



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Engaging with Involuntary Service Users in Social Work

Findings from a Knowledge Exchange Project

Citation for published version:

Smith, M, Gallagher, M, Wosu, H, Stewart, J, Cree, V, Hunter, S, Evans, S, Montgomery, C, Holiday, S & Wilkinson, H 2012, 'Engaging with Involuntary Service Users in Social Work: Findings from a Knowledge Exchange Project', *The British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 42, no. 8, pp. 1460-1477.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr162>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1093/bjsw/bcr162](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr162)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The British Journal of Social Work

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is a pre-copy-editing, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in <insert journal title> following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version; © Smith, M., Gallagher, M., Wosu, H., Stewart, J., Cree, V., Hunter, S., Evans, S., Montgomery, C., Holiday, S., & Wilkinson, H. (2012). Engaging with Involuntary Service Users in Social Work: Findings from a Knowledge Exchange Project. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(8), 1460-1477, is available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr162>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



**Engaging with Involuntary Service Users in Social Work: findings from a
knowledge exchange project**

Mark Smith¹, Michael Gallagher¹, Helen Wosu², Jane Stewart², Viv Cree¹, Scott
Hunter³, Sam Evans⁴, Catherine Montgomery⁴, Sarah Holiday² and Heather
Wilkinson¹

¹University of Edinburgh; ²City of Edinburgh Council; ³Midlothian Council; ⁴East
Lothian Council

Abstract

The participation of service users in the planning and delivery of social work services has become a familiar objective in the UK. Policy injunctions, however, mask a lack of clarity around what is meant by terms such as ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’. Moreover, since many service users do not engage with social workers voluntarily, the expectation that they become centrally involved in the planning and delivery of services highlights tensions and contradictions. This article explores social work engagement with involuntary clients, drawing on findings from a knowledge exchange project involving academics and local authority social workers. A review of the literature traces the background to user involvement and identifies its different stages and types. Data from small-scale practitioner research projects undertaken within the project is then drawn on to illuminate how social workers and clients negotiate mutual engagement in their everyday encounters. It is suggested that the ‘roll out’ of the user engagement agenda may be understood as an exercise in the problematics of government (Rose and Miller, 1992). More optimistically, the work of Michel De

Certeau is drawn on to propose that a practice of the everyday in such encounters rescues them from an ill-defined, abstract and undifferentiated policy agenda.

Introduction

The expectation that service users participate in social work policy, practice and research has become prominent in recent years (Carey, 2009). It is claimed to: strengthen communities, increase citizenship and promote social inclusion (Scottish Office, 1999); improve the design and delivery of services, and ensure that services better meet the needs of those who use them (Scottish Executive, 2006); make social work education more meaningful and empowering for service users, students and educators (Ager *et al.*, 2005). Demands for user participation became particularly pronounced within the New Public Management regimes that were a feature of New Labour's interface with the public services in the late 1990s and 2000s (Cowden and Singh, 2007; Ferguson, 2007). The 'governance' agenda propagated by New Labour was concerned with 'modern', efficient, accountable public services (Garrett, 2003), partnership with other professionals and claims to represent the voice of users and carers.

Terms such as 'service user involvement' and 'user participation' might be difficult to disagree with, and are undoubtedly legitimate aims in the social services. However, it is often unclear what they mean, or who the 'service users' in question might be. A range of terminology is employed within this general policy agenda: user involvement, stakeholder consultation, participation and so on, each of which has its own history, connotations and conceptual 'baggage'. Indeed, the very notions of *users*

and *clients* are problematic (Beresford, 2005), constructing recipients of social work in ways which may not reflect their experiences of these services (McLaughlin, 2009). Ironically, as several authors have noted, for many recipients of social work the term ‘user’ is more likely to indicate someone who uses illegal drugs than someone who has contact with social services (Beresford, 2005; Cowden and Singh, 2007).

In policy, however, the terms evoke a sense of social worker and service user entering into a contracted arrangement to co-produce the best outcomes from their mutual endeavours. Yet the reality is that most social work relationships are involuntary; they happen in situations where the recipient of the service does not freely enter into the contract but where they are mandated by law and may resent having to do so. In one recent study, a participant was asked if he had any advice for social workers, to which he responded “Yeah – fuck off out of our lives!” (McLeod, 2007, p.281) – no doubt a sentiment shared by many involuntary ‘service users’. As Beresford (2005) notes, some activists have suggested that the term ‘service *refusers*’ might be more appropriate for mental health service users who are subject to compulsory measures of care. Other groups of involuntary service users include adults with learning disabilities, families in the child protection system and offenders in the criminal justice system. McLaughlin (2009) pinpoints a central problematic for user involvement with such groups: “there is a point in social work practice whereby the social worker is expected to act on their own professional assessment of the situation, informed by agency policy, legal mandates and research, irrespective of what the service user’s choices or views are.” (p.1109) Given the inevitable tensions and contradictions inherent in this area, it is hardly surprising that user involvement “has

turned out to be more difficult than was imagined, with many attempts regarded as tokenistic or ill thought out.” (Cooper *et al.*, 2003, p.43-44).

