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Voicing a new life narrative: Communicating the dynamics of change in a welfare-dependent family

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Abstract

The Hand Up Linkage project focuses on the family as a communication context through which to explore the dynamics of intergenerational welfare dependency. It is concerned with how persistent barriers to escaping welfare dependency are perceived and how attitudes to change are constructed through communication within the family. Interviews are conducted with families reliant on welfare support with the view of identifying 'emotionally compelling experiences and realizations' (King et al., 2003, p.184) through which families construct meaning about their place in the world. These interviews give voice to people experiencing the challenges and consolations of reliance on welfare, encouraging them to be active contributors to perceptions of people in need. This article explores the way one mother from a disadvantaged family is rebuilding her life despite the disadvantages of poverty, domestic violence and drug dependency. It examines her determined emotional commitment to change as she explains the barriers to change that she has experienced. As she communicates her life narrative, she builds for herself and her children an understanding of a different possible future in which she and her children have access to a more independent, positive life experience. Seligman (2006) suggests that changing self-talk helps people to escape from pessimism and move from powerlessness to autonomy and hope. This mother makes powerful declarations about her life changes with the aim of providing her children with a vision of a more hopeful future. This article contributes the often-silenced voice of a welfare-reliant woman to a discussion of different worlds of communication, and opens a window on diversities of engagement with these worlds.

Keywords: disadvantage; family communications; intergenerational welfare dependency; narrative; voice

Introduction

This article is an outcome of an Australian Research Council-funded Linkage project in which Edith Cowan University partnered with the St Vincent de Paul Society of Western Australia (SVdPWA) in an investigation of intergenerational welfare dependency (LPLP140100935). It is concerned with the way one mother from a disadvantaged family is rebuilding her life despite the challenges of poverty, domestic

violence and drug dependency. We examine her determined, emotional commitment to change as she explains the barriers she has faced in escaping welfare dependency. As she communicates her life narrative, she builds for herself and her children an understanding of a different potential future in which the whole family has access to a more independent, positive life experience. Seligman (2006) suggests that changing self-talk helps people escape from pessimism and move from powerlessness to autonomy and hope. This mother makes powerful declarations about the changes she has made in her life with the aim of providing her children with a vision of a more hopeful future. This article contributes the often-silenced voice of a welfare-reliant woman such as this mother to the discussion of different worlds of communication, and opens a window upon diversities of engagement with these worlds.

The project, *A Hand Up: Disrupting the Communication of Intergenerational Welfare Dependency*, draws its name from the St Vincent de Paul Society's vision of 'offering "a hand up" to people in need ... encouraging them to take control of their own destiny' (SVdP, 2012, p. 2). SVdPWA has been working with Western Australians since 1865, and has developed a significant understanding of the complexity and persistence of welfare dependency. In Western Australia, the Society provides food, clothing, furniture and financial support during home visits and in specialised emergency relief centres, along with support for children of families in need through an extensive kids' camp program. This research project investigates the ways in which welfare dependency is communicated between generations within family units, and explores possible 'turning points' in such communication, within the family context, which may lead to new opportunities or optimistic visions for the future.

Interviews were conducted with families reliant on welfare support with a view to identifying 'emotionally compelling experiences and realizations' (King et al., 2003, p. 184) through which the families constructed meaning about their place in the world. Such interviews give voice to people experiencing the challenges and consolations of reliance on welfare, encouraging them to be active contributors to perceptions of people in need, thus addressing SVdPWA's vision of them taking control of their own destinies.

Over the course of the research, intergenerational family-based interviews with parents and at least one of their children have been complemented by interviews with SVdPWA staff and volunteers. Forthcoming interviews include research with providers of specialist support services, such as drug and alcohol counselling, who are linked with and often accessed through a family's relationship with SVdPWA. In all cases, the interviews are transcribed, then analysed according to the principles of a constant comparative approach (Fram, 2013) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), which examines both the words spoken and the meta-communication of the interview content. Furthermore, the approach to interpretation of the complex life experiences revealed in the interview with the subject of this article takes into account narrative analysis, which focuses on 'exploring the complexity from a human-centred perspective' (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 22). By approaching this interview as narrative, the value of this woman's personal experience is highlighted, as is her communication world, whereby her 'actions, speech, meaning-making come together ... in the context of [her] relationships and through the prism of [her self]' (Barrett Pearce, 2007, p. xiv).

