

Service Users Self-Narratives on Their Journey From Shame to Pride: Tales of Transition

Sidsel Natland
Postdoctoral Fellow
Faculty of Social Sciences
Social Welfare Research Centre
Oslo and Akershus University College
Oslo, Norway
&

Hilde Dalen Celik
Air Castle Architect & Rainbow Maker
KREM—Social Entrepreneurs for a Creative & Diverse Worklife
Skien, Norway

Abstract

As part of a course on changing attitudes developed by KREM, a Norwegian service user organization, narratives are used to explore and understand identity formation. The process is based on the role of shame in the lives of those whose life experiences lead to a reliance on government social benefits to sustain themselves. Shame is identified as an obstacle that affects everyday life and undermines one's capacity to take actions that can lead to and support self-sufficiency. Exploring oneself through the construction of the fairy tale can provide service users with a renewed sense of empowerment. Using identity formation and the concept of shame as the conceptual framework, this analysis focuses on the use of narratives to construct and interpret stories. It concludes with both practice and research implications of using narratives to acquire an understanding and sensitivity to service user perspectives.

Keywords: service user involvement, shame, narrative, identity, empowerment, social work

Service Users Self-Narratives on Their Journey From Shame to Pride: Tales of Transition

Humans are narrative beings. We tell stories about our surroundings, incidents, and things that we find meaningful in our lives. We tell stories to understand ourselves. We listen to others' stories to understand who they are. Through the narratives, we join in constructing our life worlds. We can use our interpretations of the stories as peep holes to worldviews. Stories are like the tip of the iceberg: floating on seas of consciousness, on the ocean of reality (Milkaer, 2001, p. 3).

Milkaer is a Danish folklorist who reminds us that human beings live by and through narratives and are also cultural human beings who create, change, and perpetuate culture. We live and interpret ourselves and our surroundings through narratives, not only narratives about lived life but also narratives that express ideas, wishes, and hopes about how life should be and what we wish for our future life course. Narratives enable us to understand and reflect on both ourselves and others.

So how is this connected to the HUSK project? In this article, we describe how the participating service users in HUSK contributed to its development in one particular way: namely, by their use of narratives as a way to explore and shed light on the voices of service users. If the HUSK project were to fulfill its requirements and ideals of equal participation, then the users' way of approaching the project also needed to be recognized. This form of participation was introduced and strengthened when an organization of service users (KREM) was contracted to facilitate communications among a diverse array of participants (greatly enhanced by the open-mindedness of the regional HUSK project leader).

This article begins with an overview of the long-term service users of social services, followed by a description of KREM and its development of the Courses for Changing

Attitudes that was designed to empower the service users and promote future change. The seminars used narratives as a method for exploring and understanding ourselves and how we might change. The theoretical background for this discussion is narratives, identity formation, and shame. We conclude with implications for future research on new forms of social work practice. This article features the perspectives of participating service users in the HUSK projects by capturing aspects of their own individual stories.

Long-Term Service Users—A Brief Background and Policy

Research shows that being or becoming unemployed and becoming long-term users of social benefits are experiences that can negatively affect one's health as well as one's material, social, and psychological well-being (van der Wel et al., 2010). Some studies have explicitly explored the link between poverty and social exclusion along with research that explores the relationship between level of income and patterns of social contacts (Vogel, 1997; Hallerød, 1999) and the risk of social exclusion (Paugam, 1996). Norway is an advanced welfare state where the poverty rate is among the lowest in the world and where most people enjoy a very high standard of living. Those experiencing poverty for a prolonged period may be more at risk of social exclusion in such a country than in countries where more people are poor and where the general living standard is lower (Dahl, Floetten, & Lorentzen, 2005).

When the Norwegian government decided to make poverty an issue to be addressed in order to prevent poverty and social exclusion among long-term unemployed people, it created the *Qualification Program (QP)* in 2007 (a type of welfare to work program; Norwegian Parliament Prp nr. 70, 2006–2007). The QP is based on a human resource development approach that seeks to promote the development of individual resources and opportunities through skill training designed to enhance motivation and self-efficacy based on a response to

the needs, preferences, possibilities, and limitations of the individual participant. The program was designed to be tailor-made in close cooperation with the participant. The program for each participant should be full-time (i.e., 37.5 hours per week for a maximum duration of 2 years) and may include work training, classroom training, motivational training, physical training, time for medical treatment, and/or time to carry out activities of special interest to the participant (Parliamentary Prp. nr. 1, 2006–2007—the state budget for 2007 and 2006; Parliamentary Prp. nr. 1, 2008–2009). Program participants receive a fixed, taxable financial benefit which can be higher than the current level of social assistance (Parliamentary report nr. 9, 2006–2007, Parliamentary proposition nr. 46, 2004–2005). In 2011, there were approximately 10,700 persons participating in the program throughout Norway (Norway Statistics [SSB] 2012).

KREM and the “Courses for Changing Attitudes”: Setting the Scene

KREM defines itself as a *bridge-building organization* for users based on the principles of social entrepreneurship in order to innovate in the public sector by building bridges between individuals, management, and businesses in order to increase the workforce and reduce poverty. The main objective is to empower the users to find shortened pathways back to school and/or work life. The methods and models are mostly developed bottom-up in partnership with users and local social service workers. KREM comprises people with extensive personal experience who face multiple challenges upon entering or returning to employment. They have experienced poverty, social exclusion, stigma, and shame.

