Digital storytelling as a Social Work Tool: Learning from Ethnographic research with
Women from Refugee Backgrounds.

Abstract

This paper reflects on the wider potential of digital narratives as a useful tool for social work practitioners. Despite the multiple points of connection between narrative approaches and social work, the influence of narratives on practice remains limited. A case study of a digital storytelling (DST) process employed in a research project with a small group of lone mothers from refugee backgrounds is used to trigger discussion of broader applications of DST as part of everyday social work practice. The use of DST acknowledged women's capacities for self-representation and agency, in line with participatory and strengths-based approaches inherent in contemporary social work.

The benefits of using DST with lone mothers from refugee backgrounds illustrate how this method can act as a pathway to produce counter-narratives, both at the individual and broader community levels. Documenting life stories digitally provides the opportunity to construct narratives about experiences of relocation and settlement as tools for social advocacy, which can assist social workers to ensure meaningful outcomes for service-users. These propositions can serve to inform social work practices with people from refugee backgrounds and address some of the intricacies of working in diverse and challenging contexts.

Keywords: Digital storytelling, narrative, counter-narrative, social work, women from refugee backgrounds.

We see a black screen and hear soft acoustic music in the background. The digital movie begins. A story title and her name appear next. The first picture transitions into the foreground and the woman's voice begins to narrate her story. For two minutes, she takes the listener on a journey during both arduous and happier times in her life. We listen to her voice and hear her questions, reflections, hopes and happiness. One after the other, the images slowly put together the pieces of the puzzle. We see pictures from years ago in Africa, and digital images depicting life in Australia, with her family, children and friends. She smiles, this is her life story at a glance, recorded for others to behold. Her eyes do not leave the screen. The movie ends, the music becomes louder and she sees her name on the screen once more. She is now laughing with pride.

Introduction

The above is a description of the experience of watching a Digital Story with the woman who created it. In this project undertaken during an ethnographic study with women from refugee backgrounds who were lone parents in Brisbane in 2008/9, the specific narrative form of Digital Story Telling (DST) was used as a research method. This method was chosen for its ability to facilitate a collaborative ethnographic dialogue between researcher and participant, thus diluting the relatively conventional question-answer dichotomy underpinning much of social research. Drawing on our experience of using DST with women from refugee backgrounds (Lenette, Brough and Cox, 2013), we argue that this dialogic capacity of DST is a good fit with participatory approaches in social work practice. In this paper, we reflect on the wider potential of digital narratives as a useful tool for social work practitioners.

In the following, we commence with a brief examination of the notions of narratives and counter-narratives, and the links between narrative approaches and social work, defined as a 'professional intervention to address situations of personal distress and crisis by shaping and changing the social environment in which people live' (Mendes, 2008, p. 250). After

outlining the strengths and current applications of DST, we then critically reflect on its use in the research project mentioned above, as an example highlighting the value of this narrative tool to social work practice. In that particular context with women from refugee backgrounds, DST was beneficial in documenting individual narratives from the private or hidden domain into a set of accessible audio-visual stories, while enhancing the women's sense of agency and self-representation. We therefore explain the beneficial outcomes for participants in this process, and finally discuss the broader potential of DST as a narrative tool for social work practitioners while also highlighting related ethical issues for practitioners to consider.

Narratives and Counter-Narratives

Narrative practices stem from family therapy models (Kaslow, 2010), anthropology (Connor, 2009), poststructuralist philosophy (Payne, 2006), and feminist writings (Pomerantz and Raby, 2011). According to Riessman and Quinney (2005, p. 392), 'the idea of narrative has penetrated every discipline and profession', rendering a clear and contained definition of the term difficult to say the least. Because the term 'narrative' is employed widely across different fields, it has come to 'mean anything and everything', showing that the word's 'specificity has been lost with popularisation' (Riessman and Quinney, 2005, p. 393). Narrative is often assumed to be synonymous with 'story', or to refer to all talk and text indiscriminately; however, we prefer Riessman and Quinney's view that storytelling only constitutes one aspect of narrative.

Riessman and Quinney (2005) use the concepts of 'sequence' and 'consequence' to establish the difference between the story itself and its narrative. Thus, from a narrative perspective, there is no 'natural' or 'correct' way for events to be sequenced and produce consequence. As Ingamells (2010) argues, narrative conveys a specific meaning and 'reflects *a* telling rather than *the* telling' (p. 2) (emphasis in the original) of a story. A narrative analysis thus focuses on who the teller was and how the story was shared. Such an analysis

asks why *this* story and examines how it was constructed in a particular way (Riessman and Quinney, 2005; Taylor, 2006).

Narratives can also come to constitute counter-narratives, often considered as the ‘flip-side’ of established discourses (Bamberg, 2004), which can challenge dominant societal narratives and ‘carry rhetorical weight’ (Garro and Mattingly, 2000, p. 5). For example, narratives from parents of babies with a disability are closer to their lived experience and can serve as a form of resistance towards orthodox, linear, medical and interventionist assumptions about a child’s condition (Fisher and Goodley, 2007). Thus, counter-narratives can provide a critical lens to reveal enabling processes often overlooked in dominant discourses. These examples illustrate inextricable links between (counter) narratives and the emancipatory aims of social work practice.

