

Letter Writing and Collaborative Note Making in Social Work Practice

The Ethics of Participation and Transparency in an information age

by Fergus Hogan

Introduction

This paper presents the use of letter writing and collaborative note taking as an ethical and transparent means of recording social work conversations. With the establishment of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, 1997, many social workers have rightly been concerned with keeping case notes in a manner as if 'the client is looking over my shoulder' (Mortell, 1998, p.8). Philip Mortell's paper 'Recording in the Freedom of Information Environment' (1998) makes an important contribution to the concerns of social work recording and the demands of the new legislation. Significantly Mortell recognises that case notes are now the joint property of the agency and the clients we serve. He highlights that these clients have a right of access to the information, a right to have incomplete, incorrect or misleading information amended and the rights of a client to be given reasons for the decisions made by a public body. Specifically Mortell challenges social workers to develop practices of recording, which will be, both transparent and constructive in our work with clients.

In attempting to offer some suggestions for social work practice which will be both transparent and participative the author will draw on the ethical position of 'participatory action' espoused by Imelda McCarthy the social work academic and constructivist therapist. She talks about developing 'practices of participatory ethics' (McCarthy, 1998), wherein social workers engage with clients to jointly deconstruct, not only the types of language we use but also to re-examine and re-position the 'them and us' boundaries we impose so that we can work together in joint action throughout the course of the social work relationship.

The ethics of case notes:

"Those who do not have the power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts." (Salman Rushdie)

I've heard it said somewhere, by someone important, I think, that: "Social work files damn people to a written history of their past mistakes", or maybe it was their past weaknesses, or problems. It was a saying close enough to those words. I wish I had written it down at the time, and referenced it well. All I'm left with now is my memory of unclear words that are important and useful to me. It would be quite useful if I now had some way of checking these words with the person who spoke them. I could check both the words and the speaker's intentions.

The problem of remembering clearly who said what, and in what context is a regular problem for myself and many social workers who try to write up files and keep notes of social work conversations. I think it is hugely difficult for a professional to begin to write after a crisis meeting, difficult family meeting, long day or trying week. It is also wrong to the people we meet with, to write up 'case notes' in these circumstances. Our attempts can become tired efforts. We further wrong people when we write about them in their absence and do not give them recourse to examine or answer what we 'professionals' have written about their lives. In writing like this, all we can ever do is write a subjective interpretation (our own side) of what the other (always in a less powerful position than us) has said (Hogan, 1994).

Letter writing and collaborative notes are ways of keeping files, up-to-date, accessible, and accountable. More than this however is the fact that this type of collaboration and engagement in the recording of each session or conversation invites and challenges people to become authors in their own case notes and consequently in their own lives. Rather than writing subjective, one-sided accounts of what we think we remember people as having said we develop participatory actions which are more likely to support peoples ability to speak about their lives in a more accountable (able to give an account) and responsible (able to respond) way (McCarthy, 1994, p.233). I am presenting this approach as a practical application, an ethical position, and as a therapeutic device.

LETTER WRITING

"If you wouldn't write it and sign, don't say it." (Thought for the Day)

Letter writing is one method of putting on paper an account, or memory of the social work conversation. It is a letter written by the social worker in the early time after the meeting. The letter is sent to the person, or family involved and a copy is kept on file. Letter writing as record keeping allows for the creation of two copies of 'the file' one kept by the worker, the other by the family. Individuals and families immediately have open access to their own records, workers have to become accountable and records become interactive.

The letter is written structurally, in such a way as to record the date, place and personnel involved in the meeting. The letter remembers the conversation, the points raised by all parties, the review of the previous meetings, goals for the future, plans, commitments or contracts. The letter includes an invitation for the recipient to redress any part of the lettered account. The reader/recipient may be invited or encouraged to write in

response, and this letter in turn is included to become part of the file. The reader/recipient is also invited to consider the contents of the letter and comment or critique the letter in the next session.

These letters are a contemporaneous record, which satisfy the demands of court systems. The letters can be used to chart the changes or to plan the therapeutic development through each session. Letter writing not only bridges the worrying gap between agency files and people's rights to access information kept about them, it also creates an interactive space, encouraging the co-construction of meaningful conversations and placing the responsibility for joint action within the relationship of social worker and client.

Creative uses of letters:

One specific time I always try to write letters is in my work with children who are living in care. In my experience many of these children do not receive many letters, let alone letters that remember and honour what they have said. There is something very private and respectful about sealing an addressed envelope and sending it directly to another person. There can be profound implications in talking together with an individual or family about whom the letter should be addressed to. Often the symbolic effect of recognising the child or adolescent in their own right has a very important effect on individuals. Issues of personal privacy and safety become highlighted in the discussion of who is to receive letters in this way. Letters can be encouraged as a way of communicating within discordant families or couples to help facilitate practices of speaking and listening. Another creative application of letters in family work is when families are encouraged to create a time and space for letter reading rituals.

