

Work with families that are homeless

By Daria Kutuzova



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Review of Fraenkel, P., Hameline, T., & Shannon, M. (2009). Narrative and collaborative practices in work with families that are homeless. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 35(3), 325-342. [doi:10.1111/j.1752-0606.2009.00119.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2009.00119.x)

This article (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009) tells about a particular program of working with homeless families — a discussion group using the orientation and techniques of a narrative approach. The first stage of the program included collaborative research, conducted to develop the contents (exercises) of the program to be used during meetings with families. The program was conducted in several shelters for homeless families in the United States; the families were provided relatively long-term accommodation (several months).

The key principle of the program is the principle of ‘engaged participation’. Homeless people were invited to participate in the development of the program as experts on their life situation and experience, and the workers participated as experts on research procedures and therapeutic practices. Each family was interviewed and the interviews were audio- or videotaped and analysed to formulate the main themes of concern. The draft program was developed on the basis of these themes, and was then distributed among the families to be corrected and/or added to. During the course of the program the families provided weekly feedback and suggestions for improvement of the program.

This approach was chosen, because the discussion group described is not therapy per se, but a support program for the families and the community where the workers take the decentered and not-so-directive position of facilitators.

The families appreciated the opportunity to tell their stories of becoming homeless in their own words, without fearing being blamed or not judged as not worthy of getting the accommodation provided by the social services. A narrative approach was very helpful because it allowed the families to explore the alternative territories of identity and to move away from the stigmatising descriptions.

Many exercises within the program were designed to explore collectively the actual and possible coping strategies usable in the environment of the shelter: problem sorting, making a collective document (instruction about good ways of living in the shelter for the newcomers), externalising homelessness, and looking for unique outcomes related to the experiences of joy and pride at work and/or during study.

Restoration of preferred stories projected into the future and thus restoration of images of possible futures was an important part of the program. The workers encouraged the participants to explore their dream job and the coherence of previous and actual stories about jobs with this preferred story about the future. Also such techniques of 'family tree of professions' and 'timelines for family plans and professional plans', 'writing a letter to oneself in the future', and different techniques of art therapy, were used.

Could this be applied in Russian context?

A Russian retelling of this article took place in a discussion occurring around a 'virtual round table' conducted at my personal blog. Most of the participants were people from various public social services and NGOs, working either with homeless people or with families surviving other kinds of hardship.

Two main questions were discussed: 'Are the techniques described in this article applicable to the work in the Russian context?' and 'What factors should be kept in mind, if an adaptation of this programme to the Russian context were to be implemented?' Special emphasis was put on the context-sensitivity of this programme and to the fact that it was based on certain dominant cultural stories that to a certain extent could be taken for granted. For example, from a Russian point of view, the ideas of 'making oneself from scratch', 'starting afresh after a disaster and coming to success', the expectation that people who 'have fallen' wish to 'get up again' have a rather typical 'American' flavour to them.

Below we shall share some of the opinions of the participants of the round table, in the hopes that they inspire practitioners in other non-English speaking countries (and maybe the practitioners from English-speaking countries, too) to reflect upon cultural context matters and to explore the opportunities for development of culturally specific narrative practices.

There was no doubt among the participants of the virtual round table that some of the techniques described in the article could be applied in the Russian context. For example, externalisation of the common problem, eliciting outsider-witness responses and inviting people to collaborate as experts on their life situation, are the practices that could be used in different work contexts in Russia. However, taking in mind the broad contextual factors, we

noticed a lot of differences between the American and the Russian context. First of all, in Russia we do not have the material equivalent of shelters for homeless people, nor have we any equivalent social 'fresh start' programs. It feels like the dominant social discourse on homelessness is different in the two countries, and therefore the attitude towards people who have lost their homes also differs.

The main factor that promotes the effectiveness of rehabilitation/support work with homeless people is the opportunity to provide them with accommodation for at least several months. Without that, any therapeutic or quasi-therapeutic work would not be effective, especially the kind that requires several regular meetings. Insofar as there are no such accommodation-providing programs in Russia, we cannot take on this model and implement it. Where would the money for this accommodation come from? There are definitely not enough programs for homeless people in our country, but during the last decade there have appeared many new initiatives, including football competitions among homeless teams (at the international level), and the exhibition of paintings made by homeless artists. These programs do not provide a solution to the problem of homelessness itself, but we can say that they provide unique outcomes in relation to the problematic story of hopelessness and bleak future. On a different note, a similar approach might be applicable at drug rehabilitation centres, for example, where there are people staying for several weeks or months. Here are some of the comments made by participants in the discussion.

