Victim narratives of historical abuse in residential child care: do we really know what we think we know?

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Abstract

Dystopian images of children's remains buried in the cellars of Haut de la Garenne children's home in the Channel Island of Jersey have brought the subject of historical abuse in residential child care graphically to public consciousness. Revelations around the provenance of police spin prompt examination of the ways in which knowledge of institutional abuse has been constructed more generally. Drawing on insights from qualitative inquiry, this article seeks to destabilise the subject and to question the epistemological basis for the truth claims made in respect of it. Specifically, I focus a critical gaze on the Scottish Government's Systemic Review of Historical Abuse (Shaw, 2007) to highlight how documentary sources construct and reify a particular version of the past and how 'victim' narratives are privileged and used to silence other accounts of life in residential child care. Some implications of this for social work research and for those who claim and those accused of historical abuse are identified.

Key words

Historical abuse, residential child care, inquiry reports, narrative, Systemic Review, Scotland, Jersey

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the British Isles, in common with much of the Anglophone world, has witnessed a proliferation of accounts of abuse in residential child care, from inquiries (Kirkwood, 1993, Levy and Kahan, 1991, Marshall et al, 1999, Shaw, 2007, Waterhouse, 2000), government reports (Kent, 1997, Utting, 1997), academic books and journals (Colton *et al,* 2002, Corby *et al,* 2001, Cruz, 1998, Ferguson, 2007, Stein, 2006) and biographical 'victim' stories (Doyle, 1989, O'Beirne and Sheridan, 2006). The ongoing situation in Jersey ensures that the subject remains in the public consciousness.

Sen *et al* (2007) identify institutional abuse as falling within three categories: overt or direct abuse perpetrated by an individual adult on a child, programme abuse such as that evident in the Pindown (Levy and Kahan, 1991) and Frank Beck (Kirkwood, 1993) cases, where behaviour modification and regression therapy techniques were, respectively, misapplied, and system abuse where deficits in the wider child care system prevent children from reaching their potential. Stein (2006) notes that in many cases these categories overlap. He also adds the category of organised abuse.

The various accounts intertwine to construct a master narrative of endemic abuse and systemic cover-up in care settings. This can be the default position of social work academics. Ferguson, for instance, asserts that 'it is beyond question that the entire industrial and reformatory regime was an abusive and cruel one' (2007: 124). But was it? While there were no doubt instances of abuse in residential care as in any setting where adults have contact with children what provenance can be afforded to the 'truth

claims' contained in accounts of endemic, institutionalised abuse? How do we know what we think we know about the subject and how robust is our presumed knowledge in cases where very often the sole source of that knowledge is the narrative accounts of those who recount abuse? I argue that rigorous qualitative inquiry renders such accounts less clear-cut that they can be presented to be. This is not to say they are true or false, but that the very terms true and false are problematic in seeking to understand individual experiences over time.

I begin with an intellectual puzzle based around the disjunction between the master narrative identified above and the voices of those who worked in residential care, which often give a very different version of events. Waterhouse (2000) expressed frustration at the persistent failure of colleagues of those accused of abuse to accept the version of events presented at the North Wales Tribunal. Webster (2005), however, takes the strength of these denials as the starting point of his deconstruction of the story of Bryn Estyn and of the Waterhouse Report. I attempt to explore this disjunction through an examination of the ways in which knowledge of historical abuse has been constructed, beginning with questions around incidence and prevalence.

The scale and nature of historical abuse

Given the magnitude of responses to allegations of historical abuse it is pertinent to ask about the scale of the problem to be addressed. This becomes problematic. Hacking (1992) attests that attempts to quantify child abuse fail to measure up to philosophical standards of whether a concept is well-understood: for it to be so requires that it is amenable to the question 'How many?' Attempts to quantify child abuse are 'amazingly discrepant' (Hacking 1992), largely because there is no

commonly accepted or unproblematic definition. Existing accounts give no convincing insight into the nature or scale of abuse in care settings. What we probably can say is that there is no evidence that it was any more prevalent there than in other setting where adults interact with children (Gallagher, 2000).