Research and knowledge exchange with local authority social workers

Against this backdrop, we carried out a 12-month research and knowledge exchange project on engaging with involuntary service users in social work. The project was funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Local Authority Research Councils' Initiative (LARCI). Its aim was to explore some of the complexities of involving involuntary clients as partners in the social work process, and to identify some pointers as to how this might best be done. In what follows, we outline the project before presenting some of its key findings.

At one level, the aim of the project was to promote knowledge exchange between academics and local authorities. The issue of engagement with involuntary service users was chosen as a focal point for the study. This focus emerged from early discussions between academics and local authority contacts, from which it became clear that the issue involved particular challenges, and might benefit from sustained discussion and critical examination. Our interest was in dialogic knowledge exchange between practitioners and academics, rather than a didactic knowledge transfer approach to influencing practice (Nutley *et al.*, 2007; Meagher *et al.*, 2008). To this end, the project involved:

- producing a series of reviews summarising the existing literature on user engagement in social work;
- practitioner research projects (PRPs), involving social work staff carrying out small research projects over eight months. The practitioner-researchers were offered mentoring from an academic with appropriate expertise, and a series of training workshops to provide support and guidance. Practitioners were invited to choose their focus and to define relevant research questions under the broad rubric of working with involuntary clients;
- a series of three sharing seminars, bringing together practitioners and academics for discussion, knowledge exchange and updates on the reviews and the PRPs. These events were documented to record key points from discussions.

In this article we discuss themes apparent in the existing literature on this topic and augment these with empirical examples from our PRPs. Our discussion centres on a contradiction inherent in social work practice. Both the literature and the findings from our project suggest strongly that meaningful engagement between social workers and clients – whatever terms are used for this – depends on everyday encounters and the quality of the relationships between both parties within these. At the same time, social workers currently face increasing pressures to perform bureaucratic and managerial procedures (Lonne *et al.*, 2009). In one sense, user engagement, as envisaged by policy discourse, can be seen as part of this move to greater managerialism. This is evident, for example, in attempts to develop technical procedures for monitoring and evaluating service user participation (e.g. Webb, 2008). However, increased proceduralism inevitably compromises relational work

(Beresford *et al.*, 2008; Winter, 2009). Our data show how formal social work procedures, such as professional-dominated meetings, dense reports and risk assessment forms, hinder user engagement at the level of front-line practice. We suggest that, if social work is to develop user engagement in a way that is meaningful for the ‘users’ involved, then these systems should be drastically reduced, revised and simplified so that they support relational working, rather than undermining it.

Understanding user engagement and participation

When considering social work with involuntary clients, engagement can be seen at two levels. First, there is the engagement of the social worker with the client in the business of carrying out social work. Achieving this kind of ‘operational engagement’ is essential to being able to work with the client at all. Trotter’s (1999) text, for example, is primarily concerned with helping social workers to identify how to achieve this first kind of engagement effectively. Second, there is engagement that in some way elicits the views of users about what they want from social services, with the aim of listening to and responding to these views.

How engagement, participation and other related concepts are defined and understood is of crucial importance, particularly since service users and social workers may have significantly different understandings of these terms. A study by MacLeod (2006), for example, showed that while social workers reported making extensive efforts to listen to children and to enable their participation, very few young people reported a sense that their views had been heard and taken into account. She suggests that the young people understood listening in an active sense, meaning ‘listening and taking action in

response to what has been heard'. The social workers in her study, however, tended to understand listening more passively, as a receptive attitude involving respect, openness and attentiveness.

A brief history of user engagement and participation

It is important to place user engagement in the historical context of social work, so as to understand the conditions through which it has risen to prominence. Social work today is built on a long tradition of social service: the idea that the social worker was performing a service with, and for, the service user was at the heart of the social work practised by visiting societies, housing associations and a host of voluntary and church-led organisations which provided essential help to poor and needy adults and children in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Cree and Myers, 2008). But these relationships were in no way egalitarian ones. Rather, it was assumed that it was the task of the social worker (whether paid or unpaid) to share their knowledge, understanding and world-view with the care-recipient so that they might learn to change their ways; if they were unwilling or unable to do so, they would be relinquished to the state and thus to the poor law. Octavia Hill, pioneer of the housing association movement, expressed this as follows: 'My only notion of reform is living side by side with people till all that one believes becomes clear to them' (Octavia Hill, quoted in Lewis 1995: 51). With the growth of Fabian ideas and the practical manifestations of these in such initiatives as university settlements in the UK and US, social work seemed ready to embrace a more social and critical edge (Ferguson, 2008). Its emerging professionalisation over the course of the twentieth century, however, demonstrates allegiance more to the paternalistic casework of visiting

societies and to an 'expert', medical model than to alternative community development approaches (Carey, 2009; McLaughlin, 2009). Nevertheless, even within Biestek's (1961) classic exposition of the casework relationship, there was an explicit recognition of client self-determination. This reflects the ambivalence which is at the heart of early social work, as Octavia Hill again illustrates:

