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Experts of the streets: The thoughts of experts by experience with a history of crime and substance abuse on working as a team with professionals

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Abstract

Expertise by experience has become increasingly significant in the various fields of social work. This study examines narratives told by experts by experience who have undergone an educational expert-by-experience program for people with a history of crime and substance abuse, with the main focus on the participants' accounts of their expertise and how it is created when working as a team with a professional. The stories create an image of the expert by experience as an agent who is both an interpreter and an advocate advancing the mutual understanding between the client and the professional as well as someone who promotes the client's status within the service system. However, the experts' dual role makes it difficult for them to fully recognize their status and roles in the professional organizations. All in all, the study shows that expertise by experience has much use in social and personal services, including probation.

Keywords

Desistance from crime, expert by experience, social work, user involvement

Introduction

Over the past few years, expertise by experience has become increasingly significant in the various fields of social work. The term “expert by experience” refers to expertise that is based on an individual's own experiences of using services (McLaughlin, 2009). The involvement of experts by experience in the provision of services challenges social work

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professionals to revise their views as well as expert organizations to give room to experts by experience in the service system. While social work is dedicated to empowering service users, the social workers' perspective still dominates the setting (Wilberforce et al., 2020). Therefore, teamwork between experts by experience and social workers requires a new kind of mind-set and the sharing of expertise.

This article examines how experts by experience who have undergone expert-by-experience training for people with a history of crime and substance abuse talk about working in a team with a social work professional. The research data consist of interviews with these experts by experience ($N = 19$) in which they describe expertise as it is constructed when working in pairs with professionals as well as their roles as experts in relation to the professionals.

In this study, when we talk about people with a history of crime and substance abuse, or ex-offenders and recovering addicts, we mean individuals who have been convicted of crimes and have engaged in substance abuse in the past. They can be presumed to have knowledge of desistance from crime and abstinence from substances.

The study takes place in the context of Finland where experts by experience have been particularly involved in civil society organizations operating in the field of social welfare and also in various public sector organizations (Meriluoto, 2018: 19). In Finland, experts by experience with a history of crime and substance abuse mainly participate in the functions of organizations that provide services for inmates, homeless people, and substance abusers, or that run development projects related to these services. To some extent, the concept of expertise by experience has become an indication of the inclusive and participatory character of any social welfare organization in Finland (Meriluoto, 2018).

While this research was conducted with experts by experience working with social workers, the findings have wider relevance for work within social and personal services, including probation. These stories are needed in criminology education and social sciences for the purpose of developing different practices, public debate, and decision-making.

Theoretical framework

As social work has become increasingly professional, the idea of expertise has gained more significance in the field. This has prompted discussions on what expertise is in the context of social work and who can be an expert in the field. Toikko (2016) argues that one grows to be an expert by experience in individual and collective processes. Consequently, the individual learning process allows the service user to build their identity as an expert based on their experiences, while the collective process promotes the creation of their social role. The concept of expertise by experience can be seen as based on a new interpretation of expertise, a so-called open expertise. Open expertise recognizes the layperson's perspective. Expertise is not directly connected to a certain profession, position, or educational background. The expert status cannot be given automatically to anyone in advance, nor can it be denied from anyone in principle (Eräsaari, 2002: 23–30; Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2004, 2005).

There continue to be challenges with regard to the status and role of experts by experience in social work. Peter Beresford (2000) argues that service users should be treated with the same respect as professionals. This means that their stigmas should not be reinforced,

nor should assumptions be made about their inabilities or inferiority. The equal status of experts by experience and social workers requires recognition of the fact that one's expertise is based on education, and the other's is based on experience (McLaughlin, 2009). Simpson and Connor (2011) bring up the kind of change in thinking that will bring clients' knowledge on a par with professionals' knowledge. When working in a team with experts by experience, the professionals are required to have the humility to learn from the experiences of these experts (Videmšek and Fox, 2018). Carr (2007) points out that power sharing can be difficult within established mainstream structures, formal consultation mechanisms, and traditional ideologies. According to Toikko (2016: 295), unlike with hierarchical models, power is not the main focus in a holistic model of participation which is based on a dialogue between service users and professionals.