In the absence of philosophical statements regarding scale or nature, the subject becomes shrouded in emotivism, where expressions of attitude or feeling with little rational justification assume a moral force (Macintyre, 1984). In cases of child abuse those feelings can be primitive and visceral. In extremis the power of this emotion can be manifest in the tales, subsequently discredited, of murder and torture in Haut de la Garenne. children's home in Jersey. Regimes of truth emerge, whereby moral judgments become means through which to influence attitudes or conduct, silencing other voices. The difficulty in challenging dominant truth claims, ultimately, does no-one any good, least of all actual victims of abuse in care. Their stories risk being dismissed among the multitude of other claims that are made for a whole range of reasons.

An epistemological starting point

Discussion of any social phenomenon requires some ontological and epistemological position taking within debates between realism/obectivism and constructionism (see Taylor and White, 2000). This debate is summed up by Nightingale and Crombie,

> *a commonsensical or naïve objectivism/realism might attempt to root meaning*
> *in a 'vertical' relation between terms and their referents' (Sayer, 2000: 35):*
> *that is, words, in some simple fashion or another correspond directly to reality.*

However, a key constructionist assertion is that there is no Archimedean position or 'God's-Eye View' (Putnam, 1991/1998, p. 109) from which we might compare our utterances to the world; as Gergen (1994) states, 'there is no foundational description to be made about an "out there" as opposed to an "in here", . . . once we attempt to articulate "what there is" . . . we enter the world of discourse' (p. 72). In other words, both language and knowledge are seen as socially constructed rather than as an unmediated reflection or 'mirror' of an objectively knowable reality (Rorty, 1979.)

(2002: 703)

Social work research

Approaches to knowledge construction in social work often fail to address fundamental epistemological questions, a failure closely linked to the anti-intellectual traditions of mainstream social work (Trinder, 1996). White identifies a tendency of much social work research to cling to naive realist positions where sense-making activities 'are rendered immune from critical analysis' (1997: 739). Realism offers little purchase on this subject. Hacking contends that child abuse is 'a social construction if ever there was' (1992: 192). Historical abuse is similarly so. Whereas behaviours such as gratuitous beatings or sexual assaults are unequivocally wrong, other actions are more ambiguous and are products of time and place – what might have been considered everyday practice 20 years ago might now be classed as abusive (Smith, 2008). Yet in the current climate discussion of abuse is untroubled by contingency or historical interpretation. Inquiry into historical abuse might, most charitably, be described as naive realist, where language (in this case the accounts given by former residents of children's homes) is assumed to accurately mirror the way things were.

A result of naive realist assumptions has been to effect a shift from a climate where it was difficult for children to have their stories of abuse heard or believed, to one where such stories are regarded, not as allegations to be investigated or misunderstandings to be resolved but as disclosures to be accepted (Sikes and Piper, 2006). Discrepancies or distortions are explained away in terms of time elapsing and the traumatic effects of abuse on human memory. These, of course, are legitimate reasons why people might present particular versions of events. Webster (2005), however, offers a convincing case that the prospect of financial compensation can also prompt former residents to claim they were abused in care.

The use and abuse of narrative forms

As noted, the primary (and in many cases the only) source to support claims of cruel and abusive regimes in institutional care is the accounts of former residents. Interest in such accounts reflects a wider narrative turn apparent across the social sciences over the past 30 years. 'A central area of narrative study is human interaction in relationships - the daily stuff of social work' (Riessman and Quinney, 2005: 392). Narrative approaches have, therefore, been claimed by social work at a number of levels, from practice (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000) to ethics (Wilks, 2005). Narrative approaches to research are postulated to allow silenced voices to be heard. A desire to take the side of the underdog rightly predisposes social workers to be concerned when children claim to have been abused by more powerful adults while in State care. But in wanting to listen to such voices there is a danger that academics and professionals become too concerned in Dingwall's (1997) terms, to be 'right on' rather than 'right' and thus fail to subject narrative accounts to sufficiently critical analysis. Good narrative research should follow certain conventions if it is to lay claim to academic

rigour. Riessman and Quinney (2005), in their review of narrative research in social work, found several claims to draw on the approach but few examples of what they considered to be 'good enough' work in this respect.

