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**«Ten Stories – A narrative of professional resistance of
social workers to the challenges of managing the Refugee
and Migration Crisis in Greece».**

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*“Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you’ll have understood by then what these Ithaca’s mean”.*

Quote from Ithaca. C. P. Cavafy,

Greek poet, 1863–1933

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Abstract

This article presents a part of a larger collaborative work that was presented this year at the Social Sciences Conference in the Greek island Mytilene. This article contains concentrated “insider knowledge” of ten social workers working on refugee and migration crisis management. The knowledge of social workers is revealed through a collective document that emerged by their desire for collegiality. The collective document not only presents the story of adversity in the management of the refugee crisis, but it also illuminates the storyline of their resistance. The narrative collective document describes vividly the special skills and knowledge of how individuals, groups and communities have sustained and resisted in hard times. Engaging narrative practice with this project, this paper suggests that social workers always find a way to resist and focuses on how to rewrite dominant therapeutic, organizational, and social discourses by the voice of the professionals, themselves.

Key words: refugee crisis, social work, professional resistance, narrative therapy, double listening, collective document.

1. Professional Resistance in social work

The Strier's & Breshtling's (2016) article was very useful to understand the professional resistance especially in social work practice. Studies show that social workers in various parts of the world are increasingly confronted with regulations, programs, and policies that challenge their ability to carry out their professional mission in an ethical manner (Strier & Breshtling, 2016). Social workers are sometimes required to engage in actions to oppose these adversities. In light of these circumstances, it is vital to encourage resistance as a legitimate practice of the profession (Wallace & Pease, 2011). Social work literature presents a view of resistance as an act that counters coercive practices of social control and oppressive ways in which power relations are exerted (Strier & Breshtling, 2016). Resistance in social work is a way to revitalize professionalism (Singh & Cowden, 2009). Resistance is a component of critical and radical social work, as defined by the desire to support personal and collective liberation and social change (Fook, 1993). Hynes (2013) pointed to the two dominant modes of the resistance: the macropolitical forms and the micropolitics of everyday resistance. Also, the challenges for professional resistance in social work can be arranged into three categories: institutional, professional, and personal (Strier & Breshtling, 2016). Postmodern and poststructural theoreticians presented resistance as an assemblage of practices that interact with restricting regimes of governance. Microforms of resistance can actually be sites for macro sociological change (Strier & Breshtling, 2016). According to Foucault's work, society operates on individuals, groups, or communities through social, economic, political, and symbolic systems of oppression, instilling into them conceptions, norms, and expectations, in ways by which people internalize those hierarchies of power and become compliant with them (Foucault, 1980). Although the individual is never free, people have the ability to rework their relationships in established networks of power, thereby creating more flexible social arrangements, and in this process, shape spaces of movement and legitimize multiple personal and professional options (Foucault, 1980). According to Thompson (2003), those practices must become the creative means for resistance, for forging destinies, and for creating alternative paths of self-expression.

2. Purpose Statements

The initial purpose of this practice research is to gather insider knowledge about the management of the refugee and migration crisis from social workers working in Greece. This work emerged as a response to studies that underline that social workers in different parts of the world face pressing situations, with regulations and policies that make their work harder and in fact challenge their own abilities to accomplish their goal (Strier & Breshtling, 2016). The belief that regardless of the adversity degree, people respond in some way to the situations in which they find themselves (Denborough, 2008), the idea that resistance is a cornerstone of social work as a profession of change and finally the inquirer's curiosity to discover the adversities and the way x social workers respond. The knowledge of social workers is revealed through a collective document that emerged by their desire for collegiality. The collective document not only presents the story of adversity in the management of the refugee crisis but it also illuminates the storyline of their resistance.

