Practice-based stories
Tools for teaching and learning

Jennifer Lehmann

The use of practice-based short stories as a teaching and learning tool in the education of human service professionals, particularly in social work, is the focus of this article. Based on teaching practice experiences, the use of written narratives is explored in relation to developing both content knowledge and reflective learning capacity. This edition of Children Australia *also includes one of the stories used by Social Work students in their second year at La Trobe University as a basis for tutorial and seminar discussion, together with one of the essays received from students in response to the assessment task. Given the encouraging responses of students to the use of practice-based stories as a learning tool for human service professionals, professionals in the field and teaching staff are invited to consider the further development of storying techniques.*

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The responsibilities and dilemmas of teachers of human service professionals in the disciplines of social work, nursing, education and other fields of practice are not so very different to those of us who practise in our chosen field. Teaching staff are acutely aware that students have a right to receive quality teaching, relevant and contemporary information, attention to their needs, opportunities for participation in their own learning, and a range of other supports that contribute to the achievement of professional practice standards. Increasingly, professional standards include not only the need for specific knowledge and competencies, but ethical behaviours and the ability to practise in a reflective manner. This means that students in human service disciplines need to develop reflective learning capacity and lifelong learning patterns.

Teachers are constantly seeking ways of making student learning meaningful and of value and, over the years, have developed an array of tools which are now familiar to us all. The use of films and videos, overheads and Powerpoint, class-based exercises including debates, discussions and role plays, the use of guest speakers, visits to significant places, and the Internet, all form part of the delivery of subjects across our education system in Australia.

The practice based stories that are referred to in this article were written over the last decade and were drawn from my direct practice experience and observations within the human service context. They have recently been published by St Lukes Innovative Resources under the title *The Harveys and Other Stories: An Invitation to Curiosity*. While not originally written as teaching and learning tools, it became evident during a sessional teaching appointment some years ago that the use of one of the stories created intense interest and debate. It seemed that the story, *The Harveys*, elicited responses that were qualitatively different to those I had observed when using case scenarios or vignettes. This experience raised a number of questions in my mind that became more urgent following my appointment as a lecturer in Social Work with La Trobe University based at Bendigo. Could the stories be used to maintain links between theory and practice? Would the use of stories contribute to developing reflective learning capacity? Are stories more able to capture the complexity of thoughts and feelings that social workers need to be able to deal with in their day-to-day practice? What other ways might practice-based stories be used?

Story telling is an ancient art that spans all cultural groups. Storying traditions, both oral and symbolic, are often associated with bards and wise elders, fairytales, myths and epic journeys, and carry rich philosophical and knowledge content from one generation to the next. Our stories connect us to our history, contribute to our identity, give expression to important values and ethical issues, and provide an opportunity to 'rehearse' in our minds potential future roles and responses to life events (Cobley 2001; Jalongo & Isenberg with Gerbracht 1995). To be apprenticed to a master, to study under expert tutelage, or to commit oneself to a vocation was never to merely accumulate knowledge and technical skills. It involved being immersed in a context rich in stories that carried meaning, spanned temporal constraints and awarded membership.

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Stories, both oral and written, continue to feature in our daily lives and in our education and learning approaches. They are widely used by children and adults, but are more likely to be recognised as teaching tools for children. For instance, teachers of children use stories to develop comprehension, reading and writing skills and oral expression. They are often used because of their potential to draw and hold interest. The dramatic devices of humour, tragedy, goodness, evil and sensuality are but few of those that draw us to listen to, or read, one another's stories.

THE THEORY

Since the 1980s considerable interest has developed in the use of narrative in research strategies (Fook 1996; Riessman 1993), in adult education (Jalongo et al. 1995) and in therapeutic approaches (Payne 2000; White & Denborough 1998). However, the literature relating specifically to the use of stories as an adult learning tool is somewhat limited. It is more common to find texts containing scenarios for analysis and discussion similar to those used in Compton and Galaway (1999) or Jones and May (1992). Teachers across a range of disciplines also commonly use case examples, or case scenarios, with considerable success. Many of these are drawn from their own experiences in the field and are autobiographical in this sense.

Interest in narrative and its relationship to human psychological processes encompass research into the narrative structure of perception, emotion and action, narrative psychotherapy and narrative approaches to human development (Botella, Figueras, Herrero & Pacheco 1997). This is because people make sense of their world in narrative terms giving meaning to actions, events, objects and relationships (Czarniawska-Joerges 1998; Weick 1995) and proactively plan and enact narratives that are consistent. Stories bring together sequences in time, focal character(s), narrative voice, an evaluative frame of reference and contextual features providing a mirror to the social world which Pentland (1999, p. 711) describes as 'a kind of cognitive and cultural ether that permeates and energizes everything that goes on.' Weick (1995) goes further, arguing that sense making depends on the ability to think in narrative terms. To be able to look back, look ahead, construct an understanding of events and give accounts of our actions (and those of others) is central to social relations (Pentland 1999).

Of particular interest in recent literature are professional stories (or stories of practice) that can be used for developing reflective practice in professional disciplines (Pentland 1999; Jalongo et al. 1995). Jalongo et al (1995, p. 7) suggest this is because narrative 'contradicts deeply rooted dichotomies in Western thought by connecting knowing with feeling and by linking thought with action'. Based on the assumption that authentic learning is embedded in contexts of people, places, artefacts and culture of education, they propose that narrative is able to capture complexities in spite of often appearing to be simple in form.