The application of narrative principles to discussion of historical abuse is not 'good enough'; it is misused for purposes of advocacy, a situation that amounts to illegitimate extrapolation (Atkinson, 1997). A more rigorous interrogation of the subject does not dismiss accounts of abuse but it does destabilise them. It asks questions of how such accounts are constructed and whose interests are really served by their construction.

I begin by considering the nature and purpose of documentary sources, focusing on the Scottish Government's *Systemic Review of Historical Abuse* (SR) (Shaw, 2007). I then explore how victim narratives are privileged in this debate to construct a particular version of reality. The analysis is based on a close reading of the text undertaken within PhD study.

The Systemic Review

In Ireland a Residential Institutions Redress Board was established in 2002 to make financial awards to those who had been abused in institutions run or inspected by the state. This prompted demands, presented in petitions to the Scottish Parliament, for a similar body in Scotland. These demands were, initially, resisted by the Scottish Executive. Then in 2004, Kerelaw, the largest secure and open residential school in Scotland, became engulfed in allegations of historical abuse, prompting Jack McConnell, Scotland's then First Minister, to make an apology to all victims of institutional abuse.

The evidence to justify this apology was scant. One of the two petitions to the Scottish Parliament contained one signatory, the other four (Scottish Parliament 2002, 2005). In a similar vein, the children's advocacy group Who Cares? (Scotland) had to close down a helpline established to advise victims of historical abuse after it received only one call in a three-month period (Scottish Executive 2005). Inflated figures for the scale of abuse only emerge when litigation lawyers become involved. In addition to his apology McConnell commissioned the SR, covering the period 1950 to 1995.

Texts and intertextuality

Accounts of institutional abuse have become reified in the various Inquiries into scandals. These act as what Prior calls 'generative documents', setting out 'the boundaries in terms of which experts think and talk and write' (2004: 84). While postulated as mere repositories of information, the role of public inquiries is not neutral. It is according to Butler and Drakeford,

> *often and disingenuously described…. as one of 'establishing the facts.' In that single phrase the central assumption of Inquiries is made clear: that there is an objective reality that can be discovered and represented in language where meanings will be shared and unambiguous.* (2005: 234).

Qualitative inquiry would be sceptical of discovering an objective reality where meanings are unambiguous. Instead, language and meaning are regarded as socially constructed; 'speaking/ listening and reading/writing are more than merely passing information between people but are crucial aspects of constructing our personal and social worlds' (Hall and White, 2005)**.** Texts do not simply hold a mirror to the events they describe; we 'cannot treat records - however 'official' - as firm evidence of what they report (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004: 58). Rather, 'all forms of 'expert' documentation (are produced) in a politically structured space' (Prior, 2004: 84).

Despite these caveats inquiry reports, through a process of intertextuality, become self-reinforcing 'A dense network of cross-referencing, and shared textual formats, creates a powerful version of social reality (Prior, 2004: 74), in this case a version of reality that speaks of endemic, systemic abuse. The resultant web of belief is maintained against reality disjunctions that might threaten it through ignoring or explaining away contrary evidence (Potter, 1986). For instance, recent articles on historical abuse (Ferguson, 2007, Green, 2006, Stein, 2006) fail to acknowledge an authoritative counter-narrative (Webster, 2005), which casts considerable doubt on the findings of the Waterhouse Inquiry and by extension the process through which allegations of abuse are considered more generally.

 Given the social and political construction of texts it makes sense to explore how they are produced and consumed within and by organizations (Taylor, 2008). I now move on to consider how the SR has been produced and consumed. Prior (2004) identifies three features of documents that might be utilised for social research: 'how documentation is produced in socially organized contexts; how it is used in everyday organizational action; and how it enters into the manufacture of self and identity' (2004: 77). I now consider the SR against these three features.