'It is essential to remember that each man has his own view of his life, and must be free to fulfil it; that in many ways he is a far better judge of it than we, as he has lived through and felt what we have only seen. Our work is rather to bring him to the point of considering, and to the spirit of judging rightly, than to consider or judge for him' (Octavia Hill, writing in *Macmillan's Magazine* July 1869, quoted in Whelan 1998: 63-4.)

In both Scotland and England, social work became a discrete profession following legislation passed in the late 1960s. The years following witnessed a rekindling of more radical ideas (Ferguson, 2008), questioning the role of social workers as agents of the state, and linking a structural analysis of clients' problems to an ethical imperative to challenge these. In this vision, the relationship between social worker and client was conceived of more as an alliance rather than an expert-client one. The influence of radical and community social work initiatives was only ever marginal, however, and was short-lived. The emergence of New Right social and economic ideologies over the course of the late 70s and 80s drew the social work role sharply back towards a focus on individuals. Once again, the primary focus was one of 'policing' the poor and dangerous classes to protect the public, rather than providing a welfare service to social work clients (Barry, 2000). In the 1990s, New Labour's governance agenda brought a different emphasis to the social work relationship, now

placing increased importance on the views of users and carers in the delivery of services (Carey, 2009). The terminology shifted away from the use of ‘client’ towards that of ‘service user’, indicating a move away from more paternalistic, professional-as-expert models. Instead, the recipients of social work were increasingly seen as ‘customers’, exercising choice in accessing public services, whilst service providers were increasingly required to be responsive to the requirements of service users (Cowden and Singh, 2007). This shift, as stated already fitted a wider new Labour agenda for reform, but also grew out of a major set of challenges from within the disability and mental health movement, as users of services sought to influence the kinds of services they received (Beresford, 2005).

A typology of user participation

These historical shifts have resulted in different discourses of user engagement. Beresford (2002) proposes a distinction between democratic and consumerist models. However, in our study we found a greater diversity of positions than this dichotomy suggests, suggesting at least four dominant discourses. These may overlap and blur into one another, but they are not necessarily compatible:

- Managerialist or technical-rational discourses, which construct user engagement as a means of modernising and improving services, making them more effective and efficient at performing their allotted function. In the words of Simmons and Birchall (2005), “[p]articipation is...claimed to have practical value for the performance of key public services by shaping better-informed decisions and ensuring that limited resources are used to meet service users’

priorities” (p.261). Related to this are discourses which use the notion of user involvement to attack public sector professionals, questioning their perceived power and calling them to greater accountability.

- Consumerist discourses, which construct social work users as consumers or customers of services within a capitalist market. For example, a recent report on the future of social services in Scotland suggests that “As demanding consumers of goods and services, users of social work services will increasingly expect the same variety, choice and flexibility that they expect from the business sector” (Scottish Executive, 2006, p.20). This is particularly problematic in the context of work with involuntary service users, whose ‘choices’ about accessing social work may be extremely constrained (Cowden and Singh, 2007). The pro-active, rational consumer of services envisaged here bears little resemblance to many recipients of social work; these are Bauman’s (2007) ‘flawed consumers’.
- Neo-liberal governmental discourses, which construct user involvement as a way of ensuring that individuals feel listened to, and are therefore more amenable to government policies. Cooper et al. (2003) argue that “user participation gives an initiative validity with its intended recipients, many of whom are suspicious of government and its attempts at social engineering.” (p.43) Similarly, Simmons and Birchall (2005) suggest that participation “is claimed to help reduce conflict and discord, and smooth the process of policy implementation...it has been argued that participatory initiatives play a role in legitimizing a public sector in which trust in government is low.” (p.261-262) More critically, Carey (2009) argues that service user participation “offers an

ideological agenda by which seemingly anomalous, disenfranchised and potentially morally unsound people are helped to re-integrate into the social body.” (p.183)

- Discourses of rights, citizenship and participation – what Beresford (2002) refers to as ‘democratic’ approaches – which construct user engagement as a way of ensuring social justice by empowering people to make their voices heard. These discourses have been mobilised primarily by service user groups from various constituencies (e.g. disabled people, mental health service users) campaigning for change through activities such as self-organisation, direct action, demonstrating and lobbying (Beresford, 2000; Hodge, 2005; Postle and Beresford, 2007). Beresford and Croft (2001) claim that “While the consumerist involvement offered by managerialist related approaches to social work and social services has led to very little if any, transfer of power and decision making, the same is not true of service user movements and organisations....These movements have been associated with major changes in legislation, policy, culture, theory and provision” (p.62) However, the terms of such discourses have in some instances been taken up by governments (Carey, 2009), in which context they often become mixed with neo-liberal, technical-rational and consumerist discourses, leading to inconsistencies and contradictions (Beresford and Croft, 2001, p.64).

