

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **DESCRIBING AND INTERPRETING THE STORIES USING A NARRATIVE APPROACH**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The narrative approach is very useful to help human beings give meaning to their experiences. The approach basically involves the making, telling and re-telling of stories. This process aims to help the story teller to describe his/her experiences and to interpret them using his/her own language and assumptions, so that he/she gains a better understanding of these experiences. The story making is related to everyday actions and understandings. The facilitator in the narrative approach listens to the stories, respecting the feelings and interpretations of the teller as fully as possible. The approach does not try to improve the 'accuracy' of the stories, but rather to move to new platforms of reality for constructing new stories. "Meaningful therapy will help clients gain a sense of 'being their own experts' via enabling them to author stories based upon their experiences, thoughts, and feelings" (Parry & Doan 1994: 46). This chapter is a journey through the described experiences of the story tellers and my experiences of listening to and narrating those stories. The interpretations are the authentic interpretations of the story tellers, evolved or co-constructed in their interaction with me as facilitator, in their relationship with the community; and in interaction with the group context in which they told the stories.

#### **4.2 METHODS OF LISTENING AND DESCRIBING**

Listening in the narrative approach does not focus on gathering information about the teller's life problems, but on the story itself, however problem-saturated it may

be. The listener does not try to find or investigate the core problem(s) in the story, but to experience moving with the story teller and listening to the possible meanings of the story.

To effectively listen to and describe stories various methods can be used, such as interviewing, questioning, letter writing and drawing. In this study I used interviews, questions and writing. Even for feedback I could not use written or printed forms with the young people I worked with, because many of them cannot read or write English. Thus my most common method was interviews.

#### **4.2.1 The role of listening in counselling**

In common life many people have no one to listen to their problems. This can end in these lonely people feeling hopeless about life and its challenges. The counselling process helps by providing a listening ear for people's problems. Listening is extremely important in the helping professions, especially in counselling. In the narrative approach good listening skills are vital in helping to create a healthy rapport and trust between the facilitator and story teller. "Good listening helps them [the counselees] to feel affirmed, safe, accepted and understood. This in turn helps them to make choices that allow them to share their world with you" (Nelson-Jones 1996:14). In the narrative approach there is no role for the counsellor as the influencer. Instead the helping person is a facilitator for the telling and retelling of the life story of the story teller. The narrative approach, as discussed above, emphasises stories as stories. Listening to the life stories of the counselees is not merely a part of the counselling process, but the golden thread uniting all the processes and sessions. Listening in the counselling process is deconstructive listening, which is an art. "A story deconstruction consists, in essence, of identifying the terms, the shape, and the plot of an individual's childhood survival story – what the person is coming to realize she/he had to do to survive childhood" (Parry & Doan 1994:42).

God has plans for a future of peace and hope, not of misfortune. While some young people are gripped by worry about the future and find themselves at a standstill, others are inventive, creative and hopeful, always aware that scepticism and discouragement can paralyze human beings. In the young homeless people's search for a better future, counselling can play a vital role. Condemning these young people or branding them as unwanted is a destructive approach. Through patient, deconstructive listening, the story teller can be helped to enter into a world of possibilities for the future.

#### **4.2.2 Entering the story world**

Through slow careful listening, the facilitator enters into the story world of the story teller. Before this can begin, the story teller has to be relaxed with the idea of telling his/her life experiences in story form. To achieve this, a useful beginning is initiating discussion of the non-problematic aspects of life. In all the processes of listening and story telling the facilitator must see the teller as a person and the problem as a problem. A preliminary problem-free talk is thus useful for the facilitator and good for the counselling session. "Unless people insist on moving quickly into talking about problems, we spend a while listening to stories about their preferences and pleasures" (Freedman & Combs 2002:26). In some cases the story teller feels comfortable and will enter into story telling directly. In such instances, it is not necessary to use prefacial conversation to help the teller relax.