1. Background and production

The remit of the SR provides an insight into how the account eventually produced was skewed before the process even began. The first term of reference begins, 'Against the background of the abuse suffered by children...in residential schools and children's homes...' (p.10). The existence of abuse is taken for granted. It was just there. No attempt is made to locate, quantify or qualify its extent or nature. In fact any hope of gauging the scale of abuse from the SR would not take one far. With a brief to examine a 45-year period the team interviewed or received submissions from only 35

former residents. The results can be no more than a series of individual accounts. It certainly does not offer a more generalisable picture of life in residential care. Yet, inevitably, it was deemed to have done so. The Herald, a major Scottish broadsheet proclaimed 'mass historic child abuse' (23 Nov. 2007). The final term of the remit advises the independent expert that he 'is not expected to consider material or submissions from individuals....except... to obtain information from organizations representing the interests of the survivors of abuse' (p.11) a clear case of privileging narratives of suffering (Atkinson, 1997).

<u>Authorship</u>

Who the author is tells something about a document (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004). In December 2004 Peter Peacock, Scotland's then Minister for Children and Young People, announced, 'I intend to appoint someone with experience to analyse independently the regulatory requirements...' (p.9). The person appointed became known as 'The Independent Expert'. Taylor suggests that 'It is permissible for the 'narrator' to make a brief appearance at the beginning of a report, ... to clarify their authority … , by citing their qualifications and experience' (2008: 31). The appointed 'expert' in this case accordingly asserts his authorial stamp

> *The Scottish Parliament appointed me, Tom Shaw as Independent Expert to lead the review. I am the former Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Northern Ireland. I was assisted by researcher Nancy Bell and legal researcher, Roddy Hart* (p.3).

The Independent Expert's experience is not claimed to be in residential child care, nor is that of his researchers. This lack of grounded expertise is compounded in the appointment of an advisory group that again fails to include anyone with a residential care background, implicitly positioning residential practitioners as non-experts (Prior, 2004).

2. The Document in Action: Readership and Use

Documents have a rhetorical purpose (Atkinson 1997). This is immediately apparent in the Foreword to the SR. 'Abuse of children - however it is defined, whenever it occurs, whoever is responsible - must not be tolerated. It is self-indulgence in its ugliest form' (p.1). While this sentiment might be difficult to disagree with it does raise questions as what *is* the definition of abuse, and might that definition have different understandings in time and place? Hacking suggests that this is indeed the case and that practices considered commonplace in previous decades 'have been reclassified, retrospectively viewed as abusive although they were 'not directly and consciously experienced as such at the time' (1992: 229). Without adequately acknowledging these issues the document itself is not above charges of self-indulgence.

Documents are also recipient designed. They have what Ricoeur calls, 'a public'. "Through its recitation a story is incorporated into a community which it gathers together' But that public is not just anyone at all.... it is.... those whom Nietzsche called 'my own' (1980: 176). While there was no doubt a genuine wish on the part of politicians to seek to right perceived historical injustice, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the SR also has a particular 'public' in mind, specifically the 'victim groups' whose lobbying had led to its commissioning. Documents are also performative (Prior, 2004); they have a political 'public' and a political purpose.

Arguably, this document was commissioned to prepare the way for recommendations seen to be politically desirable by the previous Scottish Government. Victim views on, for instance, the time bar on pursuing claims for compensation are co-opted and marshalled 'as an ally or resource to be mobilized for further action' (Prior, 2004: 91). This further action might be the justification of populist moves to 'rebalance' the criminal justice system in favour of the 'victim'.