Having discussed, debated and researched user engagement over the course of our knowledge exchange project, our impression is that in practice these discourses become mingled. Practitioners and service managers display varying degrees of commitment and critique in relation to these different visions. Consequently, we think

it important to resist characterising user engagement either as a brave new form of democratic practice, or conversely as merely a cynical, tokenistic ruse of government. Instead, we would suggest that user engagement is best seen as a thoroughly messy, compromised and ambivalent tangling of ideas and practices. It thus can be understood in Foucaultian terms as a form of governmentality, “a frontier on which the wills of individuals and the wills of governmental institutions directly confront one another.” (Gallagher, 2008). We extend this line of argument later in the paper.

Putting user engagement into practice

Our concern in the remainder of this paper is to explore what forms of user involvement might be both possible and desirable in social work with involuntary clients. Rather than positing an idealised version of user involvement, we use examples from our [practitioner research projects \(PRPs\)](#)PRPs to illustrate what participative practice might look like within the constraints of local authority social work with involuntary service users.

Four [PRPs](#)studies are reported on here. These were carried out over eight months. PRP1 was a study of factors that had enabled engagement in child protection where service users had initially been hostile. It involved in-depth interviews with parents in five families and their social workers. PRP2 also investigated service user engagement in statutory child protection. It involved three focus groups with a total of 32 social workers, and a review of transcripts of interviews with two families previously undertaken for quality assurance purposes. PRP3 was a study of approaches to risk in social work with disabled young people. It involved analysis of

relevant local policy documents and a focus group with social workers. PRP4 was a study of user involvement in case conferences for people subject to adult support and protection investigations. It involved a review of case records and semi-structured interviews with a service user and two practitioners. Whilst each project was limited in the resources available and the quantity of data produced, the findings resonate with themes from pre-existing research. Furthermore, the practitioner-led nature of the work resulted in findings informed by, and of direct relevance to, front-line social work practice.

The key themes across the projects can be summarised as follows:

- The importance of social workers' relationships with service users for enabling meaningful engagement.
- The value of clear communication, information and explanation for enabling engagement.
- The potential for bureaucratic managerial structures, such as reports, formal meetings and risk assessment procedures, to act as barriers to engagement with service users.

We address each of these in turn.

Engagement through relationships

The importance of the social work relationship for effective engagement with service users is well established in previous research (Mayer and Timms 1970, Schofield and Thoburn, 1996; Thomas and Campling, 2000; Bell, 2002; Cashmore, 2002; McLeod,

2007; Beresford *et al.*, 2008; Winter, 2009; McLeod, 2010). Indeed, for Buckley *et al.* (2010), “the factor that was most likely to neutralize service user negativity was the development of a quality relationship between families and workers.” (p.105) Our research adds some detail to this picture, indicating a number of important features in the formation of such relationships.

The first of these was the development of trust (Winter, 2009). Involuntary clients are often deeply mistrustful of social services, as expressed by social workers and service users in PRP1:

“I can understand why a lot of people hide things from them and didnae [didn’t] tell them ‘cos they are scared they’ll say ‘Right we are taking your bairns [children] offa you’.” (PRP1, service user)

“initially she was very mistrustful of us...thinking ‘how do I know you are going to follow through on these things?’ You know, ‘I don’t feel I can be honest with you ‘cos if I tell you the truth you are going to take my child away for ever’.” (PRP1, social worker)

Building trust was repeatedly identified as essential for overcoming clients’ fears to enable engagement to take place. Social workers said that trust could be built by simple, everyday, small-scale actions. These revolved around making sure that, as professionals, any commitments made, even at the smallest level, were upheld:

“if you don’t phone when you say you are going to phone or something, then you will get a very angry response, ‘I trusted you’...on a quite basic level.” (PRP1, social worker)

Both service users and social workers reported that as trust developed over time, clients became increasingly able to express their views within social work processes:

“At the beginning I went along with what was said and agreed but as meetings progressed I was more able to voice opinion” (PRP2, service user)

“over the years that have been working with her I think she sort of understands me a bit better than when she first saw me...of course it has been the same one over the 6 years...she has a bit mair (more) understanding than what she had at first.” (PRP1, service user)

These quotes highlight the importance of continuity in social work relationships, reinforcing messages from previous research (Munro, 2001; Bell, 2002; Cashmore, 2002; McLeod, 2007; Franklin and Sloper, 2009). This raises particular challenges in contexts of high staff turnover.

