University of Huddersfield Repository

Urek, Mojca

Social Work Tales: Client as a "Talking Problem"

Original Citation

Urek, Mojca (2005) Social Work Tales: Client as a "Talking Problem". In: Narrative, Memory & Everyday Life. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 177-185.

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/4947/

19 Social Work Tales: Client as a "Talking Problem"

MOJCA UREK

In social work context clients with their stories are strongly determined by their very "client" position, the core of which is a certain "social problem". Written social work documents are often like a detailed list of user's failures, mistakes, weak sides, deficiencies. The focus of writing is often on confirming whether a certain behaviour was appropriate or not. The author emphasises that written documents are not just dead words in the paper, but a sort of act, an intervention: they have real and actual power as professional opinions, reports, etc. This article includes recent findings in researching this matter in Slovene social work practice and suggests how to improve oral and writing professional practices toward more complex storytelling.

Introduction

It is probably not too much of an exaggeration to assert that narratives and life stories are placed at the centre of social work. Social workers – practitioners and researchers – have something to do all the time with life stories, which we listen, narrate, interpret, write down, change, pass to others and so on. Our professional position allows that we intervene in the users' lives, so we could affect also the course of their life stories. This is a very privileged position. It gives us a lot of power which we could use either for empowering the people which are in the position (voluntarily or not) to trust to us their personal stories **or** for strengthening (enlarging) the unequal position of the professional over the users. To all appearances, social workers in Slovenia are not aware enough of the effects of their acting when dealing with users' narratives. It is pretty common that personal stories and data circulate among different social services and professionals. Confidential acts actually improve this situation, but still – how many clients really have an access to their files? How many of them have any impact on what will stay written on their files? How we present them? Do social work reports include their point of view on their situation? Are reports opened for alternative readings? Users do care about this even when situations seem the opposite. I remember a young man, psychiatric services user, whom I met in a discussion on storytelling which I have had in a users mental health organisation in Ljubljana. He had spent a lot of his lifetime in psychiatry. He said: "Wherever I went, no matter to which ward,, staff always already knew

_____

everything about you. Documentation and stories about you were moving with you. They are talking about you behind your back. When I came out, my social worker already knew what I've done in hospital. It was terrible, awful feeling, it makes me so angry. You couldn't do anything against this".

According to narrative theories, the act of storytelling has many functions essential for human beings. Through storytelling, we can place the world's complexities in some form of order and, through storytelling, people can listen, respond and negotiate meaning (Hall, 2001). Storytelling is, in fact, a basic method people use to create, sustain and transmit meaning in their lives. It is one kind of interaction through which people develop shared understandings (McCall, 1989). Narrative structures allow us to express ourselves and to place the great number of fragmented experiences which form the basis of our lives into a sensible order (Plummer, 2001). Stories enable people to link aspects of their experience through the dimension of time. In striving to make sense of life, people face the task of arranging their experiences in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them (Epston and White, 1990). As the above-mentioned authors state, the interpretation of current events is as relevant to the future as it is determined by the past. How we see (or construct) ourselves has great impact on what our future looks like. Constructing stories of one-self is therefore an important component of everyday work on our identities.[1]

The message for social work practice is that clients' narratives must be handled with caution. What we think we should be aware of is that stories of ourselves, our versions of what happen to us are one of the most important rights that we possess and we can't afford to lose it without any consequence. Sensitivity is also recommended when social workers translate the stories into professional language, as these versions and evaluations of clients' stories are crucial in several respects. First, they have a significant impact on clients' self-perceptions and the construction of their stories; second, they are also part of a narrative and a discursive practice and have real and actual power as professional opinions; and third they are part of a social work discourse that characterises the social worker's own position and that of social work in society. One should be strengthened by their story, not, as in many cases, where professional storytellers actually took away the users' power and control over her or his own life.

_____

Main Movements, Research Projects and Discussions on Writing and Talking in Slovene Social Work

Use of narrative theories certainly offers many possibilities to enrich social work practice. Writing and talking in social work have recently become an important topic in the theory and practice of social work in Slovenia. Discussion of this topic has occurred since the beginning of social work and is now opening up to new levels and in many directions. In the article we'll illustrate a brief review of the present movements on this topic in Slovene professional arena, of the recent findings in researching oral and writing narrative professional practices in Slovene social work and will make some suggestion how to improve them to consider more complex storytelling. We will then consider two of the most lively and intensive discussions among social workers at the moment. First, discussions associated with professional frames within which a client becomes "a talking problem" as we named this phenomena in the title; and second, a discussion associated with case recording and other issues concerning writing and recording users' lives and situations.