Listening to the stories of young people is very interesting, because they have their own perceptions about homelessness, poverty, human life and habits, and so on. As a volunteer in the street ministry, I met all kinds of people at the Street Centre, from various age groups, language backgrounds, genders and racial groups. Each one had his/her own cultural background and belief systems. Entering into the story world of each of the story tellers is interesting because each story gives a wider perspective about life, culture and social systems. When the youth retell their stories in a narrative relationship, new meanings become

apparent to me as well as to the story teller. “Retelling, forgetting and inventing stories continues to modify the socially constructed world of the storyteller and listener. And, most importantly, these retellings, forgettings and inventions simultaneously confirm and challenge the storytellers’ and listeners’ assumption, thinking, and identity” (Musheno & Maynard-Moody 2003:158,159). In the story telling process, listener and story teller enter into a new world of discoveries about their assumptions and identities. The stories of the young people from the streets should be listened to with empathy rather than prejudice. The facilitator should have and stimulate in the teller inquisitiveness about the unique outcomes in each story. To achieve this, the facilitator must assume a stance of ignorance, rather than seeing him/herself as ‘the counsellor’ with superior technical knowledge.

From the diverse group of people at the Street Centre with whom I talked, I have identified ten whose stories most clearly reflect distinct views about homelessness and the impact of economic factors on their experiences. Their stories are described below as I heard them, with some indication of the context of their experiences.

### **4.2.3 Interviews**

Interviewing is a method used for collecting data in research studies, and can be structured or unstructured. Structured interviews use questionnaires which are prepared earlier according to a standardized theory. Unstructured interviews do not follow set questions; instead the interviewer enters into free discussion with the interviewee and promotes open answers to open-ended questions. Such unstructured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research, where empirical data leading to wider explanation and theorising is not required, but rather a deep exploration of human experiences. My study uses unstructured interviews, following a longitudinal plan in which each informant is interviewed

several times over a long period of time. This approach is often used for unstructured interviews (Arksey & Knight 1999:32).

In a qualitative interview the focus is not on collecting facts but moving with the interviewee to new understandings of his/her social world, about which the interviewee may not have much awareness or understanding. “Unstructured interviews produce a wealth of qualitative data; the findings can generate deep insights into people’s understandings of their social world” (Arksey & Knight 1999:7). These deep insights may help the interviewee to understand him/herself, society or particular habits and relationships better. All these insights and topics can be accessed through discourses. Each discourse reflects a particular context and set of concepts. Revealing the discourses in a story will help the story teller to understanding and viewing life differently. Thus unstructured interviews tend to range very wide, over many different discourses. “The interviewer would be anxious to listen to informants’ accounts of their behaviours, beliefs, feelings and actions and would probably ask open-ended questions, rather than ask questions that invite precise answers that can be tallied to provide numerical summaries” (Arksey & Knight 1999:4). Interviews in a counselling setting are usually unstructured. The counsellor listens to the experiences, feelings and discourses of the counsellee. Narrative therapy involves helping for the counsellee uncover his/her social world and deconstruct its discourses.

Narrative therapy cannot always take place in the stable environment of a therapist’s room, but places like the Street Centre, where people come and go at irregular intervals, are not ideal. Appointments for sessions cannot be made, or uninterrupted interviews ensured. Luckily a narrative therapy interview does not require that the counsellor take a journalistic perspective, gathering information. Such an interview is rather a discussion that reveals the experiences of the story teller. At the Street Centre, therefore, I found that the best opportunity for interviews was after Bible class, when the people who come to the Centre

usually sit down for a while to drink coffee. I also sat with them then and chatted with them. This free talk is possible because I am a regular visitor there and lead the Bible classes, so I have a rapport with the community there. This helped me to begin each interview. Despite the language problem – English is the second language of most of the people there – they were usually eager to talk. “At the beginning of the journey we are not sure where it will end, nor what will be discovered” (Morgan 2000:3). But conversation opens varied possibilities of story telling and story making. Through this develop interpretation and understandings that lead to new directions for the story told.

#### **4.2.4 Questions**

According to Morgan (2000:4), two particularly significant principles of narrative therapy are:

- 1) Always maintaining a stance of curiosity, and
- 2) Always asking questions to which you genuinely do not know the answers.

We ask questions not to gather information or prescribe solution, but to facilitate their story making and story telling and to create alternative stories. “[W]ithin a narrative approach, the reason we ask questions is to invite people to story their experiences and to do so in relation to both problematic and alternative stories in their lives” (Freedman & Combs 2002:202). Questions help unroll experiences in story form. Questions help both story teller and listener to understand the problem-saturated story. They help the teller to externalize the problem, that is, to see the problem as problem and the person as person. “The primary intention of our question has been to gain understanding of people's problem-saturated narratives. At some point, usually when it seems that a certain degree of trust and mutual understanding has been achieved, we begin to ask questions of a more purposefully interventive nature” (Freedman & Combs 2002:208). This is

the beginning of deconstructive questioning, inviting the teller to view the story from a different perspective.

