

## **History as research method: The Survivors History Group**

*The development of the Survivors History Group and its collective research, with reflections on the hierarchy of methods that use history in social science.*

Background paper to presentation by Andrew Roberts at the 3rd Qualitative Research on Mental Health Conference (Nottingham) 25.8.2010. Presentation, and copies of this paper, available at <http://studymore.org.uk/hisnot.htm>

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Although history is rarely listed as a social science research method, it is one of the foundations of social science. The social theories of leading figures in social science, from Mary Wollstonecraft to Auguste Comte and Karl Marx, through Max Weber, to Jurgen Habermas and Michel Foucault, include studying both the structure of society and its development through history. Counting history as a methodology is not reinventing the wheel, just acknowledging that our science has wheels.

I will not be talking about history from a particular theoretical perspective, but from the perspective of particular participants, mental patients or survivors. A recent analysis (Survivors History Group 31.3.2010), made by the Survivors History Group, suggests that the history of the mental patients' movement written by ourselves has had a different content and a different methodology to that written by others.

Our histories have tended:

- 1) to be histories of the movement,
- 2) to have a descriptive or a reflective approach,

Other people's histories have tended to be histories of something else, with a theoretical approach external to the purpose of creating a history. An example would be a study of something called "anti-psychiatry", looked at from the perspective of a particular social movements' theory perspective and arguing that the survivors/ movement is best understood in that dual context.

### **Theory - movement - who wags who?**

If you will allow me to introduce a friendly dog into the conference, you will notice that his tail is wagging. From the survivor perspective the dog is our history and we love it, from the established perspectives of outsider writers, the tail is our movement, their theories are the dog and that is wagging us.

### **Collective history**

A third difference between the survivor approach and that of others is that our histories have tended to be collectively constructed, whereas others have followed the tradition of individual authorship. Two outstanding examples of this collective approach are the research project "On Our Own Terms" and the work of the Survivor History Group itself.

## **History of history**

History writing in the survivor movement has its own history. This includes the primary efforts of individuals to record what they experience. Joan Hughes (1928-2008), for example, drafted a movement outline in the early 1980s and also recorded a confidential autobiography of her experiences at the heart of the Mental Patients Union in the early 1970s. Frank Bangay wrote a historical tribute to his friend Eric Irwin, and also annotated his own poetry with notes on the history of the movement.

Along with Frank Bangay, and Joan Hughes before her recent death, I belong to a group called the **Survivors History Group**, which exists, amongst other things, to preserve such works and find ways of making their content publicly available. The group formally started in April 2005, but it was developing an established survivor tradition. Some of this "pre-history" I have already indicated and some of it I will now outline.

### **1990 Chamberlin and Unzicker**

In 1990, two survivor historians, Judi Chamberlin and Rae Unzicker published "Psychiatric Survivors, Ex-Patients, and Users: An observation of organizations in Holland and England". This survey tends not to be noted in academic publications. Instead, attention focuses on a similar survey by the academics Anne Rogers and David Pilgrim "Pulling down churches": accounting for the British mental health users' movement" which was published in *Sociology of Health and Illness* in 1991.

I mention this as an example of what appears to be two streams of research: a survivor stream and an academic stream. Until recently, survivor historians knew and read the academic research, but academics appeared (and often were) ignorant of the survivor research. I do not state this in criticism. It is one of those sociological facts that Durkheim would have expected us to treat as the subject matter of sociology. (Durkheim, E. 1893. 1843, Roberts, A. 1997)

What accounts for the salience of the academic's work and the invisibility of survivor research? I think we can show that it is not the empirical quality of the research. Survivor research tends to be strong on this. The example I have just given contains a clue to the most likely explanation. Rogers and Pilgrim's paper is set in a theoretical context, it analyses the mental health users' movement as a "new social movement" and relates this to the article of that name by Habermas. If we are to study the two streams of history as social objects, we will need to note the value that academics place on critical theory, and the equally strong value that survivors tend to place on getting our empirical descriptions right and even avoiding theory.

### **The immediate pre-history of the Survivors History Group**

#### **1996 Peter Campbell and reflective history**

Peter Campbell, a founder and officer of Survivors Speak Out has written about how the rapid growth of the survivor movement after 1985 transformed his life. For many years his writing about the movement often contained a historical dimension. He helped develop courses at the Open University and, in 1996 "The history of the user movement in the United Kingdom" was published as chapter 26 in the Open University reader *Mental Health Matters*. This is the

classic reflective history of the United Kingdom movement. By reflective I mean that Peter does not simply recount history, but does so as a reflection on its significance for the movement. I have heard Peter's work compared to the history of the USA movement written by Judi Chamberlin. Peter later became a founder member of the Survivors History Group.

