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Book Review

Insiders Outsiders: Hidden Narratives of Care Experienced Social Workers

By Mary Carter and Siobhan Maclean (eds.)

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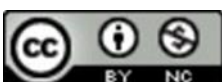
Reviewed by: Dr Ruth Emond

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This powerful and moving collection brings together reflective accounts, extended essays, and poetry, written by social workers with care experience. As I write this first sentence, I am struck by how often the phrase 'powerful and moving' is used, and, as a result, how diminished its meaning has become. However, this book has genuine power. The accounts presented hit the reader with an unavoidable force. I found it impossible to put down or walk away from. Power features heavily throughout the book; the misuse of power by adults over children, moments of powerlessness as children and as practitioners, the reclaiming of power through education and action, the power of relationships with people who really care, and how these enrich, alter, and lift up the lives of others.

The writing contained in this book is incredibly moving. I felt as if I was being given special access to a very intimate space in each of the authors' worlds. The sharing of memories leading up to their coming into care as well as their experiences whilst in care were a striking reminder of the, often overwhelming, feelings that result, as well as the confusion and complexity concerning how decisions are made and how their impact unfolds. These stories serve to remind us of the inner child that all of us carry as adults into our social work practice.

Many of the contributors described the complex motivations behind becoming a social worker. For some, like David Grimm, there was a drive to 'be a better social worker than the ones I was given'. Whilst for others the ambition was to become like the social workers who had made such a difference to them; 'Those small things they did and said had the biggest impact on my life, they empowered me, and because of that, I never lost hope' (Laura Bye).



Whilst not the focus of the book, through the accounts given by contributors, key elements of 'good practice' are highlighted. Given that this is done through narratives of real experiences this takes on added weight. The book reminds us of the importance of recognising intersectionality (Rebecca Olayinka), the experience of shame (Marie and Richard Devine), the essential value of good record keeping (Jo Thompson), and the central role that key people play in anchoring children and young people and giving them a sense of their potential and hope for the future (Naz). Many of the stories include examples of cruel and traumatic care experiences, both in relation to the actions of 'care' givers and within the wider social work system. Sharing how badly the profession has got it wrong in the past further adds to the moving accounts of when people and systems get it right.

Being a social worker with care experience is accounted for in a range of ways. For some, their care experience is described as one of many aspects of their practice and professional identity, whilst for others, it holds a far more central and defining role. Many of the writers share examples of struggling to decide whether and how to share their care experience with colleagues, managers, children, and adults. The legacy of shame often associated with the label 'care experienced' lingers on through adulthood and into professional practice.

This important book brings the complex thoughts and feelings attached to being a care experienced social worker into the light. In so doing, it exposes the tensions and discomfort inherent in the practice of social work and reminds the reader of the power social workers yield in the lives of others. It speaks of the life changing importance of relationships and the difference that genuine, compassionate people can make. There is no singular 'care experienced' social worker, and the contributors' many and varied experiences of both their care experience and their professional journeys are testament to that. As one of the contributors, Karin Herber, states: '... do not reduce people to simply a result of their past experiences because it is not that simple and multiple factors are at play. See them for who they are'.

About the reviewer

Ruth Emond works part time as a professor of social work at the University of Stirling. The other half of her week she is a social worker and play therapist at Family Change, a service for children and young people run by Perth and Kinross Council.

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