Social work relies on narrative. We listen to our clients' stories about their lives, we reconstruct clients' accounts through the writing of case notes, and we develop our services and programs from collective accounts of the lives of others melded with those of our own experiences. As social workers we tell stories when we debrief, when we are in supervision, when we participate in workshops and over coffee with colleagues. Educating social workers also relies on stories; stories of research that has developed new knowledge, stories in the form of case scenarios for analysis, and stories that address practice in specific disciplinary fields complete with the language of that field of endeavour.

Stories, whether they are self-narratives or fictional forms of narrative, are defined by Sarbin (1986, p. 9) as:

> ... a way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions; it is an achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations; time and place are incorporated. The narrative allows for the inclusion of actor's reasons for their acts, as well as the causes of happening.

Stories that are useful to students for learning purposes are believed to have four essential characteristics (Jalongo et al 1995). The first of these is that the story is genuine and rings true to the listener. Practice-based stories are quickly discarded in the mind of the listener if they seem impossible or improbable, or are excessively removed from what is seen

as a likely context of practice. Secondly, the story needs to invite reflection and discourse. There needs to be more to say, more to know or points over which it is worth arguing. Stories need to lend themselves to be interpreted and reinterpreted allowing for different frames of reference and different points of view to be considered, and finally, stories need to be powerful and evocative.

Stories are able to provide the basis for exploration of relevant knowledge and technical skills. The story 'Inside Anna', for instance, encourages students to explore a range of relationship and developmental issues. We need to ask questions like:

- why might Anna have behaved the way she did?
- what processes of adaptation might she have made to her life situation in earlier years?
- how might the children be affected?
- what policies might impact on the family's lifestyle?
- what do we know about the impacts of separation and reconciliation?
- are the particular issues that are associated with child development important to consider?

As developing human service professionals, students need to understand issues associated with family dissolution, sociological and demographic changes connected to marriage and divorce in Australia, the structures and services that respond to children and families, the impacts of context and life events on identity and behaviour, and the social policies shaping service delivery. This story also provides an opportunity to discuss intervention approaches – family therapy for instance – and the theories underpinning intervention strategies. Students may want to explore strategies for engaging with adults and children, or assess the strengths and constraints of specific therapeutic processes for working with the characters in the story.

Through this process students are able to develop investigator skills and a knowledge base that is immediately useful to their needs. Encouraging students to seek out knowledge for themselves that is connected to their interests and concerns moves away from pedagogical approaches that impose bodies of knowledge on the assumption that students are able to translate it into practice at some later stage.

In addition, Westberg with Jason (2001) suggest that learners need to be able to extract general principles and strategies that might guide their decisions and actions. Using storied accounts provides an opportunity to ask students:

- how would you describe the strategies used by the characters in the story?
- would you have used these strategies and, if not, what strategies would you have used, and why?

However, stories lend themselves not only to exploration and analysis in terms of the knowledge and technical skills needed to work with the characters and issues concerned. They provide a basis for reflection in values, attitudes, choices and consequences; and opportunities for cognitive and emotional rehearsal.

McMahon and Patton (2002, p.237) comment that counsellors 'need to become self-reflective and self-monitoring practitioners' as well as reflecting on content and process. McMahon and Patton suggest that people in helping professions need to relate content and progress to actions, thoughts, attitudes, personal philosophy and style. Kavanagh et al. (2002, p.134) suggest that 'mindful awareness and reflective practice can be fostered ... and may promote 'professional artistry'. As Seibert and Daudelin (1999, p. 175), state:

> Reflection involves the cognitive activity of taking an experience from the outside world, bringing it inside the mind, filtering it through past experiences, examining it, and trying to make sense of it.

However, many students do not yet have the practice experience in the field to bring to a reflective learning process and may not yet have the range of personal experiences to bring to their learning. The use of stories, with their dramaturgical elements, provides a stepping stone between personal, but not practice experience, and between the case scenarios of 'factual' information and the 'real' client situation with all its cognitive and conditional complexity.

They are often used because of their potential to draw and hold interest. The dramatic devices of humour, tragedy, goodness, evil and sensuality are but few of those that draw us to listen to, or read, one another's stories.

Schön (1987) proposed that a safe environment in which a reflective conversation can be held is essential to developing lifelong learning capacity. He suggests that bringing in consciousness and critiquing assumptions, premises criteria, and schemata needs to be part of the reflective process and is effective in developing habits of both dialogic and analytic reflection. The classroom provides a safe environment in which students can begin to test themselves in what could be real situations. They are able to express views and ideas that may be risky, but being removed from the direct practice context are able to do this without jeopardising their employment or professional standing. Dialogue is likely to

promote review and adjustment of their own approaches to a storied situation.

