TALES OF TRANSITION:

SELF-NARRATIVE AND DIRECT SCRIBING IN EXPLORING CARE-LEAVING

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Social workers are sometimes deterred from doing research because they think that it requires unfamiliar skills and foreign perspectives. Most of us embraced the idea of measuring and explaining differences but had little enthusiasm for chi-squares and t-tail tests. Many of us were sceptical that the complexity of the human situations that were the grist of our work could be adequately and accurately rendered through questionnaire and structured interview responses. Some of us became cynical that what was researchable had practical applicability.

Research has become much more user-friendly to social work with the acceptance of qualitative research as "real" research, the humanization of research participants (including no longer calling them "subjects"), and the recognition of change as a positive research goal. When research is practiced this way, it has many parallels with the practice of social work and values the very skills that are our daily stock in trade: establishing rapport, empathic interviewing, cross-checking information, making shared sense of ambiguous information.

In this paper I describe a technique that I call "direct scribing" which I began to develop in social work practice as a means to amplify muted voices for social change. Direct scribing consists of transcribing the spoken word into a computer as the speaker watches the screen, and amending the text as directed. I have now transferred this technique to the work on my doctoral research, where it has proven to be very powerful in supporting young people to provide eloquent narrative material about their experience of a complex life transition.   I think that the technique has rich possibilities for adaptation to other areas of research and practice.

THE ORIGINS IN PRACTICE:

The present research is deeply embedded philosophically and practically in a previous project in which young people in the process of leaving child welfare care were assisted in producing oral stories that were audio-taped and transcribed, edited and analyzed by the youth in collaboration with adult "guides", and eventually published in book form (Fay, 1989). The original intent was to use personal stories as text for teaching literacy skills. It soon became evident, however, that hearing a story exactly as it was told, valuing it by recreating it as written word, and positioning it as a source of learning were actions with transformative potential. Young people became authorities on their own reality, the guides became students of a fresh perspective, readers became engaged with the myths and metaphor of hidden lives.

The concept of young people speaking out -- saying their word to change their world, in the spirit of Paulo Freire (1972) -- became consciously central to the philosophy of the program. Increasingly, youth were invited to speak at a variety of events. New techniques were needed to universalize the right to speak out and to support the capacity to do so safely and responsibly. It came as a natural efficiency to conflate the process of telling and transcribing to typing as the youth talked: direct scribing was invented.

As direct scribing became an available resource, other applications became evident. Many young people felt strongly that child welfare files misrepresented their reality, and they used direct scribing to compose letters to be added to their files to set the record straight. Sometimes they added missing pieces to the history contained in the file, for example, that the reason why they were acting out at a particular time was because they were being sexually abused, or that the foster father who so impressed the social workers with his involvement included dope and pornography among his bonding strategies. Some youth reframed history and rehearsed for the future through creative writing, exploring roads not taken, claiming through imagination a culture that suited them.

Because anybody could write with the help of direct scribing, writing became increasingly accepted as a method for doing therapeutic work, and the occasion for doing so. The agency of authorship became a metaphor for being self-directed in life: the job of an author planfully unfolding a story is very like the job of a person planfully living a life. The therapeutic component of the work can also be kept private, if desired, which it often was by young people who felt that their peers would reject them or make fun of them for getting professional help.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

To frame briefly the work out of which this paper arises: my doctoral research is an exploration of gender differences in how young people conceptualize and manage the transition from childhood to adulthood, i.e., the adolescent transition. I focus on *gender differences* because, as a parent and a social work practitioner, my experience is that adolescence is so strongly influenced by gender, both as a personal attribute and as a force in the external world, that there might be said to be two different adolescent transitions, rather than gender variations on one process. I focus on how young people *conceptualize* their experience because I believe that how experience is framed and thought about is both highly individualized and open to modification, either of which would justify privileging that perspective. I focus on how they *manage* the transition because I acknowledge the challenge inherent in an emancipation from state care that is more abrupt, depersonalized, decontextualized and irreversible than the process by which most youth leave their families. And I focus on the *adolescent transition* because it is an important turning point in many lives, and has intrigued me as an intervention opportunity, a "teachable moment", for much of my professional career.

The participants in this research are 30 young people, 15 of each gender, randomly selected from among a population of youth who turned 18 in 1994, the year preceding data collection, and who were in the care of a Toronto (Canada) child welfare agency after their eighteenth birthday. In Toronto, youth at 16 may no longer enter care, and cannot be forced to stay where placed. They may live on their own in the community, and the youth or the agency may apply to court for termination of wardship. Wardship ends when youth turn 18, and child welfare facilities are no longer available. A reduced package of financial and/or counselling support called extended care **may** under stringently defined circumstances be offered by the agency until the youth turns 21. The participants in this research project, then, were in group or foster homes or institutions for some part of their lives, may have been living on their own for up to three years at the time of data collection, or may still be involved with the agency through extended care.