3. Narratives and Identity

Personal identity is increasingly linked with a person's capacity to maintain a particular narrative (Giddens, 1991). This contemporary focus on identity is picked up in the SR. 'We all have a need and a right to know about our past, our childhood, our family circumstances, our home - wherever or whatever that was for each of us. Our sense of identity is based on this knowledge' (p.1). Despite the remit of the SR being to 'focus on systems not on individuals' (p.9) it nevertheless devotes an entire chapter (Chpt. 6) to the narratives of former residents of care homes. While not professing to be narrative research as such, the use of individual's stories is justified in terms of claiming 'to show how the law worked in the experiences of some former resident's accounts and specifically of what they would like to see done' (p.133). Narratives are, thus, co-opted to lend authority and weight to the conclusions of the Review. Experiences recounted in the SR speak of a poor sense of identity. Affording the opportunity to tell their stories is postulated to lend meaning and coherence to former residents' lives. Yet the narratives drawn upon are flawed in a number of respects. Firstly, they are partial, skewed to create a particular impression. Secondly they fail to take into account basic conventions of narrative inquiry and thirdly, and perhaps most tellingly, they privilege a victim narrative, a stance that has implications for the credibility and methodological rigour of the document.

I will address the first two concerns before applying Atkinson's (1997) critique of narratives of suffering to the SR.

Skewed accounts

An interesting facet of the way in which the views of former residents are represented is contained in the statement that experiences were described as 'ranging from the very good to the horrific' Some 'recall positive experiences' (p.133). Later it is reported that former residents identified individuals who were kind to them (p.142). Yet the stories printed are unremittingly bleak - no instances of kindness or positive experiences feature.

Misrepresenting the narrative approach

For narrative work to be considered 'good enough' it should, according to Riessman and Quinney be empirical, 'that is based on systematic observation (2005: 397). Analysis should attend to sequence and consequence and to contexts of production, which the authors identify to be research relationships and macro-institutional contexts. They then ask whether 'epistemological and methodological issues were treated seriously, that is, viewed critically, seen as decisions to be made rather than 'given' - unacknowledged?' (2005: 397). The SR falls at every hurdle when considered against these criteria.

Specifically, the SR accepts and reports narrated accounts as factual. Yet they can only be a particular representation (Riessman, 1993), 'a selection and ordering of the 'facts' and the creation of a particular version whilst suppressing or concealing other possible versions' (Taylor, 2006). Telling a story 'can serve many purposes - to remember, argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain and even mislead an audience (Riessman and Quinney, 2005). And while of course many of the stories of abuse are told for no reason other than that they are true, there are also other reasons why they

might emerge. Sikes and Piper claim that there are many reasons why children might make allegations against teachers. 'Genuine misunderstandings occur (not only on the part of young people) and displaced cries for help will sometimes be made. On occasion though, pupils can exact revenge, gain a sense of power and importance, or simply create some excitement' (2006). All of these reasons apply to those making allegations of historical abuse and may be compounded by historical distance or by the lure of financial compensation. None of this multiplicity of purposes behind stories is acknowledged in the SR.

Narratives do not emerge independently; they are co-produced between the narrator and the recipient of any story. Context and the intersubjectivity between the teller and recipient will inevitably colour the eventual account. There is no sense in the SR of how former residents came to the attention of the team, no discussion of how the process of garnering information through individual interview, telephone interview or written submission might differentially influence the accounts received and no indication that accounts were subject to any attempt at verification or interpretation.

Yet Riessman and Quinney caution that the use of narrative, in which 'a story seems to speak for itself, not requiring interpretation - (is) an indefensible position for serious scholarship (2005: 393).

At a wider level, in cases of historical abuse the recipients of accounts are unlikely to be simple, honest brokers. They may represent particular interests such as counsellors, lawyers, victims groups or police officers, each with their own agendas. The context of stories told and received assumes a particular significance when accounts are then taken into a legal domain.

