‘Mothers Apart’: reflecting on an action research partnership project
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Acknowledgements

• ‘Mothers Apart’ is a partnership project between colleagues at London Borough of Tower Hamlets and Middlesex University, London, England.

• We would like to thank all the ‘birth mothers’ who have been interviewed during the ‘Mothers Apart’ project.

• We acknowledge the support and contributions of staff working in the ‘Hummingbirds’ intervention, that was developed as part of this project. ‘Hummingbirds’ was funded by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

• Colleagues in the project team:

Dr Linda Bell, Dr Rachel Herring, Sarah Lewis-Brooke, Sioban O’Farrell-Pearce, Theresa So (all Middlesex University), Nikki Bradley, Francoise Cosgrove, Lynne Lehane, Jo Prosser, Brian Sharpe (All London Borough of Tower Hamlets) and Pat Oparah (Royal London Hospital, Whitechapel).

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Abstract

• This seminar draws upon an action project (‘Mothers Apart’) involving a partnership between multidisciplinary staff in one local authority and university social work researchers in London.

• The project involved background, literature and interview-based research, and the development of a pilot initiative (‘Hummingbirds’), which has now been running for over two years; ‘Hummingbirds’ was intended to provide an individual and group support service to families, especially birth mothers, who have lost children to care.

• The research included interviews with birth mothers prior to the initiative starting, and subsequent review of participants’ and staff responses to ‘Hummingbirds’.

• To date we have presented conference papers at the European Social Work Research Association (2015, 2016 (Bell et al, 2016), 2017, 2018) and the Social Work International Conference (Bucharest, Romania) in 2016 & 2017, as well as at seminars in the UK.

• This seminar will discuss some of the methodological and practical issues involved in developing research that is aimed at producing research outputs alongside tangible outcomes in terms of support for users of social work services.
My background

• I’m a researcher and anthropologist by background with doctoral experience of researching with mothers and families:
  
  
  • In the early 1990s I was a Research Associate at King's College, London (Management Centre) working on projects concerning inter-professional working and social work, and on therapeutic intervention for interpersonal violence.
  
• I have now had many years’ experience of doing and publishing feminist research see e.g.
  
  
  
• Since 1995 I have carried out various health and social care research projects, taught research methods to professional social work and health students at Middlesex University, and supervised undergraduate, masters and research student dissertations. I am interested in research ethics.
  
How and why did the ‘Mothers Apart’ project start?
Some background...

• Debates about supporting birth parents whose children are removed due to child protection concerns are increasingly reported (via research and also in terms of professional practice). These issues are particularly difficult to resolve where families experience successive removals of children from home into care (see UK research by e.g. Broadhurst and Mason, 2013; Cox, 2012, 2017). International research suggests these complex, highly contested situations reveal potential for conflict between child welfare and welfare of their parents (Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes, 2011).

• Research also suggests, as we reported in our recently published paper (Lewis-Brooke et al, 2017), that there are differences between policy and practice on these issues in the UK, compared to the rest of Europe (see also May-Chahal et al, 2006):

  “Social work action such as adoption without parental consent is uncommon in countries like Norway, compared to the UK, where the concept of ‘permanency’ for children is prioritized. Research evidence shows how the actions and reasoning of social workers and other welfare workers clearly reflect their country’s policies and guidelines.”(Lewis-Brooke et al, 2017, p. 7)
Support for birth parents in the UK and elsewhere

• Support for birth parents experiencing child removal (and especially permanent removal) can be lacking, as reported by a number of researchers /conference papers (including Broadhurst, Cox and colleagues, as already mentioned. See also Blazey & Persson, 2010; Neil et al, 2010; Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014).

• In the UK, several initiatives (including the pilot ‘Hummingbirds’ in London Borough of Tower Hamlets, the ‘Pause’ Initiative (Dept For Education, 2017), and ‘Positive Choices’ (Suffolk) (Cox, 2017) were set up to address these complex concerns and try to support parents (particularly mothers) who have experienced removal of their children, including successive removals (see Lewis-Brooke et al, 2017).

• Similar initiatives endeavouring to empower parents whose children experience out of home care are reported elsewhere (for example in Norway, by Slettebø, 2013; Tasmania by Hinton, 2013; the ‘Reflect’ project [Wales]).
Development of the ‘Mothers Apart’ project

- Following our awareness of these complex issues, LB Tower Hamlets colleagues invited me to join what became the ‘Mothers Apart’ partnership project in 2014. I subsequently led the research side of the project based at Middlesex University.

- **Tower Hamlets** is located in east London, a mid-sized local authority ranked as 14th amongst London local authorities based on the size of its resident population; it is the second most densely populated borough in London and the 16th most diverse local authority out of 326 local authority areas in England. It has been estimated that 44% of households in Tower Hamlets have been living in ‘income poverty’ (defined as those living below 60% of the median (average) UK household income, after housing costs – double the national average).