The narrative-social work nexus.

The value of narratives to social work is clearly evident, given the emphasis on service-users’ views of their own circumstances – it is *their* story, rather than *the* story. The use of narrative is strongly indicative of client-centred social work practice, as the broader possibility for self-representation offers a different approach to ‘interventionist’ practice frameworks driven only by ‘expert’ theory. Roscoe *et al.* (2011) view narrative social work as a conversation between theory and practice, which offers practitioners a model to ethically engage with service users. Moreover, the possibility to shift narratives over time not only speaks to the potential for an individual to create self-empowering narratives of their own life journeys, but also highlights the use of counter-narratives to challenge oppressive societal narratives of stigma and prejudice.

Freeman (2011) argues that narrative approaches in social work practice can assist service users to manage critical moments in their life such as: transitions in life span development; lived experiences which have been silenced, oppressed or marginalised;

spiritual crises related to conflicts in morals, values and beliefs; and cultural phenomena in which significant events hold a strong meaning. In community work, White (2003) conceptualises narrative approaches as a versatile mechanism to engage with communities on their terms in relation to community healing following a significant loss, in terms of addressing a specific social injustice, or a variety of other community-focussed issues. Finally, Borden (1992) discusses the potential of narrative approaches in psychosocial interventions following adverse life events.

Despite these multiple points of connection, the influence of narrative approaches on social work practice still remains limited. Indeed, speaking of narrative, Taylor (2006) argues that reflexive social work practice has remained largely ‘immune from its influence’ (p. 194) and that social workers ‘need surely to move beyond taking texts (and talk) for granted’ (p. 204) thus becoming more reflexive about modes of representations in practice. As Miehl and Moffatt (2000) suggest, the presence of the reflexive self in the social worker facilitates the start of an on-going narrative, making reflexivity pertinent to the narrative-social work nexus.

Hence, narrative approaches can be adopted across the spectrum of social work practice contexts, meshing with a commitment to journeying alongside vulnerable groups; adopting a dialogical approach; recognising systemic issues in practice contexts; and aiming to transform structures and processes perpetuating inequities within and beyond practice (Healy and Hampshire, 2002). The narrative approach in social work thus deserves further inquiry, as do the particular methods of narrative practice, such as DST.

DST as a narrative tool.

DST is a form of narrative where life stories are reconstructed using computer software, where text, photos, narration and music make up the story (Meadows, 2003). This method involves a ‘dialogical’ approach (Taylor, 2006) where stories of past and present experiences, and hopes for the future, are created and recorded for others to view. A similar process called

‘digital life narration’ is an increasingly common cultural practice of telling stories through easily accessible software for private use, the content of which is usually highly personal and authentic (Helff and Woletz, 2009). The outcome of DST is a documentary-like narration where life stories are conveyed through digital media.

This method is thus considered a creative means of conveying narratives, and has been described as ‘empowering’, ‘cathartic’ (Gubrium, 2009), ‘exciting’ and ‘rewarding’ (Dupain and Maguire, 2007), as well as yielding a strong sense of satisfaction, confidence and recognition (Sawhney, 2009). Furthermore, Hughes (2011) explains that when used as a research method, DST allows a person to ‘express, capture and represent wholeness...beyond facts and figures and what is immediately apparent’ (p. 12). Digital stories thus have multiple strengths including authenticity as a documentary and a participatory approach eliminating the professional-amateur dichotomy (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009).

The participatory nature of DST suggests that it has ‘built-in’ flexibility in social work practice. For instance, when DST was employed in rural South Africa, DST’s western ‘roots’ and expectations were challenged through respectful application of this method to document lived experiences in traditionally oral communities, successfully tailoring the method to this group (Reitmaier *et al.*, 2011). Cunsolo Willox *et al.* (2013) concur that DST can complement rich oral storytelling traditions as in the case of Canada, where the method is one of a few that can ‘preserve and promote [I]ndigenous oral wisdom’ (p. 128), because it resonates with and respects oral histories. In the current study with lone mothers from refugee backgrounds, the outcomes for participants imply that effective and participatory cross-cultural application of the DST method constitutes a meaningful process for individuals whose experiences may be overlooked (Lenette and Boddy, 2013).

DST is currently employed in many different contexts, such as documenting narratives of intergenerational dialogue (Lalor, 2009); as a teaching technique to explain

health concepts (Dupain and Maguire, 2007); or in health promotion research and practice (Gubrium, 2009). Furthermore, the lived experiences of people with a disability are increasingly conveyed through digital narratives. For instance, Griffith University's 1000 Voices project (2012) is a participant-driven collection of digital stories. DST is also valuable in cross-cultural practice, since storytelling is often valued among marginalised communities such as newly arrived refugees in the United States (Perry, 2008). The use of DST with a small group of lone mothers from refugee backgrounds discussed in this paper thus adds to the literature on cross-cultural applications of DST.