As Warren (2007) argues, the views of experts by experience can be utilized in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of services. When conducting a systematic review in social welfare, various sources of knowledge should be used, including organizations, practitioners, the policy community, research, and service users and carers (Pawson et al., 2003). McLaughlin (2015) discusses how service users can be viewed as objects or subjects or social actors or active participants in the context of user involvement. Simmons (2009) has categorized service users into different types based on the clients' weak or strong sense of attachment to the service organization and according to whether it is an individual or collective service.

When we discuss experts by experience, we should not overlook the aspect of "peer-ness." The peer support that group members afford each other can be utilized in various group-based services offered to social welfare clients (Loumpa, 2012). In addition, different self-help groups present possibilities to share experience-based peer support among members (Noorani, 2013). Being an expert by experience and a peer can offer people new kinds of meaningful social roles and support their recovery. In Nixon's (2020) research, opportunities to work in peer support given to ex-offenders contributed to them being recognized through their strengths, which is important in the transformation process that desistance from crime requires. Peer mentoring has also been found to reduce the ex-offenders' stigma and be mutually rewarding (Kavanagh and Borrill, 2013).

In addition to the counseling work in various self-help and support groups, experts by experience have wider political potential (Noorani, 2013). Beresford (2001) argues that user representatives as well as people who have experience-based expertise should be involved in planning processes in social work. They are not planning their own services alone but those of the entire service user group they represent (Doel and Best, 2008). Expertise by experience offers the possibility to integrate in it an individual's lived experiences which then allows for the construction of professionalized and politicized identities (Jones and Pietilä, 2020). However, in various expert-by-experience projects, expertise may be authority-governed and involve demands for the experts by experience to produce neutral and objective knowledge (Meriluoto, 2018). Moreover, the experts by experience may assume the professionals' discourse to gain approval and opportunities to participate (Thompson et al., 2012). Participation may also include tokenistic practices (see Arnstein, 1969). According to Beresford (2019), to achieve more effective and inclusive participation, one key recommendation is to strengthen the funding basis of user-led organizations, which have played a key role in user involvement innovation.

In addition to what is discussed earlier, various branches in the field of evaluation and participatory research have emphasized the client's point of view in social work. Reflective evaluation, for instance, acknowledges the lay participant's perspective (Shaw, 1999: 13). This approach recognizes the silent knowledge of both the employee and the service user. Latour (1987) points out that practices are constructed in routines and that they evolve. Payne (2005) underlines the perspective of the social welfare client. The discussion on expertise may also involve open democratic and public negotiation related to knowledge production and problem solving (Nowotny, 2003). Moreover, experts by experience participate in research in various ways (Fleming et al., 2014; McLaughlin, 2006, 2009). Also, the community perspective on social work offers possibilities for citizen participation (Delgado, 1999).

Rissanen (2015: 123) described her own expertise by experience period as a phase on her journey from rehabilitation toward ordinary life and labor market. Becoming an expert by experience can be an employment opportunity for people with a history of crime and substance abuse that supports their desistance from crime. As Nixon (2020) points out, experts by experience use personal narratives of desistance to inspire hope in others and peer work can act as a start for building a desisting identity. Laub and Sampson (2001: 3) point out that a variety of developmental, psychological, and sociological processes affect desistance and there are several factors associated with it, among them stable work.

Methods

Research objectives and research question

This study has its roots in a long-term expert-by-experience educational program created for people with a background in crime and substance abuse. The training took place either in a university environment or in a non-governmental organization (NGO) providing social and training services, and it included practical training either in the form of a work placement period or paid work in one of the various services. In this study, the narratives told by experts by experience with a history of crime and substance concerning their work are explored. The main focus is on the participants' accounts related to their expertise and how it is created when working together with professionals. The study seeks to answer this question: "How do experts by experience with a history of crime and substance abuse reflect on the shared expertise with professionals in their narratives?"

Methodological starting point

The methodological starting point of the study lies somewhere between social constructionism (Gergen, 2004) and critical realism. In the social constructionist approach, knowledge is understood as something that develops in social processes and is closely connected to action (Burr, 2003). According to Burr (2003), there are four broad tenets in social constructionism: a criticism toward axioms, relativism, the idea that knowledge develops in social processes, and the connection between knowledge and social action. Burr (2003) states that language and the use of it do not merely describe reality but they also construct the world as we perceive it. At the empirical level of critical realism,

events or objects can be measured empirically but these events are always conveyed through a filter of human experience and interpretation (Fletcher, 2017: 183).

