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6 Through the Glass Darkly: Powerful Stories of Parental 'Loss' and Fortitude

BRENDON HARVEY

Abstract

This paper will explore the use and abuse of powerful stories of loss and fortitude of parents whose children have been affected by gun and gang-related behaviour. Successive government initiatives have sought to empower communities, enhance community safety and involve families in solutions to complex social problems. However, the author's recent experience of working with such families within these communities suggests that the rhetoric is not matched by the reality of lived experience. These realities are often expressed as lone voices and rich stories of life-changing personal development. This paper will have at its heart the story of such a parent, generated by the author's recent research activity, and the ways in which her narrative illustrates the potential of such stories to encourage participation and engagement (Ely et al., 1997). Moreover, the story identifies the construction of a sense of self and how such narratives can prove to be instrumental in stimulating and nurturing personal development (Schratz and Walker, 1995). However, the paper will also counter such optimism with the reality of the abuse of such stories by agencies attempting to initiate policy at a local level. As a consequence, such powerful narratives get lost amongst a cacophony of competing 'voices' which exert powerful influence over what is supported and funded. In effect, this reductive notion of 'collating stories' marginalises the story-teller, nullifies the celebration of the Other, and the potential for involvement within and across communities, is lost (Bauman, 2007).

Joanne's narrative is at the core of this paper. This is deliberate, as the author is keen not to summarise and become another voice which appropriates her story. It has much to say about the attempts to help families such as Joanne's, in both a positive and negative sense, as well as highlighting her fortitude and activism.

Introduction

Since 1997 the New Labour Government has sought to ‘empower’ its citizens and ‘involve’ their communities in ‘partnership’ with local authorities and other agencies serving their needs. Such rhetoric culminated in the announcement this month of a new *Duty to Involve* – each local authority and other public agencies across England being required “as a matter of course ... to involve representatives of local persons”. The various components of the NHS have been particularly active in ‘listening to people’:

Care staff know that involving communities in decisions about care and listening to their experiences is an essential step to improving services.

(Department of Health, 2008)¹

Putting to one side the observation of how such care can be administered without some form of listening, such pronouncements - from health services, young people services, and community regeneration projects – all claim to have at the heart of their policy the intention to listen to experience. This paper explores how such practice can elicit powerful narratives that often challenge government policy and which demonstrate the complexity of social need. However, as exemplified by an elderly uncle in my family who used to turn his hearing-aid off when subject to criticism or just wanting a break, there is a difference between listening and hearing. It is the contention of this author that, based on his experience of engaging with research practice in community involvement and government schemes, a great deal of time and energy is devoted to consultation in a form generating listening but what is heard by others is often selective.

Further, particular narratives are more likely to be subject to positioning, which the conversation partners accept, reject, or develop as they progress (Davies and Harre, 1991; Czarniawska, 2006). Therefore, as a researcher listening to a mother’s story of her drug-using son, I am aware that she is choosing to tell elements of that story to me, I am accepting certain parts of it as being ‘important’, and my prompts may generate other facets that she was not aware of, or she seeks to develop further. So what happens next? Her narrative is transposed by the researcher as part of a report that has specific goals – a further narrative – which is then passed to a government agency which is also trying to form a particular conception of what is working, and how policy should be enacted – another narrative. Schratz and Walker note the tendency of researchers to be the ‘experts’, reluctant to allow public participation in the research process’ (Schratz and Walker, 1995:24). In this

¹ Listening and responding to communities. Department of Health, 2008.

way, they argue, 'objectivity' is sustained by powerful interests within the scientific and research communities.

However, this paper goes further than merely illustrating such a reductive multi-layered process. For within the 'pocketing' of the story by the research report, lies a denial of the potential of that narrative to engage with others in that community and other communities, as well as further personal development of the narrator. The story becomes lost in its appropriation (Ely et.al., 1997). This process will now be illustrated by a particular Mother's story which emerged out of my own professional practice. First, the context of this engagement will be described, followed by the questions that arose through critical reflection of the research activity. Secondly, how these questions then generated a compelling narrative of Joanne's experiences: coping with her son, keeping her family together and her own personal fortitude and development. Here the term *loss*, is interpreted in two ways. First, as a fact of no longer having something; together with a second derivative meaning of *at a loss* - being uncertain what to say or do.