Reflecting on the significance of history has tended to be an individual pursuit of survivor historians that we share with one another. It plays an important part in discussions on the Survivor History internet forum, for example, but you will not find much on the Survivor History web site. This aims to be descriptive and relatively neutral with respect to interpretation. Collectively, we have deliberately avoided creating a "party line".

### **The Health Through History Initiative**

History is more than a research method for survivors. Tower Hamlets African and Caribbean Mental Health Organisation (THACMHO) was started by mental health service users in 1996. Its projects include "The Health Through History Initiative". One of its symbols is Tabono representing strength, confidence and perseverance. Another is the Sankofa bird that flies forward while looking backward with an egg in its mouth. The egg symbolizes the future. We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we understand why and how we came to be who we are today.

One of THACMHO's publications is *Power Writers and the Struggle Against Slavery - Celebrating five African writers who came to the East End of London in the 18th century*. Earlier this year (2010) F.E.E.L. (Friends of East End Loonies) hosted a "Pageant of Survivor History", the script for this was written by the Survivors History Group and it began with readings from the autobiography of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, one of the African writers who was considered foolish or insane.

### **1997-1998 Reclaim Bedlam and Peter Beresford's Asylum museum dream**

In 1997 Royal Bethlem Hospital commemorated its 750th Anniversary and precipitated a dramatic conflict with some mental health service users over the interpretation of history. Space for the patients to create a critical perspective on their own history became a public issue. The organisers had hoped to combine a focus on the creative painting and poetry of patients with a progressive, even complacent, view of psychiatry. They left no room for criticism, but a group of mental health survivors, inspired by the Punk traditions of the 1970s, took to the streets in "Reclaim Bedlam" protests.

Reflecting on this conflict in 1998, Peter Beresford argued that

"If mental health service users/survivors are to take charge of our future, then we must also regain control of our past".

Before all the old asylums were converted into luxury flats, Peter called for lottery millions to be poured into preserving one as a museum and archive run by psychiatric system survivors. There were to be two aspects to this memorial. First, it was to preserve a user's view of psychiatry's history (and present). Second, it was to preserve and publicise the history of the mental health survivors movement. (Beresford, P. May 1998)

Peter Beresford also became a founder member of the Survivors History Group.

### **Frank Bangay, 1999 Naked Songs and Rhythms of Hope**

Poetry music and song have been a central feature of the autonomous survivors movement ever since Frank Bangay launched the first PROMPT benefit gig at the old Metropolitan Tavern in Farringdon in 1984. Several survivor historians are published poets, but only Frank, as far as I know, has made poetry the core of his history writing.

What else would one expect from the man who said "our poetry and other forms of creativity are our only voice, and the only way we really have of communicating our experiences"? (Tuck, S. 2005)

The self publication of Frank's collected works, *Naked Songs and Rhythms of Hope* in 1999 coincided with the launch of Mad Pride, and Frank read from his collection at Mad Pride's "first ever gig" at The Foundry in Shoreditch on June 20th 1999. Since then, Frank has made CDs on which he recites his poetry to music.

Sometimes tucked away in footnotes, the book and CDs give bright glimpses into Frank's life and the movements he has been part of. Copiously annotated, they provide both the detail and the emotion of the more working class origins of the survivors' movement.

### **On Our Own Terms**

In November 2000, Diana Rose, who initiated User Focused Research at the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, circulated a position paper as background to proposed research on the user movement. The paper was preserved in Anne Plumb's archive (Rose 2000). Diana proposed a survey of the user movement in England in the context of an analysis of its historical development. The consequent research included empirical work on both the structure of the movement and its development through history, and the report (*On Our Own Terms*, Wallcraft, et al: 2003) is a snapshot of the movement at the time and one of the few efforts to provide quantitative data on the development of the movement.

*On Our Own Terms* is the most important printed empirical contribution to the academic history of the survivor movement so far. No one else has attempted anything approaching it. A core of the report is an analysis of 318 questionnaires returned by user groups in England. The historical dimension is provided qualitatively in a table of "Key developments in the service user/survivor movement in England" and quantitatively by analysing when the groups started and what that indicates about the growth tendency of the movement. The Survivor History Group later used the table as one of the starting points for our web history of the movement.

On Our Own Terms was "published on behalf of the User Survey Steering Group", with a notice that the views it expressed were those of the group, not the Sainsbury Centre. This steering group of leading service user/survivors, with strong black and minority ethnic representation, was formed before the research began and it was agreed that it, not the Director of the Sainsbury Centre, would control the research throughout. Jan Wallcraft, assisted by Angela Sweeney, took the research forward from Diana in 2001, bringing together

a team of survivor researchers to "describe and analyse the mental health service user/survivor movement in England". (Wallcraft, et al: 2003, p.1).

