

TEACHING NARRATIVE THERAPY IN RUSSIA*

EKATERINA JORNIK, M.A.

Institute of Practical Psychology and Psychoanalysis

DAVID A. PARÉ, PH.D.

University of Ottawa

While postmodernism has found a strong foothold in North American family therapy circles in recent years, postmodern/poststructural ideas and practices are more recent arrivals in contemporary Russia. This article recounts a brief history of psychotherapy in Russian as a backdrop to the account of narrative therapy's recent appearance in the country. It explores the paradoxes and contradictions in the relationship between Russia's totalitarian past and a therapeutic approach devoted to questioning normative ideas and practices. Finally, the article outlines the unique challenges associated with introducing narrative therapy in the Russian cultural context, illustrating this discussion with examples of narrative teaching innovations being implemented in the former Soviet Union.

How is it possible that a country with a recent totalitarian period in its history might show an unexpected openness to therapeutic ideas founded on the challenging of dominant ideologies? There is no simple answer to the question; however it seems fair to say that postmodern/poststructural approaches to therapy are beginning to flourish in Russia following a series of workshops offered by Western practitioners in Moscow starting from the late 1990s. Nowadays many Moscow state and private therapy training institutes supplement their programs with courses in postmodern approaches—mainly narrative therapy and Solution Focused Brief

*The ideas and practices expressed in this article are Ekaterina JorNIK's. David Paré's role was to rework an earlier draft in consultation with Ekaterina to convert it into more idiomatic English.

Ekaterina JorNIK, M.A., Russian State Humanitarian University, The Institute of Psychology, Moscow, Russia; Institute of Practical Psychology and Psychoanalysis, Moscow, Russia; Institute of Group and Family Psychology and Psychotherapy, Moscow, Russia; The Centre for Narrative Psychology and Practice, Moscow, Russia; private practice, Moscow, Russia.

Address correspondence to Ekaterina JorNIK, Russian Federation, Moscow, 127055, Uglovoy pereulok, 2-2-93; E-mail: kj@mail.cnt.ru.

David Paré, Ph.D., Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Room 308, 145 J.J. Lussier, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5; E-mail: dpare@uottawa.ca.

Therapy (SFBT). To understand how these developments have unfolded, and to examine the unique teaching challenges they pose, it would be helpful first to briefly review the long and interrupted history of psychotherapy in Russia.

Psychotherapy was introduced to Russia at the turn of the 20th century and is widely practiced today; but the practice virtually disappeared for six decades due to totalitarian policies. Many works of Sigmund Freud and his colleagues, including Alfred Adler and Wilhelm Schteckel, had been published in Russia before World War I. Russia turned out to be not only a breeding ground for psychoanalytical ideas but also a key center for the development of psychoanalytic theory and practice. Freud himself considered Moscow to be the third (after Vienna and Berlin) stronghold of psychoanalysis (Moscow University Alumni Club, 2005). The *Journal Psychotherapy: Review of Issues of Psychological Treatment and Applied Psychology* was published between 1910 and 1914.

However the Communist Revolution happened in 1917, and in 1918, civil war erupted. The Communists (Bolsheviks) won in 1922, but the establishment and consolidation of the new regime entailed at least four decades of mass terror. Tens of millions of people became victims of political repression and "purges." An anonymous denunciation suggesting that someone had spoken out in personal conversation or written down in a personal diary anything that was not in the spirit of philosophy of Marx and Lenin could be the cause for arrest and imprisonment. The Communist Party also banned all texts of "bourgeois authors" not approved by the state. The Soviet Union became a totalitarian society.

Capitalist countries were viewed as both strategic and ideological enemies by the Bolsheviks. Scholars interested in studying and analyzing Western theories and non-Marxist philosophy had to present their investigations in the guise of a critique of bourgeois thinking. It was unthinkable to risk applying those theories. This widespread struggle against so-called "bourgeois ideology" brought to a halt the development of psychotherapy in Russia. It should be noted that despite the constraints on the development of psychotherapy, many important schools of psychological thought developed in the Soviet Union even under such conditions. Unfortunately, with the exception of the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky, most has been lost to the Western scientific world.

