SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE: LEARNING BEYOND THE RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Rachel Robbins, Senior Research Fellow
IN PRAISE OF FOCUS GROUPS

• Current context of domestic abuse services
• The case for and against the use of Focus Groups
• To show how evaluative research can provide findings beyond the research aims
• Some thoughts on how to build collaboration and communication across domestic abuse services
THE WELFARE STATE

“In the next thirty years, housewives as mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the continuance of the British race” (Beveridge, 1942: para 117)
THE UK CONTEXT: DOMESTIC ABUSE

The Three Planet Model (Hester, 2011)

Domestic Violence
ADULTS
Criminal Justice
Range of Support

Child Protection
CHILD
Public Law
State
intervention in
dysfunction
families

Child Contact
PARENTS
Private Law
Mediated
outcomes,
contact
presumption
“Perhaps the most important thing to grasp about the different theories gathered together under the banner of neo-liberalism is that they have in common a central emphasis on the market as the organising principles of social life. The theorists most commonly understood as proposing neo-liberal social arrangements are principally – although not exclusively – from the discipline of economics and, therefore, social life and social relationships are viewed through the prism of economic categories.”

(Penn and O’Brien, 2009: 109)
"Liberalism assumes the individual to be essentially rational ... The individual is also attributed with knowledge of his (sic) own best interests and the ability to pursue them rationally. Rational economic man, according to classical economists, maximises profits: political man maximises his utilities through judicious participation and choice... From Hobbes and Locke onwards, the pursuit of self-interest was accepted as man’s proper motivation" (Goodwin, 1989: 35)
THE NEO-LIBERAL SUBJECT

• Homo consumens (Bauman, 2003: 69)

• “... postmodern society engages its members primarily in their capacity as consumers rather than producers” (Bauman, 2012: 76)
If a customer has capacity, knows the consequences of their action, and doesn’t consent to further action than you can’t do anything, Can’t force the issue, can only advise and give what the options are. (Adult Social Worker)

(Cited in Robbins et. al., 2016: 135)
CUTS IN THE VAWG SECTOR

- Thirty-one percent of the funding to the domestic violence and sexual abuse sector from local authorities was cut between 2010/11 to 2011/12, a reduction from £7.8 million to £5.4 million.

- The organisations with smaller budgets from the local authorities had more substantial budget cuts than larger ones: among those with local authority funding of less than £20,000 the average cut was 70% as compared with 29% for those receiving over £100,000, between 2010/11 and 2011/12.

- 320 women, just under 9% of those seeking refuge, were turned away by Women’s Aid on a typical day in 2011 due to lack of space.

- (Walby and Towers, 2012)
AUSTERITY AS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

“We argue that failing to provide key services to women who are mothers and children/young people who need help means that they are victims of two different types of violence: not only have they suffered or witnessed domestic violence in the home, but they face structural violence from the state through the government’s failure to provide sufficient support services.”
(Sanders-McDonagh, et al., 2016: 72)
The Three Planet Model (Updated)

- Child Protection
  - CHILD
  - Public Law
  - State intervention in dysfunction families

- Domestic Violence
  - ADULTS
  - Criminal Justice
  - Range of Support

- Child Contact
  - PARENTS
  - Private Law
  - Mediated outcomes, contact presumption
EVALUATIVE RESEARCH

“The systematic examination and assessment of features of an initiative and its effects, in order to produce information that can be used by those who have an interest in its improvements or effectiveness” (WHO, 1998: 3)
FOCUS GROUPS

Strengths

• Less expensive for research commissioners
• Joint construction of meaning
• Allows peer challenge
• Replicates some interventions within the field of domestic abuse
• Relinquishes some of the power of the researcher to the group – to give the group ownership of the research process

Limitations

• They can be difficult to organise, transcribe and analyse
• Unpredictable group dynamics and norms
• Issues of confidentiality are more difficult to address
‘Don’t even get us started on social workers.’ Another vociferous member of the group responded with: ‘And I am a social worker.’ There was an awkward pause, filled quickly with ‘Don’t worry I don’t do child protection’ as she explained that she works with older people.