The reflective inquiry environment, then, needs to be part of the more traditional educational context in which structured courses with defined syllabuses are delivered. Emphasis is placed on an emergent and elicitive syllabus drawing on the stories and students' interpretations and exploration, with teaching taking a facilitative role. If the nature of the learning context is one of sharing ideas, assumptions and values as well as content and problem solving, and there is a sense of mutuality and support, learning and reflection is generated leading to lifelong learning capacity. Involving students in reflective exercises can help them identify their 'tacit knowledge', that is, the 'intuition, common sense, or practice wisdom, (which) is the implicit store of knowledge used in practice' (Zeira & Rosen 2000). Identifying such knowledge can lead to the development of hypotheses about future practice that may then be tested as opportunities arise.

However, there is equally the potential for knowledge drawn from reflective learning opportunities to impact on thinking-in-action. Recollection of hearing or reading about a similar situation, observation of others thinking through issues, understanding how others respond to the demands or elements in a situation, and self-understanding (the ability to be an audience to oneself) all have the potential to alter the thinking pathway. Others have suggested that reflective practice strengthens theory-guided, evidence-based practice and is able to incorporate self-awareness (Walker & Redman 1999).

They offer a vehicle for bridging the gap that can exist when students do not yet have professional experiences to draw upon, allowing reflective learning about practice to commence.

THE PRACTICE

During 2002, it was decided to use four stories, including 'Inside Anna' with La Trobe University Social Work students in the second year of their Bachelor degree. The subject 'Individual and Societal Context of Social Work Practice' was designed to address social work practice as a discipline that takes place within a context of significant social diversity and in which a variety of conceptions and perceptions of difference exist. The subject is informed by the view that structural factors mediate human development. The subject is premised on the understanding that key roles are played by families and informal support networks as well as formal systems of support and control. This takes place throughout the life course impacting on human development in myriad ways with the life course affected by ideas about the self as 'autonomous' and 'relational' and the presence of factors associated with 'risk' and 'resilience'. These themes influence the particular developmental pathways individuals tend to take throughout their life cycle.

The stories formed the basis of tutorial and seminar discussions as well as being used as the basis for the final assessment task – an essay. In addition, Bachelor of Social Work graduate entry students used the four stories as a means for highlighting a range of theoretical and practice issues, and encouraging reflection.

Four of the stories were chosen for their ability to illustrate aspects of diversity, cultural values and developmental issues. The stories were provided to the students early in the semester and listed as reading for specific tutorial or seminar discussion throughout the ensuing weeks. The final assessment task, an essay of 3000 words, asked students to select one of the short stories and use it as a basis for discussing issues present in that situation related to social diversity, life stage development, social disadvantage and deviance which may have significance for the practice of social work.

This provided students with a sense of purpose for working with the stories. They had the time needed to connect with, and reflect on, the stories prior to choosing one as a particular focus for the essay and, most importantly, they had opportunities to engage in dialogue with the class group. The opportunities for dialogue were considered essential to raising pertinent issues and providing alternative perceptions and interpretations of elements in the stories. These processes had the potential to interest students and move them beyond their own initial thoughts and responses.

During the semester the teaching staff on the La Trobe campuses exchanged informal evaluative information about how the 'story' approach was working. Feedback was generally positive. At Bendigo students gave both verbal and written feedback with the latter taking the form of brief responses to using the stories written on 'Post-it' notes.

The responses of students suggested they found the stories a useful tool to stimulate their thinking and reflection. Some of the written comments included:

> Great learning tool. Closest you'll get to the 'real' thing which is the greatest teacher of all.
>
> Many issues, great story. Well worth using for discussion.
>
> Is grounded in reality. Allows students to get in touch with their values and beliefs, stereotypes or prejudices.
>
> Practical example of experiences facing social workers in a real life situation.
>
> Made me think analytically because it had many dimensions.

It humanises the experience when you have a story to relate to.

This is helpful in helping us think about practical social work, and how theory fits into (or not) practice.

The imagery makes me feel like I was really there and was effective in encouraging thinking as to what I, as a social worker, would do if confronted with this situation.

I found *The Harveys* story useful as a learning tool, particularly upon discussion, as I realised that each member of the class came from a different perspective and viewed the situation differently. It helped to 'step outside' my own comfort zone and ideology.

These responses support the proposal of Jalongo et al. (1995) that stories provide a means to interpret and reinterpret experience using multiple frames of reference and points of view. Each story maintains a meaning whole which acts as a container for experiential, conceptual and thematic elements. They do not tell the student what to think, but invite them into a world in which problems and possibilities can be explored (van Maanen 1988). Of critical importance, they speak to both heart and mind while providing guideposts for the future and indicating 'existing and possible courses of action as well as pathways to self-discovery' (Jalongo et al. 1995). The students' responses also indicate that the stories are able to provide a bridge between theoretical considerations and reflective aspects of analysis and learning. They offer a vehicle for bridging the gap that can exist when students do not yet have professional experiences to draw upon, allowing reflective learning about practice to commence.

It is early days for drawing firm conclusions about the use of practice-based fictional stories as a teaching tool. However, it appears that attention to the stories and their meanings as a primary source for reflective learning followed by exploration of theory as interpretation, rather than the reverse, may be a useful for developing knowledge and expertise in human service practice. Future use of the stories to investigate these, and other, questions will be needed, and there is always the challenge of developing more stories. □

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The story

Inside Anna

'It's for you, Mum. A man!' Kate drawled the last word and rolled her eyes suggestively. She always rushed to the phone these days, hopeful of a surprise invitation or new gossip from a girlfriend. At thirteen life was all highs and lows and her mother had learned to cherish the occasional moments of tranquillity that came upon the household only when all three children were absent.

