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# 7 Drug Misuse: Taking a Narrative Approach as a Means of Exploring ‘Self-Change’

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In this paper I explore the personal narrative of Jennifer; a woman who for the past ten years had been using ‘hard’ drugs. When interviewed Jennifer had been ‘sentenced’ to take part in an enforced treatment programme which aimed to facilitate ‘self-change’. The concept of ‘self-change’ would appear to convey a particular understanding of transitions, and changes in behaviour, rooted in assumptions around motivation, cognition and internal forces. In the research reported here the way in which someone ‘storied’ into a narrative of ‘self-change’ metaphorically represents her progress will be explored.

## **Introduction**

The enforced treatment programme requires that a person charged with a drug offence should go through an assessment process to evaluate their suitability for the enforced treatment programme. If deemed suitable for the programme they can make the choice to either engage with the usual court system (this could result in a prison sentence) or go before a magistrate who can impose a court order (Drug Treatment and Testing Order or prior to its introduction the 1(A)6, for more information see Turnbull, McSweeney, Webster, Edmunds and Hough, 2000) which entails urine testing, counselling, regular appointments with a probation officer and access to medical care which may include the prescribing of substitute medication. The purpose of the court order is to break the cycle of drug related offending by treating the drug misuse. While the ultimate goal of the treatment programme would aim to be total abstinence it is accepted that for some of those attending minimisation and harm reduction might characterise their progress.

The services offered by the Substance misuse, Treatment, Enforcement Programme (STEP) rely heavily upon ‘motivating’ people to change their offending behaviour drawing upon Prochaska and DiClemente’s (1984) ‘transtheoretical model’ of self-change. According to this, primarily cognitive model, an individual’s *state of readiness* for change can be conceptualised as their motivation to change. Further, Miller and Rollnick (1991) say that there is a ‘common thread’ running through the ‘stories’ of self-changers whereby

things may have happened around them but something also happens *inside* (their emphasis) to initiate change. Yet the expectation placed on the offender is that they will enter into a process of self-change that has been initiated primarily by their arrest. Therefore questions arise when self change has been brought about primarily by 'things happening around them' with limited awareness of what might be happening *inside*. To date research into the impact of the enforced treatment initiative has related to reviewing procedures and evaluating effectiveness; focussing primarily upon the objective measuring of outcomes, for example: length of time in treatment, drug testing and levels of re-offending (Turnbull et al., 2000).

Disclosure, however, is not as simple as has previously been thought and is in fact a multi-faceted event. What this paper focuses on is the way in which narrative and story telling play important roles in disclosure and in the understanding of disclosure. This arises out of my research into adult women's disclosures of childhood sexual abuse and it is apparent that story telling and narrative are aspects hardly ever considered in the literature on this subject. In particular this paper focuses on one aspect of narrative and story-telling, that of *tellability*, in the examination of some accounts of disclosure in a hope to explore some of the aspects of disclosure in a new way.

#### *An Invitation to Talk*

The research presented here invited people currently receiving treatment services from STEP to talk about their lives and their drug misuse. Engaging with these narratives and life stories aimed to add a valuable dimension to the current objectively defined evaluation of the enforced treatment initiative. Mishler (1999) says that personal narratives and life stories are 'socially situated actions; identity performances and fusions of form and content.' (p.18) Here he refers to 'narrative as praxis'; the interplay between our dual positions as active agents transforming our world yet still responsive to the 'objective' conditions in which we find ourselves. This reading of personal narratives enables the exploration of how individuals might interpret this externally initiated, enforceable (non-compliance can/will result in a prison sentence) requirement to engage in 'self-change' while provoking speculation on the form of the stories told and the functions they might serve. Therefore while being consistent with postmodernist and discursive approaches it is hoped that what will be retained will be an attempt to understand the specific experiences of individuals (see for example Crossley, 2000) As McLeod (1997) maintains even '... the simplest story conveys information about subjective intentions ..., feeling states, social and cultural context, and moral evaluations' (p.147). Thus it was envisaged that what might be revealed would be a sense of drug misusers as interactive agents thus avoiding some of the internal ontological assumptions surrounding concepts such as 'motivation' and 'self-change'.