Interview data from PRP1 suggested a range of other factors that could help build relationships. These included: workers maintaining empathy and respect during discussion of difficult issues; flexibility of timescales around individuals’ needs – where a service user had agreed to leave an abusive partner or stop using drugs, for

example; and workers acknowledging what was positive in service users rather than simply focussing on their problems:

“I have minor learning difficulties and I said that I will get there, you just need to give me time and work slowly with me...be patient with me instead of saying to me you need to do this by a certain date. Ever since then me and my social worker got more closer and worked together... you’ve just got to do it in your own pace in your own time instead of social workers having timescales on everything.” (PRP1, service user)

“[Our previous social worker] didnae know how to deal with positive things. She was all happy to jump on us when we done stuff wrong but when we done stuff right she never commented on it, she never said nothing.” (PRP1, service user)

Communication, information and explanation

Social workers and service users repeatedly emphasised the importance of clear communication and appropriate information. Some service users reported struggling to understand what was happening to them and why. In other cases, there was evidence that service users and professionals had divergent understandings.

Explanation was therefore crucial:

“I wrote down on a big sheet of paper what the social work department were worried about, why we were involved with them. And they were

quite surprised with the five reasons I came up with...they said nobody has ever told us that before” (PRP1, social worker)

“They didnae sit doon and say, ‘right these are the complaints or the worries that we have got. Now we are gonnae dae this’. They said ‘right we are taking your son off you’ and I thought ‘Whit?’ [what?]” (PRP1, service user)

Service users said that they wanted to be properly informed about interventions, particularly where the consequences were likely to be significant:

“They could have made us aware that it was going to happen... We never knew anything about it happening... At least if you’re told these things you can sort of prepare....” (PRP1, service user)

Clearly, there are situations in which urgent action on the part of social workers may be justified. However, it seems important for practitioners to be aware of the long-term consequences for engagement and relationship-building with service users. Our data suggested that choosing not to inform service users about decisions could seriously undermine trust, making future engagement all the more challenging. Conversely, both workers and service users said that being honest and ‘upfront’ could help to build relationships, even where service users did not like what they were being told:

“I think a lot of our clients feel we are out to get them and if you can turn that around and tell them ‘I want to be honest and open’ and the way I work is I say to them, ‘I am sometimes going to say things to you that you are not going to like...but I have to be honest with you [and] if you listen we can try and find a way through it’.” (PRP1, social worker)

Workers also spoke about how, in such situations, maintaining empathy and respect for service users could help them to communicate about difficult issues without leading to the breakdown of relationships (see also Forrester *et al.*, 2008). Providing clear information about what was expected of service users was also reported as being helpful:

“writing down clear goals and plans...we would say, right, by the end of this month we would have to have seen this happen and we would write down things like she would have to keep her house safe and to show she was managing her relationship with [her partner], that she wasn’t having people back and there was no police reports.” (PRP1, social worker)

Previous research shows that information and explanation are as important for children and young people as for adults (Schofield and Thoburn, 1996; Cashmore, 2002; Franklin and Sloper, 2009). When asked if things had improved for his family, one parent said:

Aye and nup [yes and no]. Aye because he [child] is a lot happier and nup because he doesn't understand why both parents are not in the house together. (PRP2, service user interview)

Clearly this is a challenging area of practice. Recent research suggests that large caseloads, combined with the increasing prioritisation of bureaucratic 'box ticking' tasks, leave many social workers unable to invest time in the kind of in-depth relational working needed to explain interventions to young children (Winter, 2009). Again, it seems important to consider the potential long-term effects of such practices on children's relationships with social workers.

There are also questions about the most appropriate form and content of information provided to service users. Written reports were experienced negatively by many service users, for example. This brings us to our final theme.

Managerial systems as a barrier to user engagement

Several of our practitioner research studies highlighted the potential for bureaucratic systems to hinder engagement between social workers and the recipients of services. Our findings in this area resonate strongly with recent research (e.g. Buckley *et al.*, 2010; Featherstone *et al.*, 2010).