Literature review

Facilitating the expression of a life narrative of a woman who has experienced multiple disadvantages and embodying this in an interview (and in this article) provides a platform for her to have a voice, and for that voice to be heard. Thill (2014, p. 10) argues that 'voice is an embodied, situated practice', but that the expression of voice does not necessarily guarantee that the voice of someone experiencing disadvantage will be listened to. 'Established hierarchies of voice' (2014, p. 7), such as those that position the privileged researcher or welfare provider, must be challenged in order to make space for the voice of the disadvantaged to be heard. Thill (2014, pp. 7–8) states:

Since oppression works in part by silencing or marginalising the voices of particular social groups then listening can function, conversely, to undermine such entrenched patterns of inequality and foster a public sphere in which a multiplicity of different voices can be heard.

Thus the value of the voice of a woman who has experienced the disadvantages of drug addiction, domestic violence and family separation lies not just in the contribution of her voice to the public sphere (as contained in this article), but also in the transformative process of her being heard in the research interview, and the research overall.

In this way, giving voice to the disadvantaged in the Hand Up project becomes a deliberate strategy to 'unsilence' the interview participants. At the same time, the limitations of the research mean that we make no claims to achieve empowerment for the marginalised research participants, other than the empowerment of being heard. In this particular participant's case, voicing her own life narrative is a way for her to momentarily leave the margins in order to help her tell her own story in the research interview. Zingaro (2009, p. 13) suggests:

In empowerment terms, and particularly in research where empowerment is a commonly expressed justification for the interaction with marginalized individuals, the actual helping or empowering service that is on offer is precisely the facilitation of the individual (marginalized) person's ability to 'tell her own story' – in effect, to leave the margin by being recognized as exercising voice.

McIntosh and McKeganey (2000, p. 1501) conducted a study in which they interviewed 70 recovering drug addicts and recounted their 'narratives of recovery'. They argue that 'the recovering addicts' narratives were not simply voicing a life narrative but that these could be seen to be doing the work of constructing a new, non-addict identity for the individual' (2000, p. 1504). Seligman (2002), whose work on hope and positive psychology is integral to several aspects of the project (such as the photovoice workshops with children documented in another article in these proceedings), also suggests ways in which narrative conversations can be a powerful strategy for change and hope, through 'telling the stories of our lives, making sense of what otherwise seems chaotic, distilling and discovering a trajectory in our lives, and

viewing our lives with a sense of agency rather than victimhood are all powerfully positive' (2002, p. 7).

While individuals can become unexpectedly welfare dependent as a result of calamitous events such as family breakdown or an acquired disability, the adult children of welfare-dependent parents are more likely than other people to live out their own lives dependent upon welfare (Fass, Dinan & Aratani, 2009; Wagnmiller & Adelman, 2009). The Hand Up research considers that there are 'turning points' (King et al., 2003) for disrupting the intergenerational communication of welfare dependency, thus opening up new possibilities. This finding is in keeping with research conducted in Australia by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families Over the Life Course, which states:

Children growing up in welfare dependent homes face challenges that restrict their ability to improve their 'capabilities' and prevent them from moving out of a state of disadvantage. The human capability framework aims to identify key points along the life course where interventions are most effective at preventing disadvantage from taking hold. (Perales et al., 2015, p. 2)

Taking a human capabilities approach (Orton, 2011; Sen, 1993) shifts the focus of research about welfare dependency from a utilitarian welfare economics basis to a broader valuing of human wellbeing that, as Perales and colleagues (2015, p. 5) argue,

takes into consideration the broader set of talents, skills and resources that people have that not only allow them to choose a profession and change jobs through the life course, but also to contribute to their families, for example through parenting and the development of their children.

Taking such an approach also avoids a 'deficit ideology', which Gorski (2010, p. 4) argues is a 'sort of 'blame the victim' mentality', which places the responsibility for the problem of social inequality at the feet of the disenfranchised individual or group – in this research, the welfare dependent. This appreciation of human capabilities allows a broader critique of the social, economic and environmental barriers that such individuals and families might face to positively altering their circumstances.

Positive psychology is another concept underpinning the research approach to the family interviews undertaken as part of the Hand Up project. Using a positive psychology framework likewise shifts the focus from pathological psychological barriers to change, to positive thinking with its emphasis on 'intrapsychic microlevel change at the level of the individual' (Krentzman, 2013, p. 152). Seligman (2002, p. 3) famously set out to 'catalyze a change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities of life'. While the project does not set out to teach positive psychology strategies, it does take into account that changes in a person's thinking about their welfare dependency can involve ideas about both the worst and best qualities in life. Krentzman (2013, p. 152) characterises such broad thinking as occurring on a continuum of psychology from 'severe mental illness on the left and optimal human thriving on the right'. Furthermore,

Seligman (2002, p. 4) states that, 'Psychology is not just the study of disease weakness and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue'.