The research protocol consisted of four sessions: completing the Canada Census '91 Questionnaire, telling a narrative about their adolescent transition, analyzing and editing the narrative collaboratively with me, and attending a gender-specific focus group.

THE PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED:

There is considerable discussion about how research methodology should fit the research question. This could be enriched and balanced by more consideration of how the research protocol fits the characteristics of research participants. I expected that young people from the child welfare system would pose some problems as research participants, to which direct scribing might offer a partial solution.

First, youth with a child welfare background are very sophisticated interviewees. Most important life decisions while they were in care were likely negotiated in interview situations. They have a well-honed awareness of the power differential inherent in the interview situation. Therefore they develop, as a survival skill, the capacity to "read" an interviewer's intent and to manage themselves accordingly, whether by complying or subverting the perceived intent. In normal work circumstances, there are ways to manage this, but within the constraints of a research protocol, there is a danger that the data will consist primarily of the "noise", the static, of their response to the interview situation, rather than their thoughts about the question under consideration.

Secondly, young people from care also have an enhanced understanding of the differential power of spoken versus written word, and of the politics of the ownership of the word. This experience, for example, might be common to them: they are interviewed by a worker who takes a few notes. She goes away and writes a report. It is typed and placed in the file, where it becomes the official version of what happened and of who and what the child/youth is. This forms the "facts" on which many decisions of crucial importance to the youth are based.

Furthermore, the file is the property of the agency that assumes parental responsibility for the child. Youth do not have free access to their files and therefore cannot easily verify whether the file "facts" bear any resemblance to the self and history they know. If they disagree with the "facts" on file, there is seldom an effective way to have them changed or their perspective added.

So life experience is likely to have taught them that the written word is not the same as the spoken word, and that the person who chooses the word is more powerful than the person who the word purports to be about. This awareness also fuels a "interview-taking attitude" that may escalate "static".

Thirdly, the life circumstances of these young people is very difficult. This raises a question of the ethics of asking them to divert any energy from surviving into doing anything that does not have the potential to be useful to them.

Related to this is the political reality within which the research is located. I believe, with feminist researchers and likely others, that the only reason why one would do research is in order to improve the world. Furthermore, if the participants who make that research possible are themselves disadvantaged, they should, if at all possible, benefit directly.

They should also be protected from the possibility of research findings inadvertently being co-opted to fuel the "blame the victim" geyser that periodically erupts. This requires early and clear articulation of political goals.

And because this population has a particular relationship to the voting public, in that they are children whom the state has decreed should be parented by them rather than by their biological parents, whose living conditions are directly affected by political will, it seems to me that public education must be included in the dissemination plans. This positions the research to be an occasion to build alliances for positive change.

Fifthly, the question under consideration is very complex. It requires an exploration of the impact on a current personal experience of individual and institutional factors. Individual factors include issues of gender, race, and class, at least. Institutional factors include the agency that has the parenting role, the child welfare system, and the judicial system within which it operates, as well as larger social forces such as employment, education, and domestic relations. Given this complexity, it is unlikely that the participant will have an adequate and accurate answer off the top of his/her head. It is only respectful to allow for reconsideration and amendment in crafting a response.

Furthermore, the question requires an exploration of what Gilligan and her colleagues (Brown & Gilligan, 1992) call "the underground", the swallowed truths that we know but have been told we should not know, or if we do know, should not say we know. And the probing should avoid, as much as is possible, imposing the researcher's construction of the problem.

SELF-NARRATIVE AS DATA

The decision to use direct scribing as a technique is intertwined with my decision to use self-narrative -- a story about oneself created by oneself -- as the primary source of data. I gave self-narrative a central role in the exploration of the adolescent transition for several reasons.

First, self-narrative had the capacity to cast a wide enough net to capture the transition story, keeping in mind the possibility that with this population the story could start at a very early age and involve many atypical circumstances. It also allows the youth's construction of the transition to emerge, which is central to a full understanding of the question.

Dorothy Smith (1987) argues that because institutions reflect and reinforce their social construction of the problem they serve, a fresh perspective can be achieved only by approaching the problem from underneath. Similarly, Sandra Harding (1987) speaks of "studying up" from the underclass rather than "studying down" from a position of authority in order to capture the studied situation more fully, including the influence of the researcher on the researched. By providing the opportunity and the means to do so, there is an increased possibility of exposing variance

between what is intended and what is delivered in service to youth, which is essential to understanding the connection between philosophy, policy and practice.