Formal reports were seen as potentially unhelpful by both workers and service users:

“I was daunted by the report, how is a child or family getting a 33 page report going to feel when you are reading so much negativity about yourself?” (PRP2, practitioner in focus group)

“They find reports threatening and intimidating – not helpful – and their strategy for dealing with it is to shut up, to sit there [in meetings].” (PRP1, social worker)

I think their experience of reports had been negative, punitive and definitely on the basis of proving that they were unfit parents so that they could take their children away from them.” (PRP1, social worker)

Similarly, in PRP3, social workers echoed previous research (Barry, 2007) when they explained how risk assessments could overshadow relational working:

“I feel that that [legislation and local procedures] is certainly influencing my view of social work and what’s important in my week, and what is good practice. In the sense that... I’ve got four risk indicators signed by clients – that’s great work. Are they any safer, are they any happier, are they any more fulfilled or further on in their lives?” (PRP3, social worker)

“If the client is engaging in risky behaviour you would be more likely to be asked... ‘have you completed a risk assessment form?’, rather than ‘have you had a conversation with the person?’” (PRP3, social worker)

The practitioner projects also documented ways in which formal meetings had acted as barriers to participation:

“I didn’t like it how everyone was round that table and it was like they were judging you...it was just such an intense thing having to sit there and just listen to, you know, what was round about you.” (PRP1, service user)

“Meetings are very formal, imagine how the family feels when they know it’s all about them and their parenting” (PRP2, social worker)

In PRP4, an interview was carried out with a service user who had been involved in a case conference. The experience seemed to have been overwhelmingly negative. He did not feel listened to and felt that he wasn’t understood at all. He did not feel that he was able to influence the decisions that were made and felt that people “didn’t want to hear (him)” and “didn’t listen”. He didn’t always understand what was being spoken about in the room and felt that people just said what they wanted and spoke their minds without listening to him or what he wanted. The only positive aspects of his experience seemed to revolve around his relationship with a key worker, who he valued, and who had helped by telling him who all the professionals at the meeting were. Social workers interviewed in PRP4 also recognised the potential for case conferences to work against engagement. One case was described where professionals had brought along three students to the conference without asking permission from the service user. The experience became very distressing for the individual, who now will not attend any more case conferences.

Discussion

Both the existing literature and the findings of our various PRPs expose notions of service user participation, especially in relation to involuntary clients, as lacking in definitional clarity and as being both messy and ambiguous when applied to practice situations. It is hard to conclude other than that the terms are little more than 'buzzwords'. Buzzwords, according to Loughlin (2002), are increasingly apparent in policy formulation. They "should be either tautologous or platitudinous, to create the sense that opposition to whatever it is you are saying is absurd, that all disagreement is unreasonable (p.232)". Few would disagree that user participation and engagement in social work is 'a good thing'. Still fewer are likely to be able to say what policy makers might mean by it. Buzzwords, nonetheless, carry some weight. They are utilised, according to Loughlin, "to control and manipulate working populations and to 'manage the perceptions' of the public at large" (2002, p.239).

The use of language to manage and control is, of course, consistent with a governmentality perspective. Rose and Miller identify how 'Political power is exercised today through a profusion of shifting alliances between diverse authorities to govern ... social life and individual contact.' (p.173). In this case, government has co-opted the views of certain carer groups to construct a narrative of social work services that fail to take sufficient account of the views of service users or carers. At the same time, though, it has initiated and presides over burgeoning regulatory and performance management regimes and sundry other technologies of government, which act to impede the kind of personal engagement from which might spring any meaningful participation. Strands of its modernising agenda collide.

The disciplining gaze of a governmentality perspective, which might posit that service user involvement is little more than a device to manipulate perceptions and control the workforce, has some substance. Certainly, our findings suggest that, in social work practice with children and families, the discourse of child protection the oftendiscourse within which social work practice with children and families is conducted is a child protection one, the concerns of which crowds out other ways of engaging with and helping families. This interpretation, though, may present too bleak a picture of actual social work practice. In this respect, the work of the French social theorist Michel De Certeau is illuminative. De Certeau (1984) destabilises ‘disciplining’ power through asserting a counterbalancing faith in everyday practices. Specifically, he differentiates between strategy and tactics in everyday life. Strategy is the domain of the state, the proper or proprietary authority. Strategy, in this case, is the abstract and ill-defined meta-narrative of service user involvement. Tactics, on the other hand, are characterised by “the absence of a proper locus” (De Certeau, 1984 p.37). They take advantage of ‘opportunities’ and “must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers” (p.37). It is the tactics of user engagement and participation, rather than the strategy set out by government, that are apparent in the everyday practices and interactions of social workers and their clients. De Certeau speaks of the resistance of the everyday to the conformity of strategic direction. His idea of resistance does not necessarily involve active opposition. Social workers rarely resist, in the sense of opposing, service user participation, but they practise it pragmatically and contextually in everyday contacts with clients. They do so, not out of deference to some abstract policy imperative, but because they consider it to be good social work.

Similarly, service users also, by and large, accept the need for social workers to be involved in their lives. But this is not a passive acceptance; it is negotiated in each encounter with a social worker.