Meeting Joanne

The following narrative had arisen from a chance encounter. My involvement with Joanne had come from an evaluation of an activities programme I had carried out as an independent contractor for a major UK city's Youth Offending Service (YOS). The activities were part of a Youth Inclusion Programme (YIP). YIP's typically targeted the top 50 most '*at risk*' 13-16 year olds in a specific geographical area. The youth programme is voluntary - young people cannot be forced to attend but must make an assurance once they have joined - and the referrals include school exclusions, persistent truants and those at risk of offending. However, to discourage stigmatisation, many YIP activities are open to other young people who live in the neighbourhood. The idea being for young people to become involved in more positive activities and to have access to advice and mentoring by staff and fellow peers.

I met with workers and young people and gathered qualitative data for a report. As a follow-up to the evaluation I attended the YIP's staff away day and reported on key findings to the assembled group. Parents of young people attending the YIP, keen to get actively involved, had also been invited to the event. The ensuing discussion was a lively one. Joanne was one of the parents attending and her contributions stood out for their directness and energy. She spoke powerfully of the needs of the young people being served by the YIP, and how it was crucial for YOS to expand that support. Joanne was a parent volunteer for the YIP and she lived in the area it served, and, at that time, my understanding, derived from the story I had been told by the YIP Manager, was

that one of her children were involved in the YIP. Only later did I realise how the Project and its workers had played such an important part in her life, and those of her children.

I was curious about Joanne's involvement in the YIP:

- Why was she involved?
- What was her passion for change based on?
- As a parent worker, was her story important for others?
- If the current Government's rhetoric of parental responsibility and increased community engagement are to be believed, could her story be held up for verification of involvement? In other words, that some parents are committed to getting involved in prevention and deterrence programmes through engaging with workers and young people.

From this initial short encounter with her I asked if I could interview her further and find out more. This was my starting point - a focus very much on her motivations. However, the subsequent interview at her place of work generated far more about her community, the young people within it, and the realities of their lives. In particular, her story spotlighted the roles of workers endeavouring to offer services that enhance life chances through engaging with young people and their families.

Joanne's Story²

She began by telling the story of Darren, her son, 15 years old at the time, who became involved with drugs. He was doing well at school, very sporty, had friends and a sense of achievement. Then he suffered an accident whilst playing school rugby that damaged his spine. He was in great pain, night and day, which medication failed to alleviate. His suffering, in Joanne's words, '*turned the house into turmoil*'. He could not go to school, he lost contact with friends, and his anger and frustration grew from trying to deal with the pain.

Then on the street he was introduced to heroin on the basis that it would stop the pain. The drug alleviated the discomfiture but now Darren became very violent and aggressive in the home. Joanne became frightened and '*I wanted to tie him up in my frustration*'. Her mother became very ill, her husband left, and the family unit broke down. Darren was one of her four children – he had two elder brothers and a younger sister. She discovered that his two brothers were also on heroin:

² All names in this account have been changed to preserve anonymity.

'Darren could not hack it, his whole life became chaotic, he was very young', Joanne explained.

He started stealing out of the house. First, he sold all his own things – Playstation, CD's, camera, TV, and was left with boxer shorts, socks and tracksuit bottoms. Then he moved onto the rest of the family's possessions – he couldn't carry out the furniture, so it was mostly electrical and other items that were sold to fuel his habit. Toiletries were gathered up, put in a bag and sold. Joanne would come back from the shops, put the shopping away, then find Darren slipping out of the back door with a joint of meat. His arrest interrupted this downward spiral. Darren was caught shoplifting at a local supermarket, then brought to the attention of YOS and the YIP. However, he was reluctant to get involved because his social life had disappeared and his confidence had gone.

The Project Manager of the YIP and his colleague visited the house. Joanne was able to explain to him the extent of the heroin problem in the local area. He basically listened and then asked 'what did the lads want?' They were keen to get assistance to get off the drug. So contacts were made with drug treatment workers and support services. Joanne, at this time, had no idea what these were or how to contact them.