Secondly, self-narrative is the usual way that humans make sense of their experience, the more so if the experience is difficult or important. For example, we might mutter to ourselves the story of what we were doing to reorient ourselves after our work is interrupted. Or we might, if anyone cares to listen, explain arriving late for work by describing decisions about routes taken and conjecturing about unexpected traffic. But if we wreck the car, or our child is hurt coming home unaccompanied from music lessons, or we learn we have a serious illness, we tell and re-tell our story to ourselves and to others, expanding and amending it in order to clarify to ourselves and to others what happened and what consequently can be understood about who we are and what others should or should not change in how they relate to us.

Moreover, narration is an essential social skill, and a way of creating and amending social identity (Gergen & Gergen, 1983). That is, we are accepted as being who we say we are, within the bounds of credibility. Therefore, the use of self-narrative offers the possibility that participants may benefit directly from their involvement in the research through learning or practising a useful everyday skill, and by direct work on identity, which is generally agreed to be a primary task of adolescence and a special concern at times of transition.

This may be particularly powerful with young people from care who have been provided stories, often problem-focused and incomplete, of who they are. How can one define a life role when the material provided is about the object (the acted-upon) of a sad and/or tawdry story, directed by forces that are invisible or incomprehensible to a young mind, missing the multiplicity of enriching perspectives and details? A victim, perhaps, or a villain, dark skimpy creations: the yarn to knit a more adequate garment is not available. To ask these youth how they managed -- which implies an active stance and success at some level -- a daunting transitional task is to suggest the existence of a positive social identity and to engage them in enunciating it.

The use of self-narrative as primary data not only increases the possibility of personal growth in the collection phase, but also of social change in the dissemination phase. Material that is stunning in its authenticity and insight will illuminate the humanity of "cases" and turn files into people; this has transformative potential, by returning child welfare practice to its pre-institutional roots. And if some of the participants become convinced enough of the educational value of their story to share it personally, and an audience is prepared to hear from them directly, direct alliances for change can be forged.

THE DATA COLLECTION EXPERIENCE:

The research data were collected in four phases. The goals of the first meeting were to engage the participants in the project, to gather information that locates them within their age cohort, and to establish some familiarity and comfort with working with me on the computer. In the first interview, the research project was explained in some detail, and participants signed an agreement to participate, and to be paid $20 (£10) for each interview. We then completed the Canada Census '91 long questionnaire presented on the screen of a note-book computer. The long census form consists of 45 questions about the circumstances of each individual who lives in the dwelling, including their relationship to the interviewee, age, gender, health, procreation, language, place of birth, citizenship, immigration, ethnic origin, religion, mobility, employment, income, and physical condition of the dwelling. This information is gathered from Canadian households every 5 years and forms a rich description of age and geographic normality that informs public policy. It seems to me particularly warranted to locate young people leaving care within the norm at the time when they are losing their special status, that is, when they are becoming ordinary and are expected to make their way in life without special consideration. In

the absence of context, marginalization can be over-attributed to personal rather than circumstantial factors. In addition to the Census questions, I asked participants two additional open-ended questions about their child welfare experience.

This interview worked quite well as an introduction to direct scribing. The participants had to look at the screen in order to see the questions and choice of responses, so the convention of sitting beside me and instructing me seemed a reasonable request. They found the material thought-provoking, somewhat to my surprise. Some offered that they had never thought about themselves in that detail before. Many were surprised to find how little they knew about the people with hom they shared living space, and they mused about whether that was "normal" and how it was the same as or different than previous living situations. The responses to the added questions about child welfare were more-or-less direct scribed, thumb-nail sketches of their time in care and the moves since they left child welfare facilities. I prompted for factual detail (what age, how long, what was the relationship with the people they lived with) without scribing my questions, except where generalizations or categorizations were made (e.g., a street-oriented youth who couldn't recall how many places she had lived in, but categorized those that she "could actually call home").

Almost without exception, the participants enthused about the technology; they loved my note-book computer and portable printer. It provided some with social status points, e.g., a participant taking a phone call during a subsequent interview said she couldn't talk just then because "the lady with the cute computer I told you about" was there. Participants were offered copies of their questionnaires. Some refused because they didn't think it was important, others didn't want to have the material around in case it fell into the wrong hands, and others took it to check the facts they had given about the people they lived with. One or two took a copy just to see how the printer worked.

The second interviews, which took place two to six months after the first, started with signing a joint copyright agreement, making explicit the assumption that the written text that was about to be created was dependent on the different but equal contribution of the participant and myself, and that each of us was free to do with it as we pleased as long as the agreement signed in the first interview, to not use real names, was honoured. Each could keep whatever gain ensued, and each was legally liable for his/her actions. My reason for including this complex and legalistic step was a sense of jeopardy in case the material produced was misused by participants and became the subject of legal action that expanded to impact on me professionally or financially. I also wanted to be legally free to use the material beyond my doctoral thesis without having to locate the participants and get their specific permission. The reaction of the participants was surprise at how much trouble I'd gone to ("They make you do this stuff at your school, eh?"), blended with indulgence and a dawning sense that the stories they were about to tell could possibly be valuable.

