10

Verbatim practice as research with care-experienced young people: an 'aesthetics of care' through aural attention

Sylvan Baker and Maggie Inchley

I've literally become a catalogue of statistics, and just irrelevant facts and info. And it's dehumanising to be honest. If adults don't really view you as a human then how can you view yourself? ... Right now, according to the system, kids have become just another number, another statistic, and it's not whether a child is being cared for, it's whether they're being dealt with. (Leah, fourteen years old, TVF Audio Archive: 2015–18)¹

The Verbatim Formula (TVF) is an ongoing verbatim theatre-based participatory research project founded in 2015 at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL). The project started out as a collaboration between the authors of this chapter, Maggie Inchley, a senior lecturer in drama at QMUL, and Sylvan Baker, then an associate director at arts and social justice organisation People's Palace Projects (PPP) and now a lecturer at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Behind its inception was a desire to find ways of using artistic and pedagogical practice that would shed light on how young people perceived the experience of entering and being in social service-based care in the UK. Our preliminary research had revealed that the experience of young people during and after local authority care interventions was marked by exclusion from education, social deprivation and increased risks of engaging with oppressive and criminalised behaviours. For example, research carried out in the UK between 2008 and 2015 indicates that only 6 per cent of care leavers entered higher education compared to 30 per cent of that age demographic nationally. Furthermore, 49 per cent of young men who had had some contact with the criminal justice system and 25 per cent of those who were homeless were found to have been in care at some point in their lives (National Audit Office, 2015: 4–6). In addition, evidence suggests that the physical and mental health and well-being of many young people entering care is a matter for serious concern. A UK

Parliamentary briefing paper produced in 2015, for example, indicates that, in general, social service's first engagement with 'looked-after children'² was as a result of abuse or neglect in 61 per cent of cases (Zayed and Harker, 2015: 4). In 2016, an Education Committee report found that almost half of children in care have a diagnosable mental health disorder (Education Committee, 2016: 3).

The disproportionate levels of criminalisation, social and education exclusion, and mental health challenges revealed in this statistical catalogue were extremely shocking, and point to what seems to be a dereliction of care for these most vulnerable of young people. Our desire to 'do something' in response to such apparent systemic 'care-lessness' led to the development of TVF, a project that explores, with care-experienced young people, their suggestions to improve the care they receive and their hopes for the future. In this sense, the project's methodology sought to discover personal experiences that lie behind the statistical evidence and to place the young people and their knowledge at the centre. Accordingly, we chose to frame our participatory research project around the practices of verbatim theatre, a form of theatre practice that promises to convey in performance an 'authentic' or 'word-for-word' account of its subjects' voices and that, as we will argue in what follows, can be used as a practice that treats the experience of young people and their reflections on it with due respect and care. Crucially, our decision to use verbatim theatre was not to align our practice with that of the therapeutic storytelling that James Thompson, among others, has argued risks recycling a speaker's trauma (2009: 45). Instead, we wanted to use verbatim theatre techniques and strategies to acknowledge the expertise of the young people and to support an implicit process of self-narration of their paths into adult life. As the project progressed, we began to recognise the potential impact of our verbatim-based practices both in relation to the potency of performed verbatim material that addressed the young people's experiences of being cared for by the state, and because the performance of the verbatim testimonies led to caring encounters and dialogues between the young people and their professional carers.

The initial invitation to be part of the early stage of the TVF project was to young people aged fourteen to eighteen who were currently living in foster or residential social care in the UK to meet and work with students and young adult facilitators, and to experience life on a university campus by taking part in a week's residential at QMUL. As it has developed, TVF has become a much wider collaboration that includes adult colleagues from a range of disciplinary areas, notably from the field of ethical management and creative evaluation, as well as with participatory officers from local authority children's services.³ Since the project began in 2015, we have gathered a broader range of testimonies, notably from foster carers and social workers who share the professional contexts and conditions of their work in the care service. These have become components of our 'living archive' – the bank of recorded material that we draw upon for sharing at TVF events, which have taken place in a range of spaces beyond the rehearsal room and

university studio, including conference halls, theatres, museums, meeting rooms, offices and libraries. At TVF events, the testimonies are performed by our project participants, alumni and facilitators to invited and public audiences or to particular groups such as social workers or university staff. Following the performance, the facilitators curate direct dialogue between participants and audience members, which is itself recorded and becomes part of the living archive. In this way, we argue, both the performed verbatim material and the curated exchanges between participants and audience members operate together to become performances of care that explore and illuminate the caring encounter.