Anna rose, putting aside the school newsletter and its inevitable requests for excursion fees, and took up the phone. Kate reluctantly left the room, knowing from her mother's steely gaze that privacy was demanded, especially if this were an after-hours work call.

'Hello?'

'Anna, it's Michael. How are you?' The tone was precise. Formal.

'Michael?' The voice was somehow familiar. A moment passed.

'Michael!' The shocked silence that followed became her refuge as realisation flooded over Anna and her breath failed her.

'It's been a long time, Anna, but I've been thinking about you and the children a fair bit lately.' He was quite calm and in control. Always in control.

'I've been wondering how you've been getting on and I'd like to see you and the children again. They must be getting quite grown up now. Are they doing well at school?'

'They're fine. They're doing fine. We're all fine.' Anna's body was trembling as she stood in the corner of the room. She didn't see the familiar view of the cottage garden through the long windows. She couldn't think clearly. It was all too sudden. It was ten years, more or less. What did he want after ten years of absence?

'Will you tell them then, that I'd like to see them?'

'Yes.'

'Could I visit? Perhaps in a couple of weeks. I'll ring again soon and make a time.'

'Yes... Yes, I'll talk with the children.'

'Good. I'll get in touch again soon then.'

There was nothing more to say. A formal goodbye and the receiver replaced.

> What's wrong with me? How ridiculous! There's no need to get the shakes. It was only a phone call. Christ, what does he want after all these years? Why now? He's never been remotely interested in me or the children. I need a drink. Coffee. Something stronger. No coffee. A bit of space to think. Was that Kate going off to her friends? Thank goodness Jonathon and Lucy are at Mum and Pop's for the day. Get a grip on yourself. Take it easy.

Anna withdrew to her usually cosy alcove, hot coffee in her hand. Here the light was subdued by the heavy curtains. Here she could curl up on the cushioned window seat. This was a peaceful niche in the otherwise busy little home and Anna retired here when she needed to think. But today the alcove lacked the warmth as Anna sat disturbed, searching for a reason for Michael's call.

Michael had left her so many years ago. Left her with three small children, Lucy only a babe of six months and Jonathon not yet out of nappies. She had done her best, both before and after his desertion. She had cared for their home and children, tended the garden, put nourishing meals before her husband at the end of a busy day. But he had never really been her mate. Aloof, always rational, reserved. How was it they had found themselves together? Married.

Michael was clever and ambitious, her mother had always said. Michael was going to go places. And Michael did go places and was often away from home, on business trips, at conferences. And he never mentioned his other activities. The other woman. Anna had discovered that by chance and guessed the rest. She had confronted him. She had been assertive. Anna wanted to work out their relationship and in the process she changed the status quo. Michael had become emotional and, in his first loss of control, had struck out at her. That was the end for Anna. She could not tolerate a physical assault and Michael had gone – gone to the other woman.

So the struggle to manage on her own began, those ten years ago, and her expertise as a counsellor counted for so little, she discovered, as she battled to pack and move the little family to a house she could afford. You don't seem to be a very good judge of character for a social worker, her father had said, when the telling of family and friends was already so difficult. Her family had, on her behalf, been single mindedly angry with Michael. She had been urged to forget him and she had tried to be angry with him, but she had so little energy left. The refresher course had to be completed, a job secured. Child care to be arranged, three children to be organised, delivered, collected and loved each day at the end of the day's work.

> He took all his gear, the bastard. Well it was his, I suppose. Made it bloody difficult though. No TV. No

radio. Most of the books and the lounge suite. The bed too. Even the bloody bed! Nothing of his for me. Just the kids.

But I got the best deal. The kids. Wouldn't want any other kids in the world. Mine are the best. What a life. Wonder what sort of a life he's had. One woman after another. Does he have a home? Somewhere to belong. Does he want to pick up where he left off? Freak, what a thought! He doesn't even know the kids. He's a stranger to them. He's a stranger to me. I don't know anything about him. What am I going to tell the kids? God, what am I going to tell the kids! Either way I'll wear the disruption. I can do without this scene. I just want a quiet life. Can't cope with anything more.

Anna watched the children as they sat eating their tea that evening. Kate's auburn hair dangling forward, almost in her food. Jonathon chattering on with his mouth full, telling about the billycart he and Pop were making. Lucy, the thinker, lover of fantasy, with her soft, creamy skin glowing from her day outside in Gran's garden. Anna was putting off the moment of the telling and then found the delay unbearable. As she served the fruit for dessert she drew a deep breath and told. All in a rush.

Eyes were bright in the silence. Looks were exchanged. The air was energised. A new view of the world had been offered up for sampling. Anna knew there was no stepping back. She and the children would have to find a way forward. Questions, many questions, and Anna found answers, part answers and some possible answers.

The following days were overlaid with supposition and conjecture, with contributions, requested and otherwise, from a family who had, for so long, operated half a tree as the whole. When Michael rang again he was offered an arrangement that was both exceedingly simple and yet contrived with masterly touch. A visit for an evening with dinner at 7 o'clock. An evening that could be shortened or lengthened depending on how things proceeded. A meal was an event, a focus and an activity which involved everyone equally.

