

Editorial -special issue

Introduction

Over the years, with accelerating impact, a quiet revolution has been taking place in public policy internationally. This has mushroomed, particularly since the development of user-led movements, such as the Disabled people's movement, the looked after children's movement, and survivors' movements. Social work has been in the vanguard of addressing this challenge and was an early profession to require and centrally fund the involvement of people with lived experience in its qualifying education courses in the UK. Such involvement is central to social work's global philosophy. Now, the UK's social work flagship journal, the *British Journal of Social Work*, has produced this special issue with the aim of making a step change forward in people with lived experiences' involvement in academic and professional analysis and discussion.

The Journal has sought to do this by providing a forum for people with lived experience to give first-hand accounts which critique, analyse and respond to social work worldwide. We provided support to ensure as diverse a range of perspectives, experiences, and formats as possible could be included. So, this special issue, headlined *Voice and Influence of People with Lived Experience*, is written 'by' people with lived experience, rather than just 'about' people with lived experience.

As guest editors, our reach as human beings may have exceeded our grasp, but we hope that these contributions will both reinforce recognition of the importance of such a participatory approach to policy, practice and knowledge development and offer others practical insights, building on our experience, as well as further evidence for taking this kind of project forward themselves.

The terminology used in this field is something of a minefield, with no clear path through. It can get even more complicated in an international context where different languages raise different

issues. Among the terms that are used for the people involved are clients, customers, consumers, service users and patients. Each has its supporters and each its critics. We have used the term people with lived experience, to mean those who have direct experience of using social work and related services or who have lived experiences which are relevant to social work. We apologise in advance if this is a term that any readers find problematic and hope that they will understand that our concern here is to improve policy, practice and learning and cause as few difficulties as possible.

The plan

The first thing we did was set up an international panel of guest editors with relevant interest and experience, including an equal balance of members with lived experience on the receiving end of social work. That was us. Together we submitted a bold proposal to the BJSW editorial board for a special issue written, reviewed, and edited by people with lived experience. The journal was fully on board. We had support from the Journal but also the benefit of a blank page to work from. We wanted the special issue to feel as accessible and inclusive as possible to both potential contributors and readers, so that meant a chance to break out of the usual format of long multi-referenced articles written in an academic style. So, we decided to provide a three-track approach. This included:

- Academic papers between 2-7,000 words
- Reflective pieces between 2-3000 words
- Creative artefacts in a wide range of formats.

Reflective pieces were particularly encouraged via a two-stage process of first requesting abstracts. Offers of guidance and support were made in respect of all categories.

The response

In the event, the response confirmed our hopes that this was an important initiative to take. We accepted 14 academic papers, 29 artefacts including music, poetry, short films, photos and visual art and 38 reflective papers.

The range and diversity of contributions far exceeded our expectations in terms of their number, international focus, key issues highlighted, diversity and range of experiences, their insights and quality and, in some cases, the very difficult, not to say extreme experiences reported. Contributions came from the UK, Europe, Australia, the US and the Middle East, dealing with social work in fields such as mental health, domestic violence, sexual abuse, physical trauma, institutional care, child exploitation and professional education.

Contributions came from experienced authors, as well as others, for whom this was the very first thing that they had written, created, or had published. Contributors included people on their own, from established lived experience groups and from groups involved in professional education, research, and practice. There were groups who knew each other and others who had teamed up for this opportunity. Some of these contributions represent collaborations between professionals and people with lived experience; some are user-controlled, and some may rightly be seen as helpful examples of co-production. All the lead authors/contributors are people with lived experience. All enable truths to be told. As one of us wrote in our blog series:

I grew up in out-of-home care in Australia, silent and silenced... I am especially impressed by the incisiveness of the many submissions to the special issue of the Journal... The voices of survivors are beginning to destabilise these deceitful [official] accounts of the past. The Journal will provide another way for these voices to be heard.

How we did it

Editing a journal special issue is all about teamwork and commitment. Fortunately, we were well served by the BJSW's editors and staff, and colleagues at the *British Association of Social Work* (BASW) who own the journal and *Oxford University Press* (OUP) who publish it, and who always seemed to come back with solutions when we encountered difficulties. That, and an absence of prima donnas in our team and real collegiality, helped enormously! We may have come

from different perspectives and backgrounds, but where there is a will to learn and respect each other, as we believe we had, this is a strength not a disadvantage. This was doubtless helped by us having regular virtual meetings both of the overall group and members of each of the three subgroups we formed for each of the different kinds of contribution. We also took turns to write updating blogs about progress which the user-controlled national organization *Shaping Our Lives* curated for us – see, for example, [Blog 12 - British Journal of Social Work lived experience issue series - Shaping Our Lives](#)

Keeping people in touch, as well as having regular chances to take stock yourself, is much more helpful than you might realise at the time. More generally though, what has really helped make this work, is the genuine commitment of all involved in the BJSW to opening up involvement and including lived experience in all aspects of the Journal. Most of us are more familiar with tokenism than we'd like to be. It's great when there's no sign of it. The Journal now has more routine involvement of people with lived experience, having recruited 11 new members to the editorial board this year which helped provide a key resource for when we needed peer reviewers. To do something like this properly needs a lot of people and a lot of support and we have had it.

A sensitive process

We quickly realized from some of the cautious enquiries we received from potential contributors that this was a process demanding sensitivity and care. We wanted to encourage, not offput people, especially people and groups who might have reason to be particularly wary about responding to invitations to get involved. This was particularly true because of our commitment to diversity. We worked to respond to all enquiries speedily and in a friendly way. In addition to ourselves, we were lucky to have the Journal's bank of lived experience reviewers to call on. Again, some of our reviewers welcomed support and encouragement to be sure they were on the right track and would ask if they were getting it right. We were, all of us, gaining skills and confidence through this whole process.