The desire to recognise and respect the experience of the young people we have worked with is also behind our decision to adopt the term 'care-experienced young people,' rather than to use the ubiquitous term 'looked-after children.' For, as they soon revealed, many young people do not feel 'looked after' at all when they are in the care of their 'corporate parents' (the term adopted by UK state bodies and local authorities to describe the social workers and organisations responsible for the young people placed 'in care'). Each of the young people we have worked with has a unique background and individual set of circumstances. Each one of them is experienced in the services they have accessed for care and education. For this reason, within all the sessions we have led as part of TVF, we have aimed to subvert the uneven power dynamics of academic practice and traditional research processes that tends to place researchers in the position of experts and participants as unknowing subjects. Instead, we have aimed to underpin the design and trajectory of our research with an ethics and practice of care that positions the young people as co-researchers, *with* whom we share verbatim theatre-making techniques, and *from* whose expertise we are learning. Placing young people in the role of co-researcher also enables them to develop and value their own interrogatory skills, which can be used to challenge the systems in which young people all too often feel that it is the adults who hold all the agency and all power. Most frequently, it is the young people themselves who conduct peer interviews with foster carers and social workers, encounters that themselves can be important interventions in young people's own sense of receiving and giving care and that also provide further testimonial accounts of the ways in which these caring adults carry out and perceive their own practices.

During TVF sharings, the verbatim testimonies we have gathered are performed using headphone technique, a practice where performers listen to clips of recorded interviews loaded on to iPods, speaking them out to the audience as they hear the words through their earpieces. This technique ensures that personal testimonies, reflections and opinions can be conveyed as closely as possible to the exact words of the original speaker, whose anonymity is preserved as another person performs their testimony. We frequently redistribute and interchange the audio clips so that a facilitator might perform the words of a care-experienced young person, or a young person might share a testimony that was given by another project

Figure 10.1 TVF welcome breakfast

participant or adult care professional. We find that the shifting of the testimony into the ‘mouth’ of another can heighten the engagement with which our audiences listen to the testimonies. This is particularly so if the identity of the person sharing the testimony is different in some way, such as with respect to age, race or gender, to that of the giver of the testimony. While the headphone form that we will discuss further below has been previously used to create plays by verbatim playwrights for theatre, we have adapted its approach in ways that we argue facilitates forms of caring, participatory practice and performance. The shift enables a ‘care-full’ and caring form of speaking and listening to be part of an ethical encounter between adult carers and young people. This palpably demonstrates that the latter have substantive contributions to make in the ongoing debate around practices of care, while allowing us to frame dialogue in spaces and contexts where they feel they are being heard.

Later in this chapter we examine how TVF might be understood as a performance of care that enables its participants/co-researchers not only to narrate their experience of caregiving and care receiving, but also to engage with a mode of attentive care through their participation in the process of theatre making itself. What TVF explores, we suggest, is an affective mode of engagement with the young participants and their testimonies, where care is present in the act of listening to and sharing their words and, crucially, for the young people, in the experience of being heard and listened to. We therefore consider how *listening* emerges in this project both as an aesthetic but also as a care-based participatory and political practice, inspired by the principles and practices of good care that we have observed and researched, that aims to empower care-experienced young people to intervene

Figure 10.2 Making verbatim

in the structures that represent them and to support adults to *honour* their experiences and needs. It is important to note that we use the word 'honour' here, both in the sense of respect or esteem, but also as a fulfilment of an obligation – to act on what has been agreed.

We have constructed the TVF methodological process by starting with an awareness that within state-based care services in the UK, listening is a legal requirement and understood as an important relationship-building tool that should be positioned at the centre of social work practice. Drawing from this, we argue that when forming part of an ethical participatory process, listening can become a mode of care for the other and a sensory practice of knowing, which can be heightened aesthetically through verbatim theatre-making processes that support a more informed and generative dialogue between young people and adult professionals. In some senses, our project directly responds to some of the provocations of feminist care ethicists, whose theorisation has influenced our reflections on listening as a mode of caring. In *Moral Boundaries* ([1993] 2009), for example, Joan Tronto identifies the practice of 'attentiveness' as one of the principle modes of care, arguing that 'recognizing the needs of those around us, is a difficult task, and indeed, a moral achievement' ([1993] 2009: 127). Tronto argues for a radically restructured society that would recognise and value interdependency rather than revolve around the rights of the self-mastering neoliberal individual. To ensure that it is not just those 'who are already sufficiently powerful' who benefit from these radical changes, Tronto calls for new democratic processes structured around an obligation to '[listen] and to [include] care-receivers in determining the processes of care' ([1993] 2009: 172). Tronto's arguments suggest there is a radical need for an intervention

into the dynamics of power in society that ensure that those for whom the structures of care are least effective are heard and attended to, and that action is taken accordingly.