At work Anna was distracted. Every case presented to her for counselling highlighted issues of separation and of reconciliation, people married one another without knowing each other. Couples argued violently and stayed together. Women left partners only to return. Men beat up their wives who took them back only to be deserted and left hurt and destitute once more. She didn't understand people any more. It seemed the longer she worked with human problems the less she felt she knew of the motivation for their behaviour and decisions.

At home the children were excited. They planned and replanned the evening and the meal. Anna was conscious of their anxiety. They didn't want to be left alone with Michael and they were a mass of 'what ifs'. Anna had to stay calm. She must stay calm and relaxed for the sake of the children.

On the day of Michael's visit she sent them about their usual daily tasks. She organised various additional jobs to be completed to keep them active and well occupied, and tried to fill her day with the preparation of the meal. She attended to household details which were normally ignored and, finally, she took an afternoon nap to force herself to relax.

Why am I bothering to go to so much trouble for him? Why should I worry about what he thinks? He walked out on us and we owe him nothing. But the children need a father. Do they? All these years without one. They've survived, done better than survive. They've done well. A credit to the family. Does he care? Does he want to be a part of it now they're older? What a cheek! People change. But do they change that much? Would I take him back if he wanted to be a part of the family again? I don't even know what he's like these days. Still good looking. Still nimble witted with a sense of dry humour. Will he think the kids are O.K.? I hope they don't lay it on him or backchat him. They might have nothing in common and nothing to talk about.

Why am I bothering to lie here worrying? Relax. You're supposed to be resting. Have to look relaxed and in control of the situation. Why? He won't like a show of emotion. Do I feel any emotion? Do I still love him? What did I love about him? God, I've been so lonely all these years. Everything I've done alone. All the decisions, all the discipline, all the work around the place. Does he care? Could he ever really care for us? Care for me? There's so little time in life. Give it a chance. These are crazy thoughts. My parents would have a fit. The staff at work would have a fit. With all the social work experience I've had, I should know better. I'm wasting time even thinking about this. Relax. You said you were taking a nap to relax.

But he never gave our marriage a chance to work. We never really talked about the important things. There was always his work, or the children. It could have worked, we had a lot in common. Did we? Well, people said we did at the time. People are always ready to say something. Most of it crap. Now they say I should piss him off - well, not in those words, but that's what they mean. What's happened to me? I used to be able to turn off and relax. I must be out of practice. More likely I'm out of control.

The day had been phased, sectioned into units which could now only culminate in the visit. Everything was nearing completion. Children showered and cleanly dressed. The dog fed and outside in its kennel. The meal ready for a final heating before it was served. Anna had the bathroom to

herself and caught herself preening like a teenager before a date.

'Mum, you look great!' Lucy's eyes were full of spark and spontaneity. Anna wondered if the child had a wisdom beyond her years, but grew in confidence before Lucy's admiring smile.

'Tea smells yummy. How long to go?' Jonathon was finding the last short wait difficult and Anna sent him, with Lucy, for a few flowers from the garden. Kate would be in her room as usual, pondering over her clothes and wondering if a different combination would serve for better effect.

> Well, he won't us looking as if we can't cope without him

Anna poured herself a sherry. She couldn't wait until he arrived and anyway, he might be late she reasoned with herself. The clock began to tick more slowly and every sound grated. Anna imagined drafts, dust on furniture, the smell of burning.

Finally, a firm knock at the front door. She hadn't heard the gate. The dog hadn't barked a warning. With the children gathered awkwardly behind her, Anna opened the door.

'Hello, Anna. Hullo kids.' A box of chocolates. A bunch of flowers were placed in her hands. A light kiss on her cheek.

> He looks just the same. His voice is the same. The same clean smell. Still confident of himself. Definite.

Anna was staring. She was worse than the children in her curiosity. As the evening passed she savoured every comment, opened herself to every nuance. Relaxed as she felt the children's warm response to this man.

> They do need their father. They have so much to offer one another. What is he thinking? Does he realise how much they need him? How I need him... Oh, God, it's not over between us!

□

The essay

Elanie Coyne

The following is an edited version of an essay completed by second year social work student Elanie Coyne. Students were asked to select one of the Lehmann Short Stories and use it as a basis for discussing issues related to life stage development, social diversity, social disadvantage and deviance which may have significance for the practice of social work.

In this essay, I have attempted to identify issues raised in reading the short story 'Inside Anna' which might be of interest to social workers. Aspects of development, diversity, disadvantage and deviance drawn from the texts used in the course provide a guide for the discussion. It is important to note that these are not all the issues which might be extracted from reflection on the events and perspectives presented in this short story.

LIFE STAGE DEVELOPMENT

Anna and Michael are parents of three children aged between ten and thirteen years, and are both moving from the end of the developmental stage of early adulthood to the beginning of the middle adulthood period. Anna is now a single parent due to Michael's desertion approximately ten years ago. Michael has had extremely limited contact with Anna and the children in this time. Before the separation, Anna and Michael's relationship had been strained and lacked communication. Achieving what Fromm called 'mature love' and Erikson called 'intimacy' appears problematic. This requires both partners to have a secure sense of their own personal identity before entering into a partnership (Peterson, 1996: 476; Longres, 1995: 511). Further, Sternberg's (1988, cited in Peterson, 1996) typology of love points to the significance of intimacy and the role early attachments play in supporting readiness for it in later partnerships as well as the role of commitment and passion in sustaining partnerships (Peterson, 1996: 470).