Present Movements and Research Projects on Narrating in Social Work in Slovenia

So first – what are the most visible movements? We mentioned already discussions which we organise, together with mental health users organisations, on the importance of storytelling with the aim of discussing topics from their point of view. Together with practitioners, last year the Faculty of Social Work organised some workshops and training sessions about writing and recording in social work. This was an important event in the professional arena. As a result of these efforts the first handbook concerning case recording will come out this year. But since writing and talking are not just a matter of good techniques, it is important for us to explore how we talk and write at theoretical and analytical levels, eg. how we construct clients through storytelling, what kind of discourses we use when we narrate and so on. The thematic issue of the Social Work Review about narrating in social work came out in 2001 which encouraged some of our colleagues to ponder and write about narrating in social work. A year after the panel discussion on the topic "The telling and changing of stories in social work" the 1st Congress of Social Work opened in Slovenia last year.

   There are two ongoing research projects concerning this topic. One is entitled "History of Social Work in Slovenia". This research has just begun and will process ideas and practices of social work since its beginning as a profession, that is, throughout the 20th century. The characters and genres prevailing in social work stories will be examined, and the practice of collecting data and writing about the people in every period will be analysed.

_____

The other project is entitled "Contextual Methods of Social Work", a conditional title, in which narrative analysis was introduced at different levels. The aim of the study was to explore methods in social work which would enable the user with his/her story to stop being the object of an expert intervention, but rather to enable social workers to include expert intervention into the personal and biographical framework of the individual, together with the introduction of user's perspective in the analysis of his/her situation. Contextual methods of social work (risk analysis, get-to-know-you interview, mapping the life worlds of users, individual planning), characteristically, aim to construct appropriate answers within the context of the occurrence of a certain crisis. The fundamental task of social work, in this process, is to direct attention to the concrete context, situations, social worlds, and everyday narratives and language. At the base of these methods is the personal profile of the user and her or his situation, her or his story. The research also tried to answer a question on what kind of narratives social work produces. How do we get to know users and how do we present them? What does our conversation looks like?

First Discussion; Stories Within Problem-Oriented Professional Framework

The first discussion which we would like to focus on is associated with some of the findings of this research. Social work is one of the helping professions that frequently deals with problems and highlights problems that arise in the ways certain kinds of stories are told. The discussion here is how to reduce the harmful effects of the "problem-oriented" professional framework within which stories about users and social workers themselves are caught. In the social work context, clients and their stories are strongly determined by their very "client" position, the core of which is a certain "social problem". As a rule, stories in social work are based on "problem-focused" methods of knowledge and the representation of people who are mostly judged to be on the margins, and on a persistent ignorance of their complexity and strengths. This professional frame which we inherit from other helping professions doesn't help us to introduce other than "problematic" stories (or as Goffman, 19?? named them – sad stories), but why do we persist with this frame even seem to strengthen it? Why does it seem that professionals won't open their ears for successful and humorous, entertaining stories? It's easy to answer to this: then we wouldn't be able to legitimate ourselves as professionals. The profession of social work is founded exactly on clients' problems, deficiencies and mistakes.

Two Modes of Getting to Know People: Ordinary and Professional Matrix (Ethnomethodological Experiment)

_____

In the assumption that the traditional matrix of getting to know people in distress leads to the perception of the users of various services as helpless, stigmatised, morally wrong, etc. we designed an ethnomethodological experiment.[2] We asked the students of social work and professionals to write down five questions that are usually asked in the setting of social work. These questions establish a frame, which, although based on kindness, is of an institutional nature, and, besides getting to know somebody, is directed towards the individualisation of problems. Typical questions were: How can I help you? Did you already face your problem? What do you expect of me? How did you try to solve your problem? Then we asked students involved in the experiment to ask the same questions in everyday settings (streets, bars, stations, etc.). The same questions appear to be inappropriate and rude. In observations of various attempts of accidental (random) co-speakers at re-establishing the ordinary context of civil interaction or at assuming the role of the client, the differences between the two modes of getting to know somebody have been analysed and compared.