Beckett claims that,

> *...the methods involved in obtaining evidence for convictions in the UK have, at times, been seriously questionable. They have typically included inviting adult former care residents, many years after the event, to make allegations and there are instances of demonstrably false allegations being made as well as allegations that seem pretty clearly to have been motivated by the possibility of financial compensation.*

<div align="right">(Beckett, 2003: 217)</div>

So while it is proper to listen to those who recount abuse, their accounts should not be our sole source of knowledge. They are but one of many possible versions (Taylor and White, 2000) and should not, without rigorous supporting evidence, be privileged over the versions of other former residents, of staff who worked in these institutions or of those expressed in contemporary documentary accounts. Yet in the present climate these other narratives are subsumed beneath the 'morally superior' account of the victim (Furedi, 2008).

<u>Privileging victim narratives</u>

Atkinson provides a coruscating critique of how narratives of suffering 'have been granted special status' (1997: 325) in the social science literature. He locates his argument in contemporary preoccupations concerning the revelation of personal experience through therapeutic discourse. This tendency is reinforced in approaches to social work research, which fail to ask

> *... the question of why people are saying what they say. The commitment to participation and a particular mode of challenging oppression remain paramount, and trumps the focus on uncovering how truths come to be*

established. Implicitly we are back to standpoint theory where the voices of the

oppressed have a privileged status (Trinder, 1996: 240).

Atkinson claims that narratives of suffering 'seem to float in a social vacuum. The voices echo in an otherwise empty world. There is an extraordinary absence of social context, social action and social interaction' (1997: 339). The voices in the SR exist in such a vacuum. There is no mention of the complexity of the problems faced or exhibited by many of those placed in residential care, including the home circumstances that led children to be taken into care, instances of offending and violent behaviour, the need at times for physical restraint or the intimacy, messiness, ambiguity and complex psychodynamic processes involved in everyday acts of caring. Former residents are portrayed as vulnerable and powerless. Powerful adults simply abused powerless children. Atkinson goes on to argue that narratives of suffering act to expunge the social from social inquiry. Problems become 'stripped of social context and social consequences. They are understood in terms of an individualized view of the self.' This he argues 'represents an almost total failure to use narrative to achieve serious social analysis (1997: 339). Victim accounts in the SR are invariably fragments of lives, shorn of context, denied interpretation and manipulated for particular (political and ideological) ends. Such decontextualised acceptance of 'victim' stories also paves the way for fabrication or fantasy (Webster, 2008). Popular victim narratives (e.g. O'Beirne and Sheridan, 2006), now widely recognised as a fraud (Kelly, 2007, Furedi, 2008) highlight this possibility. The interests of former residents are not well-served by one-dimensional representations of their lives nor by having these considered alongside accounts that are evidently false.

Memory

Understanding how historical events are recalled in particular ways requires some consideration of questions of memory. The SR appears to regard memory as a reflection of actual events. Within sociology, discursive psychology, cultural theory and oral history this presumption is not sustainable. 'Recording and reflection are not literal replications of past events. They are inevitably compressed and selective accounts' (Taylor, 2008: 39).

The malleability of memory is increasingly recognised. 'Many influences can cause memories to change or even be created anew, including our imaginations and the leading questions or different recollections of others' (Loftus, 2003: 231). The British Psychological Society (2008) cautions against accepting accounts based on memory alone. The only corroboration in most accounts of historical abuse is the similar accounts of others. Yet this too is problematic; memory is not a simple representation of individual experience but is socially determined within particular cultural contexts and through engagement with others Halbwachs (1980). Plummer describes it as a 'socially shared experience' (2001).

This raises the possibility that the context within which allegations of historical abuse has emerged might, in some cases, create the conditions for the social construction of memories of abuse. Hacking (1992) suggests that the symptoms of child abuse may be iatrogenic, induced by the helping professionals involved in such cases. The role of some counsellors, litigation lawyers and the police allied with the level of media coverage of abuse in care may create its own victims replete with their own symptoms. These contextual factors might implant or exaggerate memories in those who claim to be victims. Collective memories might also be co-constructed within the

victim groups that have emerged to support survivors of historical abuse. Accounts of abuse may often be more constructed than uncovered.