(Robbins and Cook, 2017: 2)
WHAT FOCUS GROUPS CAN OFFER

- Context as everyday experience
- Relationships/relational nature of abuse and support
- Support
- New ideas
"They say crime don’t pay and yet when my ex got out of prison for kicking my head in, he got given a flat.”

"I think there should be more consequences for the men, because it’s them who do the shit and they just seem to live the life of Larry, move house, get a car and everything and women are dealing with the emotional shit, having to care for our children and that with very little support. They’ve got the control still”

"We should be social workers and that sort of thing. Because then we get the chance to serve the community by what we have learned from them.”

"Well you can but what about the bloody tuition fees?"
“I was so at the end of my tether with the things that I’d gone through at the end of December, I wrote to (Local MP) and sent my email on the day of the floods. I never got a response. And everyone tells me that (name) is great at responding... And I think that is: is that because he’s busy with all the floods... That makes me feel again, that I’m taking up his time with this (intimidation from ex partner).”
DOMESTIC ABUSE AS AN ONGOING, COMPLEX FAMILY RELATIONSHIP

“... And he committed fraud against my mum by manipulating my movements by ordering things in his name off my mum’s accounts and bringing them to my house.”

“...I’ve actually been living off just my child tax credits for weeks on end, so that’s sixty pounds a week, plus my child benefit, twenty pound a week, and couldn’t claim universal credit because I don’t have a bank account. And why don’t I have a bank account? Because of him.”

“... I can’t even claim a benefit because of him”

“He’s an adult not a child. He should know, don’t hurt mummy, don’t take mummy for granted. Don’t go into mummy’s bank account and take all her money out and then open credit cards up in her name. Don’t threaten mummy’s family – because good parents don’t do that.”
"Social Services knows the man does things wrong, but they keep telling us and tell us we have to do that. We are doing everything but still they are telling us’

“I can’t remember the name of the children’s centre... I took my daughter to go and play and they saw that I was shattered, not happy. And they said oh we have a place you can just sit down as much as you like, relax. But they knew, I wasn’t saying much, I was kind of smiling, but the lady said is there anything you want to share with us, you want to say?... Do you know that was the same place I went back to and I cried for help and they referred me.”

“I’ve felt more passed from pillar to post, if I’m honest, because there was somebody new each time. And I had to go right back to the beginning and explain my whole story all over again”
GROUP WORK AS SUPPORT

“Really it might not be physical abuse but mental abuse can kill you.”

“Thank you, thank you I agree with you.”

“Because what she's saying, because support is very important because the mental state, the mental state is appalling, I don’t know, I don’t know, the mental state is killing. I’m telling you most of us would rather take that physical abuse than the mental one because it will drive you insane”

[Later]

“It’s very difficult for me, because the honest truth, it’s like listening to all you ladies speaking, I’m being serious, with the domestic abuse, everything is just so new to me, until today I’m still asking, am I in like a coma or something? Because it’s like, I’m just learning as I’m listening, it’s so difficult, until she started talking about the mental abuse, that is what happened to me a lot.”
As much as it is important for the awareness, it is for people to be trained, not just trained. I think a group like this, I think they should do kind of a session that you have all the staff come and listen to people who have actually been in that situation, so they know how it actually feels. Because when people are just training from, let me say, by reading books, so it’s not about reading books. It’s about having one to one with the people that are actually involved and you will know what it is to be abused in all sort of manners. Because if you hear someone’s story and you hear another person, because every story is different, and especially for these people here, they need that training.
BUILDING COLLABORATION

• Survivor’s stories matter

• Narratives are a tool for policy change
• Narratives are a tool for practice change and building relationships
• Narratives are a tool for awareness and training
ANY QUESTIONS?

• robbins1@uclan.ac.uk
• @DorisDayRobbins
• https://socialpolicyandthedorisdayfan.wordpress.com/