Another core element of TVF is the practice of what feminist ethicist Nel Noddings describes as the quality of 'receptivity', which she argues is demonstrated in both caring for an other as well as in the way creative artists practice 'aesthetical caring' in their attempts 'to grasp or receive a reality rather than impose it' (2013: 21–2). Within TVF, the quality of engagement that is forged between the participants, the project practitioners and facilitators allows for some sense of the young people's reality to emerge in the aesthetic material that is formed. TVF facilitators must be 'present' and engaged in an attentive form of 'listening, watching, feeling, contributing' (Noddings, 2013: 22). The quality of receptivity, as we go on to discuss below, also infuses the practice and ethics of TVF verbatim performances, both in terms of how the performer delivers the recorded testimonies and in the way that audience members, of whom a large proportion work in social care, are inclined and encouraged to receive them.

It is important to state that our work is also determined by what Noddings describes as the 'problem of reciprocity' (2013: 69–74). For Noddings, as for our practitioners, this emerges when the care receiver does not recognise the care that is offered. For many of the young people who participate in TVF, care is not something that is administered in ways that feel caring, rather care is something that is measured out and often mediated by bureaucratic practice and social stigma. For many young people, encounters with care-giving from state carers often feels transactional and structured to ensure that official procedures are followed. These encounters do not resemble the unconditional loving that takes place within the parent–child relationships so often held up as the ideal and indeed the norm in society. In such cases, care may become something that is experienced by a young person as 'ugly', an encounter that does not alleviate a person's trials, but rather amplifies them. We would therefore argue that the act of caring within the TVF project has important ethical and political implications. By establishing performative, dialogical encounters that can recognise and responsibly attend to the 'ugliness' of caring that is articulated by young people who are 'care experienced', the project creates a space in which these ideas can be debated, challenged and explored safely in dialogue with professional carers.

'Apparently there is some big file on me in some cupboard somewhere' (Hannah, fifteen years old, TVF Audio Archive: 2015–18)

The accounts that our co-researchers have given and gathered during TVF reveal tensions between their perceptions of the care they are receiving and the focus on good listening that is emphasised in state provision. Since

the adoption into UK law of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992, corporate parents are legally obliged to give due regard to children's wishes and feelings in matters affecting them. The Department for Education and Department for Health document *Promoting the Health and Well-Being of Looked-After Children* (2015) specifies that local authorities should ensure that arrangements are in place that promote a culture 'where looked-after children are listened to' and that 'helps others [...] to understand the importance of listening to and taking account of the child's wishes and feelings' (2015: 7). Such advice recurs through many of the statutory documents and the regulatory discourse that surrounds the care system. The 2014 Children and Families Act also emphasises the importance of young people 'participating as fully as possible' (Children and Families Act, 2014: 18) in decisions that will affect their care. Furthermore, a survey by the Children's Commissioner for England (2015) whose terms were informed by the Act found that crucially, for children, what makes the difference between good or bad care is the experience of 'being listened to'. Yet, as Leah indicates in the epigraph at the start of this chapter, many care-experienced young people believe that they are being treated as a 'statistic' rather than a person and are often left feeling uncared for by the very state provision that is delegated as a source of support. Despite the activities of children in care councils – which exist in local authorities to provide a forum for young people – many of the TVF participants we worked with recounted incidents where they considered their feelings and perspectives were unheard and ignored. These accounts are not just related to emotional outbursts when an event did not go as they had hoped, but at more incisive moments where the young people experienced a particular manifestation of care that while seeming to be well intentioned was neither personal nor caring.