Similar to Hollway and Jefferson's approach to interviewing (1997) these encounters aimed to avoid the traditional question and answer format; drawing a clear distinction between inviting stories and reports (Polanyi, 1985). Nevertheless, the research did have an agenda in that its brief was to explore the way in which those taking part in the enforced treatment programme storied their engagement with the process structures of the programme and their account of 'self-change'. Thus participants were asked to reflect on their drug misuse, offending and subsequent entry into treatment but were encouraged to broaden this out to a more general consideration of their life course. Extensive thought and care was given to asking only a few open ended questions endeavouring to invite the participants to tell meaningful stories about their experiences.

I had been concerned that Jennifer may not feel comfortable talking to someone she had met on only one previous occasion. However, once the invitation had been given her words seemed to tumble forth which of itself may be an issue for further reflection. When I interviewed Jennifer she was 38 years old. Before meeting her partner, and the birth of her son, she had worked as a qualified professional. Her partner had been an amphetamine user prior to their meeting, with Jennifer subsequently 'trying things out' as their relationship developed. At the time I met Jennifer she was unemployed, a long term user with an extensive history of offending (shoplifting). She saw her son every day, although prior to joining the programme he was living with close relatives. She had previously been in receipt of services from other agencies for her drug misuse but her attempts to 'get clean' had not been successful. Her treatment order was for two years and she had completed just over a year.

### **Exploring Jennifer's story(ies)**

#### *Changing the Metaphor*

Mair (1989) says that the use of metaphor is a human act of 'feeling towards' that gives shape and understandability to that which we sense. The use of metaphor is seen to be pervasive of everyday life where, 'The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.5). In society today it would be almost impossible to have failed to engaged with the cultural metaphors of drug misuse: 'a road to nowhere'; 'a downward spiral'; 'dead end'; 'roller coaster leading to despair'. The characters portrayed in the film *Trainspotting* aptly play out the *orientational metaphor* of sinking lower and lower. Of course the characters are not physically sinking but that is how many of us understand and experience their story. In Jennifer's account there is evidence of her 'sentence to treatment' operating in a related way, enabling a change in orientation where

she is no longer *down* and is currently moving *forward*. She talks of ‘pulling her life together’ and ‘moving forward’. When talking about the sentencing magistrate, who continued to review her progress, she says:

Jennifer: ... he’s had me all along, he knows my case history ... he does see the strides forward that I’m making and the work and effort that I’m putting in ... Like I was telling my keyworker, I cooked myself a meal for the first time - it’s a step forward for me, it’s something little but it’s a big thing in my life.

Getting ‘clean’ and putting her ‘life back together’ are part of this metaphorical move forward. So ‘sticking with’ the programme and avoiding ‘relapse’ are the focus of her life. For continuing to move metaphorically forward Jennifer receives ‘rewards’:

Jennifer: I’ve been on STEP for 13 months and since I’ve been on STEP my contact with him (her son), and nights he’s been staying, has grown and grown which to me is fantastic - like a reward for coming ... but not just ... Well there are other rewards as well but that’s just one big reward, the fact that I’m getting more and more.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) tell us that new metaphors are capable of creating new understandings and therefore new realities. It is acknowledged that this would seem to present an extremely positive view of Jennifer’s story. Rather it would seem wise to stop and reflect on Jennifer’s possible use of metaphor as a speech *act* - thus serving a function. Gergen (1996) draws attention to situated action and performance where the storyteller is an active agent capable of intending certain outcomes through the telling of a certain story. Nevertheless, this discursive view would also maintain that there are constraints on what can be meaningfully or properly said in a conversation ‘... among certain types in contexts of specific character’ (Harre and Gillet, 1994, p.33). Therefore, even though I talked through anonymity and the overall aspirations of the research, Jennifer may have perceived that it was necessary to accomplish a particular performance for me the audience. Jennifer may have been telling this story in order to demonstrate that she was achieving the required outcome of her enforced treatment programme. Nevertheless, what the programme would appear to offer is the opportunity to use a different metaphor, one that could hold the possibility of a more positive life course. If we take on board Mair’s (1989) view that metaphor is an expression of a ‘feeling toward’ then possibly the use of a *forward* moving orientational metaphor is of itself worthy.