~~It is evident, too, from both the literature and the PRPs~~Our findings also strongly suggest that ~~any~~ worthwhile user ~~participation or~~ engagement only becomes realisable through effective personal ~~and~~ professional relationships. Relationships built around trust, communication, mutual understanding and support are all pre-requisites of meaningful participatory practice. Clear indications of the contradictions apparent within neo-liberal and managerial regimes become apparent. These advocate user involvement but in reality act against its meaningful realisation by eroding the social work relationship in favour of bureaucratic, procedural systems. Managerial systems such as case conferences and reports ~~we~~are frequently cited in our practitioner research PRPs as barriers to user involvement.

Conclusion

In this article, we have synthesised knowledge from existing literature on service user involvement and added empirical detail from practitioner-relevant case studies. In doing so, we have explored ~~how~~the ways in which the idea of service user engagement is played out in the day-to-day practice of social work within a wider context of managerialism and performance management. The evidence we have presented suggests that if user involvement is to be increased and improved, resources will need to be directed away from managerial processes and into more direct,

relational social work. This is not to argue that there is anything inherently wrong with meetings, reports and risk assessments; such formal structures can be useful for engagement and communication. Nevertheless, we believe that if they are to be truly useful, they must be designed to support relationship-building, rather than facilitate performance management, accountability and defensive practice in social work.

In conclusion, we would like to suggest that a pragmatic understanding of user involvement leads us to recommend attention being given to the routine ways in which service users can be involved in shaping the interventions to which they are subject. Hernandez *et al.* (2010) argue that user involvement is best integrated into everyday social care practices, rather than added on as something separate. Our own findings support this, and suggest that engagement with involuntary service users must be re-positioned at the heart of good practice.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

References

- Ager, W., Dow, J. and Gee, M. (2005) 'Grassroots Networks: A Model for Promoting the Influence of Service Users and Carers in Social Work Education', *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, **24**(4), pp. 467 - 476.
- Barry, M. (2000) 'The mentor/monitor debate in criminal justice: 'What works' for offenders', *British Journal of Social Work*, **30**(5), pp. 575-595.

- Barry, M. (2007) 'Effective approaches to risk assessment in social work: an international literature review ', Edinburgh, Scottish Executive.
- Bauman, Z. (2007) 'Collateral Casualties of Consumerism' *Journal of Consumer Culture* vol. 7 no. 1 25-56
- Bell, M. (2002) 'Promoting children's rights through the use of relationship', *Child & Family Social Work*, **7**(1), pp. 1-11.
- Beresford, P. (2000) 'Service users' knowledges and social work theory: Conflict or collaboration?' *British Journal of Social Work*, **30**(4), pp. 489-503.
- Beresford, P. (2002) 'User Involvement in Research and Evaluation: Liberation or Regulation?' *Social Policy and Society*, **1**(02), pp. 95-105.
- Beresford, P. (2005) "Service user': regressive or liberatory terminology?" *Disability & Society*, **20**(4), pp. 469-477.
- Beresford, P. and Croft, S. (2001) 'Service Users' Knowledges and the Social Construction of Social Work', *Journal of Social Work*, **1**(3), pp. 295-316.
- Beresford, P., Croft, S. and Adshead, L. (2008) "We Don't See Her as a Social Worker': A Service User Case Study of the Importance of the Social Worker's Relationship and Humanity', *British Journal of Social Work*, **38**(7), pp. 1388-1407.
- Biestek, F. P. (1961) *The Casework Relationship* London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Buckley, H., Carr, N. and Whelan, S. (2010) "Like walking on eggshells': service user views and expectations of the child protection system', *Child & Family Social Work*, **16**(1), pp. 101-110.
- Carey, M. (2009) 'Critical Commentary: Happy Shopper? The Problem with Service User and Carer Participation', *British Journal of Social Work*, **39**(1), pp. 179-188.
- Cashmore, J. (2002) 'Promoting the participation of children and young people in care', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, **26**(8), pp. 837-847.