Deconstructive questioning is effective in the counselling process to deconstruct the experiences of the story teller. Many social and cultural stories and concepts about many social realities influence a person's life stories and the hopes and hopelessness related to these stories. Subjugating stories of gender, race, class, age, religion etc. are prevalent. Awareness of such cultural and social concepts will help the facilitator to ask deconstructive questions. These subjugating and influencing stories are called as discourses. According to Freedman and Combs, "therapists must continually reflect on the discourses that shape our perceptions of what is possible, both for ourselves and for the people we work with. Such reflection puts us in the position to ask deconstructive questions – questions whose aim is to examine problems in detail and expose discourses that support them" (2002:28).

Many discourses influence a person and his/her stories. Asking questions about how the problem influences the teller is a method of externalizing the problem. Separating the problem from the person has a powerful deconstructive effect. "We can expose dominant discourses by asking externalizing questions about contextual influences on the problem" (Freedman & Combs 2002:28). Deconstructive questions concentrate on how the problem affects the person's life and the effects of the problem on him/her. When I deal with the homeless youth, it is easy to identify the discourses in their stories about their homeless condition, discourses about age, social systems and so on. In the stories of a homeless youth, discourses about homelessness are of course the most prevalent. Homelessness is an experience which shatters all their expectations. The feelings behind these discourses include rejection, discouragement, low self-esteem, neglect, hopelessness and self-denigration. "We believe that by questioning the discourses of influence, we allow people to consider their preferences more clearly, and to decide whether or not the ideas that influence

them ‘fit’ for them” (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:69). All homeless youth have something to say about the influence of homelessness upon their life story. Some are simply more eloquent than others. While one curses his fate for being homeless, another spiritualizes her experience. Both reveal the untold areas of their experiences. When I question these tellers, the one about the relationship of fate to his story and the other about the relationship or effect of spirituality to his story, what is evoked can be called unique outcomes. “Usually, the telling and retelling of the story produces at least some heroic and success narratives (‘unique outcomes’) alongside the more habitual problem-saturated accounts of troubles that people bring into therapy” (McLeod 2004:23). Every story includes many experiences that remain untold at first, that are kept out of the problem-saturated first story. The telling and re-telling of the story thus allows these untold experiences and thoughts to be spoken, i.e. allows for the creation of alternate stories.

#### **4.2.5 Scripting experiences**

Telling a story to a listener is different to writing down the story. In story telling, the teller interprets his/her story in the moment of telling. As the facilitator helps to retell the story, the teller can reinterpret the original story and create alternate stories. In the listening process the listener may hear a story which is different to the one told by the story teller. This leads to further conversation about the story told, and this to interpretation of various ways of understanding the story. For studies such as this one, the listener then has to write down the story, so that it can be further studied. This is called scripting the story.

Scripting stories creates other areas of story making. It is very difficult to write down experiences, especially the experiences of another person. In writing down the stories the researcher faces the problems of interpretation. During the process of writing down a given story, many interpretations may present themselves as the recorded story interacts with the personal life story of the



researcher who is writing down the story. Thus the scripting of experiences involves deeper dimensions in the recording researcher. “Good research stories provide details about events and settings. They also tell us about the characters and their interactions, relationships, and feelings” (Musheno & Maynard-Moody 2003:27). Thus a detailed report of the events and settings of the interviews is not needed. This information should be included in the scripting of the narrative journey. In such a journey the events, settings, problems, interactions and relationships are sufficiently explained and interpreted by the story teller. This also opens a wider perspective of alternative stories and their scripting. Then all these processes become part of the narrative journey.