Yet, there is ample opportunity for other social work areas to benefit from DST. When employed reflexively, nuanced understandings of lived experiences emerging through DST narratives highlight how 'the multiple dimensions of [people's] experiences [are] always centre stage, not merely background information' (Gubrium, 2009, p. 190). This view clearly suggests an alignment with client-centred social work practices. Hence, while there are opportunities for DST to become an established social work practice tool (Huss, 2011), it is also true that digital narratives often remain largely within the 'creative' new media domain.

As illustrated by the women's narratives in our present discussion, DST involves a process of conscious selection of the story elements and *sequencing* on the part of participants, incisively placing the technique as 'narrative' according to our definition. By paying analytic attention to the story itself, to the strategic selection of elements of a narrative and how these are linked to form it, social work practitioners can have access to a range of information that reflect service-users' needs and concerns. In this way DST can live up to the expectations of anti-oppressive practice by encouraging service users to 'gain control and reject notions of fixed truths and social truths which have more power than others' (Roscoe *et*

al., 2011, p. 55). In other words, the role of social work practice in articulating the *consequence* of a narrative could be a powerful catalyst for social change.

As with other forms of narrative practice, DST enables the articulation of important counter-narratives. For example, while exploring the reproductive health experiences of women, Gubrium (2009) found that DST afforded a deeper understanding of meanings attached to being a woman and mother. Participants could *choose* how they wanted to frame experiences and ‘narratively position themselves’ (p. 190), reinforcing the idea of sequencing. In that instance, DST allowed the exploration and ownership of ‘previously unarticulated’ experiences, while the women’s stories became tools to address social inequities (Gubrium, 2009). Furthermore, digital narratives are not condensed to fit within an allegedly ‘expert’ account but remain the ‘property’ of participants, who are free to utilise their digital stories as they see fit – participants’ stories are not merely collected for outsider purposes, but are concrete and meaningful on their own terms. This makes DST one of the more empowering forms of narratives. Thus, there is ample opportunity for DST to be used across diverse social work contexts and fields of practice, presenting opportunities that are yet to be fully realised.

We use the case example of a small group of women from refugee backgrounds to highlight the possibilities of DST in contemporary social work practice in similar settings. By emphasising the value of telling, listening, and documenting stories digitally, the outcomes for women participating in this project demonstrate the particular relevance of DST for practitioners working with refugee as well as other marginalised communities.

DST in ethnographic research with women from refugee backgrounds. The DST project discussed here involved three women from African refugee backgrounds now settling in Australia. They migrated between 2004 and 2007 and were therefore at different stages of the settlement process. Two were fluent in English, while the other was only just beginning to

learn the language. All lived in rental properties. They cared for between five to seven children as well as other dependents such as grandchildren. Two women were undertaking university studies, had a driving licence and worked part time, while the other was unemployed, learning how to drive, had no tertiary qualifications and did unpaid work. These women were supported in creating digital stories about their life journey. All three women were lone parents struggling with the challenges of living in a new country. Nevertheless, the women felt strongly motivated to document and share their experiences with others, as they hoped others would feel encouraged by their stories. The DST phase lasted over eight to nine months overall (details in Table 1), and involved collaborative preparation, creation and dissemination of the digital movies.

Insert Table 1 approximately here

The women wrote short scripts to be recorded as ‘voiceovers’ on their life journeys, including topics discussed during interviews, such as family, children, religion, culture, cooking, community, spirituality, hope, and grief. Digital stories, created with iMovie video editing software, included pictures from the women’s ‘family albums’, as well as online licence-free pictures to represent abstract themes. The ‘family album’ pictures were a combination of photographs from the women’s countries of origin and exile, as well as recent pictures depicting their lives in Australia. With the assistance of the researcher, participants made a selection of pictures to reflect a summary of their life stories. The women selected their own story title, and recorded voiceovers in English or using a combination in their first language with English. Using music software (GarageBand), or on-line licence free music, a soundtrack was added to voiceovers (see depictions of process in Figure 1). The women provided feedback on draft DSTs until a final version was agreed upon (for a further analysis

of this process, see Lenette and Boddy, 2013). The necessary ethical approval was granted for this study and participants provided written consent to be involved.

