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voices from the frontline

Challenging ourselves, challenging the silence: how dialogue and reflection can shape resistance to the harms of institutional intervention

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We are a pair of women based in the north of England. We came together in 2014 as part of an evaluation of a project that supported women leaving prison. A decade on, we use this space of 'Voices from the front line' to reflect on what we have collectively achieved. We share with the reader how and why we came together and how our collaborative work reveals institutional harm and failure. As we have captured elsewhere, and as a central focus of this special issue, the relationship between welfare and criminal justice interventions is complex. Failures in one part of the system can drive harmful intervention in another. Understanding and challenging the interlocking nature of these different forms of institutional power is critical. To do this, we must not only challenge harmful policies and practice but also rethink how we produce knowledge. In this article, we challenge ourselves and the reader to consider what our experience means for policy, practice and research.

Keywords knowledge • dialogue • institutional failure • power • critical social research

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Our introductions

I am Leah. I am a mum and a care leaver. I have lots to say about my experience of social services and criminal justice. I was in care as a child. I have also had contact with social services as a mum to my four children. I met Becky in a women's centre; at that time, I had not long come out of prison after serving what was my first and only prison sentence. Becky was doing research for Women in Prison [WiP], and their brilliant worker had been helping me on release. Although it wasn't planned this way, we've kept

meeting and built our connection. This has become my space to say what has happened to me and how I feel about the things that have happened. (Leah)

I'm Becky, and I'm also a mum; my kids are a similar age to Leah's, but I've not had to experience the types of intervention she has as a child or as a mother. I have been a researcher for many years, working mainly around the criminal legal system. I have also worked closely with campaign organisations, such as WiP and the Care Leavers Association [CLA]. I was working on an evaluation for WiP when I met Leah. Then, through an introduction to a friend of mine at the CLA, Leah took on a role there. It's through the generous support and encouragement of WiP and the CLA that we were able to invest in building this narrative work together. (Becky)

In this reflective piece, we write about our experience of collaborating: what it has felt like for each of us, and how it has challenged us. Our shared dialogue has focused on what it is like for girls, for mums, for women when you have the institutions of care or criminal justice in your life. How being 'looked after' or 'in care' can shape what happens with the criminal justice system, and vice versa. Sometimes, we have chosen to record our discussions and then Becky has transcribed them and shared them back with Leah. At different times, opportunities have come up to use what we have created together to intervene. We co-delivered at a workshop and then a policy conference, and we have written other things together (Clarke and Leah, 2023).

Our message

The key message of this article is the value of invested collaborative approaches to research: how such work can enable new knowledge to surface about welfare and criminal justice interventions and, in the process, support new understandings of ourselves. By investing in our shared connection over time and taking a slow pace, we have challenged established ways of doing research and produced new forms of knowledge (Mason, 2021). A centring of reciprocity and care, being sociable in our work together, and taking an inquisitive approach have enabled us to bear witness to Leah's experiences and counter judgement in ways that we think would not have otherwise happened (Sinha and Back, 2014; Scraton, 2016; Clarke et al, 2017). Together, we have built a powerful narrative, with knowledge that surfaces the harm and institutional failure that are too often the experience of girls and women who have been both in care and in prison.

Our reflections

I was scared

- Becky: How has it felt to work together in this way? What was it like at the start?
- Leah: It is so daunting, to not know who to trust or who will accept you. Nobody is trusting, it feels like you can't be yourself. I think growing up and knowing that people can take over your life, that they have the power, even the power to put you down, to say, 'You'll never

be this. You'll never do that', I think it's because of this that it has felt so good to share my story and to show people how my life has been.

Some people think life is easy, but it's not; things don't happen how you want them to, even when you try hard. People who have experienced what I have say they're scared to tell their story. I was scared, but then the more that happened in my life, I've felt like I need to tell my story even more, tell it for me.

The fear was that when people find out about my life, anyone really, they are going to judge me, that you're not able to really be the person you are; instead, you become this person they think that you are. They'll think, 'She's been in care. She's probably been abused, probably been this and that. She's still going to be the same person as she was when growing up.'

I was in a difficult place when I first met you. It was scary because, obviously, you came out of nowhere, and it was a really hard time in my life, the hardest. I was like, 'Hold on a minute, who are you?'. I thought, 'She's just another person wanting to know about my business'. I wondered, 'Why does she want to know about me?', wondered if you had read my story, you know, through the papers. Yeah, to be honest, I was even worried at first, paranoid, that you might have been a journalist!

The paper self

Leah: How did you feel meeting me? How much did you really know about me when we first met? What does it feel like knowing I thought you were a journalist?