3. Practice research process

To begin this project, the inquirer contacted two social workers, she knew, who work on this field. Then, they suggested other social workers (snowball sampling). She sent a letter inviting them to take part in the interviews. She attached with the invitation a consent form. In the letter she introduced herself and she explained what the purpose of this project was. She also introduced them what narrative therapy is, in order to give them a hint of how the interview would progress. Ten social workers who work on the management of the refugee and migration crisis in Greece participated. There were 10 individual interviews with social workers in a narrative way both in person and through Skype. Before the conversations begin the inquirer reminded them once again the aims and objectives of this work as well as the contribution of their participation.

3.1 Participants

The social workers who shared their stories are eight (08) women and two (02) males from twenty four (24) to forty two (42) years old. The participants all work both in the public sector and in NGOs in the cities of Idomeni, Thessaloniki, Athens, Mytilene, Moria, Patra and Ioannina. They provided their services to the following sectors i.e.

reception and identification of refugees, psychosocial support in reception centers, hospitality and apartments, street work & case management of families on the street, psychosocial support and empowerment of refugees in camps and in apartments, day centers of unaccompanied minors, hostels of unaccompanied minors, management of housing applications, housing and integration of refugees, preparation and support for asylum issues.

4. Interviews

4.1 Double story

The narrative practice of the existence of the double story was followed in conversations (White, 2006). Based on the principle that people are multi-storied, double listening encourages the simultaneous orientation to two kinds of stories, the story of the adversity and the story of the resistance. White (2003) invite therapists to divide their attention in accordance with the ways in which clients are divided between the stories that constitute their identities. Each of these types of stories produces systematically different identity options. The conduct and identity of the person caught up in a problem-saturated stories are prescribed by those narratives, and so in this position he or she may be described as a “constituted subject” (Guilfoyle, 2014). But the alternative stories to which the narrative therapist listens have the potential to free people from their narratively constructed positions, allowing them in turn to conduct themselves in line with what they accord value to in their lives (White, 2006).

4.2 Initial conversations

At the beginning of the interview, time and space was given to accomplish the inquirer’s acquaintance with the participants (intimacy). She reminded them again the purpose of the project and she introduced briefly herself. She added that she had never worked in this field before (curiosity). Then she invited the participants to do the same, focusing on their professional and educational path. Some indicative questions:

- Would you like to start the conversation with some questions about yourself?
- How old are you; where do you live and work?
- What is your educational path?

- What is your career path?
- How long do you work as a social worker?
- How long do you work as a social worker in this field?
- What do you usually do in your leisure time? What are your hobbies?

These questions are indicative. The initial discussion was reshaped by the participants themselves. Beyond demographic data, important information emerged about the participants, who contributed to the course of the conversations. One participant had finished dramatic school and acted in theatrical performances, two participants were also musicians, one participant wrote poems and one drew. This information helped to reshape the above mentioned questions, personalize and objectify adversities and challenge alternate images and metaphors. This stage was important for the development of the conversations. In the inquirer's mind echoed the words of David Epston: "Every time we ask a question, we're generating a possible version of a life" (David Epston, quoted in Cowley & Springen, 1995). Questions during all conversations played an important role as they helped to externalize adversities, created alternative images of the identity of social workers, revealed knowledge, values beliefs and acts of resistance. Questions built in a relation to the experiences of professionals have touched upon these experiences and triggered resentments.

4.3 Externalizing conversations

The aim of externalizing practices is to enable people to realize that they and the problem are not the same thing. There are many ways of understanding externalizing, but perhaps it is best summed up in the phrase, "the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem" (Carey & Russell, 2002). One way the inquirer used was to ask questions that changed the adjectives that participants used to describe themselves to nouns. Another practice involved asking questions in a way that invited participants to personify problems. Initially, a questionnaire had been created which contained questions influenced by the Statement of Position Map I (White, 2005). Indicatively, the following questions had been presented, which in turn touched on the experiences of the participants and many times had to be remodeled.