The Courses for Changing Attitudes emerged from a process of working in equal partnership and was facilitated by KREM in the form of 14-day courses located in a small town on the coast of Turkey, far removed from the everyday life in Norway. The format included (a) personal skills development; (b) communication issues and techniques; (c) use of

the narrative method (personal story writing and storytelling); (d) reflecting upon taking personal responsibility, accountability, and empowerment; and (e) exploring values and attitudes.

During the HUSK project period (2007–2011), a total of 190 participants attended these courses. Of these were 145 service users, 20 social services providers, seven researchers, four students, and 14 members of the KREM facilitation team. The service users who attended the courses included several long-term recipients of social assistance, and others had experienced or were engaged in crime, substance abuse, mental illness, and unemployment. Some of the users were enrolled in the Qualification Program (noted above). The age of the participants ranged from 14 to 62 years, with most of them between the ages of 30 and 50. The gender balance was virtually identical. Many of the service users had previously been in regular work, but they were now outside the workforce for many different reasons. Most service users participating in HUSK were recruited from the rolls of current service users by the staff of their local public social service agency.

Each course included eleven guides (“coaches”) who had participated in previous courses and helped participants benefit from the learning experiences located in various course exercises. The most important task for the guides was to facilitate the *mapping conversation* at the end of the course in the form of an individual future plan for each participant. The action plan was developed at the end of the course when participants had internalized and adapted the content of the course. The guides also had touring responsibilities associated with showing participants around town, introducing them to various sites, and taking care of the individual participants so that they could feel comfortable and cared for. The director of KREM (coauthor) served as the course leader and draws on both personal experiences as a service user, education as a social worker, and her public

administration experience by using both an engaging style of leadership and the effective use of her own experiences. All these elements contributed to the success of the courses.

The Storytelling Sessions

Fictional storytelling is the primary focus of this article where the role of narratives is central to the formation and reaffirmation of one's identity. The main idea underpinning the storytelling sessions is that people create meaning in their lives through the stories they tell about themselves (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1991). While service users often demonstrate considerable skill in describing their life course in relation to the social service providers, these stories are often viewed by service providers within the context of a "clinical correct narrative" (Nelson, 2002) where the service user seeks to be worthy of public help and thereby tends to focus primarily on one's failures in life. In essence, the story positions the user as victim and in need, thereby, reducing the user to a "case." These stories often leave little room for promoting a sense of service user "agency," especially if the story connects only to the feeling of being hopeless and dependent and ultimately a sense of shame.

A specific goal for the seminars is to explore new and alternative stories about oneself. While KREM acknowledges the challenging process of seeking transformation through narratives, the use of *fairy tales* can be a crucial starting point for the process of constructing new stories in pursuit of new identity formations. The stories activate and challenge one's imagination and thereby create a relative distance between one's real life and experiences through the use of fantasy figures, metaphors and symbols, and locations beyond the real. The idea is that the deeper meaning of symbols may open up the possibility of new and more meaningful directions in one's life.

During the course, all participants were challenged to write a brief fairy tale about their life using the following guidelines:

1. Select a part or period of life
2. Describe the “journey” in their own lives (short or long period)
3. Begin with “Once upon a time” and write in the third person (not first person) in order to create the necessary distance or get a bird’s eye perspective of one’s own life
4. Use metaphors to describe obstacles and experiences
5. Make the writer the hero of the fairy tale
6. Give the story a happy ending

Several participants were convinced that they would not be able to write a fairy tale. But from the moment it was announced, everyone entered into some kind of process of reflection related to questions that emerged as one looked backward in one’s life and/or struggled to identify a problem or trauma. At the end of the seminar, participants were asked to read their stories to the group (voluntary), and the process often elicited emotional responses in an environment where the service users, researchers, educators, students, and practitioners were all equal.¹

Blame, Shame, and Identity Formation

While the issues of poverty, social exclusion, stigma, and shame emerged in the stories, the focus in this analysis is on shame as a tool for understanding and interpreting the various experiences and narratives that emerged. The therapeutic or cathartic expression of shame emerged as an important dimension of the KREM-led seminars.

While shame is a universal feeling, it is also an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing our being is flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging. The

word means to “cover oneself.” Shame functions in such a way that we hide our “shamed selves” from others in order to avoid more shame (Brown, 2007). Shame is a social emotion which holds a significant meaning for negative self-evaluation. Shame is about the *feelings* in these negative evaluations, as compared to guilt, that is oriented toward action. Shame may result in feelings of being not worthy, wishing to escape as well as developing negative behaviors, such as aggression and hostility, directed toward both self and others. From a therapeutic perspective, Brown (2007) defines shame as a full-contact emotion that includes both emotionally overwhelming feelings and a bodily experience. While the terms embarrassment, humiliation, guilt, and shame are often used interchangeably, Brown finds it important to highlight their differences as follows: (a) *Embarrassment* is the least powerful as we know that it happens to other people and that it will go away, (b) *humiliation* is a feeling that, if repeated, can turn into shame, especially when the person who is putting us down is someone with whom we have a valued relationship or someone whom we perceive to have more power than we do, and (c) *guilt* and *shame* are both emotions of self-evaluation; however, guilt is about our behaviors where we hold an action or behavior up against our ethics, values, and beliefs in order to evaluate it (e.g., “Did I do something bad?”). When guilt is allowed to grow and become a part of us, it can be transformed into shame (e.g., “I am bad”). Whereas guilt can be a positive motivator for change, shame typically leads to worse behavior or paralysis. As Brown (2007) notes, “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging. [...] Shame creates feelings of fear, blame and disconnection” (p. 30).