One example of this is a testimony given to us by a young woman, Stephanie, in her twenties, who described an incident that occurred in early adolescence that led her to take the extreme and dangerous step of absconding from her latest placement in foster care. 'There was an incident,' she explained, 'where I came back to one of my foster carer's house. I got there, and I saw a big black taxi, kind of cabbie thing outside.' Waiting inside the house, her foster carer and social worker had already packed up her things – 'her dirty laundry and everything' (Stephanie, TVF Audio Archive 2015–18). She was moving, for the first time in her young life away from London. Sadly, Stephanie describes an experience that is not uncommon. In 2015, 33 per cent of children in care were placed in more than one foster home and 10 per cent had three placements or more (Spring Consortium, 2016: 10). Stephanie's testimony is shocking not only because of the dehumanising way she recounts being treated, but because it reveals that she had not been consulted or even made aware of a decision about her care as is legally required. During the verbatim process, she explained that this was a key element of her experience, saying: 'It would have been nice for them to speak to me about it. Rather than it being like a set-up, and I'm like, what

is going on?’ (Stephanie, TVF Audio Archive, 2015–18). Stephanie’s decision to abscond serves as evidence in the severe break down in her trust of the adults around her. She said: ‘If they’d spoken to me, yeah maybe I’d have effed and blinded a little bit, but I would have understood. Give me the chance to ... at least let me feel like I’m helping you make the decision’ (Stephanie, TVF Audio Archive, 2015–18). Stephanie’s anger and resignation were fuelled by feelings of powerlessness, something that many of the other young people we interviewed also experienced. TVF co-researchers have repeatedly testified to feeling frustrated about the ways their lives are described and documented by social workers in case notes they are not allowed to see. The very idea of having one’s life narrated by another is seen as lacking in personal respect. There is also a feeling that their privacy is constantly being breached by social workers and other professionals sharing information that is not disclosed to the young person in question because of safeguarding regulation. As fifteen-year-old Hannah, one of the participants and co-researchers, told us: ‘You don’t know where the information that you’re telling them is gonna go to ... why should I put my trust in people at school because it ends up getting back to my social worker’ (TVF Audio Archive, 2015–18).

Of course, securing the safety and well-being of these young people is paramount, but by fulfilling the legal requirements placed upon them, and in the wake of cases of deaths of young people such as Victoria Climbié and ‘Baby P’ in the care of local services, risk-averse social workers, it seems, continually enforce a system that young people experience as bureaucratic and dehumanising (Munro, 2011). As Hannah explains: ‘Apparently there is some big file on me in some cupboard somewhere. You know, stuff that I don’t even know about myself. And my past and all that’ (TVF Audio Archive, 2015–18). Like many other young people we worked with, Hannah’s anxiety about what her file says is heightened by her lack of access to it and a feeling that she has little or no control about how her life narrative is being constructed. The structures of safeguarding and child protection as experienced by Hannah seem to leave her feeling more vulnerable and insecure. She is aware that other adults may see the file before meeting her, and the narrative it tells will intercede on her behalf in a manner that is intimidating to her and not conducive to productive relations with adult professionals. Furthermore, the keeping of records by social workers and other agents of the state seems also to encourage young people to believe these narratives preclude any acknowledgement of their capabilities and potential – instead of recording positive achievements, the documentation of their cases tends to reinforce the idea that for young people in care, adults understand them as ‘problems’. In state-orientated caring encounters, many of our co-researchers report a feeling that rather than following authentic caring practices, social workers ‘erase them’ with the use of a jargon of care. One example of this is the effect of being labelled as ‘vulnerable’, ‘hard to reach’ or ‘non-compliant’. Many young people reported that this kind of language fuels feelings of anger and defensiveness, creating a sense of

dehumanisation, which ultimately sabotages the potential of any relationship that may develop between young people and their foster carers or social workers. It was accounts such as Hannah's that led us to realise that listening is experienced by many young people in care not as caring but as a component of surveillance and part of a dehumanising statutory administration of record-keeping that feels far removed from a loving and trusting relationship with an adult. It is apposite to note here that the anonymity of our verbatim practices, the licence the project grants young people to speak back to the system and the way it is administered, has greatly appealed to many of our participants.