While acknowledging much individual variation, early adulthood is a time when people generally choose their future occupation, fall in love, get married and have children (Peterson, 1996: 503). According to Erikson, the developmental psychosocial crisis of early adulthood is intimacy vs. isolation and needs to be successfully resolved before further development can take place (Peterson, 1996: 476). Similarly Erikson suggests that the formation of any relationship in early adulthood rests on the resolution of the identity crisis in adolescence. If this crisis has not been successfully resolved, intimacy threatens the person's weak identity and may result in a preference for isolation (Peterson, 1996: 478).

Middle adulthood falls roughly between the chronological ages of 30 and 50 and is a time when marriage matures and

satisfaction with the partnership ideally increases. However, there is a risk of marital disenchantment at this stage (Peterson, 1996: 543). The psychosocial crisis of middle adulthood is between generativity vs. stagnation. Generativity refers to the ability to creatively contribute in the upbringing of the future generations and to the continuation of society in general (Noller et al., 2001: 105). The concept of generativity also includes productivity and creativity, therefore not only meaning procreation or reproduction. Stagnation refers to when people do not accomplish anything or are blocked in their efforts to use their own mature abilities (Longres, 1995: 512). Unsuccessful resolution of the crisis results in a personality marked by rejectivity – this means rejection of feelings of care for others or their society. Successful resolution of this crisis in middle adulthood brings about care, which is described as a concern for what one has generated (Longres, 1995: 512).

Anna and Michael have three children – Lucy, Jonathon and Kate. Lucy is approximately ten and a half and Jonathon is approximately twelve years old. Lucy and Jonathon are in the developmental phase of later or late childhood, which has also been referred to as middle childhood and school age. However, they could be moving into the first stages of early adolescence. Kate, a thirteen year old whose life 'was all highs and lows' is clearly in the developmental phase of early adolescence.

Later childhood is defined chronologically as between 7 and 12 years of age (Longres, 1995: 481). Physical growth is steady, the process of emotional development continues on from previous stages and cognitive development is stimulated by schooling (Peterson, 1996: 340). At this time, gender role awareness and constancy are learnt and peer group influences become more important to the child; however the family still holds the majority of the influence over the child's ways of thinking, feeling and acting (Peterson, 1996: 260). Egocentrism lessens as children move into later childhood due to increased social learning (Longres, 1995: 482). The psychosocial crisis at this stage of the lifespan is between industry vs. inferiority. Industry refers to the child achieving outcomes of various kinds. Successful resolution results in the child gaining competence, they feel they can accomplish what is expected of them (Longres, 1995: 483). Unsuccessful resolution of the crisis in this developmental stage results in the child feeling as though he/she cannot function adequately in society and experiences of inertia – a kind of paralysis that prevents productive activity or work (Longres, 1995: 483).

Early adolescence has been called a time of storm and stress; however, this is not always the case (Noller et al, 2001: 46). Other researchers have dismissed the storm and stress notion to see adolescence as a turning point that highlights the development of maturity (Noller et al, 2001: 47). In this stage, the beginnings of a secure identity form and personal relationships become more prominent. Adolescence is a period that parents tend to find more stressful than parenting children at any other age, describing it as a 'nerve-wracking job'(Peterson, 1996: 418). Adolescents seek increasing independence from their parents. However, this can cause problems in cases where there is family conflict; for example, more conflict may lead to less parental monitoring, therefore the risk of adolescent problem behaviour may increase (Noller at al, 2001: 55). The psychosocial crisis of early adolescence is between identity vs. identity role confusion. The concept of identity refers to such questions as 'who am I?' and to the process of forming a secure identity. Successful resolution of this crisis results in the adolescent forming a clear, stable sense of identity and acquiring the basic strength of fidelity which is 'the ability to freely pledge and sustain loyalties to others' (Longres, 1995: 483). Unsuccessful resolution of this crisis at this stage results in an adolescent with an unsure identity and the core pathology of repudiation which is the 'rejection of roles and values that are viewed as alien to oneself' (Longres, 1995: 483).

For the practice of social work, issues of separation and divorce must be taken into consideration when working with this family.

As Michael and Anna have experienced marital conflict in the past which eventually resulted in a physical assault and Michael's desertion, it may be important to consider effects of marital conflict on developing children. Also, it is unclear from the story as to whether Anna and Michael separated or divorced as a result of this experience. For the practice of social work, issues of separation and divorce must be taken into consideration when working with this family.

