

An everyday story of dysfunctional families: using The Archers in Social Work Education

Abstract

Social Work students encounter many different family and individual situations in the course of their training, and need to have detailed understanding of the difficulties that their future service users may experience. Learning is developed through lectures, seminars and workshops, and most of all through practice placements. However a real challenge for social work educators is how to give students access to the constant lived reality of families who are experiencing complex difficulties. An hour's visit to a family only gives a snapshot of that point in time, and service users may be guarded in their behaviour when a professional visits.

This paper considers the educational value for students, of the 'fly-on-the-wall' perspective of The Archers, in catching unguarded moments. An important recent example is the Helen and Rob Titchener storyline, accurately portraying domestic abuse, gendered oppression and doubtful parenting. Other examples include the impact of rural poverty, caring for a relative through progressive Alzheimer's disease, and issues of substance misuse and criminal behaviour.

The paper also considers the use of 'fan pages' in social media, as a method of asynchronous conferencing in blended learning for in-depth discussion of students' learning, and the discussion of social work values and ethics.

Introduction

Social workers have often been stereotyped as Guardian reading, Radio 4 listeners; whilst we would of course be absolutely against *any* stereotyping, it has to be said that many of us have been known to sit in car parks between visits to listen to the lunchtime broadcast – so I'm quite happy to be described as one of the "pillars of the community and addicted to The Archers" sometimes seen in humorous greetings cards! It was even a social work colleague who introduced me to the Archers Anarchists, where we profess that 'The Archers is real, there is no cast!'

In this paper I will explore the potential for listening to The Archers as an invaluable contribution to social work education, with particular reference to the current story of Rob and Helen Titchener's dysfunctional relationship, and look at the role of discussion forums, such as social media fan pages, in developing understanding of issues, reflection on values and self-development, for students and professionals - and for the general public.

The role and structure of social work education

Social Work students encounter many different family and individual situations in the course of their training, and need to have detailed understanding of the difficulties that their future service users may experience. None of us have innate knowledge of the range of problems that may be met in social work practice, or skills for dealing with these, so what do social work students learn and how does this learning take place? Currently SW education has to develop students' knowledge skills and values to meet the requirements of the Professional Capabilities Framework (TCSW, 2012). This covers nine domains of learning: professionalism; values and ethics; diversity; rights, justice and

economic wellbeing; knowledge; critical reflection and analysis; intervention and skills, contexts and organisations – and professional leadership. A basic level of capability across these domains is developed and broadened through the qualifying course, and then throughout a professional career. Although fast-track courses of training are now becoming increasingly popular, most social workers qualify through a 3 year first degree or 2 year Masters course. Learning is developed through lectures, seminars and workshops, and most of all through practice placements. Students must complete 200 days of placement, generally in two different settings so that they can develop generic skills.

The social work placement is arguably the most crucial learning opportunity in the social work student's training path (Domakin, 2015); they are supervised in their practice learning by a qualified practice educator and sometimes an additional on-site supervisor. Placements give the opportunity to apply classroom learning – theory, knowledge and values - to real life practice in skill development. Working with service users and carers can be a big 'reality shock', when students will experience unfamiliar situations and may not know what they will find from hour to hour when out in the community. They will learn about the application of procedures and legislation – and that these must be applied sensitively and carefully, for it is real lives that they are dealing with. However difficult this may seem, it really is the best way of learning, as research has shown: Irvine et al, (2015:144) suggested that, 'Learning from someone 'in the flesh' had far more of a lasting impression than other forms of teaching.'

However placements, and qualified practice, do not necessarily teach everything that can be known about the lived experience of the individuals and families that social workers encounter. Families can be understandably wary of professionals, particularly in statutory settings where professionals can have the power to allocate resources, provide or refuse services, and in some cases impose conditions on how families live, including compulsory admissions to hospital, or the removal of children into care. In addition to this, placements are relatively short-term, meaning that it can be difficult for a student to build up an effective working relationship with their service users, and families may struggle to trust a student who they know will be 'handing them on' to someone else at the end of their placement. And even with the best working relationships, an hour's visit to a family can only ever provide a snapshot of how they are living and interacting. As professionals, we will rarely see life as it is lived all the time. Which is where *The Archers* can come into its own, in enabling us to catch unguarded moments which a professional would never see (or hear).

So what can *The Archers* teach Social Workers about?

The Archers gives us a fly-on-the-wall insight into the daily lived experience of the residents of Ambridge which - whilst it may have its strange aspects, like a lack of Radio 4, and its own micro-climate – is in itself a microcosm of English society, with all its strengths and wonderful eccentricities, and reflects the issues that can be found in the majority of communities. We obviously hear about farming issues in real time; you may remember the difficulties experienced at Brookfield during the Foot and Mouth outbreak in 2001 – and this has always been one of the points of the programme in the first place. However, we've also experienced more general social issues, in recent years including racism directed against Usha, drug and alcohol misuse, armed robbery at the village shop and other criminal activities, rural poverty, homelessness, caring for a relative through progressive Alzheimer's disease, disabled children (though remarkably few

adults unless you count Brian's transient epilepsy and Mike's missing eye) and changing attitudes towards gay relationships. Of course the village issues have always fed into the narrative in a big way – recently the Guardian (Clapp, 2016) noted the 10 best Archers storylines to include Jennifer's out-of-wedlock pregnancy in 1966, criminal activities of the Horrobin family, and Susan Carter's subsequent imprisonment in 1993 (we had a 'free the Ambridge One' poster up in the office), Jack Woolley's dementia, numerous deaths where there were serious Health and Safety concerns, notably John Archer's and Nigel Pargetter's; and of course Helen and Rob Titchener's strained and dysfunctional relationship.