### **4.3 LISTENING FROM A POSITION OF NOT- KNOWING**

Anyone listening to the stories of another person should be curious. The counsellor must not dictate, direct or guide the story teller using professional expertise. The counsellor is only a facilitator helping the story teller to find meaning him/herself. The role of the counsellor of the modern paradigm, as advisor or influencer, has been replaced by the post-modern role, that of facilitator. “When we listen ‘desconstructively’ to people’s stories, our listening is guided by the belief that those stories have many possible meanings. The meaning we as listeners make is, more often not, at least a little different from the meaning that a speaker has intended” (Freedman & Combs 2002: 26, 27). Thus the facilitator assumes a position of humble ignorance, rather than superior knowledge or training, and moves with the story teller without prejudice.

#### **4.3.1 Barriers to listening**

When I spoke to Salin, who become homeless recently, I asked about his experience. He defined his experience as “very hard”. When I asked him to explain the word “hard”, he discovered several different meanings, namely

“unsafe”, “extreme weather”, “starvation” and “joblessness”. This shows the narrative approach in operation. In answering my question, Salin tries to examine various dimensions of his problem. As facilitator I am in a position of ignorance; I do not know his experience first-hand. Though I may have my own interpretations of his story, if I were to insist on these and express them, this would hinder our narrative conversation. Rather, I simply work to find meaning along with the story teller who is interpreting his/her own experiences.

This requires that I be aware of the various discourses at work in my own life and its interpretations, and of the discourses operating in society which influence story tellers. I do not have to try to be fully objective – the post-modern social constructionist approach takes this as impossible. Rather, since narrative therapy holds that the storyteller is the sole authority in the telling, interpreting and retelling of stories, I as facilitator must not try to be objective or show my professional expertise, but simply listen deconstructively. This is why, in the narrative approach, the story teller is called the co-researcher. I place myself in the co-researcher’s role. I do not have the right to re-interpret or manipulate the story and its meanings. It is my task to listen to the discourses in their stories and identify the discourses that are dominant. “When clients say, ‘It’s a given’, or ‘It’s normal’, or ‘That’s the way it is,’ or something similar, we perk up our ears. Our intention is to explore the ideas that influence people, not to destroy them; to question them, not to leave persons without an anchor or without some sense of constancy in their lives” (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:69).

Language is very important in story telling and interpretation. In my conversations with the homeless youth, English is for both of us a second language. We sometimes struggle to express our original and proper meanings. In spite of the language difference, however, I found that certain dominant discourses could be detected in the stories of the homeless youth. These can be identified as discourses about: homelessness, rich people, the social system and the future of the homeless. Some stories show these discourses positively, others negatively.

I found that each teller has an individual discourse about homelessness. Listening to such discourses from a position not-knowing is very interesting, especially the influencing economic factors detectable in the stories.

### **4.3.2 The Street Centre setting**

The Street Centre is the site of the street ministries run by Pretoria Community Ministries (PCM). Various services are offered to homeless people at the Street Centre. The main aim is to help the people to be self-equipped and find employment. As part of this work, the Centre offers Bible classes, moral teachings and skills development training. The Street Centre is open by 9am in the morning. The homeless people who sleep on the streets or in shelters gather there for the services. The Bible study or other classes begin at 9.30, but there is no regulation for when the people have to come and go in the Street Centre, as this would not be practical. The people come and go according to their convenience, need and mood, which is not conducive to a controlled therapeutic situation!

### **4.3.3 Position of knowledge**

The counsellor operating from a position of superior knowledge is responsible for prompting and probing the respondent for specific research material. In client-centred therapy and various other counselling approaches, the counsellor is seen as one with technical know-how, as one who can influence the course of the session. The counsellor is a learned person with knowledge of various different scientific branches such as history, sociology, philosophy and theology, and has insight into and knowledge about the life world of the counsellee. In this context interviews tend to be one-sided and directive. “Interviews set up a one-way information flow from respondent to researcher, and it is generally obvious to the respondent what the researcher wants to know” (Musheno & Maynard-Moody

2003:28). In the personalizing process of client-centred therapy, the counsellor plays the role of motivator, bringing the counsellee to a position of taking responsibility for his/her problem. “In personalizing the meaning, the counsellor stimulates the counsellee to dialogue with herself and reconsider the statements which she has made, and find out the hidden meaning behind those statements which affect her personally” (Fuster 1991:164). The counsellor knows how to deal with the person and is completely aware of the direction in which the therapy is heading. This is exactly the opposite of the narrative approach, in which the counsellor adopts a position of ignorance.

