



REFLECTION ARTICLE

# Honouring Stories of Struggle: Reassessing Australia's Records of Disadvantage – Hearing the Voices of Those Who Struggle

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## Abstract

When deciding what and how documentation should be made and kept about the experiences of welfare recipients, it is vital to ensure that recordkeeping strategies meet the needs, preferences and expectations of the recipients of those services. This article presents a transcription of a video created by a non-government community welfare organisation in South Australia that features interviews with a range of that organisation's clients. Interviewees express concern about the partial and overly negative view of their life experiences captured in the documentation of welfare provision. They suggest that a more holistic approach to documenting their lives would preserve a more accurate and humanistic record of their stories of struggle.

**Keywords:** *Community welfare; Recordkeeping; Non-government organisation*

*Note: This is a transcription of a video presented at the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Documenting Australian Society symposium, 'Honouring the Stories of Struggle' hosted by the National Archives of Australia in Canberra on 21 October 2022. Transcription prepared by Rachel Watson.*

**M**y name is Robyn Sutherland and I am the Executive Manager of Community Services at Uniting Communities. Uniting Communities is a large, not-for-profit non-government community welfare organisation that provides services to many thousands of people across South Australia.

When I was first asked to present at this seminar, it took me a while to get my head around how I would have anything useful to say. I thought about archiving in a very generalist sense. As I thought about it, I realised that our organisation has been around for nearly 115 years and, in fact, for 115 years what we have been doing is collecting people's stories and archiving their information. I then had to ask myself, were we actually honouring the stories of people and the information that they give to us?

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Like most organisations, we collect a lot of information. It needs to meet the criteria of the Privacy Act, it has to meet legislation and it needs to meet the requirements of the government bodies that fund us. It has to meet the requirements for how we want to use information in the organisation. And as I thought about that, I realised that, for most people that come to our organisation, they are usually very marginalised. Sometimes for those people, it might be a one-off interaction and we never see them again. But predominantly for most people, organisations such as ours or government agencies we have been collecting their information and archiving it, all their lives. Sometimes for the lives of their family members and their parents.

The information that we gather is problem saturated and only shows the stories of those people while they're interacting with us. It doesn't honour who they are the other 90% of the time that they're not interacting with us. I then thought that it was important that I went out and started talking to people and asking them what they understood about the information that was being collected about them, what that said about them and whether they would have an interest in telling their full story about who they are.

I then started looking at our data; how many requests do we receive from people wanting to access their files? I looked at a period of time of 12 months; it was through COVID so it probably was a lot less, but we had 200 requests for files to be accessed. Eighty-five percent of those requests were coming from government; from child protection, and it was very much looking for information probably to have children removed – whether it was right or wrong, it was that snippet. Only 13 people asked to access their file just out of interest to find out what was being collected about them. I was quite shocked – and then the more that I asked people did they understand what was being collected about them, many people didn't. What they said is because we were explaining how we collect and use information at the beginning of their journey with us they were at the heart of crisis and not always hearing.

I then talked to staff to find out from them, do we collect the whole story? In fact, most of the information that we collect is about trauma, sadness, crisis and hurt. Very little is collected about people when things are going well, because when things are going well, people leave us and we stop collecting it.

I thought what would be most useful in my presentation for this seminar is for you to hear from the voices of people who are marginalised. I went to two different groups and in those two groups are people who interact with the Child Protection System and those who come through our Drug and Alcohol Services. What I know about them is that they've probably had people collecting information about them all of their lives, and I thought what would be more useful is hearing from them, hearing their stories. And as I spoke to people and as you hear these stories, people wanted to talk about the moment, what was going on for them now, what had gone on for them while they were interacting with services like ours. I wanted to try and steer people away from that and talk about whether they want to share their whole story, but I think the thing that we do have to think about is for these people, collecting their stories has had a negative connotation, they kept talking about 'it's the negativity, it's not who I am'. It is so important for people to talk about what that meant for them, and then once they talked about that process there was this real passion for wanting people to know the full story. But we never ask people what information they want us to collect about them. When they leave our services, we don't ask them 'what else do you want to tell us about yourself' and that's a really interesting question. We need to be thinking about that in the process of how we collect information. Here are a few snippets of the interviews that we've conducted. I wonder what questions it will have you asking yourself about how do we collect information. How do we collect stories, and what do we want to do with them?

