Being a researcher in residence

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Presentation at The University of Southampton, 28th November, 2013
Big Society? Disabled people with learning disabilities & civil society

Independent living advisors

The University of Sheffield.
Manchester Metropolitan University
Northumbria University
University of Bristol
Background.

Big Society is the Coalition Government's ‘big idea’. The Cabinet Office identified three core layers of the Big Society policy agenda:

(i) Empowering communities: giving local councils and neighborhoods more power to take decisions.
(ii) Opening up public services: enabling charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer high quality services.
(iii) Promoting social action: encouraging and enabling people from all walks of life to play a more active part in society.

This research is working with people with learning disabilities and their key partners from the civil society to consider their place in the current Big Society context.
What we want to find out.

1. To what extent are people with learning disabilities joining in with civil (charities etc) society today?

2. What affect are the budget cuts having on organisations working with people with LD?

3. How can people with LD contribute to “Big Society”? 
More Questions.

4. What happens in circles of support, real employment, self-advocacy)?

5. What can be learned from them?

6. How are people with learning disabilities experiencing opportunities for (self) advocacy, employment and community support and participation in civil society?
Our partners.

Our research will draw on ideas from sociology, social policy, community psychology and disability to help us contextualise these questions.

Our study will work with three civil society research partners

- Circles of Support in Lancashire
- Real Employment in Bristol
- Self-advocacy in Yorkshire

in order to explore the three core layers of the Big Society and to see if (or how) they fit with the practices and ambitions of our research partners and people with learning disabilities

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Methodology – what we are doing.

(1) Interview key stakeholders including policy makers, lawyers and disabled people's organisations to access their views on Big Society.
(ii) Carry out a longitudinal analysis of policy documents and review the academic literature on Big and Civil Society.
(iii) Work with our three research partners to learn about what they do and how this fits with the Big Society agenda.
(iv) Analyse the data and feed this back to our research partners and others to check and revise our findings through findings workshops.
(v) Place a 'researcher in residence' into the three partner organisations in order to give something substantive back to the groups.
(vi) Share our findings through public engagement festival and conferences.

We will be guided and evaluated by a group of Impact Experts and our project partners throughout.

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At the end of the meeting, Ally tapped me on the shoulder to show me her ipad. When I say spoken to her, we’d had to do it by writing as she’s recently had surgery on her ears and couldn’t hear very well. She showed me some photos with three lovely dogs and told me that after her mum died in June she moved in with Joanne and Keith as part of their family with their three dogs and teenage daughter. Ally explained that this had happened because her social worker had put her in touch with the “Shared Lives” scheme (http://www.sharedlivesplus.org.uk/). Sometimes people with LD live with families, sometimes families become befrienders and meet for an afternoon or so. Ally invited me to the next Shared Lives Forum to hear her speak, so I contacted the organiser and was able to book my place. (Katherine’s notes)
I met Ally at the Forum, she wasn’t actually speaking this time because she had spoken at the last event but she was in charge of filming using her ipad.

Karen, the Shared Lives, social worker and Kate, who uses Shared Lives, talked about the befriending scheme. Kate is friends with Lilly, they go to the bingo together, Kate taught Lilly how to play because she had never been before. They go to the cinema too. Kate and Lilly really enjoy each others company for a few hours a week.

I met Bernard and James who are best mates. They met through shared lives four months ago and meet once a week for four hours to go for walks and do a bit of shopping following. James’ was very close to his grandfather who had died recently and Barry hoped he might be able to be a bit like a grandfather to James.

(Katherine’s notes)
Being a researcher in residence means ...

• Being there, spending time with people and getting to know them well;

• Not always trying to be the person in control but letting other people tell you what you need to do;

• Recognising the importance of what other people say and what they know.
Thinking about what people tell us: analysis

• Self advocates/people with learning disabilities have knowledge they want to share;

• Their ideas help everyone to think about some pretty big questions;

• One of these big questions is “what does it mean to be a human?”

• Lots of people in universities have asked that question when thinking about the lives of people with learning disabilities (Kittay, 2002, Singer, 2009)
Thinking about the dis/family

• We think that people with LD give us new ways of thinking about what it means to live well, to have a job, a family and to be a human

• One way of being a human is to live in a family, but that doesn’t have to mean that everyone has the same sort of family;

• Ally’s story tells us that there are different kinds of families that they can be just as happy as ‘normal’ families;

• We think Ally’s family is a ‘dis/family’ because it is a family that is shaped by disability but just as good as a ‘normal’ families.
Doing Theory

• Some people think that making up new words offers nothing new (Shakespeare, 2013).

• Other people think that we should value the normal more and not keep trying to question what is normal (Watson and Vehmas, 2013).

• People with learning disabilities are telling us that the want to be healthy, live well, have good jobs and a family – they want to be ‘normal’ (Boxall, 2013).
But

• The self advocates we have met are always doing things differently and demanding other people to do things differently too;

• Just like Ally’s story of her ‘dis/family’. Ally’s family is normal but it is also shaped by disability in, we would argue, really positive ways;

• This dis/family is a great family that gives Ally the ‘normal’ family life that she wants.

• Perhaps all families are ‘disfamilies’.
Conclusions

We have been thinking about some BIG questions and we want to keep working together with all our partners to find some BIG answers too....