The *On Our Own Terms* research is the immediate background to our own work and several of the people involved in it are active members of the Survivor History Group.

### **Survivors History Group - issues**

The opening fanfare of Peter Beresford's museum dream, and the discussion that followed it, set out a number of points that are relevant to the work of the Survivors History Group. There is the need to make a space for survivors, and the strength to counter established accounts of our history that may follow from creating our own space. Arising out of the debate was the issue of objectivity and whether that is a quality of the professional social scientist that is denied to the survivor historian. The Survivor History Group has argued strongly that objectivity does not belong to professionals. But, at a more practical level, the issues that were raised are the need to preserve the archives of our heritage and the need to combine those archives with our memories.

### **Survivors History Group - archives**

Survivors History Group began in 2004/2005 as an archival project to rescue the physical history of the mental patients' movement from the skip.

The first artifact we preserved (as a group) is a video of a presentation called 'Life after Mental Illness' that members of Glasgow Link Clubs made at a Mind Conference in 1984. This is believed to be the first time that mental patients made a collective presentation to a Mind Conference.

Individually, some of our members preserve extensive archives in their own homes. These include the records of the Scottish Union of Mental Patients (1971-1972) the Mental Patients Union started in London in 1973 and the Federation formed in 1974, Survivors Speak Out (1986-2009) and the National Advocacy Network and United Kingdom Advocacy Network (1991-present). We are seeking ways to preserve such collections for future public access. In the meantime we have adopted a policy of listing important archives in a way modelled on the idea of listed buildings. Details of our "listed archives" can be found on our website.

### **The short manifesto**

A summary manifesto drafted in July 2005 became the basis for a fuller statement in January 2006. Key values of the first manifesto are that we believe it is possible to learn from history and that the history or histories that we create will value what mental health survivors have done. We are to be survivor-led and operate as an independent group, but will willingly cooperate with interested allies.

We did not want to impose a history on others, but to find ways in which the full diversity of user/survivors can record and share history. We have welcomed different perspectives and sought to weave them into a common story without destroying their originality. We also wanted to draw on the different forms that survivor history has taken, including personal as

well as collective accounts and writings, written and spoken poetry, music, drama, art, photography, and campaigning.

### **The long manifesto**

The archive group developed naturally into a forum where the significance of the issues surrounding archiving was discussed. Our extended manifesto commented on the construction of history to the exclusion of the patient and on the need for a space in which patients could make our own history.

"The independence of any archive we set up is necessary to prevent limited access to such a resource and to expose the deliberate loss of history - in particular the lived experience of psychiatric system survivors... The history of individuals is the root of the service user/survivor movement."

The new manifesto added that we would "comment on histories (of the movement) written by non-service users" and "respond to articles/histories written by others about the history of the service user movement - and about the history of mental health services written from a service user perspective".

The negative side of our comments relates to what was happening in the field of survivor history when the manifesto was being discussed. It partly echoed dissatisfaction with the reconstruction of history to serve the interests of organisations, as in the presentation of the survivor movement as a product of conferences organised by Mind in 1985 and celebrated in 2006. We were also unhappy with some of the empirical content of Nick Crossley's *Contesting Psychiatry: Social Movements in Mental Health*, which was published in 2006 - A book that we feared would be accepted as an accurate and reliable descriptive history.

But, above all, we were seeking ways in which the full diversity of user/survivors could record and share history. Our "basic founding principle" was to be that "service users own their history". We would "acquire materials from the full range of people involved in the mental health service user movement, including minority groups", "develop a publications policy" and "make as much material as possible available electronically".

### **Survivor History web**

Grand ideas like the asylum museum staffed and stocked by survivors are visions. The practical problems of preserving archives on a more mundane level are considerable. History required some lateral thinking. In the same magazine as Peter Beresford's asylum museum vision, the alert historian would have noticed another article, in which Andy Smith argued that the internet provides users with the opportunity to break away from the monolithic structures of the past.

That is the way that the Survivors History Group has developed. We have no physical monuments and curators welcoming visitors from around the world. Instead our visitors come quietly in by the world wide web and sometimes email us with contributions to the exhibits.

The website was adopted by the group in June 2007. It is an adaptation of a previously established webpage about the history of the Mental Patients Union. The pictorial fish - heart - snake logo was adopted from the archives of the Mental Patients Union at the same time.

The website includes: The story/stories of the movement in the form of a timeline. Individuals' stories inter-related to the story of the movement. Detailed information boxes about individual events or groups. Indexes of survivor history related features in magazines such as Asylum and Openmind. Reviews and summaries of books and articles about survivor history. Copies of some articles. Copies of documents from the movement's history. Lists of paper records about groups. Lists of books and pamphlet. Records of where papers, books and pamphlets are preserved.