With the death of Stalin in 1953, there was a certain lessening of oppression in the Soviet Union; however strict ideological censorship remained until the beginning of *Perestroika* in the middle of the 1980s. During this prolonged period, psychotherapy was not encouraged and was virtually absent in the Soviet Union. The country was cut off from knowledge in the field and had no opportunities to practice. As in any totalitarian society, there was a very strict notion of what was normal, and psychiatry was often used by government as a tool for punishing and isolating citizens suspected of being "different." In this sense, psychiatry served as a tool of political repression. People who disagreed with the Communist regime or challenged it were put not only into prison but also in psychiatric clinics with diagnoses such as "continuous sluggish schizophrenia," and their statements

were qualified as “delirium” (Vorobiev & Alekseeva, 2004). There was widespread fear of psychiatrists and people avoided contacting them. The result was that the Soviet people developed a suspicion of practical psychology in all its manifestations. Drinking alcohol and talking to friends were the favored methods of coping with psychological problems.

This isolation from Western psychology began to disintegrate with the onset of *Perestroika* in 1987 and the opportunity to read books, and observe the work of foreign colleagues. The removal of the “Iron Curtain” opened our view to the vast field of psychotherapy. The discipline has been developing at a fast pace in Russia since that time. Interestingly, it appears that the development of psychotherapy in Russia during the last 15 years has copied the development of psychotherapy in the West in terms of the emergence of different approaches. For a time it appeared as though the development of psychotherapy would simply continue from the point where it had been interrupted near the beginning of the 20th century. Early in this rediscovery period, the most popular approach was psychoanalysis, which received government sanction in the form of a decree signed by president Boris Yeltsin (1996), citing a “revival of philosophical, clinical and applied psychoanalysis in Russia.” In 1990, Aron Belkin established the Russian Psychoanalytical Association.

Following these developments, there was simultaneous growth of popularity and interest in behavioral techniques, NLP, Gestalt therapy. Systemic approaches were also introduced and many started to practice family therapy, drawing primarily on the work of the Milan team (Palazolli, 1995) and of Murray Bowen (Bowen, 1994; Titelman, 1998). Among the most recent orientations to practice to appear in Russia have been the postmodern approaches, mainly SFBT and narrative therapy.

NARRATIVE THERAPY IDEAS ARE INTRODUCED

Narrative therapy ideas first entered Russia via the work of a talented therapist from Austria, Gerda Mehta (then Gerda Klammer). I participated in trainings that she and her colleagues offered in Russia for three years (1999–2001) to psychotherapists previously trained in a variety of approaches. We spent most of the time doing practical exercises, watching demonstrations, and taking part in self-experience seminars.¹ As soon as this program was over, I was asked to write

¹A group of practitioners gathers for several days, choosing “themes” they would like to work on. Participants have narrative conversations about the personal issue they have chosen with the trainer while others sit in a circle as witnesses. Participants reflect on how their experience of their own issues has altered as a function of witnessing the conversation. Eventually all participants have a conversation in the center of the circle (Mehta, Wagner, & Jorniak, 2002). Self-experience seminars are an important part of narrative training in Russia today as they provide insight into clients’ experience while also contributing to practice skills.

an article about narrative practice for the most prominent Russian psychotherapy journal, the *Moscow Psychotherapeutic Journal*. This is how I got acquainted with the theory. Before long I had been invited to teach narrative therapy at the Institute of Practical Psychology and Psychoanalysis, and other institutes. This was a new development in Russia, where narrative approaches had never previously been included in the curricula of psychotherapy institutes. Today, narrative therapy is being offered in a number of Moscow-based institutes, including The Institute of Practical Psychology and Psychoanalysis; The Institute of Group and Family Psychology and Psychotherapy; The Center for European Psychotherapeutic Education; The Higher School of Economics; The Higher School of Psychology; and Moscow State Institute of Psychology and Pedagogics.

Narrative Training Programs in Russia

The training programs vary depending on the interests and educational programs of the various institutes. None of the institutes has a department specifically devoted to narrative approaches. It is more typical for narrative training to be part of a three-year systemic therapy curriculum.

In Moscow's Institute of Practical Psychology and Psychoanalysis, narrative courses include introductory narrative training, self-experience seminar, advanced narrative training, and courses on narrative work in groups, narrative family therapy with children, and narrative work in the context of trauma. The Institute of Group and Family Psychology and Psychotherapy in Moscow offers a similar selection as well as 60 hours of narrative consulting which includes participating in narrative reflecting (Freedman & Combs, 2002, pp. 85–105) and outsider-witnessing teams (White, 2000, pp. 59–85).