#### *Is There a Cost to Metaphorically Moving Forward?*

Possibly the enforced treatment programme has enabled Jennifer to live her life drawing upon a different metaphor but this would not seem to be without a cost

in terms of her 'positioning' (Hollway, 1984; Davies and Harre, 1990). Adopting a 'position' involves the use of discursive practices which define the relations between self and others. Positioning is '... the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines.' (Davies and Harre, 1990, p.56) Here different 'categories' of people can lay claim to certain rights, duties and obligations. At the beginning of the interview Jennifer was invited to simply talk about herself and her life. The excerpt below shows Jennifer positioning herself in relation to other characters in her story but also being positioned by available discursive resources.

Jennifer: I'm approaching 40, I've a 10 year old son who's my life and soul at the moment, although he doesn't live with me a hundred percent of the time. I have him three nights a week and my parents have him the other four nights a week, but they only live three streets away, so I see him everyday anyway and his school's only at the bottom of my road ... but with my drug use it's been better for him to have some care from my own parents because they've given him the stability that at times - when I've been heavily into drug use I have not been able to, and I appreciate them for that. ... I'll give me mum her due she's never ever stopped me seeing him, she makes as many ... (pause) she'll do whatever it takes for me to be able to see him. She's grandma and I'm mummy, there's no dispute about that, there never has been, and like I say I'm having him more and more and more now which is wonderful for me.

Jennifer makes the listener aware of the personal cost attached to her drug misuse. When introducing herself she explains that she is a mother and that her son is of paramount importance for her. In relation to positioning, socially available discourses represent mothers as being responsible, having obligations to their children requiring that they place the needs of their child above their own. Yet, once Jennifer divulges that her son lives with her parents she enters into a dialogue that seems to be aiming to avoid the negative storyline afforded mothers who are unable to care for their children. She explains that he is 'better off' with her parents. She moves on to locate herself in a 'shared' parenting role with primarily her mother. Throughout Jennifer positions herself as deferential where she is accepting of her diminished parental role. Her mother is marked as the one in control; someone who has the right to stop Jennifer seeing her son. Nevertheless toward the end of the excerpt she lays claim to her rightful identity saying 'I'm mummy'. This would suggest that Jennifer's move forward requires that she occupy a subjective position that at times may be difficult to endure. Yes she has the 'rewards' but she also experiences what appears to be a passive and subordinate position. Often the failure of drug misusers to stay with treatment programmes is located within a familiar storyline around weakness of will linking into motivation and self-change. This exploration of Jennifer's story moves away from such concepts to considering

the positions those in treatment may need to occupy as they make their metaphorical journey forward.

### *Leaving Something Behind*

Carrying on with the orientational metaphor of moving forward there is evidence in Jennifer's story/stories of leaving some things behind. Participants were asked to talk about how they came to be 'sentenced' to treatment and how they experienced the programme. They could choose to include or exclude any aspect of their life including levels of offending and the offences that might have resulted in the enforced treatment order. Jennifer gave a detailed account of persistent shoplifting which subsequently funded her drug use.

Jennifer: My offending was down to drugs, usually I was shoplifting to pay for my drug habit because I was spending £60 - £150 a day which of course I'm on benefits, you don't get kind of money and to get that kind of money I was out shoplifting every day of the week, shoplifting up to a £1000 of stuff every day and I'm sure the shops are grateful now because (pause) you know, I literally was clearly. I was literally going to places and I would clear 3 or 4 whole rails of bras and knickers, I'm not just talking about 1 or 2 bras I'm talking about rails.