The web page began with documentation of material about the 1970s in the care of Andrew Roberts and an outlines of history in the 1980s and later by Joan Hughes and Peter Campbell. Since then, a multitude of other contributors have added to the story and the site is now a collective history of the survivors movement and its context which everyone is invited to contribute to.

### **Survivor History internet forum.**

The Survivors History internet forum began in June 2008. It is a Google Group modelled on one previously established by the United Kingdom Advocacy Network. Originally called the "members forum", the reason for setting it up was to avoid material all going through the Secretary before it reached members. An internet forum in which any member could participate by sending an email which could be seen and replied to by any member was considered more democratic.

After an initial period of intense activity, the forum went to sleep. It was revived in July 2009 on the initiative of Anne Plumb (Manchester) and Peter Campbell. Jill Goble (Brighton) commented "there only seems to be 19 people and no discussions since 2008".

The revived forum now has about seventy members and active discussions most days. We are careful about the titles used for threads and about archiving the emails so that they can easily be used for our research.

### **Theory of history**

John Stuart Mill argued that there are stages or levels of history writing (Mill, J.S. 1843, Roberts, A. 1997). They are levels in the sense that one is higher than another, and that the higher should rest on the ones below, and stages in the sense that we need to pass through them, we cannot start at the top. I will give a very simplified version of his theory in an application to our present situation.

#### John Stuart Mill on the methods of the Survivor History Group and their relationship to the methods of social scientists

The survivor history group represents the methods of history writing that we need to begin with in childhood and in the infancy of science. It is based on attempts to copy stories, arrange matters in date order, and study how this relates to written records.

Sociology represents the highest stage of history writing. Sociology attempts to trace the laws that relate the observed events of history. In my time it was represented (amongst others) by Auguste Comte and Marx and Engels. In your time it is represented by people like Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas and Zygmunt Bauman.

### **Methods of Survivor History.**

I made an analysis of the methods used by a range of historians of the survivor movement. This is the list of methods I abstracted. I have arranged them in some kind of correspondence to Mill's levels - Starting at the foundations and rising to the dreamy spires. The historians are listed in the appendix.

Participants' memories/stories

Interviews (Secondary collection of above)

Diaries and autobiographies

Questionnaires

Contemporary observation and participant observation

Archive collection

Primary analysis of movement literature and relevant media reports

Putting things in date order

Annotating poems

Reading and reflection

Secondary analysis of literature

Discourse analysis and other sociologically informed approaches

**Goodbye**

And that is where I will leave you - With the reflection that buildings with dreamy spires and no foundations do exist. We see them in the clouds and in the embers of fires. They were used to illustrate the cover of Julie Ford's *Paradigms and Fairy Tales. An Introduction to the Science of Meanings* in 1974. Julie was my tutor and it has not been my intention to deride the importance of imagination in the construction of social science. It is possible for description and reflection to live in partnership with imagination. It is also possible for academics to respect the care that survivors have given to the construction of an empirical history of our movement.

**Appendix: analysis of the methods used by a range of historians of the survivor movement. See bibliography for work referred to.**

Tommie Ritchie: Diary of activities, individual and collective testimony.

Liz Durkin: Contemporary observation.

Judi Chamberlin: Autobiography. Participant's memory. Contemporary observation and interview.

Peter Sedgwick *Psycho Politics*: Contemporary observation and archive collection.

Joan Hughes: Autobiography. Participant's memory. Contemporary observation and archive collection.

Claire Baron *Asylum to Anarchy*: Participant observation.

Rogers and Pilgrim: Participant observation and contemporary interviews with anonymous London activists.

Peter Campbell: Participant's memory. Personal diaries. Survivors Speak Out archives. Reading and reflection.

Frank Bangay: Participant's memory. Annotation, from memory and personal archives, of his collection of his poems.

Nick Crossley: Retrospective interviews with anonymous activists. Archives collected from participants. Secondary analysis of literature. Discourse analysis.

Wallcraft, Read and Sweeney *On Our Own Terms*: Quantitative and qualitative analysis of questionnaire returns. Interviews with selected activists.

Barnes and Bowl *Taking Over the Asylum*: Mainly secondary analysis of literature.

Helen Spandler *Asylum to Action*: Retrospective interviews with named (except one) participants. Secondary literature analysis. Some archives.

Anne Plumb: Participant's memory. Analysis of substantial archive of movement literature from 1970s onwards. Analysis of periodicals.

Survivors History: Participants' memories/stories and archives (Collective)  
Putting things in date order.

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