A number of other educational institutes as well as medical, social, and psychological organizations offer short (20-hour) narrative training courses as a part of their general programs of in-service education. Different centers and organizations also request specific narrative consultations depending on their needs. For example, The Center of Therapeutic Pedagogics in Moscow in which pedagogues and psychologists work with children with different psychiatric diagnoses and so-called limited abilities requests for its staff narrative supervision and also training in cooperative work with parents of their young clients.

Many students have expressed an interest in continuing narrative training after attending some of the programs described above. In response to this demand, I drafted a narrative training course that was collaboratively modified with students during the entire academic year 2004–2005. The program involved five hours a week of classes, and included modules on the philosophical context of narrative theory and practice, narrative practice skills, narrative work with different problems/populations (children, families, etc.), narrative counseling in different contexts (kindergarten, school, clinic, etc.), narrative reflecting (Freedman & Combs, 2002), and outsider-witnessing teams (White, 2000). A modified program was

offered the following year. In December 2006 my colleagues, Natalia Savelyeva, Katya Daichik, and I founded The Centre for Narrative Psychology and Practice in Moscow. Among the services offered by the center are reflecting team consultations for specialists, students, and people seeking narrative consulting for personal reasons. The team is made up of former students. Students interested in narrative approaches can observe the process or take part in it as apprentices.

Russia and Postmodernism: Taking Root

During the last five years of teaching narrative practices I have faced a number of dilemmas and questions, some of them particular to the Russian context and culture. By the time postmodern therapeutic approaches had become popular in the West, those cultures had long been identified by intellectuals as postmodern ones (Lyotard, 1984). But the history of the relationship between postmodernism and my culture is ambiguous and ironic. On one hand, it is easy to portray the USSR as a culture founded on practices and beliefs in sharp contrast to what might generally be taken to be postmodern ideals: totalitarianism, strict binary oppositions, linear conceptions of time, and strictly enforced depictions of truth and normality to be learned by heart but never disputed. The *Weltanschauung* of modernism which rests on the notion that the world can be cognized, controlled and guided, persisted in the Soviet Union long after the turn of the 20th century. Everyone without exception had to march toward a fixed and purportedly achievable target of pure communism.

On the other hand, the description of reality generated by communist ideology failed completely to reflect actual life practices. TV and radio news, books, newspapers, documentaries, and feature films had nothing in common with the reality of everyday life. Borrowing from narrative terminology to capture this contradictory situation, events on an ideologically *imposed* "landscape of meaning" (White, 1992) disagreed sharply with the "landscape of action" (White, 1995) where people *lived*, and with the interpretations of events that citizens might have produced if given rein to make meaning on their own.

It is interesting to note that due to the constant pressure of censorship, Soviet people have formed a habit "of reading between the lines." They learned to collect nuggets of information "weeping" through ideological bans and to make appropriate conclusions on their own. A popular joke captures this practice: A man phones a friend late at night anxious to share his agitation with something he has read in the newspaper. He whispers into the receiver, "Hey, listen, have you read today's *Pravda*?² You won't believe what they've written there!" Alarmed, the friend responds, "Tell me!" And the man answers, "Well, you don't expect me to do that on the *phone*, do you?"

²*Pravda* ("The Truth") is the principal Russian government newspaper.

Over many years of censorship and propaganda, Russians have not only had to pretend to believe in the given picture of the world, but to try their best to fall within it and to shape their experience to fit the dominant ideological interpretation of events. Only a minority ever succeeded in this latter task, and so most learned the practice of life as make-believe.

For example, every autumn, the media reported news about the brilliant achievements of state agriculture and the surprisingly abundant harvest. At the same time there was virtually no produce in the shops. During autumn months, students and most employees of scientific institutes would be recruited—a local euphemism is “voluntarily forced”—to gather in what was in actuality a meager and frost-bitten harvest. However, there was often a deficit of workers because many villagers had moved to the cities due to the agricultural crisis and many others were coping with alcoholism. Scientists were expected to work joyfully, accompanied by songs, while those who sabotaged the harvest were exposed to public criticism during special meetings. Attendance at such meetings was not technically compulsory, but there was a price to be paid for being absent. They typically took place amid rural devastation and were dedicated to praising intellectuals for their “voluntary” help to our flourishing agricultural sector, while the exhausted audience was expected to applaud.

