ABSTRACT:

Inspired by recent policy direction toward co-production of services, this paper focuses upon the author's experiences in working co-productively within a university environment. The paper uses observational accounts to critically discuss elements of co-production. The author charts the professional development opportunities available when working with service users and carers from the outset of social work education. In so doing, key themes such as reciprocity, solidarity and inter-group dynamics are explored. These concepts are illustrated via a reflective account of the author's involvement in a fundraising initiative, inspired by the work of 'Unity' a service user and carer group based in a Scottish university. It charts the learning, insights and development which occurred for the author during this experience. A conclusion is drawn which suggests that a focus upon each individual's unique contribution leads to innovative practice and important learning opportunities.

This paper is a reflective account based upon the author's observations of development opportunities available through working in partnership with service users and carers. It seeks to explore the unique qualities of the university's service user and carer's group, 'Unity'. The author discusses the group's core aims, showing the ways in which commitment leads to a sense of solidarity. The impact that the group has upon student social workers is discussed. This is critically analysed, drawing links to concepts of 'emotional contagions' and inter-group bonding. The suggestion is made that co-production empowers both service users and students to become agents of social change, promoting a commitment to future partnership based practice. An account is given of a fundraising initiative carried out with students and service users. This account serves as a vehicle for reflections upon group structure and the skills required to over-come pre-existing power differentials. This is then discussed in terms of the development of communication skills, as well as 'emotional intelligence'. The concept of reciprocal feedback between service users and students is highlighted in an account of the author's personal learning throughout work with the Unity group. This serves as an example of the myriad of learning which can occur during co-production. A conclusion is drawn which weaves together the threads of group structure, development and ethos to show the benefits of working together with service users and carers throughout social work education.

It seems appropriate at this point, to share a little about who the Unity group are and what they do. Essentially, the group comprises of service users and carers who have experience of using social work services. Some have experience of mental health issues, physical disabilities, traumatic experiences or learning disabilities. Experiential knowledge is vast and varied. The group provide workshops, present at national and local conferences and consult on the social work degree programme. Most members are involved in other community groups also. The group engage in collective action, in which they aim to improve the quality of social work services, by challenging the mind-sets of training social workers. They work to reduce the stigma associated with their prescribed labels, diagnosis, experiences; and their use of services. They aim to create structural change at a macro level, by creating students who; when qualified; will enter the workplace as agents of social change (Nandan et al, 2015).

Upon first meeting the group, I could see that there was something unique about the way that they interacted, and the impact that they made. They possessed an intangible quality that was difficult to define. I felt compelled to examine this quality in more depth. I recognised that if I could uncover

some of what makes this group function, I could gain a great deal of knowledge upon which to base empowering, co-produced group work in the future. I was inspired not only by the honesty of members, but by group dynamics and the culture that they displayed. I wondered whether this centred around their core aim. Members often vocalise their ambition to "create the best social workers that Scotland has ever seen". Whilst this may be a tall order, it conveys the sense of hope and optimism that the group centres around. The group's faith in this possibility creates a sense of solidarity with students, who feel motivated to be the best future practitioners that they can be. Alford's (2009) research suggests that a strong sense of solidarity increases commitment and motivation towards partnership working. Therefore, it is argued that this strong sense of optimism and solidarity is important in creating strong links between the 'Unity' group and student social workers.

Within the group, this sense of positive solidarity combines with group member's honest sharing of difficult experiences and their experiences of social work. I have felt this to be both humbling and moving and this sentiment is echoed in the feedback that students give to the group. Due to the experiences that have been shared, students report feeling compelled to work hard to overcome obstacles (as well as social work's poor reputation) to empower service users in practice. Goleman (1998) discusses this phenomenon in terms of 'emotional contagions'. This term refers to the transmission of emotions that can occur when difficult situations are discussed openly in group settings. Grant et al (2014) suggest that the emotional content of this type of workshop can cause either 'resonance' in the form of inter-group bonding; or dissonance and social distance. Within my own experience, and the anecdotal evidence which I have gathered, the phenomenon of resonance is clear in the case of Unity involvement. Therefore, I would suggest that member's sense of motivation and optimism combines with their strong goals, to break down the barriers between students and service users, leading to inter-group bonding and a commitment to social change.