While memory, of course, is important in how individuals come to understand their lives, remembering is not, as can be postulated in the historical abuse discourse, a simple matter of allowing 'victims' the opportunity for catharsis or 'closure'.

Memory

> *may have its downside. Once composed the story can become 'freeze dried text' .... making a process and experience become a fixed event. It may serve, ironically to lose other ways of telling the story or the life. Memory will reify the life into something it is not. (Plummer, 2001)*

Potentially, the act of remembering and of recounting these memories, rather than allowing former residents of care to tell different stories and to move on in life, can 'stick' them in a 'victim' mode. Telling their stories does not necessarily bring catharsis - it may even re-traumatise victims of abuse (Colton et al, 2002). The conceit of professing to be on the side of the angels (or the victims) on this issue may in fact open the doors to the social and psychological reification of the very abuse it professes to address.

Discussion

Questioning dominant narratives of historical abuse is not to deny that children were abused in care. There was no doubt some abuse, much questionable practice but also many acts of kindness. More than anything care probably did little more or less than reflect prevailing societal attitudes to poor children (Ferguson, 2007). An examination of the epistemological basis of received knowledge does, however, destabilize what has become the received academic and professional 'knowledge' of historical abuse

based upon simple realist assumptions of the referentiality of narrated or reported accounts to actual events.

Epistemological questions around the truth claims that can legitimately be made regarding the nature and scale of historical abuse are not mere arcane academic points. They have obvious implications for the credibility of social work research. Perhaps of more consequence, they have implications for children in residential care (past and present) and for staff who worked there. Child care policy over the past 20 years has been predicated on assumptions of widespread institutional abuse. These have been used to legitimate a wholesale shift to fostering with resultant multiple placement breakdowns, which has manifestly not protected children from 'institutional' abuse. Assumptions of abuse have also skewed practice in residential child care to the extent that staff become afraid to care for children. Their fears are not unfounded. Fulcher and Ainsworth claim that the intrusion of legal discourse into the provision of care 'does not augur well for direct practice or for the careers of individual practitioners who may get caught up in a legal action' (2006: 291). Beckett notes that it is '… likely that a significant number of imprisoned former residential workers may have been wrongfully convicted' (2003: 217).

The superficiality of current assumptions around historical abuse also has implications for those claiming to have been abused. It fails to acknowledge the complex realities of lives affected by a range of social and emotional difficulties that are rarely reducible to poor experiences in care. The promise of some pyrrhic closure that can be held out by abuse counselors and the police is at best naive.

According to Furedi (2008) the 'idea that those who hitherto lacked a voice have now discovered a new and brave willingness to 'confront the past' is a form of collective self-flattery'.

The need for proper inquiry

The subject of historical abuse is crying out for rigorous social scientific inquiry. Undertaking this in a climate of moral panic over child abuse is not easy, where questioning 'is almost seen in itself to be abusive, with identity (and ultimately sometimes career) consequences for those who ask the questions' (Sikes and Piper, 2006). The same authors go on, however, to assert the need for such critical research in the interests of social justice for those claiming abuse and those accused of abuse.

Any proper inquiry would do well to start by drawing on a range of sources and factual detail and applying some basic scepticism or at least curiosity to these. Ferguson claims that his sources in his accounts of historical abuse

> *are primarily the archival reports, case files and other records of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). … . I do not draw from the records of the residential child care institutions in question, but examine institutional child care and abuse from the perspective of child protection agencies* (2007: 124).

He goes on to allude to the RTE programme *States of Fear* to highlight the experiences of former residents of industrial schools. Some observations might be made about these sources. Firstly, child protection agencies are not necessarily the most rounded source of information on residential care.

Nor indeed are journalists; they have been instrumental in driving and distorting the child protection agenda over the past 30 years (Ayre, 2001). Moreover, an examination of the records of residential institutions would serve to refute some of the claims made in *States of Fear* (Kelly, 2007).