I then instructed them on narrative, point of view, and my definition of the adolescent transition, somewhat as follows:

> "What I want you to do today is to tell a story about the adolescent transition. Say that this (drawing a large ellipse) is The Larger World, and this (drawing a smaller circle within) is Adolescence. The Adolescent Transition is the path from Adolescence, which I am defining as when you   were the responsibility of someone else, to The Larger World, where you are responsible for yourself. The Transition is a process, sometimes quite a long process, that goes (drawing a line from within the smaller circle into the larger) from early in Adolescence sometimes, to far into adulthood. It isn't just stepping over the fence (dots on either side of the smaller circle), but a much longer journey. And it isn't a one-way street, either; one sometimes slides back into being

taken care of when things get tough (drawing an arrow head on the beginning of the line) and then goes ahead again, is more independent, when things are easier (adding arrow head to other end of line). And that might happen any number of times. So that (circling the double-arrow line) is what the story I want you to tell, is about.

"Now, I want to say something about telling stories (writing "I", "me" and "they" beside the diagram). "I" is the person who tells the story, called the Narrator. The job of the Narrator is to choose among all the things that *could* be   included in the story, what things *will* be included, and *how* they will be included. The Narrator is the boss: s/he has absolute authority about how to build the story. Because you know that there are many ways to tell the same story and each, although different, is still true. For example, if you were going to tell a story about what happened when you were out last Friday night, you would tell it differently if you   were telling your (opposite sex) friend than if you were telling your (same sex) friend, and differently again if you were telling your (adult friend/authority). But all of them are true, just differently true. So the Narrator's job -- that's you -- is to figure out what of all the things you   could put into the story you will put in, and how you'll string them together to make what points. As much as possible, I'd like you to tell the story as if you were talking to yourself as an audience. So, that's the "I".

"The "me" is who the story is about, which in this case is also you. You are the subject of the story, as well as the teller of the story. About "they", I want to say that other people play a part in stories that we tell about ourselves, sometimes by what they say or do in real life, and sometimes by what we think they might or would like to do or say.   Even when things don't happen in real outside life, they influence us. And that too, what "they" did or didn't do,   can be part of your story. And truth is whatever you as the Narrator says it is, from your point of view, whether or not other people share your perception.

"So the story I would like you to tell now, as if you were talking to yourself about yourself, is how you managed the adolescent transition, from being the responsibility of someone else to being responsible for yourself. I'm going to direct scribe the story, type whatever you say. You should watch the screen and correct me if I make a mistake, or tell me if you wanted to take back or change something you said. When you've come to the end of your story, I'll ask   some questions to make sure I understand what you mean by what you say. I'll ask the questions on the screen as well, so that we are both on the record in the same way. "

Often the first entry was a request for clarification or prompting, and sometimes there was brief testing to see if the rules operated as I had described, and/or working out an accommodation for limited literacy. Some participants, probably mostly those with reading deficits, spoke very quickly at first and/or didn't watch the screen. This put me at a disadvantage but didn't advantage the participant, a lose-lose situation. I modelled a win-win alternative by motioning with a frantic hand to slow down and echoing the oral while typing the written word, thus establishing a relationship between our respective contributions that depended differently but equally on each of us doing our part as well as we could. When we got out of sync, I read *soto voce* what I was typing to indicate where my work was relative to theirs. I asked for confirmation that I had captured their words accurately in catch-up situations by pointing to their words on the screen while reading with a question in my voice that continued when my hands returned to the keyboard, thus pacing the participant.

These approaches allowed participants, even with very poor literacy or attention-focusing skills, to become competent partners. With very few exceptions, they settled into thoughtful production of

dense, rich, eloquent material. They progressed from instructing me to erase oral fillers such as "y'know" and "like" to speaking without them, becoming comfortable with silences during which they organized their thoughts. Some spontaneously returned to themes to clarify or develop them, others responded to or asked for my questions to do so. When my questions explored absences in the story, themes that I expected to hear but didn't, most participants responded positively, either to say that they had chosen to not include that material, and sometimes to explain why; or that it had not occurred to them to include it, and usually to add it; or that it simply wasn't part of their experience.