Moving from the psychological to the sociological, Froenes (2001) observes that the shame is relational and can be described in “classic” ways (e.g., experienced when norms and rules for behavior were broken) thereby connecting shame to historical, sociological, and cultural contexts and more “modern” ways (e.g., a more individualized phenomenon where

shame is internalized such as not achieving one's goals or not becoming the person that you want to be). Both Solheim (2010) and Underlid (2001) in their studies of the everyday lives of social assistance recipients in Norway found that recipients experienced shame in their everyday lives, raising questions about how the receipt of social assistance may fuel feelings of shame as well as the role of place and gender as contributing factors.

These diverse contributors to shame suggest that the *process of shaming* may lead to what the philosopher Nelson (2002) terms "damaged individual identity" that includes feelings of being dependent with restricted autonomy or what Sen (2005) refers to as the dehumanization of the person. Shame is believed to reduce a person's agency and capacity to act constructively.

The concept of shame also relates to *identity formation* where we establish who and what we are through social interaction. We reflexively construct our experiences and ourselves in relation to the identities that are available and prevalent (Blumer, 1969/1986; Mead, 1934). So then what kind of identity emerges from experiences of guilt and feelings of shame? This question was part of the focus of KREM on the importance of service user perspectives within HUSK projects along with giving voice to the users within the context of improving social services and social policies. Therefore, one of KREM's goals was to find strategies to minimize the feelings of shame by identifying other actors that have been a part in the process of shaming. The goal of the Courses for Changing Attitudes was to learn methods for empowering users and thereby begin the journey from shame to pride as described by service users.

Narratives

Narrative is a multilayered tool that can be used in a variety of ways. A simple definition of the narrative is that it is a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end

(Polkinghorne, 1991). The story is regarded as meaningful to the narrator and includes a plot and a purpose. Narrative can be understood as a cognitive process that uses the plot to make sense of life events; people organize their experiences through narratives. Mattingly (1998) finds that narratives provide vehicles for the narrator to express past, present, and future. Narratives are dynamic and may change during our life course. Mattingly is especially preoccupied by the use of *narratives of illness* and how illness may impact on life. The essence of the narrative may impact on how they deal with it. Also, sharing stories and telling them to an audience may impact the story based on the feedback received. The offering of other perspectives and/or adding with their own life story can lead to the co-creation of a story. Mattingly terms this process a “re-plotment” or “therapeutic plotment” to capture the idea that the plot of the story can change through a therapeutic relationship.

The dynamic nature of the story means that it must be regarded as consisting of “multiple truths”; they are always reflecting the subjective truth of the individual narrator. The narrator’s view of the story may change through retelling by sharing it with others and during new experiences in the life course. As a result, a narrative is never a once-and-for-all representation of that individual.

There are many genres and forms of stories (literature, personal stories, myths, legends, fairy tales) as well as many ways of interpreting stories. Within the context of this article, the therapeutic function of narratives is the main approach. Nevertheless, the *genre* that is used as a starting point in the KREM seminars is the *fairy tale*. This is a new way of approaching and using narratives as a method that might seem like a paradox, since the fairy tale consists of *fixed structures and plots*, whereas the narrative is recognized as a *cognitive process* where the plot is unfinished and therefore open for *change*. In essence, fairy tales can be regarded as an *emic genre* where stories that most of us hear or read during childhood provide us with a common knowledge of how it is structured. It is generally understood that

fairy tale take place in a world and a time beyond our real life in an land often populated by kings and queens, heroes and heroines, phantasy figures and magic elements. If you are encouraged to write a story where you must place yourself in the position as the hero, the fairy tale provides the framework for doing it. “Everything” is permissible when you enter the world of magic.

This does not mean that it is easy to narrate oneself within the structure of the fairy tale. It may be painful to sit down and analyze your life experiences in writing. It can be emotionally demanding to narrate the difficult, the experiences of shame, or describe things that have never been disclosed. However, the fairy tale used in the context of the KREM course provides the distance and support needed to begin to cope with these feelings and emotions by transferring them to a magic world where reality is turned upside-down. And by doing this, the experience can reposition the service user from feeling like an outsider, someone who is excluded, or a victim but more in the context of being a hero.

In addition, *metaphor* is a key concept in narratives that are frequently used in KREM seminar writing sessions. Like the fairy tale, the metaphor has a pragmatic and therapeutic value. As the Australian narrative therapist Michael White has noted, “the problem that is the problem” is not the person but is rather positions external to the person in order to provide a better “working position” for dealing with the problem. By the use of phantasy and creativity, one can separate the problem from one’s own personality, so that the person and the problem enter a relation that can be explored and described. By giving the problem a metaphorical name in order to redefine the relation between the person and the problem, a process opens up by shedding light on and describing power and fights, oppression, opposition, and escape. Another important element in these externalizing dialogues is to identify new positions where the user takes an active position: an actor in his or her own life instead of the oppressed victim—“re-storying” of the history or co-creation of new narratives (Selbekk, 2007).

The Fairy Tale of the Golden Boy

By referring to a fairy tale written of one participant in the seminars, it is possible to illustrate how the tales are written, how they make use of some significant components of fairy tale construction, and how the use of metaphors provide some distance and the use of externalizing dialogue. We then show how the retrospective comments on the fairy tale by the author contributed to ongoing work after participating in the seminars. The following case illustrates the process of moving from shame to dignity and the growing confidence leading to a more active approach to life.