Letters can be kept and consulted as documents of support, encouragement and guidance at times of need (White, 1995). Letters can be presented on behalf of people to re-introduce them to their communities or families. Social work letters can be used in a radical practice, which offers a 'counter story,' or 'contra file' on behalf of the person we are working with. For example we as professionals can sign letters which recognise and celebrate the positive in a person's life not just the negative (Madigan and Law, 1998). Too often the negative stories told about us become almost 'spell-binding,' trapping us in the negative cycles of self-fulfilling prophecies. The therapeutic use of letters in this type of radical social work practice can work like 'anti-spells' (Okri, 1999) which reclaim the misrepresenting stories told about people.

I believe that these types of letters can be usefully used in child protection settings as well as child psychiatry or other social work contexts. The letters presented here are not chosen or created as excellent examples of this way of working but as everyday examples of the usefulness of this practice.

Therapeutic Language and Positive Parenting:

This letter is one I wrote to a young boy and his mother, who unexpectedly missed an early morning appointment. I have been seeing Mark since he was referred to the Child Psychiatry Clinic for fire setting and fighting with his mother, and others in the neighbourhood.

Example One:

The Family Centre
Town Street
Top Town
Ms Anybody

Dear Mary and Mark,

I am writing to you as I missed you for our appointment this morning. I am sure we arranged to meet on Tuesday at 8.30am. I hope you are both well. When you did not arrive I took the time to think about the two of you and the worries that brought you to talk with me.

I wonder if you forgot our appointment, or if you decided not to come? I wonder if I might have confused you the last day when we met? I remember saying I was not sure how I could be of help to the two of you and I asked you both to think about what you hoped would change from your coming to meet and talk with me.

I remember that we have met together now three times. When we first met, Mark had been referred, at your request I think, by his doctor, Dr. Spring, and also by his class teacher Helen Dunne. I know at that time, you, your doctor and the class teacher were concerned about Mark's change in behaviour, you described him becoming angry, hard to control and hitting out at other children.

I know from meeting and talking with you that you have asked the question, whether Mark's behaviour might be the result of any abuse you worry he might have suffered? I also know from talking with you that you are specifically worried about Mark lighting fires in the house and the neighbourhood, although the last day we met Mark had not lit any fires.

I would like to complement you Mary on how well you have parented, and still parent Mark during these very worrying times. I was particularly impressed in how you allowed Mark talk about his Uncle Sean babysitting him, and hitting him. This was I think shocking and news for you, but you listened to Mark and acted to stop Sean babysitting Mark. I think you might agree that Mark himself and his behaviour is now more relaxed. I am sure that Sean's hitting Mark was a very big worry and upset for Mark. Mark is lucky to have you there to listen and protect him.

When we last met both of you spoke about how you hoped to get on better together. I watched you play some games and laugh together and I can imagine that this happy time together is very special to you.

You talk a lot about how your time together has become negative with a lot of giving out. Mary you describe how you spend your time worrying, chasing, and giving out and grounding Mark. Mark in turn seems to spend his days, either getting into trouble or trying to get out of being grounded. (He seems to have become quite a charmer in his ability to get himself free from being grounded, some would call him mischievous others would call him resourceful!). However I do know that there are some times in the week that you share together. For example, you both talk a lot about enjoying going swimming together.

Mary you will know from your work in the youth centre, that we always try to advise parents to focus on the positives in their relationship with their child and to try to ignore the negative behaviours that are not dangerous. Can I suggest to you that you and Mark plan, and really try to keep, a promise to do something together that you really like; go swimming together, take some special time together to play a board game. I know Mark loves animals, maybe you could think of something special to do with Mark each week involving animals?

I know that something small that you do together, often, that you both enjoy will make a huge difference for both of you. I am only suggesting this because I know you can already do the difficult part of being a parent, listening to Mark's fears and upsets and then acting to protect him. Once again can I complement you on this and wish you well with the rest.

If you have decided to finish coming to this clinic that is fine. I'd appreciate it if you would contact me to let me know your decision, even to say goodbye to yourself and Mark.

With my good wishes.

Yours sincerely

Fergus Hogan, Social Worker

The letters I write can be of all lengths. This letter took two pages and some time to write. I wrote it in the hour that I had in my diary to see this young boy and his mother. The letter was written with a number of goals in my mind; as a summary of our past three meetings, as an invitation and request to attend again, as an intervention of advice if the mother and child choose not to attend again. Also as affirmation that people can choose to stop coming to unhelpful therapy rather than being judged as 'dropping out of therapy'.