For young people entering or leaving care, the shifting dynamics between 'dependence', 'interdependence' and 'independence' are desperately complex. In extremis, young people for whom state intervention has been deemed necessary have become emotionally dependent on family members who are unable to care for them or, in the worst cases, are their abusers. At the same time, the transition to becoming a 'looked-after child' can be experienced as brutal and traumatic. In many cases, acknowledging and accepting 'need' can contain enormous risk as well as being in itself a sign of an extraordinary capacity to adapt. In the TVF residentials, we have seen how some young people adopt a range of self-protective strategies, such as complete withdrawal of communication with adults, or in some circumstances violent rejection of any caregiving gesture, in order to protect themselves from further abuse, neglect or rejection. Such responses can be interpreted as a failure to compute or to recognise caring encounters, or being unable to trust others or allow oneself to be a care receiver. This accords with Noddings' account of the lack of responsiveness on behalf of the care receiver that negates the care relation (2013: 71). Such a negation occurs when the one being cared for does not feel that she is approached as a 'subject' but 'as an object to be manipulated' or 'data source' (Noddings, 2013: 72). It is this breakdown in communication between young people and their carers that leads to what the young people have described as the 'ugliness' of care.

The inversion of caring as something 'ugly' and destructive can impact both on young people and their social workers or foster carers. As child psychotherapist Peter Wilson reports, young people's negative feelings about care can become projected on to their carer, leading many carers to be 'shocked, insulted, aroused, provoked, rendered speechless' and made to feel as 'neglected, abused and abandoned' as the children they are caring for have been made to feel (2010: 13). Conversely, when the caring relation is working well, it is characterised by a fine attunement of the caregiver and the one who is cared for. If many of the testimonies that the TVF project has gathered have revealed young people's feelings of being unheard, we have also found examples of such attunement in the way that foster carers and social carers listen to the young people in their care. In fact, we have been struck by the similarities of their listening practices with the qualities of performance necessitated by the aural components of our verbatim processes. These adult professionals, who often find themselves

dealing with the everyday ugly consequences of trauma and neglect, often find themselves engaged in multiple acts of listening as a mode of care for the young people they are looking after on a daily basis. The following testimony from a foster carer describes the highly skilled art of aural heed, akin to the somatic attention that many of our TVF facilitators and performers strive for. It is arguably a practice that exhibits the kind of 'receptivity' described by Noddings in her analogy between aesthetic engagement and the art of caring. In the following testimony, Sue, a foster carer, describes how she adopts an embodied form of caring and how she 'hears' without words being spoken by the other (Noddings, 2013: 22): 'All the time I listen with my eyes and my ears because I can read as much from the body as I can from what's being said, or what's not being said. So even at breakfast time, when the lad's going out the door, I check him over and talk to him, how you're doing and stuff. It's every day, it's all the time, it's part and parcel of everything' (TVF Audio Archive, 2015–18). Sue's mode of listening seems to suggest a practice that is beyond the gesture of a simple aural attention to what is being said. In her delicate sensory engagement, she is instinctively improvising care for her foster child's needs and recognising that listening becomes a source of support and stability through her adopting of a carefully nuanced attunement towards the young man she is caring for. This kind of holistic embodied attunement seems to exemplify and demonstrate the practices of good care advocated by many feminist care ethicists. It illustrates, for example, a form of 'motivational displacement', where the carer puts her own needs aside to act instead according to the needs of the one who is cared for (Noddings, 2013: 16–18). In this moment of caring, Sue's own needs are suspended as she engages with the young man in her care with complete commitment yet without an expectation that she will necessarily discover precisely what his needs are. In this sense, this act of listening and attunement is a striving towards an understanding of this young man's frame of reference rather than her own. Crucially, this mode of listening is multidimensional and to draw on Maurice Hamington's account of care, it is arguably also 'embodied' (2004: 108). Attentive to not only what he says, but to the non-verbal somatic cues of his whole body, all Sue's senses are holistically engaged in her interaction with the young man in her care. For Tronto, who draws on Simone Weil's understanding of the human capacity for attention as the opening to 'truth', 'attentiveness' is conceived as a profoundly active moral commitment and is a form of engagement with knowledge ([1993] 2009: 128). In this sense, Sue's artful and non-intrusive practice becomes a form of inquiry into the young man's well-being. Her act of listening and attuning herself to the state of his being performs a mode of attentiveness and care that is informed by profound personal and moral responsibility. Such an embodied and attentive commitment to the experiences of our co-researchers have informed the development of TVF, and, in the final sections of this chapter, we will explore how our own practices of embodied listening have sought to emulate the qualities of Sue's aesthetic caring.