Participants were left with a hard copy of the material, both their story and the dialogue. Inevitably, as the printer worked, the "interview after the interview" took place, as if, once started, the narrative process continued. Sometimes I urged the participants to get this material "on the record" next session. Other times the post-scribing session turned unmistakably into counselling, in which I offered resources that might be useful and/or they asked for general feedback of what I had heard, or for my opinion about something in particular. Initially this blurring of the researcher and social worker roles caused me great angst, until I could incorporate this exchange as part of the effect of the research/researcher on the researched that is itself a legitimate contribution to what can be learned. The bogey-men of positivist research lurk in the dark corners of our unconfidence.

The third meeting was scheduled, when possible, within one or two weeks of the first, partly because the pilot participants had reported a sense of unfinished business, a preoccupation, that dragged the time between the two interviews, and partly to reduce the probability that the participants would move and have to be found once more. In the third session, we approached the narrative as a piece of written text and analyzed it in various ways to ensure that it represented as accurately and thoroughly as possible what they meant to say about their transitional experience, before the story is launched, independent of its author, into the world. Mindful of the impact that telling a story has on the narrator, the session ends with a closure and "re-packaging for storage" exercise. Again participants receive hard copy at the end of the meeting.

Most of the third session work is on screen, much of it direct scribed. We start by my reading their story aloud and making any typographical or capitalization corrections that missed the electronic edit at the end of the previous session. The participants were encouraged to bring hard copy of the story to the session, and many did. Some were dog-eared from use, others pristine. Several participants reported that they had shared their story with others, often as the occasion to discuss life events, sometimes to elicit a reciprocal story-telling. One participant's fiancee had taped a photograph of him on the file cover, and tucked inside a zip-lock plastic bag containing a lock of his hair.

Participants were then invited to edit and/or amend the story. Some limited their editing to eliminating oral fillers, changing "yeah"s to "yes"s. More added substantive material, sometimes things that had come up in the post-scribing part of the prior session, sometimes things they had remembered in the interim. Sometimes I had questions that had emerged. This was direct scribed.

Then I explained that all stories had a form, often a simple story arc, and they were asked to identify the beginning, middle and end of their narrative. This also gave some indication of the chronological scope of their view of the adolescent transition, as imaged in the double-headed arrow. For some, the journey started very early, when they realized they were responsible for younger siblings or that the family situation was seriously troubled. For others, it began with coming into care and/or realizing that they could not be confidently secure that the child welfare system would act in their best interests. Others describe a personal epiphany; a girl "hit rock

bottom and realize(d) things have to change"; for a boy who resented being "thrown out" at age 15, it "just seemed that I turned into the person that I despised. And I kinda wished that I was like a kid and not realized any of this because I wouldn't feel that pain." On the other hand, one participant stated very clearly that she was not independent and would not be for some while, so for her the journey had not begun. Most felt the end of the transition had not yet happened, although some identified current events, (e.g., becoming a parent, settling into a stable place) as the beginning of the final stage.

Participants were then asked to name the events, defined as "things that happened, either externally or internally", that they had selected to carry their narrative. These were listed as named, briefly, for example, "came into care", "got moved to a foster home", "went to jail", "son was born". The number of events named ranged from 8 to 23, reflecting less the scope of their story than personal preference for detail and capacity to categorize.

Next, I explained that events in a story, as in life, can either help or hinder the subject in achieving his/her goal, that the power of the force can be big or little, and that how one evaluates the impact of the event on the overall story can change over time. After giving an example to illustrate what I meant, I asked participants to rate each event on a scale between -3 ("a major drag") to +3 ("a major bonus"), and to say how the rating had changed over time if that applied. An example might be that moving out of a placement one didn't like could be seen initially as a strong help in getting on in life, but the problems one encountered living on one's own could make it in retrospect seem to be an important drawback in achieving goals like going to school, so perhaps in hind-sight that event would be evaluated as a less positive or even a negative force. I copied the participant's list of events and interjected their impact responses, direct scribed. Few participants had difficulty in carrying out this instruction, although they approached it in various ways. Some participants seemed to be learning something about themselves as they went through the exercise, and others responded as if relating something familiar. A few expanded their stories as they realized that understanding how one event was experienced required the inclusion of another. More frequently, events were conflated as themes unfolding over time. For example, a series of living situations which may have had different problems but were all unsatisfactory became one event called, perhaps, living in the community, that was given a strong positive at the outset, and a negative as problems became evident.