In the context of this study, narrative approach means that, first, the interview questions aim to collect narrative research data. Second, these narratives are analyzed within the study and, third, the data are then formed into a narrative of its own that encompasses the survival stories the experts by experience have shared in their work. Hence, this study both examines narrative information and generates it.

Interview data

The research data were gathered through themed interviews that covered the following topics:

- disengaging from crime, abstaining from substances, and interest in expertise-by-experience training;
- the identity and growth of an expert by experience in expert-by-experience training;
- being an expert by experience in peer support counseling, service development, and positions of advocacy;
- teamwork between an expert by experience and a professional and tensions related to such teamwork;
- expertise by experience from the viewpoint of empowerment (rehabilitation, delivery of services in co-operation with professionals, active citizenship)

The research data were produced by interviewing individuals who had undergone or were undergoing expert-by-experience training aimed at ex-offenders and recovering addicts (N = 19) in two cities located in Southern Finland with a population of over 100,000. The expert-by-experience training program that the people with a history of crime and substance abuse attended consisted of 3 months full-time studying and a 3-month work placement period. The central themes of the training were expertise by experience and “peerness,” the basics of criminology and criminal sanctions, interaction and professional methods, professionalism and reflection, work-related skills, and project work and multi-professional networking. The main objective of the training was to develop an educational model that would promote employment based on expertise by experience and its professional utilization. About 80 people attended the entire training; of these, 38% obtained employment after the training and 9% started studying at a vocational education institution or University of Applied Sciences.

In one of the municipalities, the training group was informed of the study in oral form, while in the other, project employees were informed through email. After learning about the study, people could indicate their willingness to take part in it. The interviewees were chosen based on their work experience related to peer support and expertise by experience. Anyone interested in taking part in the study and with relevant work experience was allowed to participate. Some people were interviewed during the training and some afterwards, but their perspectives did not differ from one another. The interviews were conducted between August 2019 and February 2020 in the units providing the training,

in two different locations. The data were gathered during the expert-by-experience training (N = 4) or about 6–18 months after the end of the training (N = 15).

After the expert-by-experience training, the interviewees worked in various positions related to peer support counseling, service development, and advocacy. Some worked in municipal organizations (N = 2), NGOs (N = 11), the private sector (N = 1), or as a temporarily employed worker for various employers (N = 1). Some of the interviewees were still attending the educational program (N = 4) but they had prior experience related to peer work or they had gained work experience related to expertise by experience during the training. The experts by experience worked in the fields of housing services, child welfare, substance abuse services, education, research, and development as well as services and projects aimed at those with a history of crime and substance abuse. A quarter of the interviewees worked in a team with a social work professional. Some of the interviewees were doing an apprenticeship (N = 3), some were employed (N = 5), and some were doing a work placement (N = 7). Those in a work placement worked for about 120 hours a month, while the others worked about 150 hours a month. The participants' paid work tasks involved sharing their life stories at educational institutions or child welfare units, taking part in different user panels aimed at developing services, or making public appearances that strove to raise awareness about expertise by experience. Some had gained work experience prior to the expert-by-experience training related to peer support counseling at substance abuse rehabilitation services or third-sector services for ex-offenders.

Most participants had spent several years in prison and substances had been part of their lives. Almost all interviewees had both a criminal record and a history of substance abuse. The majority had received more than one prison sentence. One participant had no convictions, and one had served a conversion sentence (unpaid fine converted to imprisonment). Five of the interviewees were women, 14 were men. The age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 53.

When applying for the expert-by-experience training, the participants had been desisting from crime and substance abuse for one or more years. For this reason, they had knowledge about what had helped them to recover and how they had managed to disengage from crime. Some had received help with their recovery in the form of community rehabilitation during their incarceration, while others had received abstinence support after their release. Most interviewees still regularly attended various peer support groups where they received support for their abstinence from substances. On average, the interviews lasted for 48 minutes, ranging from 26 minutes to 93 minutes. The entire interview material in transcribed form consists of 244 pages using a line spacing of 1.5, font size 12, and Calibri font.