'Doing her justice' (Sid, twenty-year-old facilitator-performer, TVF Audio Archive, 2015–18)

Following Noddings' cue that there are commonalities between the receptivity of aesthetic engagement and the practice of care whereby the artist like the caregiver is in a sense 'seized by the other's project or plight' (2013: 22), in the course of TVF, we have been exploring how the verbatim performer's aesthetic efforts in some ways resemble the caregiver's practices of attentiveness and receptivity. As we explain above, the decision to employ verbatim theatre techniques was initially due to the desire to use theatre-making strategies that would preserve the authority and integrity of the young people's own accounts of their experience of entering state care. As we developed our practice, we realised how effectively this mode of performance could be inflected with the ethics and practices of good care described by Tronto and Noddings and that is also evident in the account above from Sue. Tom Cantrell's research into the performance of verbatim material by professional actors reveals how it generates 'a sense of responsibility towards the representation' of the real-life figure that actors represent (2013: 5). It became clear to us that this sense of obligation was also a crucially important feature of the TVF project, especially given the powerlessness that many young people encounter when entering the state care system. After he performed with the TVF at the Wellcome Trust in 2015, Sid, a twenty-year-old male student, explained that it was only after several attempts at sharing the testimony of a fourteen-year-old girl that he felt he was able to begin to 'do her justice'. Far from attempting to speak *for* her, or use acting technique to somehow *become* her, Sid endeavoured to employ verbatim performance as a meticulous practice of attentiveness that *honoured* the original speaker through rigorous attention to her words and bodily rhythms.

Rather than adopting the approach taken by playwrights such as David Hare, in which a writer 'interferes' with verbatim material by rescripting and dramatising the text, we chose to draw on and adapt a genealogy of headphone verbatim theatre-making processes adopted by theatre makers such as Anna Deveare Smith, Mark Wing Davis, Alecky Blythe and Robin Oades (Haydon, 2013; Wake, 2013b). In TVF, the use of headphone performance generates a performance of 'care-full' attentiveness by requiring the performer *to attune* – via the recordings of interviews – to the original textures and cadences of the interviewee's speech, paying attention and reproducing the gaps in words, hesitations, vocal ticks, false starts and paralinguistic parts of speech such as laughs, sighs or groans. This mode of performance allows both the young people we work with and our facilitators to explore how the performer (albeit temporarily) can apply what anthropologist Thomas Csordas describes as a 'somatic mode of attention' to another person. As Csordas argues, this form of attention is a mode of embodied attentiveness where the body becomes a means of attending to another (2002: 137).

There is another analogy here between the creative processes of TVF and the act of caring, for as Noddings argues: ‘caring involves stepping out of one’s own personal frame of reference in to the other’s’ (2013: 24). We would suggest that in the practices of care that emerge in TVF, as in the caring encounter itself, the process of ‘stepping out of one’s own personal frame’ is not simply a cognitive one. Rather, through ‘care-full’ listening and articulation, care and attunement to the other becomes physically *embodied*. To use the headphone technique successfully, the performer must be engrossed in or, to use Noddings’ term, ‘seized’ by the sonic material itself, suspending temporarily their own physical needs. One adult TVF facilitator described how in the process of performing verbatim her whole being became engaged as she attempted to bring her body and voice into ‘synch’ with the voice she heard through her earphones. Trying to voice another’s words accurately and responsibly, she reported, involved a recalibration of bodily rhythm and breathing – a temporary rearrangement and reprioritisation of her own physiological needs. In the meticulous observance and re-embodiment of the verbatim somatic score, the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of performance converge. For Sid, whom we quoted above, this sense of using a practice of listening to exercise responsibility for the speaker seemed to intertwine profoundly with the mode and shape of his delivery, leading to a heightened awareness of the prolonged, bodily attentiveness and responsibility that care requires.

In TVF, verbatim performance work is augmented and extended through our participatory and pedagogical practice, which includes extensive discussion with the young people, facilitators and performers around the ethics of this type of performance, the importance of respect for the words and voice of the speaker, and how the mediation of the material by the performer qualifies the extent to which it becomes possible to represent the original speaker ‘truthfully’. As will by now be clear, we have found that many care-experienced young people have a nuanced awareness of and very strong feelings about the ways in which their care identities often become represented oversimplistically, through negative stereotypes, and in ways that exclude their input. Performance scholar Caroline Wake argues that headphone theatre ‘does not so much “give voice” as “grant an audience”’ (2013b: 321). Because audiences at a TVF event include the care-experienced participants themselves, a co-presence of adults and young people is created that engages all event participants in shared encounters that respect the acts of self-representation that verbatim theatre practice makes possible and that are honoured in the ways that we described above through headphone performance.

