

Reclaiming, Challenging and Reviving the Survivor Researcher Network: Event held 29 July 2016

A Statement from the Working Group

The working group for this event were:

Sarah Carr (SC), Tina Coldham (TC), David Crepaz-Keay (DC-K), Alison Faulkner (AF), Naomi Good (NG), Dorothy Gould (DG), Jayasree Kalathil (JK), Colin King (CK), Brigit McWade (BMcW), Emma Perry (EP), Sarah Yiannoullou (SY).

Introduction

Following a number of concerns raised before, during and after the event held to rejuvenate the Survivor Researcher Network, the group has agreed the following statement.

Context: the SRN

The Survivor Researcher Network has been through a number of different phases since the early 2000s when it was formed. Since 2011, it has been hosted by NSUN (the National Survivor User Network). In 2012, NSUN conducted a survey of SRN members and set up a working group of members who developed a draft aims and objectives and work plan based on the feedback from the survey. The survey report and draft documents are available on the [website](#). SRN currently has no funds to support it. There is a database of around 200 members. The SRN has the following aims:

- To provide mental health service users and survivors involved and interested in research a forum for networking, sharing information and supporting each other.
- To promote the evidence based on lived experience as fundamental to the knowledge base on mental health, human rights and social justice
- To set standards and promote good practice in user/survivor research in mental health

The event

The group who came together to organise this event were an ad hoc group who met specifically to arrange the event. With the exception of Emma Perry in her part-time role as coordinator and Sarah Yiannoullou as managing director of the host organisation NSUN, no other member of the group has any formal status with regard to the SRN. Several of us are associated with NSUN in different ways: NG as staff member, SC as a Trustee, AF, DG and JK as consultants (JK facilitated the survey and the working group in 2012-13), DC-K and TC as former trustees, all with an interest in reviving the SRN. We decided to explore a link with Mad Studies to see how it might fit, so involved BMCW.

The group is disbanded now with the exception of planning one final meeting to finalise the report and make recommendations for next steps.

Planning the event

The first informal meeting was to discuss what to do to revive the SRN and we looked at various funding options. One option was to apply for an ESRC (Economic and Social Research

Council) seminar series or AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) network capacity development funding. However, we wanted to have some sort of gathering or broader conversation first to think about where SRN and survivor research was at and what might need to be challenged and developed, and who wanted to be involved, before we did anything else. We agreed we should look at whiteness and hetero-normativity as well as other aspects, given the fact that survivor research generally has tended to be both white and hetero-normative.

In the end we thought it would be helpful to have a one-off seminar to widen the discussion with members of the SRN and others involved in survivor research. BMcW was able to get £3,000 from the Sociological Review Foundation to support a seminar and SC was able to get £2,650 (Middlesex University Department of Mental Health, Social Work and Integrative Medicine Small Grant Fund).

This enabled us to put on the catered event for free, with travel expenses being met for around 40 delegates. However, this also meant only a limited number of people could come, and those of us involved in organizing the event and presenting would all be giving our time for free.

We put the programme together with volunteers from the organising group to lead some of the conversations, with people like Jasna Russo and Angie Sweeney invited to speak too – in the light of their recent book 'Searching for a Rose Garden'. We decided we needed to have conversations led by people from BME and LGBT perspectives, as these voices have not historically been present or included and we thought this was important for the discussion about survivor research, whiteness and hetero-normativity.

We wanted to invite people who had been involved in the SRN and survivor research in the past as well as to ensure proactively the inclusion of black and minority ethnic survivors. In order to support the latter, and to reach new people less familiar with the SRN, we needed to send out targeted invitations. We all contributed to a list of 40 or so suggested people to invite (this was what the budget could stretch to) which was not ideal, but what we decided to do within the limits of time and money.

The event itself

We are delighted with many of the achievements of the event. We feel that the discussions that took place covered some new ground and began to shift significantly the white and hetero-normative centre of survivor research. We had 20 evaluation forms returned, with some very positive responses and comments (details will be included in the report of the event). All felt that they gained new information, most (80%) felt able to participate in the event, 75% felt listened to and 75% felt supported. There were very positive comments about the nature of the debate and the issues covered; and some negative comments included a lack of focus and too much listening.

Inclusion and exclusion

Although we aimed to make the event inclusive to people who are often excluded from such events, we are aware that the limited size of the event led to some exclusions too. Also, while some people welcomed opening up the space to address 'privilege' as a positive and necessary step forward, this may have been experienced as threatening by others. When

some people feel acknowledged and heard, maybe it is inevitable that others feel unheard. However, there were more BME survivors at this event than in the past and we were excited by the level of the debate. This was a first step and we look forward to further critically exploring the concept and practice of inclusion within the SRN in the future.

Future steps...

NSUN will put out a call in their bulletin to the wider SRN network asking for volunteers to form a new working group in the near future. We will ensure that the new working group is representative and includes people from BME communities and from different parts of England. Obviously, given the current lack of funding, this activity is likely to be limited to virtual meetings until funding can be found.

The working group is agreed that the next stage of planning for the SRN needs to be more broadly based and planned with openness and transparency. The issues raised support the call made by Jasna and Angie in their presentation for discussion about developing a values-based framework. It is important that we acknowledge and work towards shared values as well as heeding to and working with values in conflict.