Analysis of the research data

When studying inner narratives, the assumption is that the account (or other data) acts as a kind of a window into the mind of the individual. Vilma Hänninen (2004) suggests that the inner narrative is a process in which the individual interprets the past events of their life and the possibilities and constraints of their situation with the help of narrative forms adopted from the cultural stock of stories. By the term "situation," Hänninen (2004) refers to the individual's actual conditions of life, its various possibilities, resources, and limitations. These are partly controlled by the individual and partly results of their actions.

The participants' interview speeches contained descriptive and narrative responses to the interviewer's questions. They included short accounts of various social situations and past events related to them, present events (in relation to the interview), and different plans and aspirations concerning the future. Out of the storylike interview data, one core narrative was formed regarding the pair work model with a professional. This narrative describes, through the stories told by the interviewees, various events that are used as parts of the plot that describes the entire data. This form of analysis primarily brings out a reflection of the inner narrative (Hänninen, 2004). Some of the stories were related to the strengths of the team work and some to the tensions. The story of this study describes all of these perspectives based on the interview data.

Ethical issues

One of the writers of this article worked as a trainer in the expert-by-experience training program and also participated in the research. The article was part of the research which was not related to elucidating the goals and outcomes of the educational program. The dual role required self-reflection as part of the constant self-evaluation of the study throughout the process. Training the experts by experience and mentoring their on-the-job learning helped the researcher build a close and trusting relationship with the interviewees. Information related to the expertise by experience work gained from the interviewees' accounts formed the starting point for this study's interpretations. Robson (2011) emphasizes the researcher's reflection and the dialogue with the participant group. This kind of dual role of the researcher involves various considerations that need to be taken into account. The interviewees spoke openly in the interview, which may have been influenced by the fact that some of the interviewees were familiar with the trainer.

The study was conducted adhering to the guidelines of responsible conduct of research defined by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, TENK (2012). Issues related to research integrity were taken into account in the research process and the participants were treated with respect, following the TENK (2019) ethical principles of research with human participants. The participants were made aware of their right to participate, to refuse to participate, and to discontinue their participation in the study. The participants were given a consent form that was reviewed together with them, and it was emphasized that not taking part in the research would not affect their position in the training program.

Special attention was paid to the participants' anonymity and the results are reported in such a way that the participants cannot be identified. The necessary research permits were acquired from the main organizer of the training as well as the Criminal Sanctions Agency.

Analysis and results

Heroic stories of ex-offenders and recovering addicts as access to the world of work

Even though the participants that were interviewed for this study did not talk about their lives chronologically, their accounts formed narratives with a plot and multiple layers. The starting point for the expertise by experience was a primary story about recovery and

desistance from crime. To a large extent, it was a heroic story in nature, in which the interviewee manages to disengage from a criminal way of life, partly because of their own efforts and partly because of external factors. This primary story was not the actual object of this study but it formed a basis through which the narrative about expertise by experience obtained its meaning.

The primary stories typically had three phases structured around substance abuse, crime, and convictions. The interviewees describe their childhood, a period in their life preceding substance abuse and crime, in various ways, attaching to it both positive qualities as well as elements that explain their behavior later in life. This phase was followed by a period during which the interviewees either drifted unintentionally to the world of substance use and crime or made a conscious decision to engage in it. At this point, substance use and crimes were closely connected to their interpersonal relationships and their entire lifestyle. This phase included periods spent in prison. Following this was a recovery phase, the extension to which becoming an expert by experience can be considered. At the time of the interviews, many of the participants had been sober for 1–3 years.

The interviewees named multiple reasons for applying for the expert-by-experience training aimed at people with a history of crime and substance abuse. They all shared a background of crime and substance abuse—which was a pre-requisite for attending the training—as well as an interest in becoming experts by experience. Some had already worked in different peer counseling positions while still in rehabilitation. This experience with peer support work had ignited their interest in expertise by experience. Some interviewees had benefited from peer support themselves which had made them think of ways to support others in recovery by using their own experiences.