So the Soviet Union was a place where people perfected the art of playing games with words and concepts unconnected with any actual objects or events—words could mean anything—and lived their own life, free from attachment to any definite meaning, despite the fact that so-called reality was being carefully crafted and reconstructed for public consumption day by day. Drawing on the poststructuralist metaphor of life as a text, one might say the Soviet people were honing the postmodern skill of generating multilayered interpretations of texts on a daily basis. In this regard, one can see the USSR as a gargantuan postmodern project.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 was the culminating moment of the modern era in this cultural territory. But what has taken the place of modernism? As Victor Pelevin, one of Russia's most popular modern writers, noted in 1997 (cited in Zhurnal.ru, 2006), “Russia was always notorious for the gap between culture and civilization. Now there is no culture and no civilization. The only thing that remains is a gap . . .”

Russia has had a long history of absorbing other cultural influences—a tradition that has continued in the field of psychotherapy in the past 20 years. It rapidly assimilates new knowledge and adapts it to its own specifics. It may in fact be due to these peculiarities of history and culture that Russian students grasp postmodern, poststructural, and social constructionist ideas with ease.

When I began to practice and teach narrative therapy in Moscow, one of my colleagues said: “all this is definitely interesting but I doubt that it will take roots in our soil” and another colleague responded: “just start and the soil will adopt it.” That is exactly what has happened.

AV: 1997 or
2006?
pls clarify

Holding a Mirror to Postmodern Teaching Practices

As far as I know, at the time I started to teach narrative therapy, no other Russian practitioners were teaching the approach in Moscow.³ That made it impossible for my students to compare the content and style of my work with other narrative training programs and trainers. In other words, my interpretation of the narrative approach was becoming “the one and only” for them and I was becoming the “only expert” in the field. Paradoxically, this situation helped remind me that I was presenting just one of many possible interpretations of narrative ideas, and so I reminded my students that other practitioners (including themselves) were developing their own versions of narrative practice. Moreover, my own interpretation of narrative ideas and practices varies constantly in response to the particularities of the contexts in which I teach—another thing I point out to students on a regular basis.

Another way to get at this is to say that I fashion my teaching after the theory and philosophy underlying the therapeutic practice. I invite students to reflect on our roles and positions, paying special attention to the correspondence or lack of correspondence with the approach we are collaboratively investigating. Reflection/awareness of one’s own text is obviously of the distinctive features of postmodern thinking, art, StA. (Eco, 1994). The reflexive stance to the teaching practice therefore exemplifies the professional position (Freedman & Combs, 1996) of a person practicing a postmodern therapeutic approach.

RUSSIAN STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE OF NARRATIVE TRAINING

Most of my Russian students have been well educated in several theoretical approaches during the last few years. They possess a hoard of information, but have relatively limited practical experience and are eager to apply their learnings. For example, it takes students six years to graduate from the Institute of Practical Psychology and Psychoanalysis. The first three years of basic training lead to a diploma and designation of practical psychologist; these are followed by another three years of specific training during which students can choose to focus on clinical psychoanalysis, family systems therapy, Jungian analysis, or dance therapy, etc. As the name of the Institute implies, it is mainly oriented to psychoanalysis.

Many students start to undergo their personal psychoanalytical therapy right from the first year. They also listen to introductory lectures and undergo trainings in other approaches in order to get a general picture of different models and to choose a specialty area. At the end of the third year, they are introduced to narrative therapy at the time when they are about to choose their specialization. One

³This has changed. At present, several colleagues teach narrative in Moscow.

year, two hours into one such narrative lecture, a student literally shouted at me: "I've been trying to comprehend psychoanalytical concepts for *three years* and I've just begun to feel confident in this. Stop ripping the mat from under me!" Of course, students who express a wish for an in-depth study of narrative practices are more open-minded, but it is easy to understand their hesitation to let go of the extensive baggage of interpretative models they have worked so hard to acquire over their years of study. It is worth mentioning that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the teaching of the models or the models themselves—each has its own beauty, is quite logical and consistent within its own borders, and is sufficiently effective in practice. The key consideration is to what extent one or another approach matches the therapist's values and preferences, as well as the cultural context in which it is being practiced. I have found that the emphasis on the ethics of practice in the postmodern approaches seems to be the most appealing for the Russians. The students enjoy the collaborative therapeutic relationships and the focus on resources which is less evident in the deficiency-oriented "pathologizing" models. It may be that the affinity for postmodern practice is more easily understood when contrasted with the violent character of psychiatry during the Soviet period.

Do Collaborative Relationships Fit Post-Soviet Russians?