‘No mandala could tell my story’.

‘What you’d have on the paper wouldn’t reflect anything of what I’ve done in my life’.

‘The collection of information, I don’t feel tells the whole story of who I am’.

‘Sometimes you’ll mention something and it gets focussed on in the wrong way, like maybe it looks more important on paper than it actually is in my life’.

‘I guess unfortunately the majority of the data that has been collecting in regards to myself, it’s negative’.

‘I really do think it’s important for me to share my whole story’.

‘My story is about overcoming adversity’.

‘I’d like to think there was some nice things said about me. Unless it’s just from the initial interview – and if it’s just from the initial interview I don’t even remember doing it because I was in active addiction at that point in time and I was probably drunk. So it just depends on when and where they were taking that information and whether they keep taking notes as you improve during the program or how it works, I’m not 100% sure’.

‘I don’t know where my data is I don’t even know completely what is collected. I don’t know who wants to use it, I don’t know who can use my data’.

‘I actually have folders full of education results and accomplishments and achievements in my life that nobody would look at’.

‘People have been collecting information for probably the last 10 years’.

‘So over the past year there’s been a lot of information collected about me and my family there’s been Mental Health services drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, Department of Child Protection, several Uniting Communities programs, Metropolitan Youth Health, Legal Commissions. I have no idea about the data that’s collected on me or who it has been shared with or where it goes – I just know I’ve been asked a lot of questions in the past year’.

‘I think people have been collecting data and information about me since the day I was born. I guess the minute I came out of the womb or maybe when I was still in the womb actually. So, all of that is still on record’.

‘When I’ve gone to get help... that’s the records that everybody’s got. They come out and were used against me in a bad way, a really bad way, and used against my children. My children were split up in different houses all over the place’.

‘Well, the current information they have on me makes me look like it’s just about drugs and alcohol and problems with substance and this and that. But I’ve achieved a lot more than that in my life and you know, obviously that’s not recorded’.

‘Moving on I’m a completely different person to what I was two years ago, you know, I’m just not that person anymore. And it is hard because all that information that’s going to be held on me is all based on the negatives and of extreme parts of my life from when I was in a terrible place, you know. So, they’re always going to be over my head, and yeah, it’s hard.’

I'd really like a nice clean slate now, you know in some aspects of things but I'd also like to... well my stories can be useful as well, you know, but not necessarily as defining who I am now, because I'm not that person anymore'.

'Going over all the information that has been collected about me, some of the times that it's affected me negatively getting a job, it didn't really represent me and who I am properly. The data that was collected, it showed a bad light on me without looking at me as a person and who I am, it was just looking at one event one time where I might have made a mistake. And that stopped me, or could have stopped me, from getting employment'.

'My understanding of the information that's been collected about me now is different to what it was when it was collected. I didn't understand it until it was used against me in court and the youth courts. Then when they collected all the information from all the services that I'd used over the years and presented to me and presented to the courts I couldn't believe that that was the picture that was kind of collated of me, and that was how I was perceived by the courts. I had lots of files at home and references from employers and really good stuff but none of that was looked at. The stuff that was looked at was stuff from different services that I'd gone into when I was in a real hard way, a bad way, and needed food for my family or needed housing or things were going bad and I'd gone into these different services looking for help and I had to present myself as in a bad way. So, when I went to the youth courts there was all this paperwork saying that I was constantly in a bad way and it wasn't accurate. It wasn't an accurate portrayal of my life'.

'Nobody's asked me about the things that I've wanted to say, they've all demanded that I answered the questions that they wanted to hear'.