Peer reviewing

People with lived experience played a central role in peer reviewing. We've all seen reviews that are unclear and inadequate and even sometimes terse and rude. This was definitely not what we wanted where our watchwords were being respectful and kind. That does not mean any lowering of standards; in fact, we would argue that it led to a higher quality of submissions, it means treating all involved in this kind of process as valued equals. So, we offered clear guidance and support to reviewers as well as contributors. As we wrote in one of our blogs:

Each academic paper that is submitted has both a lived experience reviewer and an academic reviewer, and it has been transformative to see how reviews can be both focused on academic rigour and supportive to develop the writing of the author.

We used a process of anonymous review. There are definite arguments for transparent open review where all names of contributors and reviewers are known, but this could cause difficulties for some people involved, and so the choice of anonymity or a nom de plume are important. Final editorial decisions were made by the guest editors, ensuring a transparent process regarding accountability and a right to reply.

These issues highlight why it is important to have a sensitive, responsive, encouraging, and supportive approach through the whole process of involving people with lived experience in publishing. There were potential contributors who wanted to check things out at each of the different stages. Finally, this is no place for abrasive reviewers – egos should come last! Instead, the issue is one of reconciling our different perspectives. As one of us put it in a blog:

It is my hope that we can maintain the scientific discussions in this collegial and friendly tone further, and that the knowledge generated in this special issue is given an expanded space and value in such conversations.

Payments

Payment to people with lived experience for their involvement has come to be recognized as an important issue of reward and recognition. The skills and experience they bring and the time they commit need to be properly acknowledged and respected. BASW made a commitment to recompense contributors and lived experience reviewers and editors. We were able to offer £50.00 for each contribution. This was not as much as we would have liked, but it quickly added up to a large sum. We had to grapple with the many issues involved if payment is to be taken seriously; having a budget, a duty of care for contributors on benefits, enabling people to have the option if they wish of not being paid, and dealing with the complexities of payment to overseas contributors.

Taking stock

Having reached the point of putting this editorial together, we as editors are beginning to take stock. We see editing this special issue bringing together lived experience as a beginning not an end. For the BJSW it is a benchmark of progress, but for all of us committed to valuing social work, social work knowledge and the involvement of people with lived experience it is probably best seen as another brick in a growing and helpful wall. We have sought to be guided by the lessons for good practice in involving people with lived experience developed now over decades. Seeking to be inclusive, reaching out rather than assuming people will come to you, and providing the support that may be needed are all key. We have started here with a special issue, but doubtless this will influence the future shape of the journal – and perhaps other journals – too. We hope that is our legacy.

After the closing date for submissions, we received additional enquiries from people who had just found out about this issue. They may have been too late to contribute this time, but we see this as the start of even more involvement in the Journal. This, we are pleased to say, is one genie that can't be put back in the bottle. International politics, with their emphasis on small state neoliberalism, may not be sympathetic to involving and supporting people with lived experience and other disadvantaged and disempowered groups and communities. But the latter are also a voice for change and that ultimately is what this special issue will hopefully serve as.

Lessons to learn

We have learned a lot from this special issue. Here are some of the key messages we've received:

- Working together with people with lived experience is a developmental issue for all of us as well as a rewarding experience.
- It is important to have committed editors and reviewers with a real enthusiasm for supporting people to contribute.
- Plan the whole thing through, be flexible, but be prepared for the unexpected - we received 140 submissions, far more than we could have ever hoped for!
- Be constantly aware and mindful of the many complex contexts and power relations apparent in people's choice to engage with a peer-reviewed journal. Use this experience to reflect on how you and others operate within and towards systems of academic publishing,
- Re-examine your own relationships with what you consider 'truth'; Explore your own personal or professional role in legitimising certain narratives or styles over others.
- Funding is an issue - even an established journal like BJSW has far from limitless resources. The involvement of people with lived experience in journals and other publications is something to discuss with funding organisations. This is key to including people's lived experience, which needs to be recognised as both an access and inclusion issue.
- Allow a long enough run-in time. Your pace and the amount of time and energy you have as professionals may not fit with those of people with lived experience.
- Pull together a group of people to share the ownership and responsibility of the editorial duties (we are a group of seven). The nature of lived experience, the impact of mental and physical health, workload demands and concerns regarding the impact of payment on welfare benefits led to some invited guest editorial group members having to turn down the invitation to be involved or to withdraw part way

through. Sharing across an editorial group or collective minimises these stressors.

- We have highlighted lived experiences relevant to social work in this Issue of the BJSW. No less important and demanding future scrutiny is the diverse lived experience or 'practice wisdom' of practitioners and we hope that can be revisited in the future.
- Enjoy the ride! Alongside our call for critical reflection and notwithstanding the challenges inherent to these sorts of efforts, remind yourself of how fortunate you are to be part of a growing community of advocates for change.
- This special issue awakens us to the benefits of addressing epistemic injustice, by promoting and empowering the voices of people with lived experience for the social work profession to learn from the skills, experiences and knowledge in a way that is meaningful. People with lived experience are included, heard, visible, and well-represented in this special issue, and we hope that this is a staple for epistemic justice.

Now Dear Reader, can we say, it's over to you.

Peter Beresford
Frank Golding
Mel Hughes
Lia Levin
Omar Mohamed
Ulla-Karin Schon
Peter Unwin