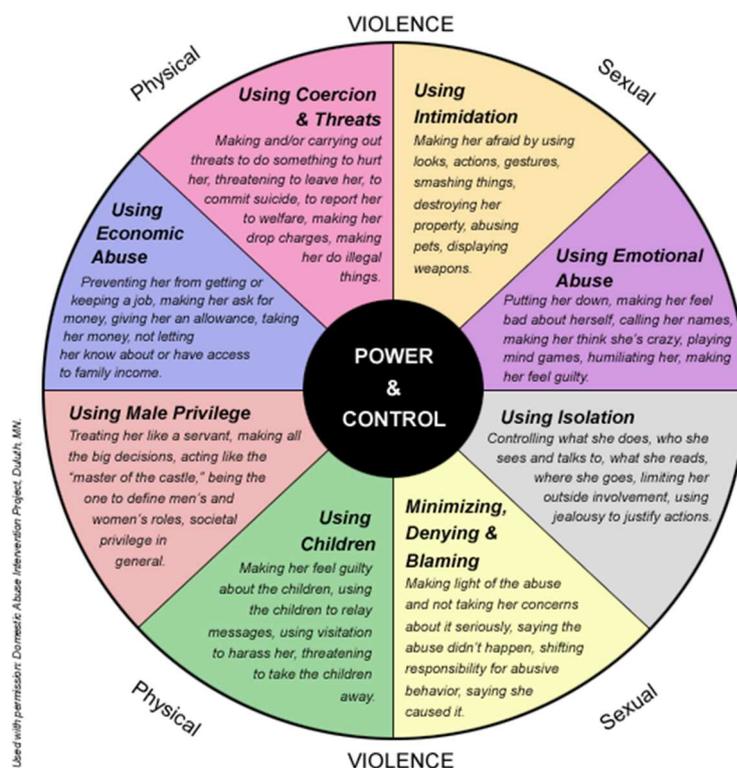
I've been listening to The Archers since 1964, but it was only recently, when a student I was supervising on placement said he wanted to learn more about domestic violence, that I talked to him about Helen and Rob, and realised how much he, and other students and professionals could learn if they started to listen in. So what might he have learned? At the time, there were many listeners expressing doubts on social media as to whether Rob's treatment of Helen could be described as 'domestic violence', as it seemed clear that he had never struck her. I think that we can be clear that it can be seen now in no other way - it fits the definition given in the practice direction for Family Courts almost word for word:

- 'Domestic violence' includes any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse ...This can encompass, but is not limited to, psychological, physical, sexual, financial, or emotional abuse.
- 'Controlling behaviour' means an act or pattern of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.
- 'Coercive behaviour' means an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten the victim. (Justice, 2014, S3)

It is also eloquently illustrated in the Duluth Power and Control wheel, (IFVS, 2015) (right)

The 'Using Emotional Abuse' and 'Using Isolation' sections of this wheel seem particularly relevant currently:

- Putting her down
- Making her feel bad about herself
- Calling her names
- Making her think she's crazy
- Playing mind games
- Making her feel guilty



- Controlling what she does, who she sees and talks to, what she reads, where she goes, limiting her outside involvement....

This is also the basis of 'Coercive Control', now defined in law in the Serious Crime Act 2015. The Home Office (2015:2) describes it thus:

"This offence is constituted by behaviour on the part of the perpetrator which takes place "repeatedly or continuously". The victim and alleged perpetrator must be "personally connected" at the time the behaviour takes place. The behaviour must have had a "serious effect" on the victim, meaning that it has caused the victim to fear violence will be used against them on "at least two occasions", or it has had a "substantial adverse effect on the victims' day to day activities". The alleged perpetrator must have known that their behaviour would have a serious effect on the victim, or the behaviour must have been such that he or she "ought to have known" it would have that effect. "

and makes it clear that controlling or coercive behaviour should be dealt with as part of adult and/or child safeguarding and public protection procedures.

Stark (2007, p14) argued that one of the reasons that coercive control has remained 'invisible in plain sight', as it appears to be for Helen and her support network, is that the primary model for domestic abuse, since it became recognised as such, has focused on physical violence. He also argues that it is a form of control targeted in a gendered way only against women because it relates to women as a subjugated group in the patriarchy. However I would argue that it must now be recognised (as it is in British law), that such abuse and control is perpetrated against both men and women by partners of either sex – this situation could equally have been Shula controlling Alistair, or between Adam and Ian.