I then explained that the research protocol was drawing to a close and that the time was nearing when the story would become independent of its author and exist on its own in the world. In preparation for this, since we had just pulled it apart and examined it in detail, I wanted them to "re-package" their story for storage and safe-keeping. I again copied the list of events on the screen and asked them to select from it the six most important events, from that the four most important, then the two most important, and lastly, the most important event, from a personal and private point of view. When they made the final selection, I asked them if the item they chose felt like it really was the most important event. All affirmed that it was, and most found it an interesting and thought-provoking exercise. The contradictions identified by their selection of events gives some insight into the complexity of their problem-solving. For example, a participant selected the birth of her only sister when she was 9 as most important, over the birth of her son who had just gone into care. Conversely, a male participant chose the birth of his son over being kidnapped at 8 from a mental health institution by his father. Another participant selected feelings of blame at the child welfare staff over a drinking problem. Another selected a long-term problem with shoplifting over having to leave on his 18th birthday one of the few homes in a wandering life that had suited him.

Finally, as a closing ritual, I invited each of them to say briefly what their story meant, and direct scribed their response. They were invited to think of this as a benediction as they sent it out into the world, or as the introduction they would make if they were reading their story to a live audience, or as what they wanted to say about the intent of the story. Participants found this

challenging but interesting. Many gave it serious thought, although a few appeared a bit flippant. Some thought for some while and produced rich tinctures, others after similar thought gave what appeared to be remnants that escaped the censor's scissors. One young man, for example, ended a highly detailed account of his time in and since care with simply,

"This is a story about change, about now knowing the wrong paths to take."

A young woman presented this extensive precis:

"This is how I became me, today. Or at least how my perspective has been coloured. I was in a difficult situation, and then I got out of it and into another one, and so on, until I found the right place for me to be in. Where I feel I should belong is very far from where I began. I am now in a place that I didn't even know existed until I was about 15, but I now call it home. I don't know if it's modern society, or just society in general, but in my experience I have found it is best to be able to make choices for yourself. Sometimes your original blood relatives may not know how to care for you as well as complete strangers. I will always love my parents, unconditionally. They are not bad people, just a little confused about themselves and how to raise their daughter. In that way, it is ironic that my god-parents, who don't have any children, seem to be handling me better than my original parents. I guess because everything messed up when I was young, I was at the point where a lot could be damaged, and therefore a lot had to be fixed, which led to more complications."

Most of the participants spontaneously indicated that they had enjoyed taking part, some offering to meet again even without being paid. They were invited to attend a gender-specific focus group meeting up to six months hence. The prospect of meeting other participants drew a mixed response, and in the end, only half the participants attended the group discussion. In some cases, they were not free to come (in jail, unable to get child care, working), and some faced quite a lengthy journey to attend, but why others who indicated intent to come did not arrive is not clear. Almost certainly some of these de-selected themselves at some level of awareness.

The two group meetings were scheduled to take place the same day, boys in the morning and girls in the afternoon, with a lunch for all participants provided on site. The same discussion protocol was presented to each group but each group dealt with it very differently.

The boys' group was smaller and more pressed for time, as it started late and was truncated by lunch. They were careful participants, directing their comments to me rather than to their colleagues, in a "spoke in wheel" pattern. Spontaneous circular discussion occurred only when tangential material was under discussion (e.g., the relative morality of bats versus fists in gang fights, the relative value of gold versus paper as legal tender). They presented extreme and harsh opinions, insensitive to other perspectives that might be in the group (e.g., re substance abuse, parenting difficulties). They agreed heartily that it was not reasonable to expect them to understand or explain a female perspective because...they were not girls.

The girls' group had the advantage of interacting socially before they began the protocol, they had more time because they started early and went a bit late, and they felt advantaged by not having had to do this "thinking work" in the morning. They valued focus and competence from the outset, were thoughtful and sensitive in their opinions, and spontaneously adopted the very democratic procedure of hearing from each participant on each issue before moving on. They acknowledged and incorporated prior comments in their responses. They had absolutely no difficulty in hypothesizing and discussing male perspectives. With one exception (who excused herself early), they enjoyed themselves and would like to have done more.

The group discussions were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed by me. Even with the memory of the experience reasonably fresh in my mind, and with a list of the order of speaking compiled by my co-facilitator, and with good typing skills, each hour of discussion took six hours to transcribe. This is probably about as efficient as transcribing gets, and yet it is very much less efficient than direct scribing, where the work is effectively finished when the interview ends (aside from field notes, which are equally time-consuming in both situations). This is not an insignificant factor in a climate of diminishing resources, either in research and practice. There is also a reduced possibility of technical failure and/or more immediate recognition and perhaps simpler remedies if it does occur.

The data from the group discussion are a different kind of data than data from the individual interviews, in that the "facts" were constructed within a quite different social reality. The group event called for the creation of a story by committee, so to speak, where the framework of the story was imposed unilaterally and edited more or less continuously. One would expect more "noise" under these circumstances; particularly with the boys, this was evident. Their material is obscured by a flurry of oral fillers, thoughts are often only partially developed, sometimes internally inconsistent and/or contradictory to what they had offered in individual interviews, and frequently non-sequential with other comments. The girls also used oral fillers, and although the material they produced was different than in individual interviews, less dense and well-phrased, the group content added to and built on it. Where there were inconsistencies, they were attributed to a change of mind, frequently as a result of participating in the research.