It is sometimes suggested that an ingrained feature of the Russian mentality is an irrational fear of people empowered with authority, whether it is a doctor, police officer—just about anyone in uniform. It is said that people easily hand over responsibility to them, obey them, or make an alliance with them. For this reason, I frequently hear from my students and colleagues concerns that people would not be willing to engage in collaborative relationships with therapists, because they would expect a therapist to take the expert position and the sole responsibility for solving problems, whereas their task would be to simply obey.

I have found that practice proves this wrong in my therapeutic work in Russia. Part of the explanation may be that so-called "traditional Russian cultural traits" become flexible and less firmly rooted when the therapist invites open discussion about the oppressive social practices that promote those supposed traits. Students quickly see this with their own eyes when they take part in work with families as members of reflecting or witnessing teams. But I have found an even more effective way to help my students gain trust in the possibility of a nonexpert stance (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990), that is, to model it as part of the student-teacher interaction.

A teacher's knowledge is not better or worse than the students'—it is just different, and of course new for the students. After all, this is a part of the agreement—if students already possessed this knowledge, they would not waste their time and money to hear it from another person. A teacher's task is to show students how the knowledge she is presenting differs from other knowledges, and to

demonstrate its coherence—philosophically, ethically, and practically—within its own frame of reference. It is not a matter of demonstrating that it is more “right” than other approaches. Just like a therapist who during deconstructive conversation (Freedman & Combs, 1996) draws clients’ attention to logical gaps in their stories, a teacher during sessions asks students deconstructive questions that help them to notice logical contradictions and lacunae in their interpretations of some system of knowledge.

Of course, the teacher presenting information based on postmodern ideas does not pursue the task of convincing students that certain knowledge is an indisputable truth—a tradition that has a long and dark history in the Soviet context. A teacher’s task is to make a certain system of knowledge sufficiently transparent and simple that students can modify and develop it, clearly understanding its borders and inner logic. Postmodern theory precludes the possibility of attempting to establish the relative truth of one interpretative model (or therapeutic approach) versus another because postmodern theory by definition assumes it is impossible to prove or refute the presence of “truth” as such (Maturana & Varela, 1987).

It seems to me that whichever approach a therapist practices, it is always helpful to clearly understand the system of knowledge that informs the approach. And while viewing this system of knowledge as dynamic and situated among other knowledges, it is important to have some sense of the boundaries and limits of the approach. Therefore, when any of my students goes beyond the border of the approach during practical sessions, we do not consider it or talk about it as a “mistake,” but try to clarify what knowledge his/her move was based on and how this knowledge relates to the narrative theory. It also makes an atmosphere in the class more creative and friendly which is an opposite to the fearful and tense mood that often prevailed in school auditoriums in the Soviet Union. There was a common practice in Soviet schools to insult, humiliate, and bring to shame pupils for making mistakes in front of their whole class, because a *social shame* was considered to be a legitimate tool of upbringing a good Soviet person. Being afraid of confrontation with the system and of being humiliated themselves, Soviet parents typically allied with teachers and did not protect their children.

Today, when students see that a teacher does not evaluate their knowledge but offers to investigate knowledge together, they get rid of an influence of “Fear of Mistakes” and start to reveal their curiosity and abilities openly.

NARRATIVE TRAINING EXERCISE: EXPERT FILTERS

Perhaps not surprisingly, given their diverse previous training, my students react readily to therapeutic situations, producing a great number of interpretations and explanations based on different systems of knowledge about human nature. My intent is not to discourage knowledges that come from other traditions, however. There is no need to abandon one’s store of learnings; however therapists should

be aware what and how various knowledges influence them (Freedman & Combs, 1996), and they should be able to reveal this influence to the people who come to consult them. This makes it possible to evaluate whether the knowledges would be useful to them. I explain to the students that according to my experience if they are choosing a narrative approach they will find out with time that unique knowledge formed by clients themselves in a process of narrative co-authoring conversations are the most valuable ones. If that happens the necessity to inform clients about theories that influence them (consultants) will come to naught as a result of critical decreasing of that influence. But at the beginning, as it can be seen even during our classes, such a necessity is significant. Consequently we need to learn to tell people of our knowledges, not losing but keeping and even reinforcing with the help of these messages our collaborative and nonexpert position.

For this purpose, we perform different exercises, one of which is presented below.

The Exercise

This exercise is created in order to help people investigate the specifics of the therapist's position in a narrative approach.