Strategies for engagement with family participants in the Hand Up project follow Seligman's call to build on existing strengths and positive attributes. Seligman (2006) suggests that when an individual changes their self-talk through a desire to think more optimistically, they make it possible to escape from pessimism and move from powerlessness to autonomy and hope. The mother who is the subject of this article, interviewed for the project in 2016, makes powerful declarations about her life changes in an interview in which she also chooses to have her children present – perhaps with the aim of providing her children with a strong statement of her affirming vision of a more hopeful future.

Our approach in this article applies a narrative paradigm in order to understand the ways in which this woman communicates the life changes that she has undergone (and is still experiencing), and the impact that such a narrative has had upon her identity. Fisher (1989, p. 56) argues for the place of the narrative paradigm in communications, suggesting that narratives 'are constitutive of people, community and the world', which can offer 'an approach to interpretation and assessment of human communication' (1989, p. 57). Like Reissman's (2008) work, this article acknowledges the multiple levels of narrative that can be encountered in human-centred communications research. Reismann (2008, p. 6) states:

The term narrative in the human sciences can refer to texts at several levels that overlap: stories told by research participants (which are themselves interpretive), interpretive accounts developed by an investigator based on interviews and fieldwork observations (a story about stories), and even the narrative a reader constructs after engaging with the participant's and investigator's narratives.

In this communications research, we privilege the narrative account that our interview subject, Rebecca, provides while recognising that this article represents the researchers' own interpretative account of that interview with Rebecca.

Rebecca is a mother of eight children, four of whom live independently as adults and four aged between six and thirteen years who live at home with her. Quotations in this article are drawn from the transcript of an interview with Rebecca and her daughter (personal interview, 23 November 2017). Rebecca was keen to share her life story in an interview for the Hand Up project, volunteering to a SVdPWA staff member that she was willing to do this, and responding enthusiastically when contacted by the research team. The reason for this became abundantly clear as the interview progressed. Since the age of fourteen, Rebecca has had a history of intravenous (IV) drug use but now, in her forties, she has managed to make a deliberate move to change her lifestyle, and wanted to share this choice in the interview, communicating the impacts of this change to both her children and the interviewer. She declared she had been 'clean' of IV drug use for seven months, and her story about this journey and the discussion of her reasons for doing so – her four youngest children – formed a large part of the interview.

Rebecca stated, 'I've pulled my head in, you know. So I'm actually totally clean for seven months ... I smoke pot, that's about it and I use that for pain cause I suffer [from a bowel disease]'. Rebecca's children had, at times, been in state care but had now had been returned to Rebecca on the proviso that she remained IV drug free. Research about mothers rebuilding families after addiction has identified that there are multiple factors affecting the success of such rehabilitation – for example, 'chronicity of drug use, identification with parenting role, availability of environmental supports, and positive future orientation' (Carten, 1996, p. 222). Carten's research, however, also identified 'the threat of loss of children as the most compelling reason for remaining drug free' (1996, p. 221). This certainly appeared to be the case with Rebecca. She was adamant about keeping the family together: 'I love my babies, and I'm doing it for them,' she said.

I've got my four beautiful children. I brought them into this world, they deserve better ... They didn't ask to be brought into this world, they ... you know I brought them into the world so I've got to do the right thing and help them grow up and be happy and give them everything you know.

But Rebecca was realistic about how difficult the change had been, 'Oh it has been and it's still tough, it's still tough you know. Addiction just doesn't go like that [she clicks her fingers].'

Along with sustained IV drug dependency, Rebecca had an extensive history of living with domestic violence. She identified a past separation from her abusive long-term partner, and a physical house move away from previous social circles, as being part of her process of change. The St Vincent de Paul Society of Western Australia was a significant component in a repertoire of support services that Rebecca had drawn upon to help her make this dramatic life change, which also included the assistance of the Department of Child Protection and several women's refuges. Recounting an incident some 15 years prior when 'I had my house burnt down', Rebecca identified SVdPWA's help:

My partner, ex-partner now, I should say [inflicted] domestic violence, he burnt the house down and I had to go to a refuge and St Vinnie's helped me out with getting some clothing and things like that at their stores and gave me vouchers to get me through.