The sharpness of the contrast between the two groups suggests that the effectiveness of group meetings as a modality varies with gender. This conclusion is in keeping with generally-held beliefs that women are more comfortable than men with disclosing personal material, in particular with peers. It might also support a conjecture that the boys felt less comfortable with me (and in the group, my co-facilitator) because of gender. But in individual interviews, the boys were more voluble; half the boys produced more than the average number of words in the narrative and analysis interviews combined, compared to one-third of the girls. Nor does it appear that the boys took longer to warm up: they produced about the same number of words as the girls in the narrative interview. Once started, however, they continued to talk more than the girls, producing 57% of the analysis material. This may be in part because the analysis interview was more structured. My impression is that the girls generally found it easier to produce material independently, whereas the boys preferred to be drawn out through questions (as in the group discussion). There were notable exceptions to this: girls of Caribbean background tended to require questions, but the boys of Caribbean background (many of whom had lived away from the Caribbean longer) were quite loquacious with minimal questioning. I also have a sense of surprise at how forthcoming the boys were in the individual interviews, with rather less posturing and parrying than I recall experiencing in other interview situations with adolescent boys. Whether this is attributable to the methodology must remain a matter of conjecture because of the limits of this research project. But it does give us reason to sharpen our perceptions of gender differences in how adolescents self-disclose, and to consider the gender-relative merits of group venues and narrative as an intervention medium.

DISCUSSION:

Trinder (1996) discusses three perspectives in social work research, suggesting that each reflects larger social conditions and the position of social work in relation to them. Direct scribing is a technique compatible with her third category of research, participatory/critical research, in that it attempts to address power differentials and to be empowering to participants as well as to the researchers. It locates the possibility of change as existing within the reality that mediates their togetherness, in this case the collection of data and learning from it. Particular attention is paid to the fit between the research question, participants, methodology and technique.

The request for a narrative is in the tradition of privileging oral history and of amplifying muted voices, with the additional empowerment of requiring the participant to preside over the transformation of the oral word into written text. It breaches the tradition by giving the researcher the right/obligation to query the story. It mutually empowers both the participant and the researcher by recognizing that stories are jointly constructed by the speaker and the listener within shared context. To speak is one thing, to be heard another, to be confirmed as being heard yet another. I believe the narrative interview operates at the third level.

The structured analytic interview, however, appears to contradict the assumption that truth is what the participant says it is, by subjecting it to a reconsideration that has positivist and external expertise overtones. The participants were required to parse their stories according to rules imported from 'outside', in this case a quite esoteric outside, which, like the narrative instructions, are pitched at a sophisticated intellectual level. The assignment requires the participants to self-reflect on both the parts and the whole of his/her story My experience of what the participant did with the assignment suggest that this engaged them at a fourth level, a step beyond being confirmed as heard. In being challenged to explain why they as narrators made the choices they did, they were required to investigate why they experienced their life circumstances as they had. The narrativists say that one creates and recreates oneself and positions oneself socially through narrative choices. My sense was that many of these participants, reflecting on themselves in the midst of the developmental task that was the focus of the investigation, found themselves in the telling, experienced themselves as creating themselves and recovering themselves from the stories that had been told about them. As I glimpsed something of why they told the stories they did, I was amazed and humbled by the complexity of the connections that motivated them, which far exceeded my imaginings.

If I had it to do again, I would choose to focus the group discussion on the process rather than the content of data collection. I would ask them to explore the value of self-narrative as a protective and therapeutic skill, whether and in what way they experienced telling narratives and analysing them as text as useful. I would also ask them to reflect on direct scribing as a technique, exploring how they experienced it, whether as empowering, supportive of analysis, an aid to eloquence, inherently enjoyable, all the constructions that I have attributed to it. But I did not, because in this project, direct scribing was a means to an end, a useful technique, and not itself the focus of evaluation. That work awaits.

No method for collecting data is without flaws, however, and I think that the greatest impediment to direct scribing being adopted as a research and practical technique is not that it is unproven, but rather that it is hard and vulnerable work. For example:

> · Touch typing at a speed of at least 35 words per minute with reasonable accuracy is essential. Furthermore, one must be able to maintain this speed while someone is looking over your shoulder and pointing out your errors.

> · The work is physically taxing, particularly if, as in two-thirds of the interviews in this project, the interview occurs elsewhere than in an office, often in less than optimal ergonomic conditions.