Once upon a time there was a boy called Golden Boy, because he was shining and almost sparkling as he graciously moved around. So full of energy and vivid imagination that mama and papa Golden used to joke about him falling into the pot as a baby. Yes, the pot that they had boiling in their house, just about all the time, but Golden Boy, was simply an energetic, somewhat different and very curious boy wondering what this life had to offer.

He went on, shining, feeling different, so different that he sometimes wondered if he was “normal,” but the thought did not sink in. He was so curious and full of desires to explore this world, and he strongly believed that around the next corner, something new and fantastic would appear. It did not always turn out to be like that, but Golden Boy thought that if he stopped in believing that—then it for sure would never happen.

Golden Boy, who had been dealt the legs of an iron horse and the body of a human, was very fast and could easily cover a lot of ground and he explored the most remote

of places in his search to find equals. The problem was that he sometimes went too fast, too far, too high and too wide and the way home became pretty long and heavy on him. But as soon as he had got his food and rest he was back in his quest to find anyone and anything that stood out from the crowd or moved upstream, somewhere he belonged. He found the hunt incredibly exciting and what he found along the way even more so. During life, he learnt that everything was not exactly as it looked on the surface, and that he had to trust his own capability to divide right from wrong. This made his eyes sharp and his ears long.

One day the time was due to go further, travel to distant countries to find out if all those who stood out from the crowd, possibly could have settled down there. Golden Boy travelled south, and yes, he found a whole city of such people that had gathered there. Hey! So great! Here Golden Boy really could unfold, yes, maybe a bit too much, because in the end his horse grew so tall that he was able to see everything from the perspective of the eagle. So clear, such an all-around vision! Now he understood the interconnections of it all, everything that he had believed, was true.

Then a condor passed him in the air, saying “hmmm . . . well, if you have understood everything that is to be understood, and explored it all at the age of 21, would it not make the rest of your life a bit boring?” Golden Boy had to think a bit on this; tasting it and did not like the taste much. Yes, the condor was right. And this thing about boredom, that was something Golden Boy feared very much. . . . So he got off his high horse and got hold of a new, a quite ordinary horse. Then he figured out that this city was not the place where he was supposed to make a difference. So back home he went, to be able to shine and sparkle there instead.

Then one day something fantastic happened. He met another boy that was, if possible, even more different than himself. His nickname was “Doctor” and he belonged in a tribe living nearby where Golden Boy had grown up. What a fortune! So great! The tribe has a mission and that was to spread love & understanding for diversity to anyone not as different as themselves. Golden Boy found this unbelievably satisfying and felt a strong sense of belonging and community. He took the task very seriously and found the work important and not to mention very fun. He kept on working for a more generous society with room for everyone.

The only thing was that Golden Boy forgot to help and care for himself. No wonder—there was so much to do. But after a while he noticed he didn’t sparkle and glow as much as he used to. One day he fell down in a crypt, and there at the bottom of it, he met a big, strong and most fearsome warrior. By the smell and looks of him Golden Boy did not feel at ease and stepped aside. The warrior grabbed him by the sleeve and asked him to slow down for a minute. Then he told Golden Boy to get up and clean up his act or he would become a clown. A clown? Him? He was supposed to be king, a king with a shining crown. Even though he didn’t take the time to digest or even respond, the word *clown* was stuck in the back of his mind forever after. Even if he wanted to, Golden Boy was not able to break out of this downward spiral at this point. Instead he beat himself over and over again, punishing himself like he had no value what so ever, until he became just a hole.

Then one day Golden Boy met a woman, with eyes sharper than laser beams and she made the mask Golden Boy had stuck to his face melt like butter. The woman was a

rainbow-maker; her eyes and her wisdom so great she could visualize whatever she believed in. She wanted to know what Golden Boy had to show for himself and he tried to make up for the time he thought he had wasted on living a useless life. But she insisted and was actually interested in what he had to say. She gave him positive feedback on various occasions and said that being different than others was becoming popular these days, and that Golden Boy who was sufficiently different, had what it takes to become really popular. This started a spark of hope in him again and he felt a warm glow inside him, a glow that spread to the rest of his body. She had seen beyond his effort to hide behind his mask and actually seen him as the Golden Boy he is. Like magic she had turned his presumed negative aspects into real capital he could use. This life he now knew, could give him so much more. If he put his mind and effort into it, his dreams would become true. He had the power to paint the future on his canvas and without delay the future became now. The future is now!

The Self-Narrative of Erik

The Golden Boy is a story about the darkness overwhelming everything—and about a sparkle of light. The story is the fairy tale version of *Erik's* self-narrative in which we are taken through the process from hope to the belief in the possibility of creating a new life. Erik provides these comments on his background and origins for his fairy tale:

Looking back at my childhood, I can remember the good times, happy celebrations, exotic foods and the social life I had the pleasure to be a part of. I remember travelling all over the world, being loved playing and having fun. But that is only one side of the story; I have been told by friends that knew me from school and were standing on the outside looking in. They tell me that my childhood wasn't exactly in an environment

suiting for bringing up children. I guess they have a point even though I have learned to accept that my life started off with a serious amount of drama and action. There were times of joy, travelling and lots of wealth and there were times of sadness, fear and hunger. Like in any other family there were ups and downs, maybe somewhat more frequent and turbulent than in others.