Since that time, Rebecca has often turned to SVdPWA for help, including when the Society assisted her to furnish her rental property after a recent house move; during times of financial hardship, when she has asked for food vouchers; and to provide support for her four youngest children through their inclusion in the Vinnies' kids camp program. Covington (2002, p. 1), in research about helping women recover from addiction, suggests that many women who are recovering from drug dependency share two elements in their life histories: 'the lack of healthy relationships and the experience of trauma'. Rebecca's history certainly fits this description and includes a birth family background of drug involvement, and a personal history of experiencing domestic violence.

The recovery Rebecca recounts in her narrative, and the rebuilding of her life, is an ongoing process for Rebecca and part of a fundamental identity change. The social identity model of recovering from addiction (Best et al., 2016) is helpful in understanding Rebecca's communication of her journey. This model identifies, in line with the work of King and colleagues (2003, p. 133), that there are significant 'turning points, or 'second chances' that allow a mother like Rebecca to reconstruct her maternal identity. The social identity model 'frames recovery as involving changes in a person's social world that coincide with changes in a socially derived sense of self' (2003, p. 133). In moving away from the location where her previous social circle lives, and in breaking away from negative partner relationships, Rebecca can be seen to be reconfiguring her social world. These actions also align with White and Kurtz's (2006) research about recovery from drug dependence. They argue that the initiation of recovery can be categorised into three styles of change:

- 1 'transformational change', which arises out of a sudden breakthrough or insight producing a 'fundamental alteration in one's perception of self and the world' (2006, p. 25)
- 2 'incremental recovery, which involves a time encompassing and stage-dependent process of metamorphosis' (2006, p. 26), and
- 3 'drift – the gradual cessation/reduction of [drug use] as a matter of circumstances' (2006, p. 27).

Although the detail of Rebecca's process of change could not be grasped fully in just one interview, Rebecca took time to reflect on how her experience of her family of origin, who were themselves involved with drugs, influenced her decision to change:

'Drugs. And money. That's it, that was my state of origin. I grew up from the underworld ... My father handed me a loaded syringe when I was fourteen years of age so that's what my lifestyle was about.

Rebecca recounted her deliberate choice to separate from her birth family, again stating that her children were her prime motivation for doing so:

Horrible way to grow up, seriously, and we were sort of in it, and with the kids a bit, and now I've just gone 'No, they aren't growing up in that shit, I'm getting out,' you know, while I can. I want to get away from that family style. I'm now the black sheep. I don't associate with any of my family members, it's just me and my babies.

In recounting moments of choice and transformation such as this, Rebecca is unwittingly constructing a narrative of recovery (Hanninen & Koski-Jannes, 1999) and communicating to herself and those present – the interviewer Kylie Stevenson, her children and a family friend (whom she elected to include as a non-participating presence at the interview) – a new identity that separates her from her birth family. Despite her perception that this new identity isolated her as the family's 'black sheep', Rebecca communicated this separation process as one of 'growing up':

Usually my money would go straight, you know, straight up my arm and then I'd be going you know, trying to borrow money, or go stealing, or you

know crime ways, to support my kids and stuff like that but not no more, I don't do that anymore. I don't know how I've done it, I've just done it. They've said I've grown up if you know what I mean? It's taken long enough but I've grown up. It's about friggin' time.

This quote from Rebecca indicates that, motivated by her role as a mother, she is engaged in an active process of revisioning her past; a process of growing out of counter-productive, negative behaviours and consequently transforming her identity. McIntosh and McKeganey (2000, p. 1508) propose that narratives about recovery serve three purposes in relation to this transformation of identity:

Narratives can be seen to be doing the work of constructing a non-addict identity: firstly, in relation to their reinterpretation of aspects of their addict life-style; secondly, in relation to their reinterpretation of their sense of self; and thirdly, in relation to the provision of a convincing explanation for their recovery.

That Rebecca felt some pride in her process of change was highlighted by an encounter she had had with a person delivering emergency relief to her home. Because of confusion about the number of times Rebecca had been visited by SVdPWA, the Vinnies volunteer told Rebecca that she asked for help too often from SVdPWA. Rebecca explained that this critical judgement had questioned and challenged her sense of her new identity as a good provider for her children:

[I] felt like I was inadequate, you know what I mean? Like I couldn't support my children and, you know, and she's like why aren't you at school? Do you know what I mean? My son was off sick, nothing to do with her. She made me feel ... I don't know, scrutinised I suppose 'cause I was asking for charity help.