Becky: It felt good to be setting out in a different way. From the start, it was different because, previously, when I was doing evaluation projects, we'd expect to only meet a person we were interviewing once. Knowing we'd have more time took the pressure off in that way. With the support of WiP, being able to create a space where we could take it slow, not in a rush, was good.

I came into the room in the women's centre not knowing anything, well, other than that you were being supported by the WiP worker, as you had recently come out of prison. I'd purposefully asked the staff at the centre not to tell me about you. The whole idea of the narrative was to hear your story, in your words, that you could choose to tell me about what had happened in your life. I had no idea what I was going to hear.

In fact, I remember having to stop two different workers trying to tell me things about you, I guess information they felt was important or maybe their judgements of you. One woman worker was a bit affronted when I tried to say that I wanted to wait and meet you. I guess this even exposes how much 'we', as practitioners and researchers, speak about and for people, our

‘take’ on people’s lives, and how these reflections, even if well intended, can pass on and shape judgement.

With the hindsight of our work together, it is so clear that, in life, when we are given the choice, we disclose our history and experience slowly over time, and some things we may never share, getting to know someone, feeling safe and ready, in ways that humanise us. This is very different to research interviews that are structured, or where files and information are shared and shape judgements. It is the opposite to the ‘paper self’. This is an idea that our friend and colleague Darren Coyne and others at the CLA talked about: the ‘paper self’ is the version of you in ‘care files’ [Coyne, 2024: 30]. It is created through assessments, through the eyes of the professional. The person becomes the object of the file, and the authors have the power to use their language in ways that can fix the person. This paper self precedes so many interactions, including the research space, if we let it.

To know now that you were worried that I was a journalist is uncomfortable for me; of course you must have felt anxious. I wonder now, looking back, whether there is something that I could have said or done differently in the early sessions to change that, some way that I could have reassured you.

Am hopeful, though, that the way we interacted, sitting with big mugs of tea on cushions on the floor, with a massive piece of paper and pens, perhaps went some way to dismissing those fears. Of course, you were probably, though, thinking instead, ‘What the heck?! Who is this woman and why are we sitting on the floor?!’

Leah: Yeah, that was my fear. After a few times of meeting, only then did I feel I could come out of my shell a bit more, and it started to feel different.

I think what else was important for me was after meeting a couple of times, we went out together, to the WiP project and to meet Darren from the CLA, you then leaving me to make my way with the CLA. That pushed me in a good way to come out of my shell and not feel so scared.

Being with people who were also care leavers, who have been in the same or similar situation, you might have not had the same journey in care, but they knew. Some had been in the criminal justice system too. They understood what my life has been like. Their own experience in the care system, that they were trying to talk about it and challenge, it was good to be part of that.

Becky: I think what our collaboration has pushed, Leah, is that sense of us sharing – whether that is sharing in time, sharing my own experiences and, yes, where it’s interesting, to you then sharing connections to others – that our relationship isn’t transactional in a traditional research way – you know, you give me your story, and I thank you and walk away – but that instead, we connect, including

connecting you to other people and opportunities. It was very important to make that connection to the CLA, a user-led group that is really pushing the agenda on people with care experiences who are in the criminal justice system. I'm not a care leaver. I'm not someone who's had those experiences. I can use my skills and experience to be an ally, to make contributions to this work with, but at other times, I step back.

Everyone has a past

Becky: If you could take something from what we've done together, like, focus on a particular message for social workers or those working with girls and women who have had experiences similar to you, what would you say?

Leah: Everyone has a past; no one's perfect. Life is so hard for some children, hard in different ways for girls. But then they should be able to move forward in life and not be judged. For example, as I've got older, I feel that Social Services judge me for my past, what happened to me as a child, as a teen and then a mum. This is how I felt when they decided that I couldn't have my baby with me.

I think that was so upsetting because the judge in the family court just took everything that had been said about me in the other [criminal] court, didn't see all the years, eight years, all what I've done to build a better life for me and my kids, that I have a job, got myself to college, got myself a house and made it a home, even when I got told that I wouldn't be able to do all of that, I did it. I have often felt like I was biting the bullet, just biting my tongue and trying to push on, thinking, 'Oh, yeah, Social Services are on your side. This social worker is nice they believe in me.' I'd do everything they ask of me, you know, to try and show them how I've changed. But, really, you find out down the line, they were lying: they knew that they were waiting to take it all away. It hurt, being tricked by them this last time.

Don't judge

Becky: How could social workers or other practitioners learn from your experiences of connecting with the CLA?

Leah: Even though it was hard at the time, taking those steps, talking to you about my childhood and then going to connect with CLA and other people who had been in care it was hard, but if I did it again, I think I would be braver. I guess I would like to say to every social worker to take it all into consideration, don't judge. Don't judge the person from reading everything in their file. I got my files, and it was awful to see how I was described. I would find it hard not to judge me! I'd say to be open-minded. Go and see that person and listen to them. Think about what things she might have experienced

and how that makes her a good person and strong person. People are not just the bad things that have happened to them.