Insert Figure 1 approximately here

Outcomes for Participants

Value of Telling Stories

The DST process encouraged the women to construct their stories, while the capacity to share narratives enabled them reflect on and articulate their actions in the world. For instance, one woman wrote about her sense of resilience in her DST script:

Up to now I still wonder how I survived in a place where there was no safety, where anything could happen to you and your family any time, and you had no option. I still don't know how I am managing a family of five and how I am doing the triple job that is work, study and family...I felt that God's grace strengthened my self-sufficiency and sense of humanity, and gave me power and confidence to face any other adversity in life. I then realised the characteristics I had in me and I remind myself of these whenever I need encouragement... Above all, I have a strong sense of optimism and hope, and I make sure I practise these values. (Participant 1)

The DST process allowed the women to share their perceptions and feelings in-depth, and reflect on their experiences of upheaval to relatively stable post-migration circumstances. The women's involvement in the digital narrative process enabled the emergence of new meanings about their lives as a lone parent with children in Australia. They were able to focus on their achievements, in a context full of intensely negative public narratives around refugee entrants, while dealing with patriarchal assumptions within their own communities. Hence, this process yielded counter-narratives focussing on their sense of agency.

For another woman, the DST process represented an opportunity to focus on achievements and future aspirations in a life full of difficult periods. In her script for the digital story, she wrote about her faith and her journey from disruption to stability:

When I have some problem, I go to bed or I run away and pray God. When I was in camp the first time, I did sewing. It was my own job. I learnt nursing also for one year... When I came from Africa, I couldn't speak English, but now I can. I communicate with others very well... I have a big responsibility for my family because I am alone... I had the opportunity to learn driving for free. When I have my licence, it will be a good thing. I can get a good job, easy transport for me and my family.

(Participant 3)

The sense of achievement and her hopes for the future were palpable in her digital story. Her capacity to give meaning to her past, to identify her successes, and look to the future are all present here. Through spirituality and acquiring life skills in Australia, this lone parent of seven looked towards ways to support her children further.

The third woman stated her resolve to prioritise her children's wellbeing in her DST script:

It is hard to describe exactly how I managed to educate my children and to care for them, but it involved sacrifice, commitment and courage to accomplish my dream... I rejected all advice to remarry, I stood firm by my decision for the sake of my children. I accepted my circumstances and looked forward for the best solutions... the hardship I overcame motivated me to be strong, and never give up whatever the case may be, that was my motto. (Participant 2)

Thus all of the women's narratives were predominantly linked to the ability to provide for their children as lone parents in an economically, politically, socially and culturally stable and safe context. Indeed, many of the pictures the women chose for inclusion in the stories

were of their children. The fact that their children were faring well in the Australian educational system, job market and social environment was critical to the women's feelings of pride and accomplishment as mothers.

Value of Listening to Stories

Listening is a critical starting point and a key aspect of relationship building, irrespective of fields of practice. By reconstructing and recording women's life stories in this project, DST offered new dimensions to the process of engaging with and understanding their refugee journeys in an empowering way. This experience yielded a deeper understanding of the women's social worlds, which may have been diminished using interviews and observations alone. DST highlighted nuanced dimensions both in terms of the process and content of creating narratives of resilience. The production of a digital story involved their choice of elements that the women felt best reflected *their* history, *their* identity, *their* families, and *their* commitments and values. The iterative cycle of producing the narratives was enriching, as were the processes of sharing stories and writing short scripts, recording voiceovers, assembling and editing pictures, sharing the movie, and receiving feedback on significant others' reactions.

Additionally, two participants reported that viewing the short movies as a family triggered lively discussions as their children had not realised how much their mothers sacrificed to ensure a future in a stable environment. This experience prompted the children to ask further questions about aspects of their mothers' journeys and about their own cultural backgrounds. Thus, this experience of listening to the mothers' narratives reinforced a deeper attachment to their cultural roots and assisted the children to negotiate their own cultural transformation in Australia.

Value of Documenting Stories

The women narrated their lives chronologically, with the intent of telling others about their journeys. More specifically though, they were concerned with upholding the memories of their abrupt changes in circumstances, living in exile, and the process of rebuilding life in Australia for their children. The women wanted to ensure their children could have a digital record of the beginnings of their lives in Australia to ‘pass on’ their stories to future generations. In many ways, the digital stories constructed by the women became new ‘family albums’.

As such, all the women chose to include photos from their past and present, indicating the importance of memory to make sense of the present and look towards the future. While some use of generic but meaningful images had to be employed to replace lost images or abstract concepts, each of the women had managed to retain a number of photographs from their pasts despite their ordeals of chaotic refugee experiences. This feat in itself speaks to the enormous value attached to photos and which ‘family album’ images convey. Family history ‘albums’ provide a means to honour memory and trigger important narratives of family experiences to be passed on to children in this new form of oral history.

Additionally, DST offered an avenue for the women to easily share their stories with significant others irrespective of location, as their extended families were spread across the globe. This transnational character of their families produced from the turmoil of their refugee journey now created new challenges in communication, storytelling, and maintaining a collective ‘memory’. The example of one of the women who travelled back to her country of origin during fieldwork is telling. She showed her digital story to family members who were so impressed that they wanted to record similar accounts of their own lives. In this case, the digital story had a ‘multiplier’ effect in encouraging significant others to reflect on their lives and think about ways of documenting their experiences for current and future generations. The benefits thus extended beyond the individual’s involvement to meaningful

community outcomes, while the act of concretising a person's story in a medium easily shared with others speaks to the needs of both dispersed families and communities. Through the process of reconstituting a digital 'family album' that can be shared across the globe, DST has particular value in creating a powerful symbolic family resource.