- Following initial joint meetings with TH staff, who all had many years of practice experience, (and a colleague’s suggestion of the project name ‘Mothers Apart’) our preparatory work included:
  - TH staff attending relevant seminar at Tavistock Centre.
  - MU & TH team members attending the ‘Slowing the merry-go-round…’ conference held in Nottingham in October 2014. This drew our attention to various aspects of the complex issues involved in providing appropriate support and intervention for parents experiencing repeated child removals.
  - We then planned our own project in the following stages:
‘Mothers Apart’ Project stages - Summary

Stage 1) **Background:** Literature review, visits to other relevant interventions and financial review by TH staff. We then identified and interviewed 10 mothers in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets who had experienced successive child removals (interview-based research carried out with Middlesex University funding). We wanted mothers’ own voices to inform the intervention.

Stage 2) Tower Hamlets staff then **set up and funded a pilot support initiative** (‘Hummingbirds’) for mothers experiencing loss and grief due to child removal, involving an individual and group support service, drawing upon experiences of the mothers we had interviewed (see Lewis-Brooke et al, 2017).

Stage 3) **Follow up:** After the first cycle of ‘Hummingbirds’, two Middlesex University researchers in the team obtained more research funding to interview staff working in the initiative and we held an initial focus group with five women participants. Further interviews with women who had participated in a subsequent Hummingbirds group (in 2018) and with two more staff has provided informal feedback and allowed us all to reflect on the initiative’s progress to date.
Stage 1

• **Visits to other relevant interventions**: We visited or contacted specific initiatives relating to work with birth mothers and their families. These were PAUSE, Hackney; Positive Choices (Suffolk Council and Ormiston Trust); Families in Care (Newcastle); FDAC; Strengthening Families (Salford City Council).

• **Financial review by TH staff.** TH staff wanted to estimate some financial costs to the borough of the successive removal of children from birth mothers living in Tower Hamlets. Broadhurst and Mason (2013) calculated the average cost of a child in care per year is £37,669 with £15000 care proceedings costs. Tower Hamlets colleagues made use of the Cost Calculator being widely used within the National Programme for Troubled Families, which is derived from the New Economy Unit Cost Database (v.1.3) delivered by Greater Manchester and Birmingham City Councils.

• Data from four example families in Tower Hamlets were used to estimate costs of removing a child and placing them for adoption. This data varied in complexity but the families were part of a typical range during 2013 - 14. The costs were then averaged out and found to be £281,171 per child. These costings have been designed to follow the child’s journey through care from removal to adoption order; they do not include post adoption services or take account of children who stayed in the care system instead of being adopted (with weekly fostering costs) until they are 18.

• **Interviews with 10 mothers** in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets who had experienced child removals (NEXT SLIDE)
Stage 1 – Interviews with birth mothers

Ethics approval was given by Middlesex University and LB Tower Hamlets ethics (RGF) panel. This included use of an appropriately worded information sheet.

Access – we decided it would be best to access mothers via key workers with whom they were already in contact; a project team member briefed key workers and also explained the information sheet to mothers face to face, once they had been contacted.

Sample: 25 mothers were originally identified locally, and we eventually managed to interview 10 mothers in depth. Two mothers immediately declined the request for interview when contacted, and four others chose not to be interviewed after showing some initial interest.

Interviews- written consent was obtained from interviewees. Some mothers asked for their partner or other person to accompany them. Some pre-arranged interview appointments were cancelled. Some key workers found it difficult to access mothers as relationships with them were not good. Although the process has been challenging we are grateful to all the mothers taking part and to key workers who facilitated contacts. Interviews with one of the two researchers lasted from 15 minutes in one case, to over an hour.
Examples of different ‘mothers’ voices’

• it would have been nice if they had actually spoken to me and said look, we’re going to be involved in your child’s life, this is the plan, which is what we need you to do.

• a lot of social workers actually talk down to the parent as though they were a bit of crap on your shoe, where it’s you’ve got to work out, these parents, right, they go to work, they’ve got clean homes, now if the house is too tidy your child is being neglected. If your house has got toys all over the shop, your child’s being neglected.

• Knowing my daughter is happy and well is the only reason why I haven’t killed myself, but there are many times when I’ve thought about committing suicide…

• [Interviewer].......the people here are really trying to develop some ideas about supporting women, can you think of anything?

I just think to make it more clearer and to not make it feel like it’s parents against the services, because I think once that happens parents don't want to engage with the services and the services see it as they’re trying to do their best for the children, so it’s like you butt heads and then they feel like that’s the only way they can look after the children is they remove them. But I feel like if they came with a different approach and parents actually felt like they was trying to support them not just remove the children they would get a better outcome (Interviewee).
Stage 2 – ‘Hummingbirds’

• ‘Our initial research interviews suggested to the professionals that many of these women were, arguably, in early stages of grief. They found it hard to focus on the future and what services they would like and were much more focused on what had gone wrong whilst their parenting capacity was being assessed. They commonly expressed disbelief about what had happened to them and did not appear to understand the reasons why their children had been removed. Mothers reported rudeness from social workers or feelings of being abandoned. Women talked about having to chase the social workers to access services. They also suggested that they could not understand why services to help them were not offered, as they felt that the removal of their children had exacerbated their problems. They commonly believed that more services ought to have been offered before the decision had been made for permanent child removal’.