- Would you like to talk to me about some of the adversities you have faced in your work? (focus on the most significant for them that they would like to develop more)
- This adversity you're describing to me if you could give it a name, how would you name it? If you could picture it and give it a form, what would it be like?
- What effects does this adversity have on your life? How does this adversity impact your Work? Leisure? Human relationships? Professional goals? Feelings?
- Are these effects acceptable to you? Or not?
- What effect does this adversity have on your hopes? What effect does this adversity have on how you want to contribute to your work and society?
- What ideas or expectations prevailed or prevail in your social environment or in your work that can nourish it or give it strength?

Through the questions, some space was created between the social worker and the adversity, and this enabled the professional to begin revising their relationship with the adversity. The externalizing questions placed the existence of the adversity into a story-line. They helped to describe the story of adversity in the management of the refugee and migration crisis, encouraged social workers to objectify or to personalize these issues, and explored the ways that adversity affected the lives of social workers, their thoughts, their identities, their professional goals. Also, with the externalization ways the social framework for supporting adversities and their allies was explored. The initial conversations helped to shape the questions. For example, the following questions were used per participant to objectify adversities.

- This adversity you're describing if you could give it a name of a theatrical play, what name would it be; (this question was addressed to the participant who acted in theatrical performances).
- This adversity you're describing if you could give a title of a song, what title would it be? (This question was addressed to the participants who were also musicians).
- This adversity you're describing, if you could draw it, what would it be like; what colors would you use? If it was painting, who would it be? (This question was addressed to the participant whose favorite activity was drawing).

Also, in order to personalize the adversity and its effect, these questions helped:

- If it was an animal, what animal would it be?
- What characteristics does this animal have? What ways does it use?

4.4 Openings to alternative stories

The inquirer had an empathic orientation to the participant guided by the question:

- Who are you in this story of adversity?

And its alternatives such as:

- Who are you in this theatrical performance?
- Who are you in the drawing/painting?
- Who are you in this poem, in this song?
- Etc.

These questions helped the movement into the story of response and triggered alternate images. The double stories are not equally represented in the speeches and actions of social workers. Sometimes problematic experiences have been particularly developed. As Foucault (1980) and White and Epston (1990) have shown, people often disregard or disqualify aspects of their lives which do not fit with more dominant narratives.

The following questions helped to highlight the story of the response to adversity:

- How did you endure?
- What aspects of your experience or behavior could not have been predicted by the adversity?
- What does this action or behavior say about what person and what professional you are?
- Could you tell me a story describing this experience?

These questions were formed this way in order to start a 'double-story' conversation, that is, to not only listen to the challenges that this experience has brought but also to

ask about the skills and knowledge that respond to this experience (White, 2007). In order to develop a 'double-memory', to maintain and document those skills and knowledge the questions influenced by the questions that David Denborough (2008) suggested.

- What does this story say about your values, knowledge, beliefs and abilities? Describe a certain value, belief, skill, knowledge that has helped you overcome the adversity.
- Would you like to share a story that this particular skill, knowledge or value had helped you in the past?
- What is the history of this skill, knowledge or value?
- What is the history of how you learned to do this?
- Are there any stories from your family, community or/and culture linked with these?
- Are there sayings, poems, songs, paintings, theatrical performances linked with these? (Depending on the participant)
- How are these connected to your intention/purposes in your work/life?
- What does this action/skill/knowledge mean to you? Do you have any allies that support this action? If so, what would they say? (Opening to re-membering conversation)
- How could this act/skill be useful in your future (life & work)?'

As they moved through these issues, the material became richly collective.

5. The process of creating the collective document - Why collective document?

Following the desire of the social workers to participate in collegiality, it was in the inquirer's mind to create a collective document. The methodology described here is informed by the collective narrative practice and the use of collective documents (Denborough, 2008). Collective narrative practice could be described as a hopeful and

respectful approach for the work with individuals, wider groups and communities who are experiencing difficulties. One of the first uses of documents with communities and collectives can be found in the efforts of David Epston to link the stories of those who had consulted him and to circulate the knowledge to others who might be experiencing similar difficulties (Epston, 2004 y 2008). The use of collective documents is informed by the ideas of the narrative practices that question critically the portrait of people as passive subjects (Denborough, 2008).