About Golden Boy travelling south and joining the tribe with a mission to spread joy, Erik explains:

I always had a special interest in music and wanted to pursue my dream of becoming a music, film and theatre producer. My dream was crushed by a social worker I met when I was 18 years old. So I said: “fuck it”! No matter what he says I’ll do it anyway. Over the next 22 years or so I worked with a multimedia performance art group and gave over 200 performances in different counties. We had more of a reputation of being unpredictable and uncompromising than famous. However, following this dream of mine became instrumental in me entering the dark tunnel of alcohol and narcotics. Then these expanding moments became more of a journey into the abyss and the darker sides of society.

The condor who warns him about boredom at the age of 21 and the meeting with the warrior in the crypt, is Erik’s metaphorical way of describing and reflecting on how he came to a point in life where he understood that he had to change the life course, but that this turned out to be difficult:

It was time for something else, something new, but what? I did not know. The months went by while I tried to live an ordinary life and become an ordinary man. It was not easy or any fun at all. All my prophecies that if I only stopped using drugs, everything would organize themselves and life become so easy, failed. It was right there and then that real life hit me with all its challenges, struggles and pleasures and pains. I had to dig myself out of the hole I had made for myself. The task ahead seemed prohibitive and I did not know where to start.

So what about the rainbow maker? This is expressed in a crucial incident and turning point for Erik:

Lost and without any expectations for the future I went back to see a social worker and told my story. She looked resigned and powerless to help me. She admitted not having any solution or cure to my problems but gave me the business card of Hilde Dalen, establisher of the organization called KREM. Hopeful I gave her a call and we had a business meeting in her car.

So here, KREM experience enters the scene and the fairy tale ends. But new self-narratives may emerge. In a later interview ² where he is asked to reflect on writing a fairy tale, comment on it and how the seminars and storytelling has affected him, Erik starts by telling how he later was encouraged to take part in the Courses for Changing Attitudes. He found it to provide a start of something “unbelievably valuable” and a “life changing experience”:

It made me realize that from now on I had to make time count for something. I learned a lot about how to differ between meaningful actions and less meaningful actions and how they can affect my life and others. I came back from Turkey empowered and high on life in a way that was noticeable for anyone. This experience gave me insights about myself and how I can be a player in my own life and how I can be able to make a difference to anyone but me.

This may mark the “re-employment” of Erik’s story. Erik’s story is a story that illustrates the move from a childhood that affected him in ways that drew him into a life of a “rolling stone” and the abuse of drugs and how, when he reached the bottom line, experienced recognition during his participation in the KREM seminars. This started a process leading him into activity and meaningfulness in his life. His damaged identity now became the focus of his narrative repair (Nelson, 2002). One concrete example of his major life changes is how he was able to resume responsibility for his son. Also, the meeting with the “rainbow maker” in the fairy tale opened up new possibilities as his former experiences and skills related to being a user of social services were acknowledged as point of departures for new tasks and responsibilities:

I was engaged by KREM to participate in an interdisciplinary cooperation with intent to develop public services based on my experience as a recipient of the services for the next 4 years while I completed my basic education in 2012. I am enrolled in higher education. I teach students in social work. I have also started my own business, SET (Social Entrepreneur Television) or “Participatory Video for Social Change” and I am representing KREM in a forum on poverty that is in direct contact with, and has influence on the political authorities. I guess I should be proud—and I am proud! My

son is doing fine, living on his own while I live together with my girlfriend and our 3 years old daughter. I still have a burning commitment to heal the society and create a more diverse society with room for everyone, and I have found a way!

This also illustrates one important factor for bringing out change within the narrative approaches; it is the creator of the metaphor who identifies the message within it. If it fits, then new meanings can emerge.

Shame as an Obstacle for Achieving Agency

While Erik's story is uniquely his and reflects his life experiences, the process for all individuals begins with an acknowledgement of their shame and how it serves as an obstacle to achieving agency. Some examples from the other participants when engaged in a retrospective reflection on their fairy tales and their personal processes include the following:

The more ashamed I felt, the more I acted out my anger and vice versa. I was heading for my own destruction with the thought that it was not my fault. (Markko, male, 31)

Ashamed, frustrated, angry, sad, lost, low self-esteem, no self-respect and feeling like I have no worth at all. The feeling is so strong right now and I feel overwhelmed by them. I have made my own prison because I am so afraid that other people can see what I feel. Lost in my own world of shame. (Randi, female, 41)

When you are out of work, fat and have a growing feeling of uselessness, I felt shame. (Torvald, male)

In a long time I was lost, without any future, work or any other activity, my life had no meaning. I felt a lot of shame, have a lot of negative thoughts and have no belief in myself. I had little hope for the future and lived in my own world with a bad picture of myself. (Tom, male)

It's just that the Shame was always so great, I was so small, the feeling of powerlessness came. (Heidi, female)

Many of the stories also are about feeling guilt, making wrong choices, and negative behaviors and how this leads to a process of feeling guilty that can in turn lead to shame. What triggers shame in some of us but has no impact on others? What makes us feel that our sense of shame can change from one situation to another? How do we react differently? During certain times and situations, we are all struggling with the feelings of not being good enough, not having enough, and not belonging enough. According to Brown (2007, 2010), there are two ways to handle this reaction; we can turn these emotions inward, convincing ourselves that we are bad and that we deserve the rejection that we fear, or we can lash out, scream, or respond to cutting comments from friends, colleagues, or family. Either way, it will leave us feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and alone (e.g., “being trapped” or “being in a prison of shame,” phrases used by service users).