Consequently, the value of the digital story as a representation of material culture was apparent in the sense of pride the women experienced in seeing their achievements as lone parents depicted in audio-visual form. As one of the women explained in an email post-fieldwork:

The CD is beautiful and everybody who saw it, were surprised asking who did this professional work. My kids and my cousins and my colleagues at work commented that I have gone very far, I don't know in what sense. (Participant 1)

This capacity for narratives of growth and strength to be reinforced by others as the digital story is shared demonstrates a unique value of DST, which relatively private and 'temporary' narrative approaches to social work practice does not have.

Implications for Social Work Practice

While for purposes of analysis we have separated the telling, listening and documenting of digital narratives, we acknowledge that the ways in which these aspects of the creation of narrative come together as a whole are just as important. This characteristic of the process of DST is precisely why it constitutes a good fit with participatory approaches in social work practice: the dialogic, iterative nature of the DST process is as critical to the narrative nature of DST as the 'final product'. The digital story produced certainly functions as a concrete outcome of the process, but the multiple encounters prior to (and following) it are equally part of the narrative process.

Further evidence of the coherence of DST with contemporary social work practice is that it presents the opportunity for individuals to have a voice and maintain ownership of the narratives. Despite a certain sense of risk associated with publicly discussing and recording issues usually confined to the personal domain, the narratives of the women were recorded as a way of hearing their voice amidst broader (mostly negative) refugee discourses. DST can therefore enrich contemporary social work concerned with those usually left at the margins, by creating authentic opportunities for engagement and relationship building, the repercussions of which extend beyond the personal domain. The dialogical nature of the method positions DST as an effective advocacy tool in social work with new arrivals and similarly marginalised groups.

Another example of DST, enabling marginalised voices to be heard (Riessman and Quinney, 2005), was its use with disaffected young people in Palestinian refugee camps to articulate the underlying trauma caused by loss and violence, through the act of writing stories and creating visual representations of their lives (Sawhney, 2009). This process was particularly beneficial for young Palestinian women who were refugees and whose ‘voices’ may be constrained by conservative norms, as their narratives emerged alongside other participants’ stories. Therefore, the ‘dialogical’ element (Taylor, 2006) of digital narratives facilitates access to diverse information beyond what might be immediately available (Hughes, 2011).

In similar examples, the experiences of immigrant women in the United Kingdom collected through DST brought together narratives of opportunities and difficulties encountered in new contexts from the private to public sphere (Clarke *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, DST workshops targeting Canadian immigrant women enabled the articulation of a deep sense of social isolation, which connected the women as a group of new migrants (Rose and Granger, 2010). Thus, in practical terms, DST can allow a deeper understanding of individual

as well as collective narratives, to better inform relationship-based practice aiming to enhance wellbeing. This proposition informs the narrative-social work nexus and highlights new points of connections between narrative approaches to social work practice.

Discussion

By its very nature, DST is *a priori* a display of peoples' strengths and assets, whilst its inclusion of history and social experience articulates a critique of the way in which services and institutions are currently dealing with the needs of those involved. For example, used with a group of Indigenous Elders in Canada, DST enabled participants to share their stories on video for future generations, to 'unsettle colonial understandings of history in which the lives and realities of Indigenous people are absent or erased' (Iseke, 2011, p. 322). Such enhanced understandings of institutional exclusion can assist with achieving the social justice aims inherent to social work. DST narrative can therefore yield deeper understandings of the intersectionality of issues central to critical social work (Suárez *et al.*, 2008). It is this deeper understanding of the complex and intersectoral nature of people's needs afforded by DST, which suggests its value as a tool for engagement in social work.

In another example, DST can be used as an advocacy tool to contribute to policy processes. For policy makers, stories outline individuals' and communities' needs and priorities; for communities, engagement in consultations and decision-making can be more meaningful through recorded storytelling (Lénárt-Cheng and Walker, 2011). DST thus offered a creative means of engaging with the women in this study on an individual basis, and became an effective means of 'collecting' or gathering narratives that usually remain in the private sphere, and sharing them with significant others.

Hence, DST is valuable as an 'innovative way to voice... values by harnessing the power of digital media' and becomes 'a new anthology of community' (Marcuss, 2003, p. 13). The benefits of DST extend beyond the individuals into their social networks by creating

social connections through (counter) narratives. Further, the method's benefits extended to the women's families and communities as a source of inspiration due to DST's dialogical element (as in Marcuss, 2003). This paper illustrates how DST can reconstitute a person's narrative using a 'bottom-up' approach (Helff and Woletz, 2009), thus strengthening a sense of community.