Christine: How did you manage that?

Jennifer: Through learning, and over a time watching other people do it, you learn how to do it, I used to wear like a long winter coat, you can't get away with it so much in summer, but in like winter spring and autumn you can, wear a long winter coat, have a big heavy bag, about 2 rails you can fit in a bag and one rail under one arm one rail under the other and walk out and there you are you've got yourself 500 quid. I mean I have literally walked into supermarkets with 3 or 4 empty carrier bags and walked out with 3 or 4 full carrier bags and only bought one 15p (unclear) I have done that many, many times and how they've not caught me at that time I don't know I mean I have been caught many, many times don't get me wrong but I have done - well ...

Jennifer's offending is presented as a consequences of drug use with the action being portrayed as inevitable. Harre and Gillet (1994) say that, 'Acting in accordance with one's moral and personal commitments is a learned ability in which one masters the structuring of one's activity according to one's own discursive positionings' (p.120). What this quote would appear to suggest is the need to consider how it might be that Jennifer is able to present her offending within such a straightforward causal framework. Again familiar storylines can be identified within a number of available discourses that explain drug misuse and offending. For example: a medical disease discourse and a discourse of dependency position the drug user as being unable to commit to the moral requirement not to offend as they can not be held

responsible for their actions (see Sussman and Ames, 2000). Still, Jennifer appears to occupy an agentive position as an 'expert' shoplifter. This past self while committing offences appears worthy of admiration. Jennifer does not engage in justification or elaboration in the way she did when talking about herself in relation to her son. Here there are two things to consider the way in Jennifer appears to utilise the rights, obligations and responsibilities of drug users portrayed within particular discourses and the personal cost incurred when leaving this apparently 'expert' and active self behind.

Jennifer also talks about her friends when using drugs and the way that as part of the moving forward metaphor she has found it necessary to 'get rid of' them.

Jennifer: This is by the by really but one problem I did find when I first started STEP was getting rid of the so called friends, acquaintances. That was difficult and that did lead me into a couple of relapses at the beginning because they would have been my only company for 10 years but suddenly ... (trails off)

Christine: Can you tell me a bit more?

Jennifer: It's not that I didn't want them or need them anymore, I did want friends and I needed friends but those friends were leading me back into the old way of action and subsequently through me worker I had to think 'look they're not me friends they're my acquaintances when I'm not giving what they want they don't want to know me' and I did within 2 or 3 months of coming here I wiped my hands of all of them. And well now it took this length of time, 12 months later, but I've now got a friend whose not a drug user and that's where now my future lies. It's about developing my normal life style, normal friends, people away from the drug circle.

While there is further evidence of Jennifer using the forward metaphor there are yet more things that she is required to leave behind. She refers to her 'so called friends, acquaintances' moving on to talk about them 'leading' her into the 'relapse' that she experienced at the beginning of the programme. Thus she is successfully positioned within a discourse that recognises the detrimental effects of continued contact with users when trying to make the move forward. But she seems uneasy with this saying, 'It's not that I didn't want them or need them anymore'. Here Jennifer positions herself within affirmed discourses where 'friends are not got rid of easily' and where 'everyone needs friends'. Interestingly Jennifer affords her keyworker the position of instigating the action. Possibly this enables her to distance herself from any responsibility for leaving her friends behind.



## Conclusion

Relying upon Mair's (1989) 'feeling toward' viewpoint Jennifer made available her use of a particular metaphor to make sense of her enforced treatment. Yet this moving *forward* metaphor appeared to carry with it certain costs and benefits that may all too often either be overlooked or storied into narratives that confirm internal ideas around motivation and weakness of will. While a great deal of emphasis is placed on notions of 'internal' self-change Jennifer's story(ies) shows that it would be useful to take account of a more cultural and contextual dimension. Therefore, when trying to understand the complex nature of drug misuse and the impact of treatment programmes it would seem vital to gain an understanding of the ways in which the lives of clients are socially situated being placed within an unfolding story.

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