Much of the language and ideas in this specific letter are influenced by the ideas of 'solution focused work'. "I asked you both to think about what you hoped would change from your coming to meet and talk with me." I was also intentionally including a strategic manoeuvre where I wanted to raise the point that I may not have the answers to the family's worries but that the family themselves should remember their own problem solving resources. This letter is also concerned with highlighting Michael White's ideas of 'unique outcomes, contradictions and sparkling events', (White, 1995, p.202), which are all descriptions of alternative stories or 'counter plots', which re-describe the presented 'problem saturated story' (White and Epston, 1990) – "I watched you play some games and laugh together and I can imagine that this happy time together is very special to you both." I am not suggesting that letters should only be used to put a gloss or sum up all that is good. From the example it is clear that the difficult and dangerous issues of fire lighting, possibilities of abuse and behaviour management are developed. However, the position adopted throughout the letter is one of honouring Mark's mother's abilities and qualities as a parent and then developing possibilities or 'preferred' patterns of communication. This approach to positive parenting is carefully outlined in the 'Parents Plus Programme' developed by the Irish practitioners John Sharry and Carol Fitzpatrick (Sharry, 1999).

When people miss a session I try to include a tone of invitation in the letter I send. This is generally helped by reference to how hard it might be to continue or to come back to the conversation. I include this as a respectful recognition of a person's struggle or dilemma, and an invitation to return by choice at a later date (Hogan, 1998). Another often forgotten beauty of letters is the level of intimacy which they create between the sender and the recipient, where someone has taken time to think and write to another in his or her absence (Moore, 1994). The issue of intimacy in social work is often left unspoken and unwritten about. Yet even in the most difficult issues of social work we are engaged in the most intimate aspects of people's lives (Weingarten, 1991, 1992).

The possibilities of a good start!

After I sent this letter, Mark's mother phoned to apologise for 'sleeping it out'. We arranged a meeting for the next week. Mark was under threat of being suspended from school for bad behaviour, so he had asked to meet me at 8am before school, this was something we successfully arranged. The meeting began with Mary's very negative description of Mark's 'bad' behaviour and the arguments involved in getting up and out of the house in time for our early morning meeting. At eight o'clock in the morning, I did not feel excited by the thought of a 'problem saturated conversation.' Winnie the Pooh offers an important suggestion for beginning the day; "If possible, try to find a way to come downstairs that doesn't involve going bump, bump, bump on the back of your head." This is also a good suggestion as to how we should at least try to begin our social work meetings with people. In an attempt to shift the focus of our conversation from a wholly negative focus towards one with some more possibilities for change I suggested that I might read out loud the letter I had written the week before. Mark and his mother agreed. As I read the letter aloud, Mark moved to sit beside his mother who, in turn, put her arm around him. When I finished the letter, Mark's mother said "I'll tell you one thing, you're a terrible reader, but a great listener." We laughed, (although I was disappointed at being called a 'terrible reader') and our conversation changed its focus to recognising the positive accomplishments of Mark and his mother in their relationship together. Mark's file is now a collection of letters written in this language and used in this way.

COLLABORATIVE NOTES:

"Poverty in an age of affluence is being unable to write and having others write about you." (Thought for the Day)

Collaborative notes are again a development on the theme of narrative and letter writing (Powel, 1997). Collaborative notes are, as one might expect, notes written in collaboration with an individual or family. Collaborative notes written together at the end of the session record both the social worker's and the individual person's experience or position.

I introduce the idea and use of letters and collaborative notes with people early on, when I meet them first. I talk with them about my needing to keep notes on file, but also my ethical difficulty in writing after I meet with someone or keeping on file anything that they have not seen or have not recourse to redress.

I very strongly see this practice of letter writing and collaborative note taking as being both responsible and respectful. The joint venture of collaborative note taking asks that both parties accept responsibility for their part in the process of social work. Towards the last part of the session I return to the idea of collaborative note taking, by saying something like, "Maybe we could try to sum up what we've said or said we'd do before the next session. I'd like to write this part down as I mentioned, and I'd be happy to send you a copy or have it ready for the next day."

Collaborative notes should not be considered as statements of compromise, where either side feels they can not include a difficult or different point. In fact, collaborative notes can, at times, most usefully highlight different positions or ways of thinking from the people involved in the meeting.

Example Two:

Collaborative Notes, 23/4/2000. Meeting between Fergus Hogan, Social Worker and Jane Mann. Health Centre, Main Street. 3.30 –5pm.

This meeting was held to discuss the fact that Jane's son Kevin was placed on an emergency basis with his maternal aunt and uncle in Thomastown on Friday night. On Friday night last the Gardai were contacted by concerned neighbours who reported that Kevin was left at home alone (again) time 9.30pm. They moved him to Thomastown at 10.30 by which time Jane had not yet returned home.