A trainer and two volunteers roleplay a family based on the novel "Lillebror and Karlsson?" by D. Gorshkov.⁴ The Swantensons live in Stockholm, Sweden. Lillebror is 22 years old and is still convinced of Karlsson's existence. Psychiatrists have failed to help, though the Swantensons have spent all their savings on them. The only thing they have managed to find out from all the professional help was the idea that the little boy simply lacked their attention and that they are guilty because they did not even buy him a dog as he had asked. Now both parents are on antidepressants, sharing pills with Lillebror. The mother has not worked since Lillebror finished school five years ago and the father has been fired for absence. He had been missing a lot of work because of calls from his wife who alerted him each time Lillebror escaped from home. When escaping, Lillebror always runs to the roof of the building. The parents consider these suicide attempts because of an incident many years ago, when Lillebror had "fallen" from the roof. According to Lillebror, he was occasionally dropped by Karlsson while they were flying

⁴Gorshkov's novel is a modern twist on a familiar tale. There is literally no Russian person who doesn't know the story of Karlsson and Lillebror by Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren. In Lindgren's version, Karlsson is a very short and portly and confident man who lives on the roof of a very ordinary house, on a very ordinary street in Stockholm. When he turns a button in the middle of his navel, it starts a clever little motor with a propeller on his back allowing him to fly. Karlsson considers himself excellent at everything, but there is, in fact, one thing he particularly excels at: being a playmate to a seven-year-old boy named Lillebror (little brother), who lives in the house below with his family. Lillebror tries repeatedly to introduce Karlsson to his family, but none of his family members can see Karlsson. A Russian film of the Lindgren story by the award-winning animation studio Soyuzmultfilm, is one of the most celebrated and loved cartoons in my country.

av: spelled
Gorshkov
in text - pls
clarify

together. He was lucky to have landed in a garbage container which is now situated just in front of the Swantenson's window on the ground floor where they had to move due to financial problems. The parents had known their child had an imaginary friend long before the accident, but until then had not worried about it. Lillebror's relationship with Karlsson worsened after the accident. Constant shouting and slander can be heard from Lillebror's room. His toys fly against walls, he breaks furniture and screams that Karlsson betrayed him. From the parents' point of view, their elder children are all right. Their daughter is married to an NHL hockey player and lives in the U.S.A., and the older son became a successful broker. Neither is in much contact with home.

The trainer discusses the story with volunteers outside of the room, so that this version of an otherwise familiar story is a surprise for students. In the first part of the exercise, students sit in a circle and each of them takes a turn being therapist for the family for five minutes. Students are welcomed to try out techniques they have learned recently but their main task is different. They are asked to focus their attention on the thoughts about this family evoked by their personal and professional knowledge, and to notice and write these down. The more they write the better. This is to be done by all students—both while sitting in the circle and while acting as therapist. They come up with a wide variety of reflections: they are psychotics; they are kidding me; they are crazy; a psychiatrist should be treating them; the child is triangulated with his parents; Lillebror is schizophrenic; the problem is a dysfunctional marriage; the parents have a low differentiation level; it is all a manifestation of incestuous anxiety; I do not understand anything; I am afraid of this family; they are trying to fool us; it is not a problem but a lifestyle, etc.

In the second part of the exercise, students read their notes aloud and explore with a trainer the most effective way to deal with these automatic expert judgments, "aha-reactions," opinions, and personal experience. They discuss how to trace and notice the influence of some ideas and knowledge on their perception of the family's story, how to convey to the family how the ideas are influencing them, how to invite the family to actively choose whether they will draw on the therapist's ideas as a resource.

Because the original children's book about Karlsson is so popular in Russia, the students have immediate assumptions about the characters once they hear their names, although the story presented to them is in fact a different one. During the exercise, participants can retrace, evaluate, and discuss how the effect of this recognition influences them. For instance, almost everyone forgets that the family comes from a different culture or that Lillebror, at least technically, is not a child anymore. This form of exercise can be duplicated using any popular story, film, or fairy tale.

The main task of the exercise is to help students to investigate and improve their reflexive abilities. They are encouraged to (1) notice during the therapeutic conversation which professional and personal knowledges may compel them to inadvertently direct the conversation to predetermined results and (2) be transparent

with clients about certain knowledges that may be influencing the direction of therapeutic conversations.