When I was a kid, don't get me wrong, at times, social workers were amazing and went out of their way to help me. As I've got older, I suppose as I became a mum, then things changed. It's hard to explain: you're the same person – in your head, you're actually a better one, a good person – but they don't see you, and they're definitely not supporting you in the same way anymore. It's as if they are not there to help you; they're just there to judge you.

My most recent experience: I thought this social worker seemed really nice. I was doing everything she asked of me. I didn't see it coming. She made me believe that my child was coming home. I got everything ready. She seemed encouraging, and anything she asked me to do, I would do, over and above. At times, I remember feeling unsure, paranoid, but said to myself, 'No, you're pregnant; it's just your hormones.' I believed what she was saying that she was on my side. Then, she took him, the day of the birth.

Becky: Did you ever get the opportunity to say this to anyone, how it felt?

Leah: No, because I was still in that place of trying, had to bite my tongue. I wanted to be able to see him. I was breastfeeding; I was desperate to do that and keep the contact. So, I still didn't say how upset and hurt I was.

Becky: As someone who walked with you along this part of your journey, it was so upsetting. I've known you nearly ten years, watched you grow. You're a person who always follows the rules, does what's asked and has an inspiring belief in others. It hurt to see how you were treated, to listen as you continued to try to keep moving forward. You are such a good person, trustworthy to the 'T'. Seeing how things were manipulated, even after the birth, your fear they could stop contact, made things hard for you. After it all, they just walked away as a group of practitioners. The lack of care was shocking; no one deserves to be treated like that.

Leah: Yes, for me, this is probably the thing that keeps me wanting to do this, keeps me wanting to make a record of what we talk about. There's not always a lot I can do for the kids, you know. But one thing I can do, though, is speak out. It is hard to talk about your story. I feel scared even now. I get upset. But I want to be strong. Before I couldn't do it, but now I'm strong enough to stand up and speak for myself.

Challenging research conventions

Leah: What makes you keep doing this Becky, us working together?

Becky: Working in this way with you has challenged me; it's really been one of the best but also hardest experiences I've had. Our collaboration has challenged assumptions about: how we do research, how I do

research; what it means to really think through together, at every stage, what we are doing and why; how far negotiation can and should be pushed; what an ethics of care might mean when we let go of the usual ways of working.

Making this different commitment to a research process, working so closely with you, has taught me so much. I've always like to collaborate, but building our working relationship together, sharing in something reciprocal, has pushed me to think differently about lots of steps to research: how we capture ideas; the power we have as researchers to frame things; what it means to go back to the person whose story it is and ask them how we should make sense of their experiences; even the ideas of anonymity and authorship, that if someone is telling their story and it is the first time they have really had that ownership, what it means to have their own name attached to it, to be able to see themselves fully. Your narrative, shaped together over a long time, it tells us new things, things we don't hear or read in other research, about: the experiences of girls and women; what it's like to have this constant and unending intervention in your life; how what may seem like small acts are deeply powerful and inspiring strategies to resist the harm of intervention.

Just do it

Becky: What has been the impact for you Leah?

Leah: It's really built my confidence. It was always so nerve-wracking, being part of a session or meeting. It makes me want to stand up now and tell my story. Doing what we've done and also then working at the CLA, seeing others who have been in the same place as me with care and prison, it's built my confidence to speak out.

It's funny, now I've done it, published something and put 'it', my story, 'out there', I feel a lot better in myself, stronger and, like, you know what, that's it's the start. I think speaking it is only part; it's when you see it in black and white, without the judgement. My name is on it. Those are my words; I said that. It gives me that encouragement to carry on and do more. We need to tell people how we're feeling. Knowing that others can read it is important to me.

I want others experiencing it too to know that they're not on their own if they're going through the same thing that I have been through. Speak out when you get the chance; be strong. Just do it.

Challenging the silence

Becky: What might be next?

Leah: For me, maybe being more in those practice spaces, like we did a while ago, with the right people in the room who are doing the

job, the social workers and people working in probation, showing them my experiences and changing how they see things. If I could speak to the actual people who were there when I was in care, the social workers and other adults, the police, the workers – some from when I was a child may have gone but I guess recent people may be there and see it – I think it is about them hearing it too. If they could have the time of day to listen, they might question themselves a bit. Would they be able to see how there was another side, other options, also think more about the aftermath, how what they have done has impacted upon me and my children?

Becky:

It is a right, to speak back, to challenge that silencing?

Leah:

Absolutely, yes, to be able to say this directly to those who have the power to change things.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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