Overall, DST processes have elements of 'progressive' practice approaches (Healy and Hampshire, 2002) as the worker journeys alongside the participant; is engaged in a dialogical process; understands the impact of systemic barriers on individuals' lives; and shows a commitment to the transformation of processes and structures towards a more equitable context by including participants' voice in dominant discourses. Thus DST encourages social workers' reflexive self (see Miehl and Moffatt, 2000), enabling meaningful relationships in social work practice.

Ethical Concerns and Limitations to the Use of DST

While there are many opportunities in utilising DST narratives in a variety of social work practice contexts, it is important to critically consider the potential ethical challenges of using DST too. Firstly, as Perry (2008, p. 353) has cautioned, the desire for narrative about refugee experiences 'may seem to imply that storytelling and the sharing of personal experiences are crucial for *all* refugees. This is not the case. Not all refugees want to – or even should – share their stories'. Thus, individuals have the right to choose if, when and how they share experiences, depending on culturally prescribed norms (Cunsolo Willox *et al.*, 2013). This paper by no means argues that DST will suit all circumstances and contexts; it is one among many tools to enhance the value of narrative in social work practice with people with a refugee history and more broadly.

Secondly, Cunsolo Willox *et al.* (2013) argue that there can be a sense of burden for facilitators to disseminate stories in ways that respect privacy, do not perpetuate stereotypes,

idealise, neutralise or pathologise the individuals involved in DST. Additionally, given that the DST structure is based on Western approaches to storytelling, complexities may be overlooked from the perspective of those who are the ‘beneficiaries of the often-unnoted privilege of speaking safely and comfortably’ (Matthews and Sunderland, 2013, p. 100). Thus, established forms of constructing digital stories ‘does not necessarily resonate with non-Western storytelling forms or traditions, which celebrate stories-in-process and do not require stories to conclude succinctly and fully by the end’ (Cunsolo Willox *et al.*, 2013, p. 141). Many questions about the appropriate use of such stories remain unanswered at this stage; what is clear is that there are considerable ethical, personal and political issues linked to this method.

In addition to established ethical considerations specific to using audio-visual data in research (Mason, 2005; Perry and Marion, 2010), there is a further and enduring ethical tension in this project, which should inform the use of DST in social work practice. In the case study presented here, an ethical position was adopted of ensuring ownership of the digital stories remained with participants, involving a commitment to the women that they would decide how they would use their stories. This point raises two further issues, in terms of how digital stories should be used beyond research and outside practice ‘interventions’ upon project completion, and in relation to how DST can be used effectively as a tool to influence relevant policy when they remain in the private domain.

It is true that individuals may not object to practitioners utilising their movies for purposes beyond the immediate research or practice contexts, once initial consent for involvement is given. However, it is not always feasible to anticipate exactly in what ways and for how long the digital movies can be used in the future. The potential enduring ‘public’ nature of DST raises its own sensitivities, unlikely to be issues in more private encounters

between a social worker and service-users. Thus, practitioners need to carefully consider the full realm of implications in terms of privacy and respectful use of recorded narratives.

Finally, the use of digital storytelling requires considerable investment in terms of time, resources and training (for facilitators and participants), and crucially, building relationships of trust. This can come in sharp contrast with publicly funded projects requiring immediate implementation and results. In Cunsolo Willox *et al.*'s (2013) project with Indigenous Canadians, digital stories were created over six week-long workshops and one-on-one workshops for those struggling with the skills required to create their stories. Facilitators also struggled with taking on a 'counsellor' role when participants wished to share stories of trauma, mental health and addiction (Cunsolo Willox *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, positive outcomes can outweigh considerable demands on facilitators, when DST is used in a participant-centered and sensitive manner (Lenette and Boddy, 2013).

Conclusion

Stories have the ability to provide insights into contextual circumstances most people may not have experienced first-hand (Garro and Mattingly, 2000). Through the discussion of outcomes for participants, this paper provides an illustrative example of how DST can enrich the field of social work, particularly in relationship-based practice. These outcomes show the scope for widening the potential benefits of DST to become integral to contemporary social work, since DST has a broader potential besides an audio-visual 'add-on'. As a further corrective to dominant discourse and practice, DST can help translate people's goals, needs and aspirations into an accessible form that can influence policy and practice at a broader political level.

Yet, Matthews and Sunderland (2013) argue that despite the clear potential for large digital life-storytelling collections to inform policy-making, there are a number of obstacles, ranging from the political to the ethical, which prevent this outcome. Little is known about

how digital stories are used once they are in circulation in the public domain, let alone how they can be used effectively in policy design (Matthews and Sunderland, 2013). Research on the use of DST to inform policy is therefore still in its infancy.

We have argued that the use of DST in social work practice with people from refugee backgrounds is valuable to accentuate strengths and abilities while producing counter-narratives to the deficit discourses and images that usually circulate about new arrivals in the public domain. The particular relevance of DST to refugee individuals and communities is that the technique achieves meaningful outcomes in deeply polarised and challenging service provision contexts.