Alford (2009) suggests that this can lead to a sense of democracy, which encourages long-term commitment to working co-productively in future social work practice. A potential threat to this sense of fairness, social justice and democracy arose recently when awareness grew that governmental budget cuts could potentially curtail the group's activities. The Unity group members had been aware of these budget cuts since 2011[i]. However, many students only became aware of this recently. Myself, and a small group of students became increasingly uneasy at the government's decision to withdraw the £5000 of annual grant funding upon which the group had come to rely. We learned that many Unity members had been volunteering their time, without accepting travelling expenses due to their concerns about the impact of the cuts. Inspired by the Unity member's approach to collective action and social justice, a small number of dedicated social work students rallied to raise funds and awareness. Our aim was to work co-create a sponsored event. The project had two fundamental aims: to raise funds, and to highlight our belief in the importance of working together with service users from the outset of our social work education. We aimed to show solidarity with group by proving how much social work students value the work of the Unity group. Following group discussions, a sponsored abseil was decided upon.

As facilitator of the project, I felt a huge amount of responsibility. It became apparent to me how much skill is involved in overcoming pre-formed power differentials (Hunter, 2007). As such, I felt it necessary to examine the structure of Unity, to make sure that the event was organised in keeping with the ethos of the group. Upon doing so, I realised that the culture of the group is not one which is created, or maintained in a haphazard way. This led me to analyse and reflect upon my own interactions, and those around me. I recognised that if the abseil was to have the positive impact that we hoped, it would have to embody the key elements which underpin the group. Through

observations, I came to recognise that the group's convener (a university staff member) could be conceptualised as being at the "centre of a web of connections", rather than at the head of a hierarchy (Helgesen, 1990). Within the group, there is an absence of traditional hierarchies and each member (whether service user, student, carer, staff member) is continually encouraged to see themselves as a valued, contributing member of the group. This led me to thinking of the group as a community.

The group's convener ensures that obligations are met, and takes on an organisational role. However, flexibility and new ideas are embraced. This allows opportunities to flourish, and each member is able to develop, gaining opportunities to take on new roles (Jones, 1968). After attending meetings, I was able to see that all opportunities are thoughtfully shared by members. Participation in events is decided upon in open, democratic ways, with an absence of competitiveness. Ideas abound openly and are discussed freely. It became evident that each person is challenged, and encouraged simultaneously, allowing opportunities for personal development. Leadership occurs in the side-lines – the group is offered guidance and direction, without its innovation being constrained by rigid frameworks and obligations. When I reflected upon these observations, it occurred to me that the absence of rigid structures and hierarchies allows space for relationships to be built. This allows each person a valued contribution, which plays to each person's strengths. This adds to the sense that the group is continually developing and evolving.

With these reflections in mind, I acted as the bridge between the student group and the Unity group during the planning of the abseil event. I recognised that I had a role to play in ensuring that the group's ethos was conveyed and maintained. Therefore, I consulted both groups at each stage of the abseil organisation. I could see the importance of open and continual consultation. My aim was to maintain equal participation in decision making processes. However, practicalities such as time constraints meant that this was not always possible. At times, I was forced to make autonomous decisions, and consult with the groups retrospectively. At this point, I became aware of a power imbalance. This observation made me recognise that transparent communication was key to maintaining equal participation (Wilson et al, 2011). In a co-produced environment however, I realised that this was far more acute due to the existence of pre-formed power imbalances (Hunter, 2007). I felt that this was an important lesson for future practice, in that time could not be allowed to take precedence over communication. That said, I pondered how possible this would be in future practice, given the likelihood of time and resource constraints.

In considering this, I wanted to explore the qualities that I would need in order to work in empowering, relationship based ways in future practice. Morrisson (2007) suggests that maintaining relationship based practice in co-produced environments requires the development of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is conceptualised as the capacity to understand, regulate and use our own emotions to guide behavioural responses and create intuitive decisions (George, 2000). According to Morrisson (2007), this skill builds over time. This led me to consider the personal learning that I have gained over time, from working with the Unity group. Through the reflections of group members during our work together, I have gained insight into my own coping strategies when under pressure.