So, through listening, and in discussing this in our supervision sessions and through online discussions, which I will look at shortly, my student will have learned about abusive relationships, how professionals, friends and family can be fooled by 'disguised compliance', and indeed become inadvertently collusive with the abuse. He will have learned about child and adult development issues, the welfare of a developing foetus (and considered whether we would carry out a pre-birth assessment in this case), and come to understand victims' perspectives, the dynamics of violence – and also about legal and policy contexts and relevant procedures.

Learning from narrative

Use of dramatic narratives in social work education is a teaching and learning strategy that is not widely used, but has much potential. Rutten et al (2010) suggest that one of the outcomes of engaging with dramatic narrative is that engagement with the dramatis personae can be intense – as I'm sure we may all recognise from our own listening habits - and that this can engender strong feelings; developing such empathy can enable readers or listeners to relate themes from the narrative to their own experiences, and this then enables reflection on both themes and experience. Scourfield and Taylor (2014) researched social work students' learning from a book group studying JK Rowling's (2012) novel, *A Casual Vacancy*, which has significant social work content, and as they rightly point out (p534), 'Not all students and practitioners are instinctively

drawn to social scientific writing and some find it dry and difficult to read', so dramatic narrative can be a useful addition to textbook learning.

As Helen Walmsley-Johnson wrote recently in *The New Statesman*, 'Storylines like this are really best covered by the soap genre because they allow an almost real-time development of the plot' (Walmsley-Johnson, 2016). Rob and Helen's relationship is being shown to us in a way that truly does reflect the experience of others, as messages on social media in the last few weeks have made increasingly clear. It is the sort of concerning situation where social workers, were they to become involved, would never see the full dynamics during their visits, and would more than likely meet hostility or minimisation of concerns. Irvine et al's (2015) research found that students wanted to learn more about the perspectives of service users who might be critical of social work intervention, in order to develop more effective skills in working with them. Other research (Tham and Lynch, 2014; Ring, 2014) suggests that 'a deep appreciation of personal concerns and lived experience' (Ring, 2014:1106) enables students to examine their own views, attitudes and perceptions, as well as to acquire knowledge and skills, and validates both explanations for observed behaviours, and the legitimacy of both the caring and controlling functions of social work practice. It is important to remember, however, that insights into the real life experience of a particular issue can not necessarily be generalised to all people experiencing something similar (Smith, 2014). We cannot say for certain that all couples where one is controlled by the other experience the same as Helen and Rob, but we can start to recognise patterns that fit certain common behavioural traits.

The role of discussion in developing learning

Blended learning, using online methods as well as more traditional classroom teaching, is well established across the Higher Education sector. The use of online discussion, sometimes referred to as 'asynchronous conferencing', if well designed and managed, is widely understood to be an effective online teaching method in terms of meeting students' diverse learning needs and styles (Salmon, 2004, Madoc-Jones and Parrott, 2005), and in creating communities of learning (Garrison and Anderson, 2003; Gillingham, 2009) and communities of practice (Moore 2008). In meeting learning styles (Honey and Mumford, 1986), relevant activity is offered to pragmatists and activists, and space to reflect and consider to theorists and reflectors – though consideration must be given to the needs of those who are auditory learners by preference, or who have more difficulty with the written word (Salmon, 2004). The use of a discussion forum fits in well with Cheung and Delavega's (2014) five point model of experiential learning, in enabling students to explore difficult issues whilst respecting the privacy of their own histories – this enables both self-development (in understanding the viewpoints of others) and the development of professional competencies, the use of self in practice, and empathy in particular, which has been shown by Forrester et al (2008) and others to be a crucial factor in good engagement and change management with service users in complex situations.

Valid discussions can of course take place in the classroom, but time constraints can limit the possibilities of exploration of understanding, values and related skills (Chaumba, 2015). The on-line medium allows students to explore 'at a distance', (and sometimes shyness or unwillingness to open up personally in front of fellow students) in spaces that they feel safe in, without the need to be literally face to face with their audience. Discussions in social media certainly appear to enable this openness, however

Paper - Helen Burrows - for 'The Archers in fact and fiction: Academic analyses of life in rural Borsetshire' conference, University of Liverpool in London, Weds 17 February 2016

in the interests of student confidentiality and privacy, online discussion can easily be facilitated on university online workspaces such as Blackboard or Moodle.

A final point

I have used online discussion groups to develop student 'communities of practice' (Burrows, 2010) and would agree with Moore's (2009) point that central to understanding communities of practice is viewing work and learning as social activities. Working together, people learn from each other and develop a shared purpose, a common way of thinking and talking and eventually share a sense of mutual identity.

As I write this, in the first week of February, this model appears to have moved from professional practice into public social action through the power of social media. I am a member of the Archers Appreciation group on Facebook, and I cannot end this paper without a mention of the initiative set up by Paul Trueman, another member, who, following ongoing group discussion of domestic abuse, set up a JustGiving page to raise money for the charity Refuge, with the aim of helping 'all the Helens, male and female' as one giver described it. This has so far raised over £40,000 in a mere 6 days, and the comments and tweets are testament to the public raising of awareness of domestic abuse. People have shared their own experiences, have shared how Helen and Rob's story has changed their perceptions and values and helped them to understand what needs to be done to help victims of abuse escape.

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