After the expert-by-experience training, some of the interviewees applied for jobs in peer support where the applicants were required to have personal experience with recovery and desistance from crime. Some had professional contacts that had been formed in their own rehabilitation who then assisted them in finding jobs. Most positions were part of various organizations' projects to develop services related to housing, substance abuse rehabilitation, child welfare, or social work education.

The expert by experience as a reflective producer of knowledge

The teamwork between a professional and an expert by experience is constructed in the various practices of the work. The interviewees described how the professionals' understanding of their clients was gradually built up through joint client work with the experts by experience. The interviewees emphasized that the client benefited the most from support given to them by the professional and expert by experience together. In the interviewees' descriptions, skills acquired through education were seen as the strength of the professionals, whereas the interviewees' own strength in the context of the teamwork model stemmed from surviving a life filled with crime and substance abuse:

Working in pairs is brilliant. It's the best way to do this work. We need the professional who has the necessary education, so that the client can get the best help possible. Then we need the guy who's actually survived that kind of life. But absolutely as a team. I think it combines the best of both worlds. I think it would be kind of crazy if an ex-criminal just attended a course and

after that was all of a sudden somehow capable of doing that work. At least I couldn't do my work without my work partner. Like, literally, how to do these reports and write stuff. I really need my partner for that. (Jack)

The importance of the trained professional was accentuated in this interview. However, it constructs a fairly shallow notion of the skills of social work professionals as well as the professionalism of social welfare in general. The interviewee recognizes that the professional is needed to make the written reports in particular. Assessment of treatment need, organization of services, and legal competence were also mentioned as responsibilities of the professional.

The professionals' ability to approach their work analytically was brought up in the interviews, while experts by experience were said to engage in their work emotionally. The experts by experience identified themselves as peers in relation to the clients and this helped them understand the needs of the clients in the transformation process:

There's the professional who uses the language of professionals and then there's me who uses the language of the streets. And then they are running the group and saying how things are but don't explain them in a way that would make people understand what they mean. And then I step in and ask them to make it clear to us because even I don't understand it but for them it is obvious, because they have studied it but for people like me some words don't mean anything before they explain what they mean, and you know, after all, change doesn't come from the outside, it starts from the inside, meaning that if you don't understand what they are talking about, nothing can happen. (Ben)

This interview illustrated how the expert by experience was needed to build a bridge between the professional and the client, as the professionals and the clients do not always understand each other. This is especially problematic with regard to the client's recovery.

The interviewees spoke about how they could notice various phenomena related to the client work based on their previous experiences that the professionals could not have recognized without their help. They communicated their different work-related observations to the professionals, some of who also took notes:

I notice stuff at times and we've written some of them down. Things that the other person wouldn't think of. For example, a while ago there was this young client. We finally managed to get him to come to the treatment need assessment. We started to check what he was really using and they took tests to see what he had in his blood and then they said to him that when you come back in a week there can't be any traces of amphetamine or opioids. There can only be traces of medicines and pot. Those were their instructions. And once we left, I told the young guy that right now he needs to go and buy enough medicine so that it won't run out. So that he doesn't end up in a situation where it runs out and you go look for them and can't find them and then someone comes to you and says no, I don't have that but here's a sub. And the whole damn work goes to waste. This was one of the things that my partner commented like well, of course, but they wouldn't have thought of saying something like that. So, that's one example and they keep coming. Things that you can't learn from any books. So, that's what I bring to the table. (Jack)

This description exposed some of the various aspects that had come up in the practice of social work that the professional was not able to recognize and the expert by experience

had to point out to them. The description indicated that there are certain conditions in the world of substance use that may become obstacles in the clients' path toward receiving services. In their accounts on the teamwork model, other interviewees also talked about passing on their observations to the professionals. These descriptions create an image of unilateral communication of observations that only takes place from the expert by experience to the professional.

The interviewees also talked about their understanding concerning what the client is going through stemming from their own prior life experiences:

For someone like me who has spent time on the streets going to school. That is a school, too, a kind of school. You have to learn about human psychology because you're always in danger. You have to learn all kinds of stuff. Your senses are sharp. You have to understand a lot of things. Maybe you can't talk about it in a professional language but I've seen the root of it and the evil in people and also the good in them without any structures. Like social layers and such. The clients, when I've been to rehab to talk about stuff . . . The clients come to say things to me that they wouldn't say to the social workers there. No matter how good a worker you are, you're still a worker. (George)

In the interviewee's description, the expert's own knowledge of human nature was seen to stem from their experiences on the streets, while the professional's knowledge was considered to be based on different social structures. These experiences deriving from "the streets" were useful in client interaction. In the interviewee's description, the survival story that the expert by experience shared granted them a more honest relationship with the client in comparison to the professional.