'I think stories about people like myself would be very important to collect and the whole picture, you know, not just those negative events, the whole entire thing'.

'I think there'd be great value in hearing my story and what I've been through'.

'I think there's a point in recording my story'.

'If somebody was to ask me about my story they should literally just ask me, 'well, how do you see yourself?''

'Who I am now, I'm a mum, a stay-at-home mum who also works as a disability support worker or in the aged care sector. I am a good person, I try to be a good person, very much so. I've learnt from my mistakes, I want my children to see me being a good person. I want hopefully for them to learn from my mistakes'. 'If I was asked to share my story I would probably be interested in that. I suppose for me the comebacks are always bigger than the setbacks. Every time I've fallen I've gotten up and achieved a lot more than I had, and especially this time around in my recovery journey, my comeback has been full of positives that would be wonderful to share and could help a lot of other struggling addicts out there'.

'Who would benefit from hearing my story? I just believe that whoever's in charge of the youth courts could really use some help, like in structuring their system a bit better, they really need to listen to people that are in the system, but they know and then not think that because they've got University educations that they're somehow high and mighty and superior and brush off people that maybe are criticising their actions. Well maybe not criticising

their actions, we want to be heard and we want them to take note of what we're saying and to just give options, to make better options'.

'If someone was to record my entire life story to get the real picture of who I am today, I would want to share all the bits, good, bad everything because all of that is who I am, that defines me, the good and the bad, the whole picture. If I leave bits out it's not going to make a lot of sense is it?'

'As far as sharing my story and adding that to the archives, I'd be absolutely...that would be brilliant to do. I mean, as far as my journey going forward from this program, the jobs that I'm going to be looking at doing is going to be a lot based on my life experience so I'm going to archive that regardless of whether someone wants me to do it for the archives because I'm going to have that in my resume. My life story's going to be part of my resume and all the stuff that I've done and working with Indigenous people and working in drug and alcohol and, you know, being a chef and having apprentices and running large teams of people as a manager, all that stuff's going to go into my story and I'm going to write it, whether someone asks me to do it or not. So that's going to be part of me creating my resume to move forward into what I want to do'.

'Who am I all alright; who I am is I'm a nice, caring, good person who just wants to be involved in society and has missed a lot through his life and has made many, many, many mistakes but knows he's made these mistakes and I know that I can be a massive contribution to something. I don't know what, you know, I can be very helpful, whether it's in this organisation or the art world or I just don't know. But I think I've got heaps of potential that was definitely muffled by my choices of drugs etc and in life. That's who I am and that's what I wish people knew about me is where I'm sort of headed and who I am now, and not of those terrible times they were in my life where I mean, geez, I was sometimes suicidal in my life or I had to come to a breaking point before I got to becoming wanting to become good. But I've never felt so good about myself in my life and never been as happy as I am now and just to my thirst for knowledge and my brain's all opening up and everything and, you know, I was just dumbed down, you know, for a long time, you know. I didn't have any confidence, the loss of self-esteem as well, you know, Now I'm just ready, I'm really, really happy, you know, just ready to take on everything. But, yeah, I definitely think that my information like when I went to court the other day, I was saying, I had all these letters of, carried references in that from Uniting Communities drug and alcohol rehabilitation and prevention service and everything else and the judge actually stopped and commended me on it, you know. Which was good but whereas if I hadn't had all those letters and that, my history would have looked terrible, you know. But yeah, then he was obviously glad that I gave him that information so then it was good, yeah'.

Going through this whole process for me really has me questioning the way we collect information. I know that we do it in the way that meets privacy and meets all the legislative requirements, but I feel that we're actually missing the most important thing about people, which is about their resilience and their whole story. That we're only getting one bit and so certainly what I'm taking away from this is that I think we're going to start to look at the way we collect information. At the heart of it, or at least when people are leaving our services, ask them 'what else do you want to tell us about yourself?'