'Wherever we have tried applying the narrative approach, the results always are very promising. Partnership and collaboration are built with people referred to us, and formerly overlooked avenues for action are made visible. The feedback from the people for whom our services are designed is a great thing, very enlightening, and it strengthens the collaboration. We have tried this type of accountability this year. It is quite unusual in the Russian context but the results have been very valuable for us all!'

'There is a "catch" for a person who comes to receive help from public services. After experiencing a collaborative attitude from us, the person may be frustrated by the ordinary expert-authoritarian approach, because the public social services do not implement a collaborative-partnership model. But if people request such collaboration more often, the powers that be might take notice and make an inquiry or start a research.'

'I am rather doubtful, though, that our practitioners would be willing to relinquish their expert position and the moral privilege that goes with it. Also, the accountability structures, paperwork and power relationships between the practitioner and their superiors would make switching to more collaborative mode of work more difficult. On the side of the old mode of work there is the whole system, and on the side of the collaborative approach there is only the worker's sense of satisfaction because of acting in concordance with their values. Therefore, so far in Russia, a narrative approach and other collaborative approaches are being taken up mostly by workers in private practice or in non-governmental agencies, and not in state agencies.'

'I wonder if the work with a sense of personal failure (White, 2004) might be a component of the initial interviews with families? It would be great to know more about the collaborative research itself, because it feels that a lot of work that ensured people's motivation to participate in the program in a collaborative way was conducted during this initial research phase. This looks like the core of the method, and the exercises themselves are the result, the side-effect, to a certain extent, of this research. I would like to know more about the way the researchers introduced themselves to the people in the shelter, how many people refused to take part of the program and whether they justified this decision. If so, what were the reasons they stated?'

'The cultural specifics of Russia also manifest in the fact that people in Russia are generally very sensitive to sincerity or a "for-the-sake-of-the-show" quality of other people's performance. When something falls out of the range of "fitting-the-situation" emotions, this something is perceived as insincere and therefore suspicious. For example, if there is more exultation about something than is averagely expected – like when we are talking about someone's "dream job". Working in Russia with people who have been living in hardship would entail a special task of overcoming mistrust/suspiciousness on their part. They do not necessarily believe that there is such thing as help offered without payment extracted afterwards.'

'I do like the idea of creating a collective document about the knowledges of life and skills of living in a certain context, to be shared with newcomers. For example, we could make a collective document about "Acting in accordance to your values while working in state agencies", or "Preventing burnout while working in social services". I am working with refugees and migrants a lot, and I suppose that, instead of the "family tree of professions", we could draw a "family tree of ways of coping with new and/or adverse situations.'

'In regard to the "engaged participation" of people as experts on their life situation, I am thinking now about the applicability of this approach to building virtual communities of concern. For example, if we are trying to facilitate a virtual (online) support group for the parents of gay/lesbian youth, we can invite the parents as experts on this situation in the "mutual help group" format. Externalisation of the common problem could be used in any kind of self-help/mutual help groups, as well as a witnessing response from the group.'

'In regard to the specifics of the cultural context, I have certain reservations about the "problem sorting exercise". In our culture it is considered a good thing to show a "good front" no matter what you are going through. Thus, telling a group of strangers that there are things you find more problematic than others could be a challenge to these cultural norms. On the other hand, when another family says that they don't find a particular factor problematic, while for you it is really problematic, it may cause envy (and shame, because envy is not a socially sanctioned feeling, either) and not desire to learn from them. I am really curious whether those families in the United States had a similar problem initially and, if so, what did the workers do to reduce its influence?'

‘It is very important to ensure a safe context for the discussion of the experience of homeless people, especially children and teenagers who have lived on the streets. Double listening and other elements of work with the consequences of trauma should be incorporated in this work’.

In summary, there are several factors to be kept in mind while thinking about any possible adaptation of the program described in the article by Fraenkel et al. to other cultural contexts: 1) structural/material social factors, such as availability of shelters; 2) dominant discourses within social service and ‘helping professions’ that support and maintain the expert position of the professional and demand certain kinds of accountability; 3) initial mistrust and lack of willingness to collaborate on the part of the homeless people themselves. Generally, however, this approach to work is inspiring people to adapt certain aspects of it to their work contexts, and, paraphrasing Clifford Geertz (cited by White, 2006), we can say that the ‘virtual round table’ format of discussion is helpful to initiate the ‘copying that originates’.

Acknowledgements

There were many people who contributed to the virtual round table; in this paper there are excerpts from the opinions of Viacheslav Moskvichov, Anna Paykova, Tatyana Archakova, Olga Gerassimenko, Vladimir Rokityansky, Natalia Sidorenko, Anastasia Nikolaeva, LJ-users ksann and lelaya.

The retelling of the article by Fraenkel et al. in Russian was made by Tatyana Archakova and Daria Kutuzova. The compilation and translation of people’s opinions into English was made by Daria Kutuzova.

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