

Peter Beresford

SRN/BSA Seminar Series 2009

Introduction

NOT TO BE QUOTED WITHOUT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First can I welcome you all here to this first seminar in a pioneering new series jointly organised by the Survivor Research Network and the British Sociological Association Mental Health Study Group. My name is Peter Beresford. I am proud to have a long association with the Survivor Research Network as well as having links with both service user and academic organisations. I want to say a big thank you to both these groupings, the Survivor Research Network and the British Sociological Association Mental Health Study Group for coming together to make this important initiative possible. There are many people to thank for getting us all here together to be part of something new and important, but I would like to single out the hard work particularly of both David Armes, Ruth Sayers and Angela Sweeney of the Survivor Research Network and Jude England, Lydia Lewis and Michelle Rhone of the British Library and British Sociological Association.

We are starting, I think very opportunely at the start of a new year. Who would have believed 20 years ago that such a positive collaboration would be possible. Some people would be surprised to

know about it even now and I think one of the good things we can all do is help to spread the good news. But we can also do it in the best way possible, by showing the high quality of research, research findings and research discussion that can be engendered by such a linking between an academic and professional discipline – sociology – and the input of people with both research skills and expertise by experience – survivor researchers.

When I was preparing for today, I was thinking back to people I knew from the survivor movement whose lives for one reason or another had come to too early an end. I thought of people like Richard Sutton of Survivors Speak Out, of Ros Kaplan who was linked with Mind and Open Mind and Chris Harrison again of Survivors Speak Out but also of the disabled people's Liberation Network. Not famous people. Not survivors everyone has heard of. I know all the survivors here, will have your own list of people they have known on their journey, who sadly are no longer with us. People who through their lives and efforts, their support and encouragement have been part of us getting here today. None of your rubbish here!! British Library, British Sociological Association – and us – all together. And I thought to myself how pleased those people would be if they could see us here today. How far they have helped us to come. What symbolic as well as practical importance the seminar series kicking off today has.

I have been asked to make some introductory remarks which I am honoured and very pleased to have the chance to do. There are just a few opening points I'd like to make.

The first is about the timeliness of this innovative seminar series. We are just getting feedback following the results of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise which provides the basis for future academic research funding. I have only had the chance to look at this for my own subject, social work, but this highlights the importance that is likely increasingly to be attached to user involvement in research and survivor research. This is what it says:

- The involvement of service-users was weak in a number of submissions. While important steps have been made, there remains a need for further development in methodological approaches to service-user and community involvement and in promoting partnerships with service-users.

So it is no longer some enthusiastic researchers and service users who think this is important. Increasingly it is becoming the official view.

Mostly in what I want to say I want to stress making links and making connections. This I think is not only what this seminar series symbolises but also what we should be seeing and doing as a matter of increasing priority.

That's explicit in our collaboration here today. What I think this represents is a realisation that if survivor research is to take its rightful place in the spectrum of research and gain more

understanding and acceptance, then we need to make alliances, we need not only to draw in those who are receptive, but those who may not be so aware or so sympathetic and those who may even seem to be opposed to such different approaches to research and evaluation. I think it is important we look out and seek to engage in this way. This seminar series is a great example of that, learning from each other, sharing and building understanding and trust. I am talking about building bridges, while retaining our values and goals.

As people involved in mental health research, it is important we are not isolated. So I would also argue the value of linking up with disability studies more generally, where mental health and survivor research have helpful roles to play. There is a national and international disability studies movement and I think it will help to make our presence felt more strongly in it.

As survivors and others interested in research we should also remember that many people including many service users, are not so interested, often put off and intimidated by its jargon and distance from them. So it's helpful always to see research as part of broader efforts to bring about better knowledge, understanding and change. I have always valued the comment I heard from one survivor who saw user/survivor research as an expression of collective self-advocacy. It is helpful to see research always in terms of the helpful role it can play in securing people's rights and needs. We must always be working hard to feed back the helpful information and insights it offers

to survivors more generally and avoid becoming isolated from them. Research will not be powerful if it ends up in isolation.

Finally I want to stress the importance of addressing diversity and being inclusive in how we take forward survivor research. Its development is essentially about challenging traditional barriers. We must make sure we can't be accused of perpetuating any of those in how we do things. We must be truly inclusive in terms of addressing all the equality issues; race, gender, sexuality, age, cultural, class, belief and disability equality. We must work to ensure that all groups, whether people with other impairments, learning difficulties, who are homeless, in forensic services, in prison, or who are refugees and asylum seekers, who experience mental health problems, are all included in the work we do.

We will be looking through the course of this series at some of the barriers in the way of survivor research, how to overcome these, how people are doing survivor research, how we can better link up about it and spread the word, particular projects that are being undertaken and methodological issues that are being raised. We will be thinking about making change at all levels. I hope 2009 helped by this seminar series represents a step development for survivor research. Two major books about survivor research and user involvement in mental health research are due to be published this year, one from the Survivor Research Network. Something to be proud of as a marker of our progress. I very much hope to add to that, that at least some of the contributions from this series of seminars, can be

brought together in some kind of publication, to reach a wider range of people than can be here with us.

Thank you.