Young children model behaviour on their parents, including conflict resolution behaviour. Exposure to marital conflict for young children has been found to have negative consequences for this reason (Noller et al, 2001: 32). However, the type of conflict resolution may influence these findings. Children who are exposed to high incidences of inadequate parental conflict resolution are at more risk of problem social behaviors, such as delinquency, than children who have been exposed to high incidences of constructive conflict resolution (Noller et al, 2001: 33). Divorce has been found to be a highly stressful event for children; however, studies have mainly focused on the immediate aftermath of the divorce and not on the long-term developmental consequences that result from the divorce, therefore they cannot inform us of how long these stresses last (Longres,

1995: 275). Rodgers (cited in Healey, 1999: 8) concluded that, while there was a higher risk factor for adverse social and psychological problems associated with parental separation, some children seemed to benefit from marital dissolution. Many factors contribute to the detrimental effects of divorce or separation on the development of children. These include the level of marital or parental conflict at the time of separation, witnessing or experiencing domestic violence or abuse, the quality of the long-term relationship between the parents after separation, the level of involvement of both parents in the lives of their children, and social influences, such as level of income in the lone parent households (Healey, 1999: 11). Longres cites Wallerstein's study from the eighties (1995: 275), which found that a decade after the divorce, those who were affected the least were those who were young children at the time of the divorce, and those who were affected the most were early or older adolescents at the time.

These aspects of Anna's situation highlight just some of the struggles that single parents face in everyday life. Single parents are at a greater risk of poverty than other family forms.

SOCIAL DIVERSITY

Social diversity is commonly considered in terms of four broad conceptual groups of ideas:

- culture, ethnicity and race; gender,
- life-stage and age;
- socio-economic class, estates (inherited status),
- religion and caste; level of ability/disability. (Cox, 2002)

There is sense though in which it might also be approached from the vantage point of diversity in family form.

Anna's single-parent family is a minority family form and from the story in the eyes of this reader, no clear differences of culture or ethnicity stand out. When culture appears to be invisible, it is often due to the vantage point being within the culture in question, especially when it is the culture of the dominant group in society. These cultural norms are usually the hardest to see as they are enmeshed in everyday events and expectations. Although some references to occupation, education and monetary concerns were noted, assumptions about social class would need to rest on more information.

A single parent family is defined as consisting of a person aged fifteen years or over who does not have a resident spouse, married or de facto, who has at least one usually resident child with no spouse or child of their own (de Vaus & Wolcott, 1997: 136). Nearly 90% of all sole parents are lone mothers – an issue of gender (Healey, 1999: 30). Most single parent families are caused by the separation of a couple but they can be formed by death of a spouse, divorce, or by never married mothers (Healey, 1999: 7).

Single parent families have been increasingly common since the 1970s due to the rise in the divorce rate, decline in the marriage rate and changing social values which have led to increased acceptance of family forms other than the nuclear family (Healey, 1999: 1). In 1969, single parent families with dependent children constituted 7.1% of all families; in 1981 it was 13.2%; in 1986 this number increased to 14.6%; in 1992 the figure was 17.5%; and finally in 1997 this had increased further to 18% (van Krieken et al, 2000: 362). Increased divorce rates mean that 1% of children are likely to experience their parents' separation for each year of their life; this means 10% of children aged 10 will have divorced parents, 15% of children aged 15 will have divorced parents, and so on (van Krieken et al, 2000: 367).

Single parent families are found over a variety of social classes and ethnic groups, but in US studies Hispanic and black people are at a greater risk of residing in a single parent family than white people. In 1991, 17% of white children compared to 54% of black children and 27% of Hispanic children were living in a single parent family (Longres, 1995: 201). Regardless of whether an ethnic minority or part of the white majority, poverty-class families are usually characterized by higher rates of divorce or separation and higher rates of female-headed single-parent households than other classes of families (Longres, 1995: 227).

> Just as there are no rigid boundaries between social classes, there are no rigid differences in family forms and lifestyles related to social class. Rather there are tendencies among middle-class, working-class, poverty-class and upper-class individuals and communities which are reflected in certain family patterns (Longres, 1995: 224).

SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

Anna and her children live in a 'busy little home' which 'they could afford'. As Anna is a lone parent, she depends on her own parents, the children's grandparents, to contribute to child care tasks. Monetary concerns can be deciphered from the reference to the 'school newsletter and its inevitable requests for excursion fees', and when Anna remembers those ten years ago when 'the struggle to manage on her own began', when she moved 'the little family to a house she could afford' . When Michael left Anna and the children, he took all his belongings and left Anna with nothing except the children. From the time of Michael's

desertion, Anna's small family had 'operated half a family tree as a whole' .

These aspects of Anna's situation highlight just some of the struggles that single parents face in everyday life. Single parents are at a greater risk of poverty than other family forms. A study conducted in 1997 by the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University found that 84% of sole parent families lived in poverty (Callanan, 1999: 16). In 1986, the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 63% of single parent families were in the lowest 20% of family incomes, in contrast to 12% of couple families with dependent children (van Krieken et al, 2000: 363). Problems stemming from poverty include poor housing, lack of recreation and entertainment opportunities, social isolation and possible geographic isolation as low cost housing is often poorly located and maintained (Inglis & Rogan, 1994: 147). For most single parents, affordable housing generally means the cheapest. The private rental market is a disaster for sole parents and government reliance on it to solve housing problems for low income people is short sighted and inequitable (Callanan, 1999: 18). In recent years, this has been further complicated by the low vacancy rate in Melbourne. Four out of five mothers who head families alone live in the private rental market, stretching low incomes to cover high housing costs – the average apartment will cost far more than an average single parent's entire monthly income (Mulroy, 1995: 110). The relative disadvantage of lone parent families to intact couple families can be seen by their housing circumstances. The 1996 Census shows that 40% of lone parent families owned or were purchasing their own home compared with around 77% of two parent families with dependent children.