The YIP workers noticed Darren's younger sister sitting on the stairs chewing her nails. Joanne, whilst caught up in the maelstrom of Darren and his brothers' lives, had not realised just how much at risk her daughter was. The YIP workers wanted her, despite her age, to be involved in their Project and get support. Through her inclusion she was able to talk confidentially, express her considerable anger; speak of her Mum being 'lost to her', and how sad and lonely she felt. Her brothers were *'monsters'*. Joanne related to me how the YIP workers skilfully supported and educated her daughter about her family's plight. Through this process Joanne noticed that her daughter *'grew and became more confident'* because she was encouraged to 'express her feelings in a mature way'. In addition, she started to be an advocate for the YIP, encouraging friends and their older brothers [*'who were all on smack in the area'*] to attend. Now, five years on her Mum sees someone who is *'drug-free, sensible, and enrolled on a childcare course at a local Further Education College'*.

For Joanne, Darren's arrest and the YIP intervention came just at the right time. She was at *'rock-bottom and it gave me that glimmer of hope'*. The type of intervention was crucial because she had no understanding of drugs and now she felt that she had family support. The support was not just about Darren but encompassed the whole family.

The actions of the YIP manager and his colleagues had great impact:

just visiting, talking things through, asking, “what do you need?” , ...because there was nothing for parents of drug users in the area at that time, we needed just somewhere we could meet, exchange info, have a phone line.

Word started to get around to families of the possibility of support, and then funding followed. Joanne and others started to look to see how they could be more actively involved, to become trained to deal with problems. At one point they ‘*gate crashed this conference*’ to ensure they were up-to-date and knowledgeable about drug issues. She said that professionals tend to carry around perceptions of parents that ‘*they are all the same, that they don’t care*’. But that is mistaken. She felt that ‘*we had had it up to here, we had to ‘fight’, we were angry about drug dealers*’.

Her support network became precious – her Mum’s strength [which she believed she had inherited], a good family friend, the YIP staff. However, the strain took its toll on her. She had to give her hospital job up – events had made her ill – and she went on days part-time. Her sons’ experiences had led Joanne to ‘*question everything*’. Her control as a parent had been taken away – the drug controlled all her son’s actions – and she felt powerless to stop it. She had lost him. What overwhelmed her was seeing the craving for the drug – she still cannot stand the sight of tin foil and has none in the house, even for her cooking – and the measures she had to go to in order to protect herself. Joanne still sleeps with her handbag close by her side. She took to sleeping downstairs because it was safer – made it more difficult for her handbag to be stolen from when she was asleep.

Yet, as things got worse she went on courses and training, gaining understanding and knowledge, and began the first steps in setting up a community drugs project. Joanne clearly stated how doing this ‘*gave me back my power*’. By knowing more and organising she felt she was doing something for herself and her family against the drug. Two of her sons, including Darren, were able to have rehab but the third ended up in prison at one point. Even then Joanne was not downcast:

I was pleased that they were getting help and, to be honest, having them out the way was good, gave me a chance to have a think and recharge my batteries.

Other agencies were not helpful. At her lowest point Joanne visited her G.P. who prescribed her anti-depressants, but she was adamant that they were not the answer:

How can you support yourself if you are asleep all the time, I would not be able to think straight, so I binned them and went back to the YIP. Trying to help families was the antidote; they need to be responsible for themselves not rely on another drug. Don’t slag families off!

Darren's school were not helpful either. Once he was away from the school it seemed that he didn't matter, and that the family did not matter. Joanne called for much more effective school-parent partnership. She felt that the peer pressure to be on drugs is enormous in her area. Over half of the pupils in Darren's class of roughly twenty-eight pupils were on smack, she believed. *'There is a sense of real bravado, that they [the kids] know it all, "it wont affect me"'*.

Darren was referred to the hospital for further investigation of his back problems but they were not helpful at all. Joanne claimed that 'as soon as they knew he had a drug habit they didn't want to know'.

