This article by Polly Baynes focuses on life story work with looked after children and is based on her 20 years’ experience as a practitioner, independent life story work trainer and mentor, independent reviewing officer and children’s guardian. The article traces the history of life story work and considers how changes within social work have affected practice, and are played out within the narratives that we create for children who cannot live with their birth families. The re-emergence of life story work within the current ‘target-led, evidence-based’ culture of social work is discussed and the impact of attitudes to gender, poverty and professional accountability is considered. Finally, there is a discussion of respectful practice with children and the issue of social work power, as manifested in the writing of children’s stories.

Polly Baynes is a children's guardian, independent trainer and risk assessor for Ahimsa Safer Families, an independent agency based in Plymouth

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Introduction

Life story work as a social work technique was developed primarily to meet the needs of children separated from their birth families through adoption or long-term foster care. It comprises three main elements: the gathering up of treasured objects, photographs and mementoes; the creation of a written story that explains the reasons for the child’s moves and gives information about birth family members; and the communication of this story to the child in a meaningful way. Some children are actively involved in the work using play, drawing and visits to previous carers, while for others (such as babies going for adoption) the story is written down for them, to ensure that information is available as they grow older. Life story work is a process, not a product, and most children will need to return to it with the support of carers or workers as their understanding of what happened to them changes over time.

Although life story work is not therapy, it may be therapeutic and can be used during transitions when a child might not be able to cope with therapeutic intervention. It is a flexible tool which can be integrated throughout work with a child, from before they become looked after to many years after adoption or rehabilitation home. Life story work is one of the most skilled and emotionally demanding tasks that a worker can undertake. It can help a child in very difficult circumstances to understand what is happening to them, to express their feelings, contribute to decision-making and share their story with a new family. The work is rewarding and can offer a unique insight into the child’s experience of social work intervention in their lives. This has the potential to enrich practice in many ways.

The standard of life story work offered to children varies tremendously. The most fortunate receive timely and consistent explanations from adults for the changes in their lives and are given the time and attention of a worker who knows both them and their story well. The work is carried out at their own pace and is well prepared and appropriately supervised. Every attempt is made to link the child’s lived experience to the information on the file, to help them to explore the meaning of these events, to recognise what matters to the child in his or her own history and include key people in the process. These children move on to their new families, or go back home, with a sense of the world as a place in which important decisions have been made with care and with a more coherent narrative of their own lives.

Conversely, some children wait weeks or months after being separated from their birth families before they are given photographs or toys from home; others receive no more than a family photograph album and a record of their time in foster care. A number of children are given descriptions of their birth families so glowing they must wonder why they were ever removed. Other carefully constructed life story books languish, gathering dust on top of wardrobes as children have little sense of ownership.
of the work or adopters have not been enabled to pass these stories on. For many children, life story work is too little too late, at the request of the adoption panel. The task is given to workers with variable levels of skill and confidence in communicating with children, little specialist training and inadequate time or resources.

A history of life story work
Life story work emerged in an era when social work was heavily influenced by psychodynamic theory and practitioners regarded their relationship with the client as central to the helping process. This period was already coming to an end by the time *Making Life Story Books* (Ryan and Walker, 1985) was published in the UK. This seminal work remained the only major publication in the field for over 15 years.

The following decade saw a significant shift in the nature of social work practice, which seemed for some time to threaten the practice of life story work with extinction. In the aftermath of a succession of public enquiries and loss of trust in the public sector, the Conservative government (1979–1997) was determined to increase the accountability and reduce the power of the social work profession. An era of inspection and targets was dawning, with an increasing emphasis on information gathering, care management and delegation of work to unqualified colleagues. There was a focus on adherence to procedures and work shifted strongly towards child protection and providing evidence within the courts.

Life story work became a peripheral task, often delegated by social workers with no experience of the work to family support workers who were offered little training. Practice wisdom was dissipated and, as the social work profession increasingly struggled to recruit and retain workers, life story work became seen as an optional extra rather than a core social work skill. Much of the raw material of the work – the memories of workers who had known children and families over many years – flowed out of organisations. The chatty, detailed style of recording of previous decades was abandoned in favour of a more business-like approach, in which it was often hard to find in the file the real child, ‘with chocolate cake on his face’. Children’s stories were lost.