Being trapped in a prison of shame leaves little room for agency or meaningful activity. Many participants enter the courses with a mix of fear and hope in anticipation of the outcomes of the course. Many have overcome challenges by deciding how they will manage their journey.

Shame is not about low self-esteem. Our self-esteem is based on how we see ourselves, our strengths and limitations over time. Shame is an emotion, and it is about how we feel in certain situations when we are taken back to a place of smallness and unable to sense the context where we can feel overwhelmed by the feeling of loneliness that can expose a deep sense of being flawed (Brown, 2010). Erik is expressing this in the fairy tale about Golden Boy. Most of us use both fight, flight, or freeze mode. We use it at different times with different people for different reasons. Sometimes, we try to conquer the fear by blaming others to be able to deal with our feelings of powerlessness. Another reaction is to “explode” by lashing out, unaware of what we are doing and why. This is done by being aggressive and by using shame to fight shame. When we experience shame, we are often thrown into crisis mode, and it is difficult to maintain power. Shame often produces overwhelming and painful feelings of confusion, fear, anger, judgment, and/or the need to escape or hide from the situation. Brown (2007) draws a line between shame and violence, aggression, depression, addiction, eating disorders, and bullying.

These responses to shame can also be viewed as strategies for salvaging self-worth and identity. As in Erik’s story, one response was to enter into the “dark tunnel” of drugs. Yet all of these strategies move us away from our story. Shame is about fear, blame, and disconnection. In the KREM seminars, it is noted that “shame happens between people” and the responses to it are relational because when you feel ashamed you position yourself in relation to someone. But this can also mean that shame can also heal relations between people. During seminars, it was noted that shame needs three things to grow out of control: secrecy, silence, and judgment. Further, Brown (2007) argues that our level of resilience in handling shame is determined by our ability to recognize shame and the willingness and/or ability to *speak* about it. Shame is so powerful that we sometimes feel it just by talking about

it. To understand how our shame gets triggered and different ways to share it is one of the ways to manage it.

Experiences from the KREM seminars confirm that this might be a painful experience; just listening to someone share stories and experiences of shame can be a challenge. It is also hard to make the experience accessible to other people; it is hard to find the words to make it understandable. At the same time, *speaking shame* gives us the tools we need to express how we feel and ask for what we need (Brown, 2007).

The narrative perspective enables us to interpret shame as a contributing factor that can be an obstacle for participants seeking to “story themselves.” Following both Sen (2005) and Nelson (2002), the positioning of themselves as active subjects and having agency seems like an impossible task.

Given that the seminars seek to explore responses and strategies for overcoming the barriers created by shame, the goal is to find the strength to write your own story, own it, and hopefully be able to share it. It is in this context that the fairy tales and the encouragement to use *metaphors* provide us with a new and hitherto untried strategy to respond to shame.

From Shame to *Empathy*—Joint Stories

The opposite of experiencing shame is experiencing empathy. Empathy is more than words and more than sensitivity:

Empathy is the skill or ability to tap into our own experience in order to connect with an experience someone is relating to us. It is the ability to perceive a situation from the other person’s perspective. To see, hear and feel the unique world of the other.
(Brown, 2007, 33)

Brown defines four attributes of empathy: to be able to see the world as others see it, to be nonjudgmental, to understand another person`s feelings, and to communicate understanding of that person's feelings. In order to be empathic, we must be willing to recognize and acknowledge our own lens and attempt to see the situation that someone is experiencing through his or her lens (Brown, 2007, 38).

Many of the service users confirmed during the seminars that they are often in need of empathic responses. For example, one participant shared how she experiences empathy as follows:

They talked to me, not down to me. They looked at me when I spoke, they did not interrupt me, they let me take time to say what I wanted to convey, and everybody gave of themselves. What I said was not swept under the carpet (Heidi, female participant).

She also noted in this situation that she felt that “the shame was less.” Another female participant, Randi, said that “I realized that other people were interested in my thoughts and they really saw me for me and not who they wanted me to be.” A male participant, Torvald, looking back and reflecting on the process during the seminar, found it strongly marked by the feelings of empathy and solidarity:

I experienced how warm it can be to be together with people and the strength in a group that cares for you and you care for them. There was so much that I learned about human, feelings and communication.

For Torvald, secrecy, silence, and judgment had for a long time made him feel disconnected from the outside world, but by experiencing empathy, he was provided with a feeling of connection which he described as making him decide to fight his way back by believing in himself and future possibilities. He reached his goal of securing employment.

The strategy of constructing and sharing a story within the context of constructing a fairy tale represents a significant leap of faith based on the hope that others will be capable of responding with empathy and understanding. It is courage that makes us tell our story, even if we are not immune to criticism. Courage involves speaking openly and honestly about who we are, what we're feeling, and what we have been experiencing, both good or bad.

According to Brown (2010), maintaining vulnerability involves a risk that needs to be taken in order to arrive at a point of growth and a feeling of connection between people when they are seen, heard, and valued. Connection also means that we are free to give and receive feedback without feeling judged so that the relationships can give us the feeling of strength to develop new relationships as well as identities (Brown, 2007). Sharing fairy tales and using metaphors by connecting with others can lead to a form of cognitive reconstruction and the acquisition of new meanings and understandings (Nelson, 2002; Selbekk, 2007).