For example, a student is influenced by systemic theories and keeps asking parents about their marital relationships, assuming that Lilibror's problems are a symptom of family dysfunction. If the student notices the persistence of this idea and its influence on her/his ability to attend to the family, she or he might say "I notice I am asking a lot of questions about your marital relationships due to the influence of a particular family therapy theory. There are many such theories that explain people and their relationships very differently and I don't think that any of them is an indisputable truth and fits everyone. Would it be all right if I gave you a brief summary of this theory so that you could evaluate if it relates to your story and is useful? If it's not useful, we could choose a more fruitful direction for our conversation. I may ask you to stop me if you notice I'm falling into a theory that you have decided is not useful."

NARRATIVE DECONSTRUCTIVE EXERCISES

The task of separating from and gaining a perspective on a given system of knowledge may be especially difficult for people with a Soviet background. Under the Soviet regime it was forbidden to make distinctions between oneself and dominant social knowledge, because of the threats to the system associated with opening space for reflection. In some circumstances the consequence for making such a distinction could actually be death. We had two major banners hanging everywhere: "People and Party are One and Undivided" and "The Knowledge is the Force." An attempt to separate oneself from The Knowledge was equated with an attempt to separate oneself from the Party and Nation (people), and had to be castigated with the full Force the unit possessed.

For these reasons, the idea and method of deconstruction is both vital and difficult to grasp for Russians. As a result, we engage in a lot of deconstructive exercises with students. Two of these exercises which bring a playfulness to the introduction of deconstruction are described below.

Exercise in Deconstruction #1

Students break into groups of about three or four. They choose a particular context of living and write three or four diverse cultural beliefs related to this particular area of life on separate sheets of paper which are pooled together. They then take turns selecting particular events related to the context in question, and make sense of the event in terms of the cultural beliefs written on the slips of paper. The intention is for students to see how the interpretation of the event changes as the interpretive frame changes.

Suppose the context is male/female relations and the event is that a man gets married. In the Russian context, some dominant beliefs around male/female relations include: men are stronger; women are the weak gender; we live in a male dominated world; women are more emotional and have a richer emotional spectrum than men; men are oriented to the outside world, while women are relationship and family oriented; men love freedom while women like dependency, etc. Drawing on these interpretive frames, a man might conclude that getting married constrains his freedom while a woman might conclude that marriage meets her needs. Students are asked to evaluate which interpretations fit for them.

Exercise in Deconstruction #2

This second exercise involves tracing the origins of a dominant cultural meaning. It works best in a group of 3 to 6 people. One person formulates an idea, belief, or attitude which he or she would like to investigate. It may be something that causes ambivalence, raises doubts, or promotes distress. After stating the idea the person poses the question, "Where did I learn this?" The participants then relate different social practices, ideas, habits, people, folklore, etc., that support this idea.

An example, drawn from the Russian context: the belief that a female employee cannot assume the role of boss. The following ideas and observations support this statement: Women are very emotional and cannot make balanced decisions; female bosses are appropriately fewer than male ones for natural reasons; a boss should be endowed with male qualities of competition and vigor, able to defend his/her authority on a high level; a woman would be unhappy taking on such a role and would risk turning into an overbearing "man in a skirt"; "man is the head, woman is the neck"; women are (drawing on influential male theorists such as Freud and Rousseau) passive and masochistic; dominance is a male trait exhibited throughout the animal world, and so on.

The person who put forward the original idea simply listens to this input. In the second part of the exercise the person continues to listen to her/his colleagues while they are relating contradictory beliefs—that is, those social practices, stories, stereotypes, which *do not support* the original idea put forward. The participants might recount stories about Cleopatra, Joane of Arc, or Condoleza Rice, for example. They might argue that women are relationship-oriented from childhood and therefore skillful communicators with more developed verbal skills than men, making them ideal for leading and guiding people. They might propose that women have a gift for understanding what is going on between people, and can therefore make work environments less conflictual and more productive. They might make reference to the Scandinavian countries where feminism is victoriously imprinted in their parliaments and contributes to the region's economic success.

Finally, during the third part of the exercise, the holder of the idea shares his/her impressions. She or he relates how his/her perception of the idea and of herself/himself was changed during the first two phases of the exercises, and describes what has shifted in her/his relationship with the original belief.

The exercise gives participants an opportunity to discern the difference between trying to convince a person that a particular idea/belief is right or wrong versus joining with them in deconstructing it through a collaborative exploration. The exercise parallels the process of a deconstructive conversation in therapy. It renders visible the stories that support an idea, unveiling the idea's relative nature. This opens the door to alternative stories and helps a person to separate from an idea, creating space to change one's relationship with ideas in general beyond the one featured in the exercise.