Joanne gave me a clear understanding of what is needed to help young people, families, and communities of which they are a part:

1. First, it is a matter of approach. She highlighted the manner of the YIP manager as being *'caring and non-judgemental, the kids just respond to it...the Project is "affectionate"... where I feel the YOT seemed much more "penal" in its attitude'*. The YIP she feels sees things *'from both sides'*. One of her sons ended up in a special Remand Unit, and, afterwards, he was *'fostered out to a lovely lady'*. She praised her highly and thought what she did with him was *'highly successful'*, but she was unsure if this part of the service continued. At 16 the young person leaves such a Unit and she felt that a gap then appears. What is needed, she felt, was a *'16-18 service that offered a sheltered, more supportive environment'*.
2. Secondly, more needs to be done to prevent and deter at a younger age. At the other end of the age scale Joanne felt that in her area there was a real need for a Junior YIP. Her own experience has told her that younger siblings of users are at risk as well. In her area this number has increased, and so, consequently, there is even more need to protect their younger siblings through the 'safe haven' principles of the YIP.
3. Thirdly, she is very conscious of the financial restraints put on the YIP from funding bodies. Joanne spoke highly of the level of skill and personal qualities of workers that in her case had saved her family and supported her own personal and career development. The YIP should not be in a position she believed to be losing some of these critical staff but should be expanding their services to give the level of family support in her community that is so badly needed [at the time of the research the YIP was facing cuts in its annual budget which would inevitably lead to the reduction of its staff].

4. Fourthly, Joanne through her experience has gained wisdom. She stated that '*after all these years I can now see what needs to be done....I have the wisdom*'.

Her insight leads her to strongly believe that is at the level of the family where support needs to be directed. It was only when Darren was arrested that she could be informed and then gain access to services. Joanne is conscious of all those families in the community whose children have not been caught but are still vulnerable to the same pressures and conditions that she endured for so long. That support has to be of a particular type though, she feels, in order to be effective:

We have to give support from outside the family but there is such a lack of trust of professionals...as a parent other families know I am coming from this as someone who has been through it, here, in their community...this helps in trusting me.

The Story as Commodity

Joanne is now a qualified youth worker and facilitator. She continued to work actively in the YIP, dealing with referrals, supporting outdoor activities, and supporting families through home visits. Her commitment to increasing drug awareness and offering support for her community persists. She is passionate about adequate training for workers and families; recent projects have included leading training workshops for young policeman in dealing with families, as well as workshops for young mums and dads from her community. Darren is back in college but his struggle with drugs continues.

Joanne's remarkable insights and extensive learning were encapsulated in a report commissioned by her city's Youth Offending Service. What happened to this is unclear. No feedback was offered to her or the researcher as to its progress beyond the point of submission. Her account was presented at a National Youth Offending Conference but Joanne was not present and her 'voice' was interpreted. The YIP is still operating in 2009, but, two years on, a recent report by a different researcher of the very same YIP stated in the report's 'weaknesses' section that:

Some of the best outcomes for young people have been achieved where the programme has included family work. This is not funded via PAYP [*a stream of funding that supports the YIP*] and additional funding has had to be sought from elsewhere.

It seems the impact of the work being done with families, as evidenced by this narrative and others, is still not being funded directly. Such failings do little to

justify the Government's claim of the importance of agencies engaging in 'joined up working'. Numerous reports have highlighted just what Joanne realised, that helping young people means helping the families they come from. Joanne had been consulted, her narrative brought to the fore, but it seems she had not been heard.

However, her own fortitude and drive had led to local action to support families within her community. Such action relies on voluntary work and the impact of Joanne's story is confined to just one small area of this city, whereas there are many other areas of the city that have similar levels of family deprivation and numerous young drug-takers. So much more could be achieved by supporting this form of community-based initiative across cities.

So How Could it be Different?

The assumption is simple: 'every organization has something that works right – things that give it life when it is most effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. This approach begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy and vision for change'.
(Cooperrider et al., 2005, p.xvii)

Why is it that stories like Joanne's become lost and appropriated? The Cooperrider quote above suggests a different way of working with social phenomena. Government agencies have been obsessed with a problem focused model, even if the current vogue of identifying 'what works' [often prompted by an up-coming election] seems to suggest otherwise.