> · The work is mentally very intense, lacking some of the social conventions that dilute interviews. This, combined with physical fatigue, limits the length of the interview. I particularly missed the non-verbal affirmations that are a social worker's stock in trade, although in thinking about the boys' discussion group, I wonder if they may not also be an opiate. The data collection part of the interviews in this project seldom lasted more than 1.5 hours. But by the same token, the intensity tends to produce very rich, dense material.

· The interviewer/researcher is more vulnerable than usual. This is partly a legal reality because the material physically passes out of interviewer/researcher control, which can be avoided by not giving hard copy, or addressed legally, as I did through signing a copyright agreement. But there is something more: in 30 years of interviewing, often under observation and within a stringent accountability framework, I have seldom felt as exposed — or as fluent — as I have in this project. I think it has something to do with the torque between leading and following. Both plyers play both roles in the course of the interview and are equally represented in the same medium. It creates the sense of a level playing field with no place to hide, which is perhaps evidence of a real shift in power relations, at least within that micro-world.

Direct scribing may have equally useful applications in social work practice, quite apart from research. It may be useful with populations other than youth wh are unaccustomed to being heard or who need assistance in putting their thoughts together in a way that can be integrated into established systems, as long as they share the enthusiasm of youth for computer technology, or at the very least, are not intimidated by it.

To review the apparent merits of direct scribing in this project, with a view to other applications:

· The speaker and the scribe sitting together and facing the screen mutes many non-verbal indicators of power that may retard the development of a more collaborative relationship.

· When the researcher/interviewer is reduced to a scribe, typing madly to keep up with rapid speech, it is quite evident that in this micro-world, power has been endowed on the speaker. As participants come to trust the rules, they become more thoughtful and engaged in the task of providing quality material. This recommends the approach for situations in which one wishes to elevate the speaker's status and sense of control (and may be part of the reason for its success with adolescent boys in this project).

· When the speaker pauses to allow the scribe to catch up, s/he can be directed to follow the words as they appear on the screen, which creates a focused space that supports self-reflection, a feed-back loop that sharpens recall and analysis.

· The authority of the speaker to preside over the transformation of spoken word to written text is a powerful act of self-definition. Moreover, giving this role to the speaker addresses many of the difficulties noted in the literature of disregarding the differences between oral speech and written text, and/or the privilege inherent in editing the one to the other. (See Mishler 1989 for a full discussion)

· The participant has physical possession of his/her material between interviews and may use it to support and inform continuing reflection, leading to enriched data. S/he also has the researcher's inputs available for continuing consideration.

· The presence of the computer at the apex of the work triangle, the servant of joint authors, adds honest to the data-collection situation. It is not credible that either an interviewer or an interviewee 'forgets' about a tape-recorder, no matter how softly it whirs. Furthermore, to disregard the equipment is unwise for any interviewer who values his/her data. Apter, in her study of mother-daughter relationships, replaced the audio tape with a portable computer as a practical rather than a methodological move in her research. She reports "The bother of using the keyboard when conducting an interview was actually less intrusive than the tape, which made many participants

nervous — they wanted the opportunity, if necessary, to 'take bake what [they] said'."
(Apter, 1990, p 12)

· Direct scribing is efficient, relative to audio-taping aor note-taking and subsequent
transcription.

CONCLUSION:

Direct scribing offers a simple but elegant means to amplify muted voices. Sue Armitage says,
"We will learn what we want to know only by listening to people who are not accustomed to
talking." (Minister, 1991:32). But those who are not accustomed to talking often lack eloquence,
which may have as much to do with how we hear as with how they speak. Direct scribing, by
supporting self-reflection and validating voice, expands the proportion of the silenced who can
achieve eloquence. And eloquence is a chink in social change, because it speaks to the heart as
well as the head, and supports the fullness of

understanding instructed by both kinds of knowing.

The use of narrative is gaining a renewed popularity as a therapeutic technique. Direct scribing
offers a means of engaging those who do not think they have a story to tell, and of clarifying the
ownership of authorship. It also creates, without additional work, a record of progress which can
be evaluated. This may have a practical application in child welfare file-keeping, where the file
has many functions, one of which is to record a life. In describing a childhood in context, the
voices of the subjects of that story, as well as the official voices, should be heard. Direct scribing
could be a means of bringing absent voices to the record.

Narrative has always been central to social work practice. Within a team of professional helpers,
it is often we who write the social history. Sometimes it is treated as not much more than the
background on which "real" analysis and intervention occurs, and again, as the story changes
over time, as an indication of progress or lack thereof. I think that telling stories is as old as
mankind, and that who tells them, and how, marks the quality of civilization. And the quality of
social work. Direct scribing offers a technique for flattening the helping hierarchy and repatriating
the ownership of healing.

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