



Mental Health User Narratives: New Perspectives on Illness and Recovery

Bruce M. Z. Cohen
Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, £50.00
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Mental Health User Narratives is an interesting book bringing together changes in mental health services, new ways of working in psychiatry and using mental health service user narratives as a way of trying to ensure that assumptions are not made about the needs of those with severe acute or chronic mental ill health. It is based around English services with emphasis on hospital and home treatment teams.

This book covers the history of the care of those with a mental health problem and the theories as to what caused those problems, from the Middle Ages to what is called the 'post-community care' period. Then there is a chapter on the history and theoretical content of narratives, looking at them from the perspective of person-ality theory, social constructionism and social science. After a chapter explaining crisis intervention and home treatment and one on the methods used to collect the narratives used in the book, are several chapters of narrative. Then themes are explored – descent into illness, psychiatric intervention, recovery from illness and self-coping.

On the whole I found the book very interesting, well researched and respectful of the service-user voice – the service users were from Bradford. It is great to read stories about their ill health in the context of their whole life albeit in broad Yorkshire dialect! I found some of the more theoretical chapters, especially that on narrative, very difficult to read which made me wonder who the book was actually aimed at.

The thematic review of the narratives was perhaps the most interesting part for me. Bradford has always had a tradition of listening to service users in the planning of new services and the author was involved in the setting up of the home treatment service. Therefore, perhaps it is not that surprising that the book finds this service most useful among service users in their recovery. One could maybe argue that those who find the home treatment team the most helpful were the most advanced in their recovery anyway and that those still ending up in hospital were more ill. It is sad, though, to read the comment at the end that the service had been changed from what the users and planners wanted

it to be, to bring it more in line with Government policy.

Many of the usual issues for service users came up – medication, the vacuum that is the psychiatric hospital and the difficulties around relationships, employment and meaningful daytime activity. Because the narratives are from Bradford, which has a large Asian population, there is the chance to compare the issues this group had in common with their English compatriots and those that were different, and this is fascinating.

The author dedicates the book to those who have had mental health problems with the comment, 'This is just the beginning'. I think it would be a good beginning to use the themes of service-user narrative as well as evidence bases to move mental health services on in the future.

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The Bridge

Directed by Eric Steel, Koch Lorber Films, 2006

The Bridge is a documentary by Director Eric Steele that records 24 suicides from jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. The film was inspired by 'Jumpers', Tad Friend's 2003 article in *The New Yorker*. Steel has compared the images of the 'jumpers' to Bruegel's painting 'Landscape with the fall of Icarus'; because the fatal leaps go almost unnoticed by passers-by. In the corner of the painting, a pair of legs disappears into the water with a splash so small it is hardly noticed by the other people in the picture.

The Bay Bridge is one of the most popular suicide destinations in the world. Eleven men died in its construction when it was completed in 1937. Since then it is estimated that 1300 have leapt to their deaths off the 4 ft railing, while only 26 have survived the 220 ft, 4 s, 75 mph jump into the Bay's ice cold water.

The Bridge was filmed in the daylight hours through the whole of 2004 using two cameras one with a telephoto lens that captures a close-up view of the bridge and the other with a wide angle camera that gives a long 'postcard' shot of the bridge. The operator only had to change the tapes every hour and press record. When looking for potential suicides the film crew paid special attention to people who were alone, hesitant, lingering or pacing a little too long, sometimes crying or just staring.

Interviews with families, friends and those who survived their fall are one of the most touching aspects of the film. The film doesn't just document jumps, it triangulates on the jumpers, their families and the witnesses whose lives are changed by their inadvertent participation in a stranger's act of self-destruction.

The two stories that stand out in the film are those of Gene and Kevin. The film begins and ends with Gene's story. Gene Sprague, a long-haired 34-year-old biker-type is seen walking up and down the bridge contemplating suicide. Steel was criticised for not calling for help since Gene was filmed for 90 min before his jump. Steel has taken pains to point out that saving lives was a priority for him, that the bridge security office was called the moment anything suspicious was seen through the camera. Steel estimates they prevented six jumps that year. But Steel did mislead the authorities about the purpose of his cameras and did not inform relatives that he had actual footage of their loved ones' last moments until much later. He felt that the film would not have been possible if he had not taken these measures.

The story of Kevin is a very different one. Kevin Hines, a young man with bipolar disorder decided midway in his jump that he wanted to live and positioned his body into a sitting posture before he hit the water. He survived, but with severe damage to his back. Kevin recalls standing on the bridge crying for 40 min before making the jump. The only person to approach him was a German tourist, oblivious to his tears, who asked him to take her picture.

Steel wanted to punctuate the debate about the suicide barrier at the bridge and as a consequence of the film the Bridge District authorities instigated a study on a possible barrier in April 2006; the cost of actually building the barrier is estimated at \$25 million.

What stands out in the film is the stark contrast between the beautifully shot film and the difficult issue at its heart. The issue of suicide has been dealt with great honesty. There is nothing gratuitous or vulgar in the depictions. No judgements are made nor is there any accusatory finger wagging. The documentary is brave and unflinching; it is honest and therefore hard to watch. It is a must see for anyone with an interest in mental health and suicide.

FRIEND, T. (2003) Jumpers. The fatal grandeur of the Golden Gate Bridge (letter from California). *The New Yorker*, 13 October.

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