• ‘The ‘Hummingbirds’ service, named so as to signal a different sort of service to mainstream Children’s Social Care (CSC), aims to work in partnership by working at women’s own pace, offering a voluntary service addressing their various needs. The pilot service was funded initially through the UK (Government’s) Troubled Families programme. Initial staffing comprised a 1.75 post and an initial target was therefore to work with 6 women in the first year’ (Lewis-Brooke et al, 2017: 9, 10)
What did ‘Hummingbirds’ aim to do?

Areas of work focused on by Hummingbirds:
- Bereavement and loss
- Therapeutic work
- Improving physical and mental health
- Basic needs being met
- Relationships being increased and improved
- Contact tasks supported
- Education /employment experienced
- Support network
- Interests and leisure opportunities improved

The team explain to women that the service cannot:
- Work on getting back children who have been placed permanently
- Work with women who are pregnant
- Offer parenting classes (from: Lewis-Brooke et al, 2017: 8)
Hummingbirds’ Team Secure Base Model
Stage 3 – follow up

- Two university based researchers conducted interviews with staff and Hummingbirds participants after the initiative had been running for over one year.
- **Key research issues:**
  - We identified similar issues to those revealed by Slettebø and colleagues (2013), for example:
  - issues of power and control arising during group support;
  - shared and also differing perspectives of participating mothers and workers;
  - deep feelings of loss experienced by mothers;
  - discussing possibilities for involving fathers in parent support initiative(s);
  - the significance of professional intervention work alongside peer support.
Experiencing Hummingbirds

• ‘At first I thought I wasn’t going to get no support at all but then like coming up with something like this, I thought I needed it, plus there were other women as well that had gone through like the same thing, if you know what I mean. It’s a different story, but they have gone through like you know. And then like so I went through it and I think it helped me actually, it did, because you can talk about it and you get help as well so it’s good.’ (Hummingbirds participant)

• ‘...from what I understood these women weren’t comfortable going to the same service, I guess who took their children away from them, to then get support from them. They didn’t feel comfortable about that. It brought up a lot of horrible memories. So having something separate ['Hummingbirds’] allowed them that kind of accessibility and encouraged them to come for support somewhere’. (Staff member)
Follow up (continued)

Twenty three women have participated in a service so far:

- 15 in both group and 1:1 service; 2 in just 1:1 service and 6 in just the group

- To date: 3 Hummingbirds women are now in full time employment, one is completing an apprenticeship, 3 are doing voluntary work (most had never worked before).

Two of the women are now proposing to lead a service user led /peer support group following their participation in Hummingbirds

Staff and women at first lacked confidence that such complex needs could have positive outcomes.

• Our qualitative research feedback demonstrates that women using the service and staff value the work of the ‘Hummingbirds’ team, and it has identified future possibilities and challenges.

• Group work has been a crucial part of ‘Hummingbirds’. (This approach is not always used in other support initiatives).

• A “secure base team model” has been useful to inform ‘Hummingbirds’; adequate sustainable funding is essential to underpin this model.

• Securing funding for both the intervention and for research/evaluation remains challenging at present. This is despite strong ‘invest to save’ evidence (using an evidence based cost saving model*) that we developed in Stage 1 of this project.
Practical and social aspects of developing ‘Hummingbirds’

What has helped:

• Developing a ‘secure base team model’ (adapted from Schofield, G, Beek, M. (2006).

• Building trust when many women felt “rubbished “ by previous experiences of professional help

• Having several routes into the service - not ”one size fits all”

• Women regularly supporting each other and empathising in challenges of contact with their children, despite experiencing very different contact arrangements

• A multi disciplinary team is likely to best meet the holistic needs of these women
What have we learnt so far from the ‘Mothers Apart’ project?

Above all, the value of taking a partnership approach to the overall project. This approach has proved important in terms of a) managing expectations, b) funding and c) addressing complex project outcomes.

A) Working in a partnership project between local authority and university staff has meant acknowledging our different expectations, particularly in terms of outcomes – for example university staff were expected by their employer to produce research outputs from ‘Mothers Apart’, whilst for the local authority, the successful implementation of a pilot support initiative (‘Hummingbirds’) was key to the partnership’s success.

B) Goodwill on both sides was important, since university staff also wanted the pilot support to be a success, whilst local authority staff also wanted to support the research. One key way to make progress turned out to be sharing funding opportunities. The university researchers applied for and obtained research funding for the initial and subsequent research activities (interviews etc), whilst the local authority funded involvement of their own staff and paid for the staffing and implementation of the pilot support (‘Hummingbirds’). One member of the ‘Mothers Apart’ team also had a foot ‘in both camps’ which was helpful!

C) We acknowledge that the outcomes from this project are complex and cover both research and practice outputs; working as partners also involved some practitioner team members becoming ‘research participants’ in so far as they were interviewed about their involvement with implementing ‘Hummingbirds’. Researcher members have thus attempted to maintain a ‘neutral’ / non-practitioner approach to the project (though this was not always easy).
References


References (2)


References (3)


Vulnerable mothers and recurrent care proceedings: keynote conference discussion. (Lewis-Brooke) Nottingham, April 2016