For example, following several weeks of careful planning; the abseil event came together successfully. On the day, after ensuring everyone's comfort and safety, it was my opportunity to participate. Without recognising it at the time, I had poured a great deal of effort and attention into everyone else's needs, in order to dissociate from my own anxieties. I had been operating upon the assumption that if everyone else was fine, I would be too. This meant that as I stood at the top of the 70 metre precipice, hearing cheers from below, I was besieged by unexpected fear and alarm.

Due to not processing feelings of nervousness gradually and planning for how I might feel, I was hit by a flood of panic all at once. Therefore, by avoiding these feelings in the run up to the event, I had placed myself at psychological (if not physical) risk. Thankfully, I had chosen the instructor well during the planning process, and his support enabled me to 'take the plunge' and complete the event. However, as I reflected later, I could see that parallels could be drawn to the risks involved in practice. I could see the importance of remaining aware of my own emotions in future practice, using these as a guide rather than ignoring the emotional components of the social work role.

At a later meeting, as we reflected upon the month's events, a member whom I shall refer to as Adam[ii] pointed out that he had seen me do this before. He recounted a further example, which occurred at a recent conference, where we had been presenting as a group. He mentioned that he had watched as I made sure that everyone knew exactly where they needed to be and made sure that everyone was comfortable. He then jokingly informed me that I subsequently stood in the wrong place myself throughout, breaching the on-stage positions that we had planned. This observation was delivered supportively and with humour, so was easy to accept in the supportive nature in which it was intended. However, it allowed me further food for thought. I came to realise that focusing on everyone else's needs, whilst ignoring my own was a 'habit' which I used regularly in stressful situations. Whilst this coping mechanism allowed me to be a conscientious, dedicated worker; I could see that it could lead to an increase in stress when in practice (Dwyer, 2007). Therefore, this was exceptionally valuable feedback. Grant & Kinman (2012) claim that 'emotional intelligence' is central to the mitigation of psychological risk in social work practice. Therefore, the Unity group's reflections once more had guided my professional development.

Throughout my involvement with the group, member's feedback has been helpful in shaping the development of my professional identity. Their feedback has allowed me to focus upon remaining mindful of my own abilities, needs and limitations. This will help me to be realistic about my own commitments and responsibilities in future. According to Kemper (2000), many service users have developed highly attuned emotional radars, which can detect the emotional demeanour of practitioners/students long before the worker has become aware of their own emotional state. This, Kemper (2000) claims, is due to having lived with dysregulated emotions at points in the past/present themselves. As such, service users often have important insights and wisdom to impart to guide personal and professional development.

This paper has provided a reflective account of the insights and professional development which I have gained in working co-productively with Unity, the University of Stirling's service user and carer's group. Although the unique group dynamics have been explored, it is difficult to capture the sense of belonging and community which underpins the group. The sense of community has been explored to an extent, in recounting the structure and facilitation of the group. However the intangible quality possessed by the group, which strengthens their message and impact remains elusive to the written word. As one member recently reflected, "It's like love isn't it? You can't grasp it, count it or measure it, and yet, you know it's there". Perhaps that analogy goes some of the way to grasping the value of this dynamic, inspirational group. As such, discussions as to the tenets upon which Unity is based; such as reciprocity, solidarity and democracy; go only some of the distance towards describing the ecological functioning of the group. Upon reflection, I would suggest that perhaps the intangible quality which makes this co-produced group function centres around the individuals who form part of the group. The group is more than merely the sum of its respective parts (Peck, 1990). Instead, it is the unique character of each individual which contributes to the indelible imprint that they leave upon training social workers. This leads to the recognition that successful co-production can only occur in a culture of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 2003),

in which the individuality of each contributor is recognised and embraced. Working with Unity has undoubtedly offered me a great deal of insights and personal development opportunities. It has been a valuable, enriching experience, made special by the humour, acceptance and support offered by the group. It has led me to the realisation that although we can learn the basic requirements for co-productive practice from books; there is no substitute for learning to meaningfully connect with others. In order to do that successfully, we must each develop the capacity to truly understand ourselves.

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[i] £5000 government funding was previously available to service user and carer groups within Universities, to help with running costs. This funding ceased in 2011.

[ii] Names have been changed to maintain anonymity. Ethical permissions have been deemed unnecessary due to the observational and reflective nature of the piece.