I had left a note to meet on Monday morning and it was today Wednesday that Jane made first contact with the social work department. Jane explained that she knew that Kevin was safe with these relatives since her neighbours had let her know what had happened. I explained that I would have expected Jane to make contact with the health centre much sooner.

Jane very clearly said that she wanted Kevin to be returned immediately and said that she had only left the house for a very short while to get some cigarettes from a friend and that she got delayed talking when she thought Kevin was safely asleep. I explained that even though there was not a legal order removing Kevin, that myself and the social work team would need to talk with Jane much more before we could decide if it was safe for Kevin to return home. Specifically I want to talk with Jane about the allegations made by the neighbours that she 'often' leaves Kevin alone while she goes to the pub to drink. Also that the Gardai waited for an hour, late on Friday night and you could not be found and that you did not make any contact for 5 days.

Again Jane expressed her strong wish just to have Kevin home and only after a long talk together did she reluctantly agree to allow Kevin to stay for another week with his relatives.

We have made a number of plans and commitments today these are:

You agreed to leave Kevin with his relatives for the next week, so that we would have space and time:

For you to phone the house and agree a suitable time very soon to visit and spend time with Kevin

That you would make an appointment with the legal advice people, the number is 345267

I would talk with the team I work with so that I can be very clear about what I expect or need you to do so that we as social

workers will feel that it is safe for Kevin to live with you again.

We have arranged two meetings together this week, Friday afternoon at 3.30pm and Tuesday morning at 11am both here in the health centre. I want to talk with you about

- a) Your drinking. You spoke today a little bit about your drinking habits, you said you don't drink all of the time but that you do drink a lot at times during the year that are connected with some painful anniversaries in your life. I think this is something really important to talk about together.
- b) I want to talk about what it is like to be a sole or lone parent with an active 'boyish' 7 year old. And who gives you any type of support or encouragement. You described today how on the contrary your family criticises, judge and isolate you. You believe that they are the people who reported you to the Gardai.
- c) I also want to talk about what role or responsibility, John's father plays in his son's life.

Jane has asked that we record that she reluctantly has agreed to leave Kevin for another week. That she loves and misses him and that she really thought he was safely asleep when she left him alone for a short time on Friday night. And that she did not contact me sooner because she knew he was safe with his relatives.

Signed: Fergus Hogan

Jane Mann

Collaborative notes, like letter writing, are both useful records and planning tools. Collaborative notes are co-constructed within the social work session and are, therefore, a time efficient way of working. The joint action of record keeping (which may take the form of bullet points) has the potential to include the points of view of all the members of the system. Many behavioural and solution-focused therapists document word for word what each speaker has said; so that in future sessions family members can be reminded of the exact goals they set themselves. The commitment they made or evidence of how much their reflections or beliefs about a problem or relationship have changed. Collaborative notes should be copied so that the people concerned directly can consult the issues raised and decisions agreed. Some notes include information such as contact addresses and phone numbers, such as legal aid or counselling or therapy centres. Also the collaborative notes may be very important for people as they consider their rights or consult their legal advisers.

Similar to the letter writing this method of collaborative note taking is intended to open spaces of possibilities for future conversations, which would invite parents into conversations on responsible parenting rather than frighten them into silent spaces where they do not account for themselves. Possible conversational spaces for instance in this example would include conversations about types of family and community support for sole parents, the issue of gender justice in parenting; the rights, role and responsibilities of fathers as carers in families and the differences between responsible and dangerous drinking.

Central to the ethics of participative and transparent social work practice is, the endeavour to engage with the people we work with in ways which allow them to speak for themselves. Too often we co-create social work conversations with people wherein they must take up defensive positions or avoid us,

often at the very times when it is crucially unsafe for them to remain silent. Far too many social work files are catalogues of people's failures, deficits and mistakes. We must find ways, which can give a voice within the case notes to the person's story, so that when Kevin reads his file he will know that Jane loves him, misses him and thought he was safe.

SUMMARY

The Freedom of Information Act (1997) has faced social workers with the challenge of keeping records that are both ethical and therapeutically useful. This paper has highlighted the resource and benefits of Letter writing and Collaborative notes as a means of recording social work conversations. The types, style and language of the letters and collaborative notes we co-create can incorporate the different therapeutic frameworks we use. Both types of records are written contemporaneously. Both invite the person involved to become part of co-constructing the written description of the conversation and the planning of the development of sessions. The transparency involved in the collaboration of social workers and those we serve, in regard to record keeping, is an action of 'participatory ethics.' Actions of participation and transparency offer people a redress to what we as professionals say about their lives. In making our social work practice more responsible and accountable we are also inviting and challenging the people we work with to take a position that is in turn more actively responsible and accountable.

The power to have a say in what is said about us is one of the greatest freedoms in life. If social work is about social justice and emancipation we must be centrally involved in supporting the people we serve in becoming subjective authors in the description of their own lives.

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