A more rounded approach to research in this area needs to draw upon the stories of a range of interested parties in order to bring some balance to a debate currently dominated and distorted by a small number of 'victim' accounts. These accounts need to be set alongside the stories of other former residents of care homes who recount very different experiences and those of staff who worked in care homes. Very often these are the silenced voices in this debate. It will be necessary for researchers to 'believe' the range of stories told, while simultaneously not being naïve regarding their absolute truth (Sikes and Piper, 2006).

The next requirement in any more rigorous research is interpretation. This has been sadly lacking thus far. Those who lead inquiries into historical abuse and indeed academics who warrant such accounts ostensibly bring qualities of objectivity and detachment to the process of inquiry, privileging outsider perspectives. While epistemological questions might be raised more generally about this 'voice from nowhere', it is a particular problem in this case, making it difficult to apply any interpretive lens. Complex historical study requires a hermeneutic perspective, where historical and proximate understanding is brought to bear. Returning to the SR, such understanding might lead anyone with such an understanding to be curious, for instance, about whether the nun on page 136 of the SR really used a long wooden

stick to beat children with such force that it periodically broke? Or did some former residents really stay in residential care for 18 years and if they did might this not lend itself to a counter-narrative of placement stability? Such questions do not seem to have been asked.

A reflexive turn

The issue of historical abuse also needs to be located in broader context. It has not just been uncovered but has emerged and exists as a product of wider social forces. The notion of epistemic reflexivity (White, 1997) demands a critical analysis of our claims to knowledge and an awareness of the dominant professional constructions that influence how that knowledge is constructed and understood. A reflexive approach is 'helpful to make sense of subjects where 'knowledge is often hidden, obscured or claimed by emotion, theory and professional power' (Myers, 2008: 204).

A reflexive gaze might uncover a number of wider discourses that feed into how conceptions of historical abuse have been constructed: individualism and consumerism, moral panic over child abuse, the dominance of child protection over child welfare, declining trust in professionals, and the idea of the therapeutic state, whereby governments intervene in an ever expanding range of social issues, all spring to mind as possible macro influences. Some of these come together in the rebalancing of the criminal justice system in favour of 'victims'. But the term 'victim' is not neutral; it has emerged from these wider discourses of individualism and consumerism where personal worth is explicitly linked with questions of financial compensation (Spalek, 2006).

Furedi claims that:

> *contemporary culture provides a powerful incentive to individuals to manipulate their memory and present themselves as traumatised victims. The assertion of trauma as a result of past suffering has become a way of winning public recognition and attention, and of making a claim on resources'* (Furedi, 2008).

It is only in wider social context that historical abuse can be understood. It is not in the interests of those who claim to be abused or those on the wrong end of allegations of abuse to have these stories reduced to simple abuser/victim dualism as is so often the case.

Conclusion

Denzin and Lincoln liken qualitative research to a *bricolage,* 'a complex, dense, reflective, collagelike creation that represents the researchers images, understandings and interpretations of the world or phenomenon under analysis' (1998: 4). Instead of a rich bricolage, research into historical abuse rarely moves beyond standpointism. While a narrative turn may have much to offer social work practice and inquiry it needs to be adopted with due criticality. In cases of historical abuse victim narratives risk descending into at best an unreflexive solipsism and potentially an outlet for fantasy or fabrication. Co-opted in one-dimensional ways the narrative form is antithetical to the critical and emancipatory potential claimed for it. Victim accounts demand the same methodological scepticism as any other form of knowledge (Atkinson, 1997). A genuinely 'thick' and rigorous account of what residential child

care was like requires that other voices, those of other children raised in care and of staff who worked in such settings be afforded the same status as those of the 'victim'. It also demands that these accounts are subject to rigorous hermeneutic and reflexive interrogation and interpretation by those with a grounded understanding of practice in this area. The interests of genuine victims of abuse, of those encouraged, for whatever reason, to believe they were abused and of residential workers accused of abuse are not well served by a situation where ideology and preconception too often supplants rigorous inquiry.

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