The '*Professional matrix*' produces problems, seeks inadequacies and elicits sad tales. The division of the roles is asymmetrical from the start; the client is subordinated and dependent, while the professional's efforts include her or his own distancing and separation from the client. The relation is based on tinkering, uses the institutional, formal spaces, people are encouraged to tell tales with a predetermined object, thus reducing the experience by reinstating the theme in a rigid frame of the conversation, individualising the responsibility and intruding into intimacy, this is potentially warranted professional secrecy.

The *Ordinary conversation matrix* constructs social and personal mapping, concentrates on virtues and encourages happy, successful stories and entertainment. The roles are in principle symmetric, based on the assumption of equality and reciprocity and feelings of trust. Conversation takes place in public and intimate spaces and is characterised by a net of diffused topics, it is open, it is associative in nature and thematically peripatetic. Responsibility is collective, tone unofficial, intimacy achieved gradually, by seduction and protected by ???? and trust. One of the important elements in everyday conversation is humour. The mixing of frameworks, comedies of errors, funny mistakes are comical elements in our loves. Turns in frameworks, inversion of frames and roles make us laugh. Although there are plenty of such events in the field of social work and primarily in the field of mental health, the power of laughter, irony and black humour present in past, in folklore and in the users culture, was being swept under the carpet by the traditionalistic mentality in social work (Flaker, 2001: 77-103).

In order to get to know people, the ordinary context seems superior, and it is recommended for use in professional settings as well. What we suggest is not a simple substitution (replacement) of one frame with another, but a synthesis

_____

of the ordinary model with pertinent professional skills, discipline and ethics. That was exactly the last task that students were asked to do: to make an interview with a user with mixing both frames. They should be getting to know him or her as an ordinary person first, with emphasis on ways she or he presents her or him self. When conversation turns to their distresses, stigma and other darker, problematic sides, they were asked to pay attention on the co-speakers' ability and ways of coping with it, on valuing her or his life experiences and knowledge. We have no illusion that we easily just overcome the problem-oriented professional framework with this suggestion, but we do hope that these suggested strategies at least help to shake and question it.

Second Discussion: Writing and Recording in Social Work

The next intensive ongoing discussion in our profession is how to improve the quality of case recording in Slovenian social work aiming towards greater democratisation. Written records and documentation in general open up a range of questions, such as questions of ethics and confidentiality, access to files, writing techniques, and the question of the user's involvement in records. In social work practice in Slovenia in the past we gave much more attention to the professional methods of working with people and very little or nothing to the writing and recording. And yet the writing and recording is also about "working with people", it is a method in which all principles of social work doctrine are reflected. It demands that professionals enter in a "common working relationship with client", which is one specific social work method. It seems that in social work practice in Slovenia a certain discrepancy is occurring here. A social worker can do excellent work with clients, but after what was done is recorded or with clumsy handling with notes and files, what was built with the client may be lost. There was a story told by social worker which we heard in our abovementioned trainings of writing and recording. He told us that years ago he worked with a client – an older woman – with whom he developed a very good and trustful relationship. This good feeling among them was probably a reason that one day she had asked him if she could see what he was writing down all the time in their sessions. He was completely astonished – nobody had asked him this before – and he tried to get out of this embarrassment by using a poor excuse that his notes were just for himself and for social services and that he could not share them with her. This old lady kindly said goodbye after their session and she never again returned. What was absurd in this story – as the social worker told us – is that there was absolutely nothing in his notes that he would have been ashamed of. It was just so impossible to think at that time of sharing any kind of notes with clients. Although some users nowadays sue social workers if they do not allow them access to their files, the majority of users are still not aware of their rights. And if social workers mostly consider existent legislation, they mostly still don't

see the participation and partnership in recording as part of a "working relationship" and as possibility of more qualitative work with client. If they consult clients about what will be recorded it is mostly because they want to avoid later possible complications or feeling of embarrassment when, for example, they have to read a report in the court in front of the client.

In analysing social work recording practice in Slovenia we can see the tendency towards it becoming more and more formalised and standardised. The State direct new forms which social services should complete. This State control recently extended also to non-governmental social organisations. It is not surprising that social workers describe writing and recording as one of the most boring and bureaucratic parts of their work, and they regularly complain that they spend more time on paper work than on work with clients. So if we can see writing and recording as a two-sided activity – one repressive, prescribed and exercising control, and the other – creative and opening possibilities for expressing and presenting clients in better ways – we can surely say that the first side predominates over the second one at the moment.

So, the focus of writing is often on showing "what was done" in the particular case, which produces a special type of stories – working tasks descriptions. Social workers in their reports and explanations attend to a range of a rhetorical and interactional concerns through which they are able to demonstrate that their work is in accord with responsible, justifiable and defensible professional activity.