- Cooper, A., Hetherington, R. and Katz, I. (2003) 'The Risk Factor: Making the child protection system work for children', London, DEMOS.
- Cowden, S. and Singh, G. (2007) 'The 'user': Friend, foe or fetish? A critical exploration of user involvement in health and social care', *Critical Social Policy*, **27**(1), pp. 5-23.
- Cree, V.E. and Myers, S. (2008) *Social work : making a difference*, Bristol, Policy.
- De Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Featherstone, B., Fraser, C., Ashley, C. and Ledward, P. (2010) 'Advocacy for parents and carers involved with children's services: making a difference to working in partnership?' *Child & Family Social Work*, pp. no-no
- Ferguson, I. (2007) 'Increasing user choice or privatizing risk? The antinomies of personalization', *British Journal of Social Work*, **37**(3), pp. 387-403.
- Ferguson, I. (2008) *Reclaiming Social Work: Challenging Neo-liberalism and Promoting Social Justice*, London: Sage.
- Forrester, D., Kershaw, S., Moss, H. and Hughes, L. (2008) 'Communication skills in child protection: how do social workers talk to parents?' *Child & Family Social Work*, **13**(1), pp. 41-51.
- Franklin, A. and Sloper, P. (2009) 'Supporting the Participation of Disabled Children and Young People in Decision-making', *Children & Society*, **23**(1), pp. 3-15.
- Gallagher, M. (2008) 'Foucault, Power and Participation', *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, **16**, pp. 395-406.
- Garrett, P.M. (2003) *Remaking social work with children and families : a critical discussion on the "modernisation" of social care*, London ; New York, Routledge.

- Hernandez, L., Robson, P. and Sampson, A. (2010) 'Towards Integrated Participation: Involving Seldom Heard Users of Social Care Services', *British Journal of Social Work*, **40**(3), pp. 714-736.
- Hodge, S. (2005) 'Participation, discourse and power: a case study in service user involvement', *Critical Social Policy*, **25**(2), pp. 164-179.
- Jordan, B. (2010) *Why the Third Way failed: economics, morality and the origins of the 'Big Society'*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Lewis, J. (1995) 'Social facts, Social Theory and Social Change: The Ideas of Booth in Relation to those of Beatrice Webb, Octavia Hill and Helen Bosanquet' in Englander, D. and O'Day, R. (eds) *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain 1840-1914*, Scolar Press, Aldershot, pp. 49-66.
- Lonne, B., Parton, N., Thomas, J. and Harries, M. (2009) *Reforming child protection*, London, Routledge.
- Loughlin, M. (2002), 'On the buzzword approach to policy formation'. *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, 8: 229–242.
- McLaughlin, H. (2009) 'What's in a Name: 'Client', 'Patient', 'Customer', 'Consumer', 'Expert by Experience', 'Service User' - What's Next?' *British Journal of Social Work*, **39**(6), pp. 1101-1117.
- McLeod, A. (2007) 'Whose agenda? Issues of power and relationship when listening to looked-after young people', *Child & Family Social Work*, **12**(3), pp. 278-286.
- McLeod, A. (2010) "A Friend and an Equal": Do Young People in Care Seek the Impossible from their Social Workers?' *British Journal of Social Work*, **40**(3), pp. 772-788.
- Mayer, J.E. and Timms, N. (1970) *The client speaks: working class impressions of casework*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

- Meagher, L., Lyall, C. and Nutley, S. (2008) 'Flows of knowledge, expertise and influence: a method for assessing policy and practice impacts from social science research', *Research Evaluation*, **17**(3), pp. 163-173.
- Munro (2001) 'Empowering looked-after children', *Child & Family Social Work*, **6**(2), pp. 129-137.
- Nutley, S.M., Walter, I. and Davies, H.T.O. (2007) *Using evidence: how research can inform public services*, Bristol, U.K., Policy Press.
- Postle, K. and Beresford, P. (2007) 'Capacity building and the reconception of political participation: A role for social care workers?' *British Journal of Social Work*, **37**(1), pp. 143-158.
- Rose, N. and Miller, P. (1992) 'Political Power Beyond the State: Problematics of Government' *British Journal of Sociology* 43, (2) 172-205.
- Schofield, G. and Thoburn, J. (1996) *Child protection : the voice of the child in decision-making*, London, Institute for Public Policy Research.
- Scottish Executive (2006) 'Changing Lives: Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review', Edinburgh, Scottish Executive.
- Scottish Office (1999) 'Aiming for Excellence: A White Paper: Modernising social work services in Scotland', Edinburgh: The Stationery Office.
- Simmons, R. and Birchall, J. (2005) 'A joined-up approach to user participation in public services: Strengthening the "participation chain"', *Social Policy & Administration*, **39**(3), pp. 260-283.
- Thomas, N. and Campling, J. (2000) *Children, family, and the state : decision-making and child participation*, Houndmills; New York, Macmillan Press Ltd.; St. Martin's Press.

- Trotter, C. (1999) *Working with involuntary clients : a guide to practice*, London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif., Sage.
- Webb, S.A. (2008) 'Modelling Service User Participation in Social Care', *Journal of Social Work*, **8**(3), pp. 269-290.
- Whelan, R. (1998) [*Octavia Hill and the Social Housing Debate: Essays and Letters by Octavia Hill*](#), London, IEA Health and Welfare Unit.
- Winter, K. (2009) 'Relationships matter: the problems and prospects for social workers' relationships with young children in care', *Child & Family Social Work*, **14**(4), pp. 450-460.