The last few years have seen a number of publications in the field. Resources for children include *My Life Story*, an interactive CD Rom (Betts and Ahmad, 2003), a workbook entitled *My Life and Me* (Camis, 2001) and the booklet *Life Story Work: What it is and what it means* (Shah and Argent, 2006). Ryan and Walker’s original book has been extensively revised and amended in line with growing understanding of the needs of black and minority ethnic children and those who have suffered sexual abuse, with the new title *Life Story Work* (Ryan and Walker, 2003) reflecting a shift of emphasis beyond books to a broader area of work. Two further publications for workers are: *The New Life Work Model* (Nicholls, 2005) and *Life Story Work with Traumatised Children* (Rose and Philpot, 2005).

Life story work has experienced something of a renaissance as a result of government emphasis on adoption, the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to provide children with information about their history and increased scrutiny of the work during inspections. However, this has not been without its difficulties, as life story work does not readily yield measurable outcomes. It is thus difficult to inspect and defies organisational timescales. Robust methods for evaluating the quality of the work have yet to be developed and much depends on relationships developed in the process.

A critical examination
While a renewed emphasis on life story work is to be welcomed, attempts to standardise it are futile and destructive. At the heart of the very best life story work lie the uniqueness and creativity of both the process and the child’s story. This should not be stultified by insistence that all workers use ‘life story
packs’ or by the inspection of the work out of context by adoption panels. A pile of messy drawings may represent a piece of high quality, deeply personal work with a child, while a beautifully presented book may have little meaning for the child concerned. There is a danger that the finished product is mistaken for evidence of the work with the child, as it increasingly becomes seen as another box to be ticked. This is already happening, as I learned when one bemused participant on my course asked, ‘Are you saying I need to actually meet the child?’

Life story works sits somewhat uncomfortably in the world of evidence-based practice and measurable outcomes. Despite being widely regarded as ‘a good thing’, there is little research on its efficacy; one study found scarce benefit to direct work in preparation for adoption with those children who were not amenable to the sessions (Rushton et al., 2004). There is an urgent need for large-scale studies of the experiences of children, birth parents and adopters. Furthermore, the ambivalent status of the work, as neither therapy nor social work, results in an absence of regulation of practitioners. There is no requirement for professional qualification or supervision, despite the powerful and emotive nature of the work (James, 2007).

There is a need for a more critical examination of life story work and recognition that far from being a neutral, benign activity, it is an example of the use of social work power. Life story work reflects the changing face of social work. Our retelling of children’s stories within the work is intimately connected to the world view of both individual practitioners and the social work community within which they operate. Our understanding of fundamental issues, such as sexual abuse or drug misuse, shifts and changes with the times. There is never only one version of the story and it is vital that we recognise that our understanding of children’s histories is historically and culturally contingent. Our information may be inadequate or incorrect and is often deeply at odds with the understanding of children, birth families and sometimes other professionals. Only by beginning to recognise that our knowledge is partial and subjective can we begin to develop a reflexive approach to the work.

The role of gender

One example of the way in which life story work reflects both social work and the wider community is in response to the issue of gender. Male violence to women and children and male sexual abuse of children are prevalent issues in families coming to child protection conference and before the courts, and yet social work has historically failed to engage with men or even to gather basic information about them (Ryan, 2000). Women are regularly seen as responsible for the protection of their children from men, sometimes from men so dangerous that professionals will not visit them alone. The concept of female ‘failure to protect’ runs deep within social work practice (Scourfield, 2003).

These themes often emerge in the life story book, which may explain that ‘your birth mother could not keep you safe from your birth father’, without adding that ‘your birth father would not end the relationship, even though this meant that you could not go home’. Any notion of male responsibility for violence or for the decision to end a relationship that jeopardises the children’s place in the family may be absent. This is not only unjust to the woman concerned but it also diminishes men, robbing them of their responsibility as fathers or a sense of control over their behaviour.

Domestic violence is often described in social work files using sanitised language (Humphreys, 1999) and this is often also true in the life story work. Describing a relationship as ‘volatile’, or with violence ‘between the parents’, is a very different story from one that explains, ‘Your birth father punched your birth mother in the nose, then tried to strangle her.’ We need to question what sense these tidied up stories make
to the child who was there, phoned the police and wiped the blood from a parent’s face.

Social work not only fails to engage with men as risks to their children, but it also often ignores them as potential resources, particularly if they do not live in the family home (Ryan, 2000). The fathering role continues to be defined primarily as that of breadwinner, with little emphasis on practical parenting. Fathers are often invisible in social work files, particularly in the area of neglect. If life story books echo this, as they often do, how can a male child learn to grow into a nurturing, non-violent man when so little is apparently expected of men?