When writing of clients the focus of writing is still often on confirming whether a certain user behaviour was appropriate or not. Social work written stories are often like a detailed list of the user's failures, weak sides, deficiencies. When analysing the written documents, it appeared that the less stigmatising were the reports which were not written by social workers but for example from sociologists who are working in social services.

Conclusion

The first case recordings in the 19th century were based on photographs of people – inmates in asylums. They believed that appearance could give an evidence of the pathology, criminality and moral degeneration of people. Photographs haven't caught moments of motion, changing and life contradictions, on the contrary – they iced the very moment and together with ideology of frontalism were giving evidence for pathology. Frontalism was emphasising symptoms and isolation of the person. The picture was individualistic and excluded the context. They believed this picture presents a truth. The question which we have to ask when we think about good practices of recording is – what did this early photograph miss out? Did we want to repeat this frontal image or would we rather include all missed dimensions in

_____

our writing? It is important to write about those experiences of users and of our own, which usually stay out of the picture, and which were staying out of diagnostic assessments as well, and that we work on storytelling which tends to destigmatise and empower people. What we should know is that social work accounts are not just dead words but are sort of an act, a positioned intervention: they have real and actual power as professional opinions, reports, etc. Beside this they have a significant impact on users' self-perceptions. With a certain intonation or certain characterisation in the story the social worker can determine the type or direction of intervention. These shifts in the theory and practice of talking and writing in social work we have seen in Slovenia recently, and which we have tried to describe are very important and are being inserted into existing contemporary movements and trends in social work in Slovenia. The aim is to de-institutionalise social services, to normalise users' lives to allow their empowerment, better negotiating positions and more equal participation in the processes of helping. As we already said, professional storytelling can be seen as an act that can both widen and limit professional practice. Therefore, let us conclude this paper with some thoughts from Karen W. Tice's book, "Narrative practices involve power and intervention and thus have profound implications for modes of thinking and writing that have silenced poor people, immigrants, people of colour, women, gays and lesbians, and other historically marginalised groups. Narrative practices also create opportunities for dialogue, self-representation and more participatory ways of knowing. Yet such questions are given too little attention within contemporary social work" (1998: 10).

Notes

1. The link between storytelling and identity becomes most evident when people are not allowed to have and tell their own stories, their own versions/constructions of reality. Attempts to reduce the person to just one possible autobiography are basically violent and may result in severe personality disorders. According to Goffman (1968), an important part of admission in total institutions is to destroy the sense of self and the biographies that people held to that point.
2. Vito Flaker has described it widely in Social Work Review 40 (2001), p.77-103.

References

Epston, D. and White, M. (1990) *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*, New York, A Norton Professional Book.

_____

Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums*, Doubleday & Co., 1968 (a revised edition).

Hall, C. (1997) *Social Work as Narrative: Storytelling and persuasion in professional texts*, Aldershote, Brookfield USA, Singapore, Sydney, Ashgate.

Hall, C. (2001) Pripoved (naracija) in socialno delo: nekaj o teoriji, analizi in praksi, (Narrative and social work: some implications for theory analysis and practice), *Socialno delo 40*, 2-4.

Flaker, V. (1995) K navadnosti izjemnega (Toward the ordinary of the uncommon: On the possibilities of a paradigmatic shift), *Socialno delo 34* 6: 361-372.

Flaker, V. (2001) Intervju kot umetnost spoznavanja: etnometodološke beležke o tem, kako strokovnjaki spoznavajo uporabnike (Interview as an art of getting know: ethnometodological notes on how the professional get know users), *Socialno delo 40* (2001).

McCall, Michal M. (1985) The Significance of Storytelling, *Life Stories/Recits de vie 5* (1989), p.38-48.

Plummer, K. (1983) *Documents of life: An introduction to the problems and literature of a humanistic method*, London, George Allen & Unwin.

Plummer, K. (2001)

Tice, W.K. (1998) *Tales of Wayward Girls and Immoral Women: Case Records and Professionalzation of Social Work*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, Aldershote, Brookfield USA, Singapore, Sydney, Ashgate.

Urek, M. (2001) Življenjske zgodbe in njihov pomen: nekaj izhodišč za proučevanje pripovedovanja zgodb v socialnem delu (Life stories and their significance: some starting points for an examination of storytelling in social work), *Socialno delo 40*, 2-4.