*‘I think I listened with a more open ear if that makes sense’
(Rash, social worker, TVF Audio Archive, 2015–18)*

During TVF performances, we have found that the ‘care-full’ and ethical receptivity of TVF performers and facilitators to the material gathered from our co-researchers has extended to the way audience members engage with

it. Recounting his experience of attending a performance of Klaus Pohl's verbatim play *Waiting Room Germany* (1995), playwright and actor Robin Soans notes the tendency of audience members to become 'unselfconsciously involved' (Soans, quoted in Hammond and Steward, 2008: 23). This observation leads him to argue that 'in verbatim theatre the audience assumes an active rather than a passive role' and that audience members' responses are framed by a deep sense of 'responsibility' (Soans, quoted in Hammond and Steward, 2008: 23–4). This sense of active engagement has also been discussed by performance scholar Patrick Duggan with regard to the ethics of representation. In analysing theatre company Paper Birds' production of *Others* (2010), Duggan notes that though the subject of the performance was absent and therefore in danger of being misrepresented, 'the live performance event positions the spectator as ethical respondent to the presented work and the problems it is grappling with' (2013: 155). Because of its shortening of the distance between a member of the audience and the representation of the other, Duggan argues that verbatim theatre 'makes visible the ethical complexities of such representations' (2013: 158). In TVF performances, the importance of the ethics of representation that so preoccupy scholarship on verbatim theatre are animated in the performance and reception of the testimonies of young people to whom issues and practices of representation make a real difference to how their voices are heard, and to the care that they receive.

The use of the headphone technique, then, we argue, can foster recognition, respect and a sense of responsibility both in performers and among audience members towards the young people and their testimonies. Given what young people have told us about the extent to which their corporate parents are *not* listening, we think that our aesthetic and participatory practices will ultimately make an important intervention into the way that social workers reflect on young people's responses to their caregiving, especially in those moments when young people express anger, frustration or indifference. Importantly, the performances of the verbatim material disrupt the normal mode in which young people's voices are heard, and the aesthetics of the performance practice seek to position adults not as the arbitrators of the way young people's care is given, but as audience members who are invited to listen and take on some responsibility for what they hear. The performance of the testimony in TVF is thus not the end stage: the sharing and attentive listening it evokes leads to political and ethical reflection on the care of so-called 'looked-after' young people and invites further conversation, often without the urge for defensiveness or antagonism that adults might experience when they sense criticism of their practice or behaviour.

As noted above, the performances of TVF usually take place in the presence of audiences made up of social workers or other adults responsible for young people's care and education as well as the young people themselves. During our events, the testimonies are interspersed with facilitators' explanation of TVF participatory research practice. Placing young people centrally to the practice means they take an active role in choosing which testimonies

Figure 10.3 Sharing verbatim

to share and, during events, actively participate in extending discussion. This has often revolved around issues of representation, pertaining not only to the testimonies, but also to the meetings that young people must undergo as they enter care and the ways that their care identities are documented. In this sense, the performances of TVF establishes a new ground of representation under different terms, giving young people and adults the opportunity to discuss the extent to which the experiences that emerge in the testimonial material could lead to changes in areas of professional practice. By adopting an aesthetic process of caring, TVF establishes a dialogic opportunity for exchange between the young people and adults that feels very different from the confrontational exchanges that often occur in care settings. Feelings that are challenging and that might otherwise accrue blame are allowed to emerge and are mediated by the performance process itself. The caring, participatory, performative processes the project opens up generates spaces of communication that are far removed from the more transactional encounters of which young people have complained. The project's events can become an opportunity for professionals to reflect on how their own daily working practices can exacerbate the reasons why young people find it difficult to accept the care that they are offered. The young people themselves report feeling that their voices are being heard on more equal terms.