Refusing and Coping With Shame—Approaching Agency

The narrative sessions often evolve from feelings of shame with a minimal sense of agency, connection, or experiences of empathic encounters for building a sense of solidarity with growing feelings of power and agency. Service users refer to the process in terms of “opening closed doors.” The storytelling can launch a process of *negotiation with the shame* (Goffman, 1963) by acknowledging that it will not necessarily disappear quickly but needs to be addressed in order to cope with it. As Torvald noted, “I still feel ashamed but less than before, and little by little I will be rid of it.” Another example is Randi, who at 41, looked

back on her childhood and reflected on her process in refusing to deal with shame by noting that

I was the girl who was bullied in many years and I just took it, I didn't use my voice. In the present I bite back and I have a voice. I no longer hide behind many masks but instead I show who I really am, what I stand for and I am more comfortable around many people than I used to be. I feel pride for me, I feel love for me, I feel strengthened, empowered and have hopes for my future. I am now active at "Fontenehuset" in Oslo. I go outside of my apartment every single day. I do things that make me happy. My comfort zone and the guard I had to face before have transformed into my front door and my doorstep, it's up to me if I want to cross it and when. I can sometimes go inside my comfort zone but as every day goes by I am choosing not to. When I try to see my future I see myself fulfilled [through] my dreams. I believe that I can do anything as long as I have trust and pride in who I am. I love getting to know me and I have taken back more control of my life. I will make it because I believe in myself again and I know that it's so much out there for me, I just have to grab it and take chances.

While this narrative no longer relies on the construction of a fairy tale, it is clear that the self-reflection process is ongoing and people like Randi are able to "story themselves" when they assume the position of a subject with agency without the need to "externalize themselves" from the problem through the use of fairy tales and metaphors. These examples provide evidence of how the narrative approach can be effective in bringing out changes and empowering service users. In the retrospect, the narratives include improvements, achievements, hopes, and wishes for the future. As a result, service users can play an active

part in their own narrative as well as in their identity formation. When Randi says it is up to her to “take the chance, and that now she can do ‘anything,’” it suggests that she has gained sufficient agency to actively negotiate her identity within a social context.

One last example that effectively captures the process of moving from shame and no agency to experiences of empathy and the strength to address shame can be seen in the following narrative provided by a participant named Tom:

In a long time I was lost, without any future, work or any other activity, my life had no meaning. I felt a lot of shame, have a lot of negative thoughts and have no believe in myself. I had little hope for the future and lived in my own world with a bad picture of myself.

During [the Courses for Changing Attitudes] I got access to simple tools and methods. After returning home I got involved in HUSK and KREM and the shame disappeared, my confidence came back. My own picture of myself had grown and I have now great belief in the future.

I remember I used to feel like riding around with a horse too small for me, a horse so small that my feet [were] always hitting the ground. To give you the picture of my change, I now feel like a knight riding around on the most proud horse in the world. And as the proud knight I am, I know that I can make a difference for a lot of people who struggle against the system, by helping them. Another thing is that people around me are listening. They are asking for my opinion and treat me with respect. I’m on my way to become master in my own life, independent of public benefits. I have established my own company and am building up my own business as a quizmaster.

Tom has come full circle as he closes the process that started with writing his fairy tale and ends with the use of a new metaphor on how life has changed: He now positions himself with agency: a proud knight, recognized by others, being a resource and help for other people in need as well as building up his own business.

It is important to note that the journey for each participant is rarely easy and that success in dealing with life's challenges takes time. It is clear that the narratives emerging from the KREM seminars help to surface the shaming processes experienced by service users that are often made more complex by the way that service users are categorized by the service system and experience a loss of identity. The KREM seminars enable participants to explore how shame and the lack of agency affect the identity formation process and the production of "damaged identities." The seminars also provide evidence that narrative approaches can be useful for exploring and repairing identity.

The particular pragmatic approach to fairy tale construction obviously provides for new and different narratives about oneself through the process of re-employment that gives direction for discovering hope and new possibilities. Clearly the sharing of fairy tales represents a moment of listening, learning, recognition, and the joint construction of new self-narratives where marginalized voices can be amplified and understood.

Implications of Narratives for Future Practice and Research

On a daily basis, social workers are involved with narratives reflected in multiple dialogues and conversations with users and stakeholders as well as the reading and writing of case reports. The HUSK experience with KREM suggests an expanded use of narratives involving service users would support and enhance a more participatory form of practice. In particular, Mattingly's concepts of re-employment and therapeutic employment could be used

within a social service context to strengthen the relationship between users and social workers by focusing on *narratives of shame*. The goal would be to (a) increase understanding of the experience of shame through the use of storytelling, (b) provide a vehicle to hear how service users deal with shame and “damaged identities,” and (c) help to share an individual’s perception of shame in order to understand its meaning and impact (Clouston, 2003).

The use of service user narratives provide a valuable tool for increased human understanding in the form of more humanistic dialogue within social work practice. The focus on the narrative may promote more reflexive and reflective practice as well as improved relationship-building competences in the interaction between service providers and users where both engage in the *emergence of new narratives* through co-construction. According to Baldwin and Estey-Burt (2012), *ethical narratives* emerge in this process when they are based on mutuality, solidarity, concern, care, and trust for the “other,” providing social workers with the opportunity to respond ethically to the stories of their service users.

As for a future research agenda, the new emphasis on the role of language within social sciences, where narratives are no longer the principal domain of literature and folklore, suggests that the professions have much to gain from the use of narratives (Riessman & Quinney, 2005).

The study of narratives also benefits from interdisciplinary research where different traditions, theories, and methods help to promote new and creative thinking as well as facilitate collaborative research. As this analysis has shown, collaboration between service provider and service user organizations demonstrate how social workers and researchers are able to see how narratives can inform their profession and discipline. There is a critical need for involving researchers with interdisciplinary training to work with social workers in these new forms of practice research.