Figure 1 Two Approaches to Initiatives

Traditional View of Dealing with Problems in Initiatives	Appreciative Inquiry³ Approach to Initiatives
➤ Identify Problem	➤ Appreciate “What is” (What gives life?)
➤ Conduct Root Cause Analysis	➤ Imagine “What Might Be”
➤ Brainstorm Solutions & Analyze	➤ Determine “What Should Be”
➤ Develop Action Plans	➤ Create “What Will Be”
<i>Metaphor: Social Organisations are problems to be solved</i>	<i>Metaphor: Social Organisations are a solution/mystery to be embraced</i>

In figure 1, the left hand column shows how stories become part of identifying and then solving the problem, whether that is youth crime, problem estates, or substance and alcohol abuse. Joanne’s story becomes part of an edited package of ‘similar’ stories, a commodity, that help ‘to identify the problem’. The resulting actions become targeted programmes, ‘done-to’ the community.

The other critical element often missing from the left hand column is emotion. Meeting Joanne, hearing her story, reliving it now in this form, emotes. Citing the work of Shotter, Patricia Shaw states how when we converse it is not purely an intellectual activity but rather we are ‘immersed in a sensuous flow of patterned feeling’ (Shaw, 2003, p.55). The resulting edited government report document is free of emotion, a sanitised account of what is seen as relevant data.

What is apparent from Joanne’s account is how she exemplified the elements of the right-hand column of figure 1. Her insights on what had happened were helpful in shaping an imaginary future.

However, these were not clear set goals but arose from her:

³ **Appreciative Inquiry is a** form of action research that attempts to create new theories/ideas/images that aide in the developmental change of a system (Cooperrider and Srivastava, 1987). The key data collection innovation of appreciative inquiry is the collection of people’s stories of something at its best.... These stories are collectively discussed in order to create new, generative ideas or images that aid in the developmental change of the collectivity discussing them.

- telling her story;
- meeting supportive staff and young people at the YIP;
- her anger for the lack of agency support;
- sense of community, and how that should operate supportively and challenge the drug-taking culture.

Joanne was particularly keen to share her positive story to researchers, trainee policeman and young mothers. It has been this activity, at the local level, in conjunction with the YIP manager who encouraged her involvement, which has brought change to her and others she has come into contact with. The stories have been collectively discussed so new generative thoughts are created, aiding the developmental change of the community members. In this sense, stories are seen as instructive accounts. The story, in this sense, is 'instructing us in how to manage or organise our ways of perceiving and acting' (Shotter, 1993:35).

The story edited in the report, carried forward to the government agency, the conference, was appropriated from Joanne and her community. If such powerful narratives and their collective discussion could be enhanced at the local level, in the form outlined above, then the possibilities for the development of communities could be greatly improved.

Conclusion

The image portrayed of families and communities such as Joanne's is often of a dark hue – they are seen through a glass darkly. Therefore, young people from these communities can grow up being stigmatised by their postcode. Within Joanne's story of losing so much, her family and home wrecked by the use of drugs, is a fortitude and wealth of experience. She was often at a loss of what to do, let down by a number of key services, except the YIP which encouraged her and provided the empowered space to share experiences, organise with other parents and support her family. Instead of her story becoming a commodity that was listened to but not heard, it was shared and developed within her community. Such activity lacked financial support due to the continuing financial uncertainty for programmes such as those of the YIP, as well as the lack of clear joined-up income streams to support engagement at the family level.

Joanne, through the lens of the AI framework above, provides evidence of what is significant for her [*what gives life*] - her need for family support and belief in empowering others to deal with the community issues around substance misuse. And creating [*what will be*] through awareness, training, involvement, recognition and development. Eliciting powerful stories such as

Joanne's, serves to recognise the impact of programmes and initiatives at the level of individuals and their families. These can be powerful in encouraging sense-making, for others to become aware of and to connect with their own experiences of effective practices of situations that can be turned around through family support and parent involvement, and to understand how resources need to be generated to sustain this.

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