We rarely apply the idea of ‘failure to protect’ to those men who abdicate responsibility for their children’s care when the children’s mother is a chaotic drug user or has serious mental health difficulties. We need to be conscious that we may perpetuate these assumptions in our life story work if we explain that ‘your birth mother could not look after you, your clothes were dirty, you did not always get any tea and she often stayed in bed all day’. We need to fill in the missing parts of the story: ‘Your birth father never came to see you, he did not check whether you were OK’ or ‘Your birth father knew the house was dirty but he never helped clear it up.’

These are the parts of the story that convey to a child that a man can be responsible for a child and actively involved in her or his care. All children (unless bereaved) have two parents, whether or not they have both been involved in their care. It is only when both of these parents, and extended family members, are not able or willing to meet the needs of the child that they become looked after. Our life story work should reflect that.

The role of poverty
We also need to question whether telling the family story in isolation is a sufficient explanation of the child’s removal. Social work has long debated the relative influence of individual pathology and social factors and the role of the profession in achieving social change. The Common Assessment Framework requires us to look at environmental factors, and our day-to-day work tells us that most of the children in the care system come from the most deprived parts of society. Many of the vulnerable parents I work with face the task of raising their children in conditions that would daunt far more resourceful adults. Low incomes, poor housing, racism and unsafe neighbourhoods are routine elements of most social work caseloads, yet are not always made explicit in the life story book. These untold stories deserve to be included, particularly for children who may grow up in middle-class adopted families, with little personal experience of poverty or the kinds of streets on which their birth family lived.

Failures in the system
More specifically, we have a duty to acknowledge within the work the role of the system that is provided to try and keep children at home with their birth families. A recent consultation with children whose names are on the Child Protection Register revealed how important it was to them that their parents were given help and given a fair chance to try and change (Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2006). This is likely to also be true of most children who were adopted against their parents’ wishes. This too must be part of the story, ideally in the words of those who did the helping. Of course, parents do not always accept support and sometimes the life story book will record that ‘the family support worker kept on knocking on the door, but your birth mother wouldn’t let her in’ or ‘the psychiatrist thought he could help your birth father but he would not come to the appointments’.

More difficult are the situations when there has been inadequate help available or the child has experienced further loss and abuse within the care system. We need to be honest with children, telling the story that ‘your birth mother wanted
to go to the drug unit, but there was no place for her for a long time’, or that ‘we thought this would be a good family for you, but we were wrong and sometimes they were really mean to you’. These are some of the hardest stories for us, as professionals, to tell, but it is important to accept a share of responsibility for what has happened on behalf of our flawed and under-funded services. We need to recognise that there are many family problems that we simply do not know how to resolve and to give the child an honest apology when the system has failed them. In this way, we do not lose sight of the reality that both they and their birth parents deserved something better.

**Listening to children**

The last decade has seen a growing emphasis within social work on ‘hearing the voice of the child’. The children’s rights movement has led to an increase in child participation in planning (for example, through attendance at reviews) as well as in service development, recruitment and inspection. Lord Laming’s enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) emphasised the importance of listening to children in order to ensure their protection.

However, these ideas have had only limited impact on the practice of life story work. One possible explanation is that the social work workforce is increasingly uncomfortable engaging with children. The competence-based approach to social work training, the increasingly task-focused nature of supervision and the pressure on social workers to generate information both for inspections and for court processes may all have contributed to this, creating a style of working that is no longer centred on the use of relationship (Simmonds, 2008).

Children need to be involved in the decision to start life story work, but all too often they are required rather than invited to participate. Many of those who grow up outside the care system choose never to explore their family history or secrets, and it is important for looked after young people to be given the choice to learn more at a time that is right for them, rather than in response to organisational requirements. Our role is to make information available, but also to accept that some people may not wish to access that information until they are parents themselves, if ever. We also need to be sensitive about how the sessions will fit into the rest of the child’s life, taking care that we do not require them to return to school immediately after a difficult session or to miss *Hollyoaks* for our convenience.

Opportunities should be provided within the work for children to choose not to participate without needing to be disruptive – for example, using a rug to establish a workspace which can be stepped off if a child chooses ‘not to play’. The use of play creates a natural set of boundaries and a language with which children are familiar. It also conveys respect, indicating that adults are prepared to make themselves vulnerable by entering the child’s world and having the courtesy to communicate in the child’s way.

The inherently dynamic and interactive nature of play also helps to ensure that the work is done with (rather than to) the child and allows the child to play and replay events, finding new meanings. This will help to ensure that the written story reflects the child’s experiences, helping to create a coherent narrative of events, feelings and memories. Without this, we risk creating a life story book that has little meaning to the child, rather like a funeral service delivered by a vicar who never met the deceased.