Epilogue

Many of the service users participating in the seminars have moved forward with their lives. Of the 90 who have maintained contact, 29 are engaged in meaningful activity, 25 are in ordinary work, 12 are enrolled in the training program (Qualification Program), 11 are unable to work and receive a public benefit, and one has died. Of the 14 service users who participated on the KREM facilitation teams, 11 are working inside or outside the KREM network and three are still receiving public benefits. One of the poems created by a seminar participant in 2011 (Leni Hemminghytt Rønbeck) represents another form of narrative expression.

Home from Turkey with myself in the luggage.

Inspired, happy and optimistic.

In group therapy.

Tells about my experiences—I am shining!

I am my own power!

They are shocked.

We were supposed to compete over who had the worst week.

Some cry.

So positivity is required now?

So I cry.

And leave.

Going on

Notes

¹ A collection of fairy tales is published in *Fairy Tales From Reality* (2011), edited by Sidsel Natland and Hilde Dalen.

² Interviews conducted by Hilde Dalen Celik during fall 2013.

References

- Baldwin, C., & Estey-Burt, B. (2012). Narrative and the reconfiguration of social work ethics. *Narrative Works*, 2(2). Retrieved from <http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/NW/article/view/20169/23262>
- Blumer, H. (1986). *Symbolic interactionism. Perspective and method*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Original work published 1969)
- Brown, B. (2007). *I thought it was just me (but it isn't). Making the Journey from "What will people think?" to "I am enough."* New York, NY: Gotham Books.
- Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection. Let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are*. Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden.
- Clouston, T. (2003). Narrative methods: Talk, listening and representation. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 66(4), 136–142.
- Dahl, E., Floetten, T., & Lorentzen, T. (2005, September). *Poverty dynamics and social exclusion—An analysis of Norwegian panel data*. Paper to be presented at the Annual Conference of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Poverty, Social Welfare and Social Policy (RC19), Chicago, Illinois, September 8–10, 2005 [Working paper, GIV, Oslo University College; Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research]. Retrieved from http://www.northwestern.edu/rc19/Dahl_Floetten_Lorentzen.pdf
- Dalen, H. & Natland, S. (2011). *Eventyr fra virkeligheten* [Fairy tales from reality]. Bergen, Norway: Fagbokforlaget.
- Froenes, I. (2001). Skam, skyld og ære i det moderne [Shame, guilt and honour in modern times]. In T. Wyller (Ed.), *Perspektiver på skam, ære og skamløshet i det moderne*. [Perspectives on shame, honour and shamelessness in modern times]. (pp. 69–80). Norway: Fagbokforlaget.

- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Halleroed, B., & Heikkillä, M. (1999). Poverty and social exclusion in the Nordic countries. In M. Kautto, M. Heikkillä, B. Hvinden, S. Marklund, & N. Ploug (Eds.), *Nordic social policy: Changing welfare states* (Chap. 8, pp. 185–214). London, UK: Routledge
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2000). *The self we live by. Narrative identity in a postmodern world*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Mattingly, C. (1998). *Healing dramas and clinical plots: The narrative structure of experience*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self & society. From the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Milkaer, L. (2001). Fortælling, eksistens og virkelighed – en fortolkning af den narrative konstruktion af virkelighed, forstået gennem forældres fortællinger om deres døde børn. [Narratives, existence and reality—An interpretation of the narrative construction of reality through parents' narratives of the death of their children] Københavns Universitet: Speciale i folkloristic, upublisert. [Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Copenhagen, Denmark].
- Nelson, H. L. (2002). *Narrativ oprejsning. Når identiteten går i stykker*. [Damaged identities, narrative repair]. København: Gyldendal Uddannelse.
- Paugam, S. (1996). Poverty and social disqualification: A comparative analysis of cumulative social disadvantage in Europe. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 6(4): 287–303.
- Polkinghorne, D. (1991). Narrative and self-concept. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1, 135–153.

- Riessman, C. K., & Quinney, L. (2005). Narrative in social work: A critical review. *Qualitative Social Work*, 4(4), 391–412.
- Selbekk, R. (2007). Bruk av metaforer: Et narrativt perspektiv på terapi. [The use of metaphors: Narrative approaches to therapy.] *Tidsskrift for norks psykologforening*, 44, 1372–1377.
- Sen, A. (2005). Human rights and capabilities. *Journal of Human Development*, 6(2), 151–166.
- Solheim, I. J. (2010). Sosialklient i en liten kommune: mest på godt? [The social benefits recipient in small municipalities: mostly good?]. *Fontene Forskning*, 1, 17–28.
- Underlid, K. (2001). *Fattigdommens psykologi* [The Psychology of Poverty]. Oslo, Norway: Det Norske Samlaget.
- Van der Wel, K., Dahl, E., Loedemel, I., Loeyland, B., Naper, S. O., & Slagsvold, M. (2010). *Funksjonsevne blant langtidsmottakere av sosialhjelp*. [Functions and ability among long term recipients of social benefits]. Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo [Oslo University College]. Retrieved from https://www.nav.no/Om+NAV/For+kommunen/_attachment/805387644?_ts=119e6ff
- 1940
- Vogel, J. (1997). *Living conditions and inequality in the European Union*. Eurostat: Population and social conditions (E/1997-3). Luxembourg, Germany: Eurostat.