CONCLUSION

Despite the somewhat ambiguous relationships between Russian culture, post-modernism, and psychotherapy, narrative practice is currently kindling great interest among both practitioners and students of psychotherapy. As many as 200 people have attended recent narrative workshops in Moscow presented by Michael White, Jill Freedman, Hugh Fox, Gerald Monk, and Amanda Redstone. Practitioners from diverse regions of Russia come to Moscow to take part in monthly narrative trainings offered by Natalia Savelieva. Academic journals are publishing articles about narrative practice. This extends to popular magazines as well: in June, 2006, for example, the magazine *Psychologies* with a circulation of 250,000 published an article I wrote on narrative therapy. Training institutes for psychotherapists and psychologists include narrative approaches in their educational programs. An increasing number of practitioners are building their clinical work on narrative practices.

This interest in Russia regarding narrative practice has intrigued me and I have conducted informal research to understand it better. When students at introductory trainings request more intensive, long-term narrative courses, I ask them what draws them to the practices, and the most common answer is that they are attracted by what they refer to as the nonviolent position assumed by the therapist. In modern Russia, violence continues to be a social norm and is apparent in many contexts, from the family to the wider setting. Parents feel free to both say and to publicly demonstrate that they beat their children; citizens are more afraid of police than they are of criminals; the government routinely interferes in private business. At the same time, there has lately been a huge public backlash to this violence and a proliferation of nonprofit antiviolence organizations and open public discussions. Many Russians are deeply unhappy with the violence and are looking for alternatives. In the context of learning narrative approaches, students often

speak of the "great relief" they felt in discovering they could work in a manner that would involve no practices associated with violence or compulsion. Another two widely cited reasons for being drawn to narrative practice are the opportunity to use humor more widely, and to have fun while attending to serious matters. These may be expressions of the Russian temperament; or perhaps they are universal.

REFERENCES

- Bowen, M. (1994). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York: Jason Aronson.
- Eco, U. (1994). Postscript to *The name of the rose*. In Eco, U., *The name of the rose*. Harvest.
- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (2002). *Narrative therapy with couples . . . and a whole lot more! A collection of papers, essays and exercises*. Adelaide, South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publication.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge. (Theory and History of Literature)*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1987). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Mehta, G., Wagner, H., & Jorniak, K. (2002). Gruppenbildungen und ruppen(auf)lösungen. In H. Molter & J. Hargens (Hrsg.), *Ich - du - wir - und wer sonst noch dazugehört. Systemisches Arbeiten mit und in Gruppen*. Dortmund.
- Morgan, A. (2000). *What is narrative therapy? An easy-to-read introduction*. Adelaide, South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publication.
- Moscow University Alumni Club. (2005, May 12). *The work of a psychoanalytic is similar to the work of an investigator . . .* Retrieved June 1, 2006, from <http://www.moscowuniversityclub.ru/home.asp?artId=1463>.
- Palazzoli, M. (1995). *Paradox and counterparadox: A new model in the therapy of the family in schizophrenic transaction*. Jason Aronson.
- Titelman, P. (1998). *Clinical applications of Bowen family systems theory*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Vorobiev, A. I., & Alekseeva, L. M. (2004). From the speech of Vorobiev, A. I., member of Russian Academy of Science, and Alekseeva, L. M., President of International Helsinki Federation, on the 15-year anniversary of the Independent Psychiatric Association of Russia [Electronic version]. *Independent Psychiatric Journal*, 2, 3-7. Retrieved June 1, 2006, from <http://www.npar.ru/journal/2004/2/extracts.php>.
- White, M. (1992). Deconstruction and therapy. In D. Epston & M. White (Eds.), *Experience, contradiction, narrative & imagination*. Adelaide, South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publication.
- White, M. (1995). *Re-authoring lives: Interviews and essays*. Adelaide, South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publication.
- White, M. (2000). *Reflections on narrative practice: Essays and interviews*. Adelaide, South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publication.

Av: pls
list city
of publication

- White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Yeltsin, B. (1996). *About the revival of philosophical, clinical and applied psychoanalysis in Russia*. Presidential decree 1044, July 19, 1996.
- Zhurnal.ru. (1997, February 11). *Cyber conference with Victor Pelevin*. Retrieved June 1, 2006, from <http://pelevin.nov.ru/interview/o-peirc/1.html>.