Finding or creating opportunities for sharing stories (Perry, 2008) can inform better ways of engaging and working with individuals and communities. Storytelling is a simple way of sharing aspects of lived experience, as stories speak to everyone and build common ground across cultures and over time, whether they are shared orally, textually or digitally. Storytelling has elements of mutuality and is relational (Mackenzie, 2011), making it a valuable tool to work with vulnerable populations. Narratives thus represent a sophisticated approach to rendering people's experiences. Yet, these nuanced aspects perhaps indicate why the notion of narrative remains vague, both in research and practice.

The process of engaging in DST represents an avenue to inductive knowledge building in reflexive social work practice. There is a need to recognise mundane processes of practice and pathways through which practitioners gain knowledge about service-users (Taylor, 2006), particularly in diverse settings. Practitioners' understanding of their role in 'creating knowledge about practice through experience rather than simply applying ready-made knowledge to practice' (Taylor, 2006, pp. 191-192) is critical. DST narratives can assist workers to understand aspects of lived experiences and address issues that may not emerge

using other methods. The role of practitioners as co-constructors of counter-narratives can address some of the intricacies of working in diverse and challenging contexts.

References

- Bamberg, M. (2004). 'Considering counter narratives', in Bamberg, M. & Andrews, M. (eds), *Considering counter narratives: Narrating, resisting, making sense*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company. Available online at <http://www.clarku.edu/~mbamberg/Papers/Counter%20Narratives.htm>
- Borden, W. (1992) 'Narrative perspectives in psychosocial intervention following adverse life events', *Social Work*, **37**(2), pp. 135-141.
- Clarke, R., Wright, P. and McCarthy, J. (2012) *Sharing narrative and experience: digital stories and portraits at a women's centre*, available online at <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2223663>
- Connor, L. (2009) 'Empathy and healing: Essays in medical anthropology and narrative anthropology', *Australian Anthropological Society*, **20**(2), pp. 256-258.
- Cunsolo Willox, A., Harper, S. and Edge, V. L., 'MyWord': Storytelling and Digital Media Lab, and Rigolet Inuit Community Government (2013) 'Storytelling in a digital age: Digital storytelling as an emerging narrative method for preserving and promoting indigenous oral wisdom', *Qualitative Research*, **13**(2), pp.127-47.
- Dupain, M. and Maguire, L. L. (2007) 'Health Digital Storytelling Projects', *American Journal of Health Education*, **38**(1), pp. 41-43.
- Fisher, P. and Goodley, D. (2007) 'The linear medical model of disability: Mothers of disabled babies resist with counter-narratives', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, **29**(1), pp. 66-81.
- Freeman, E. M. (2011) *Narrative approaches in social work: A life span, culturally centered, strengths perspective*, Springfield, Charles C Thomas.

- Garro, L. C. and Mattingly, C. (2000) 'Narrative as construct and construction', in Mattingly, C. and Garro, L. C. (eds), *Narrative and the Cultural Construction of Illness and Healing*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Griffith University. (2012) *1000 Voices*, available online at <http://www.1000voices.edu.au/content/stories>
- Gubrium, A. (2009) 'Digital Storytelling: An Emergent Method for Health Promotion Research and Practice', *Health Promotion Practice*, **10**(2) pp. 186-191.
- Hartley, J. and McWilliam, K. (2009) 'Computational power meets human contact', in Hartley, J. and McWilliam, K. (eds), *Story Circle: Digital Storytelling Around the World*, United Kingdom, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Healy, K. and Hampshire, A. (2002) 'Social capital: a useful concept for social work?', *Australian Social Work*, **55**(3), pp. 227- 238.
- Helff, S. and Woletz, J. (2009) 'Narrating Euro-African life in digital space' in Hartley, J. and McWilliam, K. (eds), *Story Circle: Digital Storytelling Around the World*, United Kingdom, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hughes, M. 'Unitary Appreciative Inquiry (UAI): A New Approach for Researching Social Work Education and Practice', *British Journal of Social Work Advance Access* published October 20, 2011, doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcr139.
- Huss, E. 'What We See and What We Say: Combining Visual and Verbal Information within Social Work Research', *British Journal of Social Work Advance Access* published November 7, 2011, doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcr155.
- Ingamells, A. (2010) 'Community development', in Ingamells, A., Lathouras, A., Wiseman, R., Westoby, P. and Caniglia, F. (eds), *Community Development Practice: Stories, Method and Meaning*, Australia, Common Ground.