The expert's by experience professional tensions

The interviewees talked about various tensions related to teamwork. One interviewee described how a professional had treated them on the first day of work:

On the first day, my team partner said to a by-passing guard that Jennifer works here, so don't throw her out even though her habitus is what it is. And this speaks volumes about the difference in how they treat people, I doubt that they would have said that about a social worker, that Sarah here has this tattoo so don't throw her out even though she's like this. Sometimes the communication does cross certain lines. I feel that people think that, because I have had a quite colorful and brow-raising past, they can talk to us in any way they want and say things about us and we should just take it with a smile because you know what it is and you've probably heard worse. It doesn't work like that, we are people, you can't say to us that because you look like a junkie, let's make sure that they don't throw you out. You can't say things like that to anyone. We don't talk to the professionals like that either, even though something like that might be expected from us. The other one has worked in rehab and is highly educated and I'm a drug addict with a criminal record and this is my first day here and yet the one who behaved badly certainly wasn't me. It does have its own kind of contrast. (Jennifer)

This citation sheds light on the challenges of language use. The professional juxtaposes the expert by experience with the clients based on their appearance. Yet, the expert by experience had hoped to be treated like an employee on their first day of work.

Likewise, the expert by experience criticizes the fact that the professional is not using the kind of language that could be expected from a trained professional. Furthermore, this excerpt brings forth the expert's perception of their subordinate status that seems to entail that they should endure everything with a smile on their face, while others can say what they want to them and about them.

This raises the issue of contradictory statuses related to expertise by experience and the tension connected to the language of the streets. On one hand, the similarity of the expert by experience to the clients and the style of speech they use are seen as strengths but, on the other hand, the expert by experience also expects to be treated as an equal to the professional.

In addition, some interviewees reported that in some organizations, they were only given positions in peer support counseling and not in the development of services. Some interviewees also felt that in some organizations, they could not find their place among the professionals or that their views held no importance because they did not have formal training in the field. One interviewee described how the unclear status of the experts by experience as well as the ambiguous nature of their tasks both complicated and limited their possibilities to act as experts by experience:

I've said it before that there are those token experts by experience around every corner, but no one has really defined what the actual job description is. If it was defined, it would be possible to focus your energy and competence on the matter at hand and not just wander around like a walking question mark. It's still a bit difficult to find your place as an expert by experience, especially in large organizations. Like, it's really popular for everyone to have their own expert by experience. That there are experts by experience in each unit, for example, in the city's substance use services and we attend those unit meetings and networks and all of that, but no one really asks for our opinion and when they do, they're a bit like . . . So, it's like our competence doesn't exist because we, in principle, don't have an academic education, for instance. So the expert by experience is a bit like . . . Well, you talk to this addict, they'll understand how you feel. But, like, that is the only function we have, even though we would have so much more to give, for example, to these processes and practices and all those things. They could even save a lot of money if someone asked a substance abuser about what they think could have been done during those 27 times that you were on rehab, to reduce expenses or the number of visits or what would have helped you. And if you ask 40 people and the answer is always the same, then that thing might be something to look into. But no, we're still seen as jesters of sorts. (Jennifer)

The interviewee described people like her as "token experts by experience" who were considered useful from the perspective of the organizations' reputation, especially in the substance abuse services. The interviewee describes having been mainly given tasks related to peer guidance and not to the planning or development of services that she felt she could have contributed to.

The strengths of the experts by experience stem from the fact that they know the world and the language of the clients that differ from the reality and language of the professionals. This may enable the formation of a mutual understanding, or even an alliance, between the expert by experience and the client that sets the expert by experience apart from the social worker. It seems that a tensional relationship to the professionals is somehow inherent to being an expert by experience.