Creating the document was a challenge for the participants, who had never taken part in something similar. In this way participants came close to the narrative therapy and more specifically to the narrative practice of the collective document. They were informed about the collective document, what are the goals and possibilities for the future as well as their contribution to the life of other professionals. During the conversations the inquirer was taking notes paying attention to the “particular” and of the “imagery” that arise in the conversations. Also, the interviews had been recorded with the consent of the participants. After the interviews transcription, careful and multiple reading of the produced material took place. To create the document, attention was paid to details, metaphors and word images. The gathering of the particular stories, the phrases and sayings “as they were said” and the images and metaphors used for the construction of the collective document (Denborough, 2008). These images, metaphors and particular phrases are the ones that will be resonate and bring to memory the link and acknowledgement of the skills and knowledge that sustains these social workers. The collective document created a space where the voices of the social workers working to manage the refugee crisis were heard and described richly. This includes the development of the double story, the story of adversity and the story of resistance to this, the revelation of strengths and reserves and also, the revelation of skills, knowledge, values and hopes.

Starting the process of creating the document, the inquirer was convinced that social workers would initially benefit personally from the discussion itself and that the "double story" conversation would give them value (White, 2007). They were also given the opportunity to participate in a collective effort to respond, to connect around common interests, skills, knowledge and values, to make a contribution to the lives of other professionals. This makes it possible for people’s initiatives to become linked,

and for further actions to be taken. In addition, there seems to be many possibilities for a collective document to contribute in the future. This will be supported by searching for a relevant audience to co-ordinate these stories and with the participation of outsider witnesses. It also creates the opportunity to use the collective document of social workers supervisors. The collective document is an open document in which other social workers can build with their experiences. One of the more important features of collective documents it's that they seek the generation of a significant sense of "Communitas". This term refers to the ideas of the anthropologist Victor Turner, who defines it as a "sense of shared unity among the individuals, who are going through the same experience" (Denborough, 2008). The participants said that the document creation process was useful and that it could be a tool for supervising social workers, support and resilience.

6. The position of the inquirer

On the one hand, the inquirer listened to what the adversity said and done. On the other hand, the inquirer paid attention to expressions and actions that seemed inconsistent with those dominant, problematic expressions. Generally, the inquirer heard social workers telling more than just one story. The role of the inquirer was directional as I chose which issue of each discussion would be explored more – but without guiding the descriptions given by social workers. In the stories of the social workers there were many expressions that had allowed the entry into different narratives of their professional life. For example, recognition of skills and resistance to adversity had created the inquirer's response to these discussions aiming at the description enrichment but not the construction of the story. The inquirer's role was de-centred in the conversations with social workers. There was intimacy as we were colleagues. This intimacy made the participants' speech more spontaneous. The inquirer had a position of curiosity and respect. This position was supported by the initial revelation that the researcher and social worker had not worked in managing the refugee crisis and was curious to hear the stories and experiences of the workers. The inquirer also asked social workers more questions about the effects of the conversations we were sharing. She asked questions about what they found useful in conversations and she refrained from applause or congratulations.

7. Ethics

With regard to the ethics and reliability of this practice research, this was reinforced by conducting a pilot interview, with the participant's consent form, by informing the participants about the aims and objectives of this work as well as the contribution of their participation. The participants were informed about the collective document - about its creation, its goals and its possibilities for the future. They consented to the recording of the interviews. Also, the document does not include names of social workers or workplace names and does not include sensitive personal data. The collective document created was returned to the participants to confirm it and/or propose modifications.