This notion of working with children to find meaning is crucial to child-centred life story work. The creation of a life story for a child is a significant manifestation of social work power, as we control the limits of the narrative and select information to include. Workers often express concerns that the child wishes to write things in their life story book that are ‘not true’, yet most of us have experienced conversations...
with a parent or sibling in which family events are recalled quite differently to our own memory. We also come to understand our own childhood histories differently as we mature or become parents ourselves. The truth of family life is rarely simple and children may need to cling to an idealised version of events until they are ready to look more closely at what went wrong.

It is important to remember that the story told on the file may be misleading or inaccurate, and can only ever be partial at best given the complexity of real human lives. The file may provide a chronology of decision-making that can be seen as the bones of the story of the child’s removal, but it is the flesh of the child’s lived experience that brings this story to life. It is the child who has lived the story and the child who has the task of understanding and re-understanding these events throughout his or her life. How the child understands things now is always part of the story. We must listen to this in order to learn where to begin with the work, as this is the child’s emotional truth.

A social constructionist approach requires us to treat the child as an active participant in exploring and creating meaning within the safety of the sessions, rather than as a passive recipient of our privileged narrative. The worker’s role becomes that of providing information and offering some alternative ways of framing the story – now or in the future. For example, a child may believe that they were removed from home as a result of their own bad behaviour as a toddler. The worker may respond by telling stories about how all two-year-olds have tantrums and need adults who can help them with this. She may remind the child of how a younger boy in placement throws himself on the floor in a rage when thwarted and how the foster carer gently keeps him safe.

The child may choose to accept or reject this new way of looking at things or may return to this idea at a later date. Very often, it is appropriate to record more than one way of making sense of what has happened:

Raoul thinks that he was a naughty little boy who made his birth mother cross. The family support worker says that Raoul was a lovely little boy who enjoyed playing in the park and had only had tantrums when he was upset or frustrated, like most little children. The judge says that Raoul’s birth mother took too many drugs and didn’t always notice when he needed her to cuddle him or play with him. Raoul’s birth mother says that no one looked after her properly when she was little, and she just didn’t know what to do when he had tantrums.

This approach allows for the possibility of a future change of perspective, in recognition that we all revisit the significant events of our lives as we mature and understand them in new ways. In addition, a life story book that contains many voices is likely to be seen by the child as having more credibility in the future.

**Birth parents’ stories: how much should be told?**

Finally, I consider the issue of social work power and birth parents. When the courts remove a family’s child that power is overt. When we write the story of that removal, the power is covert and, as such, it is less easy to challenge. In life story work, we write the child’s story but it is always the birth parents’ story too. How do we resolve the dilemma of including the voice of these parents in the work? A young woman recently played me a song she had written and recorded for her child who was going to be adopted. The song was beautiful but also a howl of pain and loss that would deeply affect both the child and the adopters. The question for professionals is: To what extent do we have a duty to protect the child from that impact? To what extent does the child have the right to hear the genuine voice of his or her birth mother? It is easy to speak glibly of the importance of adopted children knowing about their birth families, but there is a limit to what we actually want them to know.
These are familiar issues for all those involved in the letterbox process, but they are not easy to resolve.

As we write a life story book, we reduce the complex and messy reality of these real human beings, and the many-layered and sometimes contradictory versions of how their child came to be adopted, to a single version of the truth over which we, as professionals, have total control. The birth parents’ versions of the stories frequently remain untold. Often the chaos and trouble in these adults’ lives have already caused great harm to the child and it may be with good reason that we fear what these stories may do to him or her. We are afraid of the power of these stories to disrupt the placement the child needs. For some children, we can honestly report that ‘your birth mother and father knew that they could not look after you, and they wanted you to have a new family’. For others, their birth parents remain deeply angry many years after the care proceedings end. They continue to feel that their children have been stolen from them and to suffer deep pain at their loss.

**Conclusion**

There are no simple answers to these dilemmas. As we carry out this difficult and important work, it is essential that we recognise the power we wield as we tell and retell these stories of pain and loss. We must remember and respect the many and various understandings of what has happened and have the humility to recognise that our current system has only limited answers to the problems of abuse and neglect. It is likely that all those involved in the adoption triangle will come to judge our motivations and understandings of their lives through the evidence of the stories we write to explain the removal of children and the search for a new family. At present, we are often equipped only with the very best of intentions. It is time to develop a more reflexive and critical approach.

**References**


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