This volunteer's critical judgement of Rebecca's performance as a mother, and as a support for her children, undermined the new sense that Rebecca has of herself as a good provider. Rebecca's insistence on recounting this incident, and her request that the interviewer communicate her complaint to SVdPWA, affirmed the validity of her need for assistance at that time, and refuted the volunteer's negative response. In standing up for herself, Rebecca illustrates a refusal to be drawn back into her old identity as someone unable to support her children. At the time of the interview, in her discussion of the child protection rules about the way she must run her home, Rebecca had gone out of her way to show the interviewer a well-stocked fridge and a modern, well-kept kitchen. During a subsequent (non-interview) visit to the home, Rebecca also showed the interviewer the iPads she had purchased on a payment plan as Christmas presents for her children, and for use in their bring-your-own-device school, along with several large bags of food and consumable goods that included 'stocking fillers' she had obtained from the local Foodbank. Covington (2002, p. 5) suggests that 'when a woman is disconnected from others or involved in abusive relationships, she experiences disempowerment, confusion and diminished vitality and self-worth – fertile ground for addiction'. In her rejection of the SVdPWA volunteer's judgement of her parenting, however, Rebecca demonstrates that she has changed her communication

world, having regained sufficient personal power to project an image of good parenting and a renewed, more positive sense of self-worth.

This is just one of the instances through which Rebecca used the interview to communicate with her children about her pride in achieving seven months free of IV drug use, and her hopes for an increasingly better future. Rebecca had welcomed a family friend to be present during the interview, partly because he was present in the house at the time but also, in part, as a witness to her narrative as the interview unfolded. Several of her children came home from school during this time and Rebecca also included them in the research conversation. One child, who was directly interviewed for the research, used this opportunity to declare firmly and with poignancy, given the child's past experience of state care, 'I have a loving mum'.

In addiction recovery communications, Jackson, Wernicke and Haaga (2003, p. 15) conceptualise hope as incorporating both expectancies and self-determination, arguing that 'high levels of state hope [the current state of hopeful thinking about goals] and self-efficacy are correlated with longer abstinence from substance abuse and a higher quality of life' for recovering addicts. Seligman (2006, pp. 235–53) suggests that optimism can be learned when it is grounded in inter- and intra-personal communication, including communications between parents and children. He advises parents to work with children to help change the child's self-talk from powerlessness to autonomy and hope. When Rebecca uses the interview process in the company of her children, her friend and the interviewer to demonstrate her new, hopeful vision of herself, and further models her move away from powerlessness in the face of the emergency relief volunteer's criticism (not to mention in the face of domestic violence and drug dependency), she demonstrates her commitment to positive change as she orients herself and her children towards a more hopeful future.

Conclusion

The family involved in this interview provides a strong example of the intergenerational communication of welfare dependency. Rebecca is herself the product of a drug-affected family of origin and it was her father who, when she was 14, set her on the path to a 30-year battle with IV drug use. As is sometimes the case, Rebecca's drug use became intertwined with persistent poverty, periods of criminality, family dislocation through having children taken into state care and domestic violence. Embarking on a process of change that is sufficiently radical to rewrite these scripts of dependency and disadvantage takes courage, hope, support and strength. In this instance, Rebecca and her family turned to SVdPWA for some of the support required with everyday necessities such as furniture for a new home when Rebecca fled from domestic violence and from her engagement with a locality and social circle associated with IV drug use

Rebecca's interview shows her in the process of constructing a new communication world in which she is IV drug free, an autonomous agent, a provider for her family and entitled to the respect of those she asks for help. She is proud of what she has achieved already, and seeks validation of the huge changes that she has wrought in her own life and in building a new future for her children. Rebecca uses her voluntary participation as an interviewee in this research project to give voice to these

changes and this pride, and to construct a narrative of recovery that engages her children, her family friend and the researchers in her vision of that change and of the positive future ahead. The discussion also provides an opportunity to 'send a message' to SVdPWA about a disappointing encounter in which Rebecca felt judged and diminished by the representative of an organisation whose aim is to support and empower. Rebecca is harnessing the researchers' privileged speaking position with SVdPWA, requesting that her interviewer passes on her concern.

This article offers an examples of how Rebecca, with a history of disempowerment, accesses an opportunity to give voice to her experience of the world, engaging others to reaffirm a narrative of hope, and adding to the diversity of perspectives on welfare dependency. She seizes this chance to reinforce her construction of this new communication world, underlining her agency in the creation of a different future for herself and those she loves.

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