Single parents have fewer child care options, and less flexibility due to the absence of another partner and a low income. When entering or participating in the paid workforce, single parents are also disadvantaged in relation to married intact couples. Even though the participation rate for women has increased, about 90% of this increase has been in part-time work mainly in the secondary labour market; in 1993, 42% of all employed females worked part-time (van Krieken et al, 2000: 255). Many part-time jobs lack security, often entail varying hours of work and are subject to termination at short notice (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000a: 115). Probert (1989: 107) acknowledges evidence suggesting part-time work reinforces negative aspects of women's employment – low status and low pay with few opportunities for career advancement. In May 1998, women earned, on average, 33% less than men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000b: 149). Another obstacle to workforce participation is adequate and reliable transport. Sole parent families (79%) are less likely than intact couple families (97.4%) to have access to a car (McDonald, 1995: 22). Their work related costs are often high, therefore they are more likely to decide increasing childcare costs mean it is not viable for them to remain in the paid workforce (Callanan, 1999: 21).

Remarkably, despite all the struggles and hardships, 94% of single mothers were found to be optimistic about the future, higher than any other family group – this coincides with experiences of single mothers as a highly resilient, resourceful and determined group who are prepared to fight to improve their circumstances (Callanan, 1999: 14).

Anna's family is stigmatized by societal reactions to her family form, societal attitudes to divorce when children are involved, and to an extent by the social work professionals she works with, as well as her parents ...

DEVIANCE

According to Anleu (1999), deviance is also an elusive concept. Related to perceived violation of social norms, its form may vary greatly from one culture to another and within cultures over time. Deviance is in some instances connected to the criminal law but it can include many other forms of stigma, for example, the myths and stereotypes surrounding single parenthood. A stigma refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, and stigmatization involves casting an individual into the category of outsider, other than normal, or not quite human (Anleu, 1999: 108). Anna's family is stigmatized by societal reactions to her family form, societal attitudes to divorce when children are involved, and to an extent by the social work professionals she works with, as well as her parents, as they encourage her to 'forget him' and move on. Michael's actions could be seen as deviant when compared to societal norms, due to his extramarital sexual relationship or affair and due to the physical assault on Anna. This can be seen as an incident of domestic violence, as well as his abandonment of Anna and the children.

Outdated views of single mothers are still present in our society despite the changing community attitudes over the last twenty years (Callanan, 1999: 14). The Family Council of Victoria described other types of families (apart from the traditional nuclear family), such as lone parent families, as incomplete and states that public policy should aim to increase the number of children who grow up in two-parent families (*Age*, 1999: 31). Taking into consideration the domination of the nuclear family and the assumption that anything less will harm society, single parent families which flow from divorce may be deemed as deviant and, therefore, problematic (Longres, 1995: 274). These societal attitudes

translate into social disadvantages in everyday life stemming from societal disapproval. Gerstel (cited in Longres, 1995: 275) suggests that the experiences of societal disapproval, and therefore stigmatization, rest on the specific circumstances of the divorce.

Sole parents are more likely to be receiving welfare benefits due to their diminished earning opportunity; however, women on welfare not only have to face the burdens of poverty but also those of being a welfare recipient. Women who receive welfare have been stereotyped as lazy, cheating the system and promiscuous freeloaders who continue having children to gain ever increasing benefits (Davis & Stasz, 1990: 229). In reality, 84% of sole parents had only one or two children, and were subjected to assessment to make sure they genuinely qualified (Healey, 1999: 14). Another common myth is that single mothers are happy to stay on child support and do not want to return to work – however, 24% of sole mothers are employed in full-time work and 21% work part-time (Healey, 1999: 14). It should be kept in mind that 80% of sole parents are on a sole parent pension for less than five years, with 30% of recipients only receiving benefits for a matter of months (Healey, 1999: 29).

Domestic violence in the family is usually seen as physical abuse or injury. However, Barbara Star uses the term 'domestic violence' to include all forms of family abuse; this encompasses spouse abuse, elder abuse, child abuse, neglect and abandonment, emotional abuse and psychological abuse (cited in Longres, 1995: 266). The hidden nature of domestic violence can lead to underreporting of incidences as well as community acceptance of at least some forms of domestic violence (Anleu, 1999:237). It has been estimated that one fourth of all couples will experience at least one violent incident or episode during the duration of their marriage; however, when taking into consideration issues of under-reporting and the private nature of domestic violence, this figure could realistically be closer to 60% of all couples (Longres, 1995: 266).

> Abuse rarely occurs just once – after the barrier to physical abuse has been broken, it can become an integral part of the husband-wife relationship (Longres, 1995: 267).

CONCLUDING NOTE

Using a frame of reference which attends to life span development, social diversity, disadvantage and deviance, reflection on this short story raised many issues and could have raised many more of interest to people engaged in providing human services. Reflection could embrace fields of practice as diverse as relationship counselling, child development and policy development and advocacy for groups who are structurally disadvantaged. □

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