preface, 'how we represent ourselves and others is something to be worked at' (Taylor, 2006: 194) and we can only speculate what other influences were critical to the stories and to the telling of the events. As the authors who assisted in the construction of these stories, we feel confident that the people who gave their time and interest did so out of a strong desire to talk about their experiences honestly and directly, and to contribute to improving practices.

Using the book

Everybody has experienced teachers and most people have encountered doctors, but social work is not a universal service and many people's first contact with social work is exactly that. As we noted in the Preface, there are few fictional examples of social work in action, whether literary or televisual, and there are indications that service users have unclear ideas about what social workers do, so that they learn most of this during the actual process of working with a social worker (Kadushin, 1996). We hope that the book can paint a picture of social work for the wider population.

These encounters can help readers to consider issues of good practice, whether you dip into one or more stories from time to time, or read through from start to finish. The commentaries which follow on from the stories might serve as additional teaching and learning, or the stories might just speak for themselves. Depending on who you are, you might put yourself into the story and reflect on how you might have experienced the encounter or what you might have done. You might choose to consider a story from a particular perspective, for example, emancipatory practice (Wilkes, 2004). The stories could be

used side by side with case vignettes, either from the the current experience of the reader or from the literature (such as Haulotte and Kretzschmaur, 2001).

As authors, we too had an opportunity for reflection in the commentaries which follow each story. These are our attempts to deconstruct the experience from a rather abstract point of view – the process of *social working*. The stories were not recounted with any moral in mind, and yet it is difficult not to convert them readily into morality tales. Reading each story, what can we abstract from it in terms of the processes of social work that are experienced as positive? Whilst specific to the particular story, what is also open to generalisation, tentative though this may be? (See Chapter 11 for more about these generalisations.) Of course, these deconstructions are ours, as the book's authors; subjective, yet emerging from honest listening, which was part of the ethical basis for the book. As the reader, you might prefer to make your own reflections first.

The commentaries are not prescriptions for good practice, not bullet-pointed 'to do' lists, rather an opportunity to present themes and issues for debate. There are sufficient texts telling social workers what they ought to do. We hope it will be refreshing to have a dialogue with these actual encounters and to ponder how and why they were experienced as positive.