#### **4.3.4 Position of ignorance**

In the process of narrative counselling, the story teller is the custodian of information about his/her life. “Narrative ways of working are based on the idea that people’s lives and relationships are shaped by the ‘stories’ which individuals and communities of people develop in order to give meaning to their experiences. These ‘narratives of meaning’ do not simply reflect or represent our lives – they actually shape and constitute our lives” (White & Denborough 1998:3). Each story teller is the authority in telling, interpreting and forming meaning for his/her story. The listener must not dictate the story. He/she does not know how the story will develop or what particular features of the story mean. The story teller is the sole producer of the story and its meanings. The listener or counsellor plays the role of facilitator, helping the story teller to tell and retell the story with new meanings. The facilitator should operate from a position of ignorance, participating in rather than directing the meaning-making process of the story told and retold. This is the opposite of more directive approaches, discussed in the previous section. In the narrative approach the story tellers are the researchers who discover new meanings in the dominant discourses of their stories. By participating in this process, the facilitator is the co-researcher who co-authors the stories. In such participation it is essential that the facilitator does not influence the story teller according to his/her own perspectives. Instead, the

facilitator must challenge the dominant discourses which negatively influence the story teller and so help the teller to move towards preferred stories with new hopeful meanings. “If people are engaged in a project of challenging the dominant meanings of their lives, and creating alternative, preferred stories, then the participation of others in the creation and reflection of these stories is very important” (White & Denborough 1998:9). From an assumed position of ignorance, then, the listener or co-researcher listens for the unique outcomes implicit in the stories told, and thus engages in a narrative journey with the teller.

## **4.4 THE PROBLEM IN THE YOUTH’S OWN WORDS**

### **4.4.1 Losing power in the streets**

Renjan: How are you, Joy, today?

Joy: Ok

Renjan: In our last conversation you named your problem as “powerlessness”. Can you share the experience of powerlessness in your life situation?

Joy: You mean in the streets, or that of my past life?

Renjan: If you like, both.

Joy: My father was a daily wage labourer, but he drank a lot and wasted money. When I asked him for my needs in the school he never gave any. He was not concerned about our family. He never allowed me to do anything on my own, even though I am his only son.

Renjan: You felt powerless in that situation.

Joy: Surely, I had no confidence to do things on my own. With money only, we can survive. For getting money we have to do some business, but it is not possible for me.

Renjan: Did you try to do something on your own?

Joy: No, I know that I can't.

Renjan: How does this problem of powerlessness affect you?

Joy: I am not getting any job. I am struggling financially.

Renjan: You are struggling to find your livelihood.

Joy: It is a hopeless situation for me.

Renjan: You are not finding any hope in front of you?

Joy: Yes.

Renjan: How does this powerless experience affect your relationship with others?

Joy: I don't have many friends, but I know many people coming to the Street Centre. I know some people in the street also.

Renjan: How do you relate yourself with them?

Joy: I don't have a problem to mingle with them because some of them are powerless as me.

Renjan: Do you think that you are powerless or your problem is powerlessness?

Joy: Yes, it is my problem.

Renjan: How are you related to your problem?

Joy: It is really putting me in distress, but my little hope is there, there are many people with the same problem.

Renjan: It gives some hope for your survival.

Joy: In the midst of the problem I am surviving.

Renjan: Is this the survival you want?

Joy: I want more, I want a job.

Renjan: Until you get a job can you survive?

Joy: I hope I can cope, with that hope of getting a job.

Renjan: I wish you all the best to get a job.

Joy: I will try to overcome my problem of powerlessness by trying and trying.

Renjan: You will continue trying and trying until success is yours, isn't it?

Joy: Yes.

#### **4.4.2 No options**

Renjan: How do you experience being in the streets?

Joseph: As I said last time, it is so hard.

Renjan: How this homelessness and hardships affect your daily life?

Joseph: Sometimes I feel so desperate.

Renjan: It's a bad feeling, isn't it?

Joseph: Yes, I know that but no other way.

Renjan: You think that there is no other way.

Joseph: I don't know what to do, struggling.

Renjan: When we talked last time you said that you would think of some plan for survival. Is there any progress in your thinking?

Joseph: In the street there is no time and space to think in other ways.

Renjan: What tempts you to tell like that, or what do you mean by that?