Future career plans of the experts by experience with a history of crime and substance abuse

The interviewees talked about various future prospects concerning expertise by experience. Some of them had had the chance to realize their aspirations when working in planning new kinds of services as part of various organizations' projects. For some, more stable employment became possible when they started apprenticeship training in the field of social work.

Some talked about obtaining a degree in social work and about their goals of strengthening their position in working life through education. One interviewee who had taken part in social work training described how their expertise by experience, which they had kept a secret during the studies, had manifested as an exceptional ability to understand substance addiction and recovery.

Many of the interviewees believed that the status of experts by experience would gradually become stronger in working life as expertise by experience becomes more widely known and professionals get a better idea about experts by experience through teamwork. One interviewee spoke about how the status of experts by experience would become more pronounced once they are hired in different units as the professionals' *minions*. This point of view may include a consensus-oriented relationship to the professionals. All in all, obtaining a vocational qualification in social work and healthcare appeared in the data to be a central way in which the expert by experience can strengthen their position in the labor market. However, this presents a conflicting situation: To continue working to support people with addictions and criminal records seems to require the expert by experience to turn into a professional.

Conclusion

The stories concerning teamwork told by the experts by experience with a history of crime and substance abuse created an image of the expert by experience as an agent who is both an interpreter and an advocate advancing the mutual understanding between the client and the professional as well as promoting the client's status within the service system. People with a history of crime and substance abuse have such knowledge that can benefit both the professionals and the clients. The ex-offenders and recovering addicts identified themselves in their work as peers to the clients. This understanding, which stems from their status as peers and their prior experience as service users, is a strength in client work. Nevertheless, they expected the professionals to treat them like professionals. However, the dual role of the experts by experience made it more difficult for them to grasp their status and roles in the professional organizations. All in all, the study data portray a rather positive picture of expertise by experience.

As Maruna (2001) points out, recognition of the various achievements related to the transformation of offenders helps them construct new narratives of themselves that, in turn, offer them the chance to make amends with their past. Becoming experts by experience offers ex-offenders the possibility to create new narratives in which they can take advantage of their past experiences and their survival story in a professional framework. To build these narratives through expertise by experience, employees, and organizations need to redistribute the

power concerning expertise. According to Daley et al. (2019), the experiential knowledge of those living in the margins concerning various services is often overlooked because it is not seen as being up to scientific standards. In addition, it became evident in the future-oriented narratives of the experts by experience that acquiring a stronger status in the service system might require them to do two things. They have to demonstrate a consensus-oriented mindset (see Meriluoto, 2018) in relation to the openings within organizations or obtain a vocational qualification in the field, which might mean giving up on being an expert by experience. However, giving up their position as experts by experience can also represent an opportunity to give up their identity as “former criminals” and the stigma associated with it. Vocational training can also be seen as something that can support their desistance and improve their possibilities of obtaining employment.

This study revealed that professionals and clients failed to understand each other at times, which leads this study to introduce the question as to whether social work or rehabilitation activity should involve no experts by experience in the first place. Working together with professionals can be the way to successfully involve ex-offender service users in the criminal justice system (see Awenat et al., 2018). Beresford et al. (2008) bring up the necessity to review the political and professional basis of social work in relation to what social service users’ value in social work. They point out that clients value, for instance, humane qualities in social workers. Based on their experiences, these experts by experience have the possibility to build their expertise that stems from “peer-ness” to manifest these qualities in their work.

The stories about expertise by experience the participants had adopted during the training had given them somewhat unrealistic ideas about their equal opportunities in the service system in relation to professionals. Future possibilities in this study field are related to the time perspective. A look at the development of teamwork alongside professional growth would require a longitudinal study.

Criminal policy believes in new opportunities, and genuine opportunities are measured by how professionals accept former offenders for co-operation. The starting point for collaboration between professionals and experts by experience is to mutually respect expertise. The attitude toward experts by experience reflects the ethical attitude of professionals toward clients. Importantly, the goals of the work and the division of tasks should be clear to both. If the work is to be developed, then the critical voices of former service users should be heard. In the future, we should have low-threshold receptions for experts by experience in community sanction offices and teamwork with professionals and experts by experience in drug-free wards in prisons. These stories of experts by experience with a history of crime and substances are opportunities in various different ways as shared stories of desistance from crime and recovery, not threats.

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