8. The collective document

This project closes with the collective document:

“The liquidity of the conditions”

We, the social workers of the first line of refugee and migration crisis management, we are constantly facing multiple adversities at both macro and micro levels. The intense liquidity and volatility of the conditions, the lack of protocols, the closed borders, the obstacles coming from the European and state policies brings us constantly face to face with professional uncertainty and moral dilemmas. Deaths in the Mediterranean, Inactive government support mechanism, multi-speed refugees regarding the asylum procedures and access to services, rejection of asylum applications, discontinuity of housing policy, absence of an essential integration policy, no policy for the day after the end of the housing programs και after the end of NGO support, a poorly prepared education system to welcome refugees. These and others...

“An image of total destruction”

Sometimes it's like we're on the edge of a cliff, like we have a wild animal in front of us and then comes the frustration, we no longer make big dreams. We have witnessed very tough situations. An image of total destruction, where the black and red prevailed, Moria was often burned. A frozen image with adults and children trapped in the snow.

An image trapped in a wreck, drowned in water and pain. The shipwrecks were recruited one after another. An image from Shakespeare's storm. The distance from Turkey to Mytilene is very small. Even our mobile has a signal from Turkey. The trip from the opposite coast is about two hours by boat. Two risky hours. Dangerous weather, bad condition of the boat, people who do not know how to swim make Ithaca to be lost (*Ithaca was, in Greek mythology, the island home of the hero Odysseus*). And if they finally find it, it opened up to hear the painful stories of the refugees and we were blushing or we were crying with them, with refugees and with interpreters who also cried. It looked like the Scream on the Munch painting.

“What are we supposed to do?”

The contribution we make daily is much smaller than the actual size of the problem. The agony and impasse keeps always knocking on the door. Many times frustration came and we saw our effectiveness declining. We are wondering, what we are finally supposed to do? We are the ones planning integration programs but we are also the ones announcing the unfair eviction from the apartments. We are the ones knowing that there is no serious integration policy but saying that we are working on integration. We are part of a humanitarian organization. Are we? We seem constantly unreliable in refugee's eyes, precisely because the unreliability of state policies has also been a natural consequence of our own practice. And we feel insecure. We are called upon to explain to them that they are in yet another traumatic reality. More is expected from us to be the translators of state power, rather than servants of social justice.

“We wish we could speak the same language”

The directness of communication with the refugees themselves is missing. The interpreters could not always meet the needs. Sometimes there weren't many of them and other times they did not translate everything. Unfortunately, we did not receive important information. Many times, as we said farewell to people at the airport, we wished together to had spoken the same language. How many things had been lost all this time?

“How should we stand by people? ”

We have a grievance and often some insecurity about what to do and how to stand by the people. Some of us were wondering if we should look at the women refugees in the eyes, hold their hand in a difficult time, or whether this would be perceived as an insult. Other of us felt pressured when we wanted to support a woman victim of domestic violence, watching walls coming out of the forced presence of the husband in the meetings. Also, we did not know how to manage the denial of vaccination.

“Lives like open books”

The issue of privacy of course does not exist. The lives of people resemble open books and magazines which anyone can flip through. The refugees are almost never asked if they want or allow their personal data to be shared with a third party.

“Our job has become our whole life”

Almost all of us have over-invested time and thought on the issues of our work at the expense of our personal and social life. We were working overtime, we X faced x intense stress, insomnia, overeating, physical fatigue, psychological stress, physical and psychosomatic health problems. Our surroundings struggled to understand the demands of our work or we kept it at a distance because we did not have any reason to put it in our own microcosm. We have faced intense racism for refugees, have accepted intense criticism of our work and sexism - that women would not be able to work in this field. Some of us have moved away from important relationships. Most of us have made friends our colleagues. We meet out of work too and so we never relax. We are constantly alert. For many of us this job has become our whole life.