Social workers who have attended a TVF sharing have fed back that they were reminded of the impulse to care that led them to enter social work to begin with. They also tend to add that the project also reminded them of how difficult it is to do their job well or even adequately given the lack of time and resources within the system. Some social workers have also stated they intend to change their practice, by making more time to talk to a young

person as an individual, for example, or trying to turn off their phone during a meeting with them so that they can listen better, or writing in a more positive light about the young people in their files. On their own, these acts may not seem significant but taken in a context that often feels dehumanising, these small acts speak volumes, not least because they tangibly demonstrate that, to some extent, the young people have finally been heard. After a conference TVF facilitated with and documented by the Young People's Peer Outreach team at a Greater London Authority conference in Care Week in 2015, one social worker delegate pledged to reach out to a care leaver she worked with: '[I promise to] meet up with a care leaver who I know is very lonely. I usually only meet him when he asks for support over a specific problem' (Peer Outreach Team, 2015). Such a change suggests the beginning of a process of 'humanising' care systems and helping to improve the quality of 'reciprocity' in the exchanges between care-experienced young people and the professionals working with them. Certainly, we hope that TVF performances can generate changes, however small, that cumulatively make it less likely that young people become distrusting of or disengaged from the adults who are their corporate parents. In pledging to make this change, this social worker committed herself to a sense of *honour*, promising to fulfil her obligations as a carer, taking responsibility for what she heard by making it action. Of course, if all corporate parents are to be empowered to identify and honour changes in their daily practice, their good intentions will both require personal commitment and need to be supported at a structural and policy level.

In facilitating this research, it has become clearer than ever to us that the 'care-full' art of attending to care-experienced young people requires extraordinary patience, persistence, subtlety and a strength of character that challenges the boundaries within which many artist practitioners or practice-based researchers tend to operate. In addition to being tender, respectful and generous, the act of giving and receiving care, we have discovered, can often feel ugly and involve psychologically and emotionally distressing aspects and incidents. We are also conscious that our own participatory practice sometimes risks replaying painful adult-child power dynamics that are all too familiar to the young people we work with and can therefore also become a further source of complaint. Yet while the realisation of a fully egalitarian and democratic practice remains an aspiration rather than a reality, we have found that TVF practices have led to effective moments of reflection for both the young people involved in the project and the adults who have been involved. Certainly, many social workers and foster carers report shifts in understanding and perspective that seem likely to motivate them to make other small changes to their daily practices. We also hope that by sharing the issues in this way, the project helps to democratise and open up debate in relation to the problems the care system as identified above, which the young people have described as 'ugly' and from which adults might in other circumstances turn away. We believe that our methodologies, which aim to honour the experiences of care-experienced

young people and share tools and opportunities for self-narration, are an important practical response to the statistics we introduced at the beginning of this chapter and to the damaging cultural narratives that situate those who need care as a drain on economic resources, where dependency is a 'condition to be overcome' (Tronto, [1993] 2009: 163). We firmly believe that far from being a deficit to society, young people who enter care have immense knowledge and potential from which we can all benefit.

If, like Csordas, we think of embodied experience as 'the starting point for analysing human participation in the cultural world' (2002: 135), then the corollary of this is that young people's affective and aesthetic transactions with carers and other adults can be used to diagnose much wider structural deficits in social relations and responsibilities. In other words, listening to the care-experienced voices of young people in public obliges adults to recognise the ugly, 'care-less' cultural structures and power dynamics that delimit a caring society and that ultimately lead many young people to believe that any dialogue with adults is both futile and inauthentic. The 'care-full' aural aesthetic of TVF is therefore not intended to create a social portrait of care for an audience of passive viewers, but to invite all those with an insight and connection with the care process to reflect collectively on how it functions and, crucially, how it can be enhanced. By facilitating an embodied somatic attentiveness to young people's voices, no matter how challenging or disturbing what they say, TVF facilitates socially responsible encounters and dialogue that perform a mode of caring that seeks to make the needs of care-experienced young people more audible and to place the onus on adults to meet their responsibilities more effectively.

Notes

- 1 The testimonies that are quoted in this chapter are part of *The Verbatim Formula* (TVF) Audio Archive, collected 2015–18. All names have been changed to protect and respect the identities of the original speakers.
- 2 The legal term for children in the 'care' of the state in the UK.
- 3 We are indebted in particular to Rosie Hunter and Renata Pepl at People's Palace Projects, to Priya Clarke and Sadhvi Dar at QMUL, to arts evaluator Mita Pujara, to our research assistants Shalyce Lawrence, Darcey Williamson, Michael Amaning, Henrietta Imoreh and Jerome Harvey-Agyei, and to Becs Colwell and Alfie Kingsnorth of the Peer Outreach Team at the Greater London Authority, who have all made invaluable contributions to this research.