- Iseke, J. M. (2011) 'Indigenous digital storytelling in video: Witnessing with Alma Desjarlais', *Equity & Excellence in Education*, **44**(3), pp. 311-329.
- Kaslow, F. W. (2010) 'A family therapy narrative', *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, **38**(1), pp. 50-62.
- Lalor, D. (2009) *Ipswich Stories: Using Digital Storytelling to Research Intergenerational Sharing of Heritage, History, Place, Identity and Community Connection: A Pilot Study* (Unpublished report), available online at <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/28615/>
- Lénárt-Cheng, H. and Walker, D. (2011) 'Recent trends in using life stories for social and political activism', *Biography*, **34**(1), pp. 141-179.
- Lenette, C. and Boddy, J. (2013) 'Visual ethnography: Promoting the mental health of refugee women', *Qualitative Research Journal*, **13**(1), pp. 72-89.
- Lenette, C., Brough, M. and Cox, L. (2013) 'Everyday resilience: Narratives of single refugee women with children', *Qualitative Social Work*, **12**(5), pp. 637-653.
- Leonard Cheshire Disability. (2012) *Young Voices*, available online at <http://youngvoices.lcdisability.org>
- Mackenzie, S. (2011) 'Dissecting the social body: Social inequality through AIDS counter-narratives', *Public Understanding of Science*, **20**(4), pp. 491-505.
- Marcuss, M. (2003) 'The new community anthology: Digital storytelling as a community development strategy', *Communities & Banking*, **14**(3), pp. 9-13.
- Mason, P. (2005) 'Visual data in applied qualitative research: Lessons from experience', *Qualitative Research*, **5**(3), pp. 325-346.
- Matthews, N. and Sunderland, N. (2013) 'Digital life-story narratives as data for policy makers and practitioners: Thinking through methodologies for large-scale multimedia qualitative datasets', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, **57**(1), pp. 97-114.

- Meadows, D. (2003). 'Digital storytelling: Research-based practice in new media'. *Visual Communication*, **2**(2), pp. 189–193, doi:10.1177/1470357203002002004.
- Mendes, P. (2008) 'Teaching community development to social work students: A critical reflection', *Community Development Journal*, **44**(2), pp. 248-262.
- Miehls, D. and Moffatt, K. (2000) 'Constructing social work identity based on the reflexive self', *British Journal of Social Work*, **30**(3), pp. 339–348.
- Payne, M. (2006) *Narrative therapy: an introduction for counsellors*, London, Sage Publications.
- Perry, K. H. (2008) 'From storytelling to writing: Transforming literacy practices among Sudanese refugees', *Journal of Literacy Research*, **40**(10), pp. 899–912.
- Perry, S. and Marion, J. S. (2010) 'State of the ethics in visual anthropology', *Visual Anthropology Review*, **26**(2), pp. 96-104, doi: 10.1111/j.1548-7458.2010.01070.x.
- Pomerantz, S. and Raby, R. (2011) '"Oh, she's so smart": Girls' complex engagements with Post/Feminist narratives of academic success', *Gender and Education*, **23**(5), pp. 549-564.
- Reitmaier, T., Bidwellb, N. J. and Marsden, G. (2011) 'Situating digital storytelling within African communities', *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, **69**(10), pp. 658–668.
- Riessman, C. K. and Quinney, L. (2005) 'Narrative in social work: A critical review', *Qualitative Social Work*, **4**(4), pp. 391-412.
- Roscoe, K. D., Carson, A. M. and Madoc-Jones, L. (2011) 'Narrative social work: conversations between theory and practice', *Journal of Social Work Practice: Psychotherapeutic Approaches in Health, Welfare and the Community*, **25**(1), pp. 47-61.

- Rose, C. B. and Granger, C. (2010). *Digital Stories of Coming to Learn: Experiences of Access in a Community-Based Digital Storytelling Workshop for Immigrant Women*, available online at <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/FundedResearch/201009BrushwoodRoseGrangerFullReport.pdf>
- Sawhney, N. (2009) *Voices Beyond Walls: The Role of Digital Storytelling for Empowering Marginalized Youth in Refugee Camps*, available online at http://www.envisioningpeace.org/sites/default/files/file/VoicesBeyondWalls_IDC2009.pdf
- Suárez, Z. E., Newman, P. A. and Glover Reed, B. (2008) 'Critical consciousness and cross-cultural/intersectional social work practice: A case analysis', *Families in Society*, **89**(3), pp. 407-417.
- Taylor, C. (2006) 'Narrating significant experience: Reflective accounts and the production of (self) knowledge', *British Journal of Social Work*, **36**(2), pp. 189–206.
- White, M. (2003) 'Narrative practice and community assignments', *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, **2**, pp. 20-55.

Figure 1. Screenshots of script, GarageBand and iMovie software.

Table 1. DST process employed with participating women

Approach	Phase		
	<i>Preparation</i> <i>(approximately 5 months)</i>	<i>Creation of digital story</i> <i>(approximately 3 months)</i>	<i>Dissemination</i> <i>(within a month)</i>
<i>Unstructured</i>	<i>(Researcher and participants)</i> Sharing and recording stories through in-depth interviews	<i>(Participants)</i> Writing short scripts (content and language used)	<i>(Participants)</i> Receiving feedback on people's reactions
<i>Structured</i>	<i>(Researcher)</i> Ethics approval and consent forms Acquiring DST skills	<i>(Researcher and participants)</i> Writing short scripts (length) Recording voiceovers Assembling and editing pictures Viewing and editing of final version	<i>(Researcher)</i> Distribution of DVDs