“A mosaic of alternatives”

We've been here! We focused on what can be done here and now. We focused on people's strengths. They have managed to get here, be alive and want to move on with their lives. And we admired them for this. By empowering them, we strengthen ourselves. When the state mechanism was absent, we activated networks of volunteers, sensitized professionals, citizens and local businesses. We made a mosaic of alternatives. Our goal was to meet both the basic needs of the refugees and to provide

additional opportunities for creativity and participation in the social sphere. We have responded to the inefficiency of state policies, to the analgesia of services, to the incompatibility of programs with the real needs of the population, to the violation of rights and to racist comments. We have acted efficiently either by forwarding the needs to hierarchically superior ones or by writing letters where we attached the relevant laws to the competent services, or even with references to the Greek Ombudsman and appeals to the European Court of Human Rights.

“We cannot change the system, but we struggle that it will not change us”

The intense challenges in crisis situations made us activate reserves that we never imagined we had. Even when our own capabilities were limited by the system, we continued to have faith in people’s strength. Their own desire for life is certainly far greater than our own desire to help them. We have tried to set small and achievable goals and reduce our expectations, especially when our own expectations do not match those of people. Everything seems to be possible if you have a will, but still up to a point. We are something between heroes with superpowers that can make significant changes and a tiny ant with limited influence in front of a huge system. Even if, we cannot change the system, we struggle that it will not change us (*Chronis Missios quote, Greek writer, 1930-2012*).

“The road that leads to the day, to the sun, to the flowers”

We have strengthened our relationship with people. This relationship was portrayed graphically in their drawings. And how not to feel joy when you see your office depicted in the refugee’s painting as a road that leads to the day, to the sun, to the flowers and not back to the cells? Our friction with their cultural reality has given us important lessons of respect and food for reflection on our practice and our prejudices. We have often been reminded our own attitudes that come from a more Western way of thinking.

“The power of art”

Art played an important role in our work as verbal communication was limited. Through listening to Arabic music, we acquired a new code of communication with people. We started out with something common, we were bridging the cultures and we

were getting a new impetus to continue, every pace a new effort. Through theatrical play-groups, we could communicate at a non-verbal level and build relationships of trust. Theatre brought the refugees themselves closer and weakened the conflicts that existed between them because of religious and ethnic differences. We created opportunities for creative interaction and the cooperation between the locals and the refugees, through theatrical rehearsals and performances in which they participated together, thus moved away stereotypes and people came close.

“The strength of the team”

In our workplaces we searched for reserves even when it seemed that nothing existed. We grabbed every opportunity for professional conversations and supervision wherefrom we received guidance and feedback. Even when these were not enough, we addressed personal supervisors and we reconsidered and reformed our practice. We participated in networks and human rights organizations and shared ideas and concerns with people of similar concerns and ideological background to ours. What we almost all conceived as the most useful source of resilience was the strength of scholarship, team, and solidarity. It was the bridge that helped us to be exonerated when things were not going well, to feel secure, and that we were not alone or weird. We supported each other, even beyond working hours, we shared our time crying and laughing.

“Some things, even if we die, do not die”

Some of us grew up in families who were not afraid of the different. Some of us grew up in families defending the people whose rights had been violated, having their homes open to the world, having substantial friendships with people of different origins, sexual orientation, high values of love and unconditional acceptance. We were told how important it is to treat our fellow men well, we were also told that we could not save the world, but if someone was asking for help to change his own world, we ought to do it. Some of us have faced intimidation and racism for our diversity, whether in terms of our appearance, our origin, our gender, and this has made us even more decisive to resist injustice. Some of us have experienced the move from one country to another, having a migrant background, and that has made us feel closer to the refugees. Some others have had the opportunity to interact with different people during trips and / or stays in multicultural areas or to meet them in alternative locations and this experience

has given us important lessons and supplies. Our education in social work was also very important. We all try to move on the principles and values associated with our professional role and the science we serve. Our footsteps get rhythm from the Greek song “three rubaiyyat” (*Thanasis Papaconstantinou, singer-songwriter, 1959-*) a rhythm that connects life and death because some things even if we die, they do not, like our values.

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