Joseph: It is like that .Nobody has any concern for others. Everybody is selfish. When I think about my younger sisters I think of some ways to get a job.



Renjan: Your relationship to your sisters is encouraging you to search for a job.

Joseph: Yes, because they are so loving and they are starving.

Renjan: So you are concerned about them.

Joseph: Yes

Renjan: What would be their feelings and reactions to your absence and to your joblessness?

Joseph: They will be so sad, but they know that I went away for their good.

Renjan: How do they understand that it is for good?

Joseph: They know that if I get a job they will be helped.

Renjan: They have such a hope. What is your feeling about the condition of your sisters?

Joseph: I feel so pity and sometimes guilty of them. I left them in a sad condition. But I have no other way.

Renjan: What do you think about such a situation?

Joseph: I know that I am not doing my responsibility to my family. Even by calling them, I feel more guilty. I am really struggling in the midst of their love and poverty and my joblessness.

Renjan: In the midst of that struggle you know and believe that you will get a

job. The love and condition of your sisters motivate you to search for a job.

Joseph: Yes, I am searching.

Renjan: Do you have the hope to find?

Joseph: I think I will get one.

Renjan: Is this the situation you want to be.

Joseph: No, I never wanted to be a homeless, but now I am here. But I know God will open some ways for me.

Renjan: What kind of job are you searching for and what are you doing to get it?

Joseph: Any job I can do. But I am looking for a security job or to be an assistant in some companies.

Renjan: Did you send some applications for that or have you approached somebody?

Joseph: Yes, I am waiting for the response for some applications.

Renjan: So you have more confidence about the future.

Joseph: Yes I have.

Renjan: Be in your hope, God will provide you.

Joseph: Thank you. See you.

#### 4.4.3 Waiting for the future

Andre: Hi! Pastor!

Renjan: How are you Andre?

Andre: Good.

Renjan: Did you make some plans for your future?

Andre: Yes, I did and have already started.

Renjan: It's so interesting that you planned and started working.

Andre: I made a plan for starting a business in the streets and I got it.

Renjan: How do you work out everything?

Andre: I borrowed some money from a friend in the street and bought some sweets. I picked up some wood pieces and a piece of wood from the backyard of some shops. With those things I made a small table to place the sweets. Then I found a place to do my business. I got a good place.

Renjan: You place you mean?

Andre: Where more people pass by.

Renjan: How do you manage the income and the expenditure?

Andre: I started with a small amount. After some days, it is the same. A fear that, it will stop after sometime.

Renjan: What makes you worry like that?

Andre: Because, when money is with me I have to eat something. No I am separating some money for buying sweets and spend the rest for my food. If I fail to do that one day my business will finish.

Renjan: Your story is interesting; it is full of plans, negative and positive.

Andre: [Smiles]

Renjan: You have a fear that you are not managing your business well and it will end up one day. Do you think that it will help you not to spend too much for your food?

Andre: That's right. In a way it will help me to spend less. But I like fruits and it is costly. That is a problem.

Renjan: That means you have to make some plans for your eating habits.

Andre: Yes, I have to.

Renjan: Thus, what are your future plans?

Andre: God will guide me.

Renjan: You changed your position from God will provide you to God will guide you.

Andre: God will guide me to receive his provisions.

Renjan: That is a good understanding. Why do you believe that God will guide you and provide you?

Andre: It is my experience, even from my present situation. God guided me to start a business. People are buying sweets from me because God guides them.

Renjan: You are speaking like a good theologian.

Andre: My experiences make me speak.

Renjan: Do you have the plans for the future with the guidance of God.

Andre: I am waiting. If God gives me opportunity I have the plans to buy some chips and cigarettes for sale.

Renjan: Then it will help you to improve your financial position.

Andre: Not only that. I have a plan to start a public call booth, in the future. I don't know how to start it or to operate it.

Renjan: Even if you don't know more about the public telephone booth, you wish you could start one.

Andre: I wish I hope so.

Renjan: That is good. You have improved a lot in your dreams and plans, how do you think about you now?

Andre: It's nice.

Renjan: You feel so proud and worthy.

Andre: Yes, sure.

Renjan: It's nice. All the best for your plans!

Andre: Thank you. Pray for me.

Renjan: It's pleasure. I will.

#### **4.4.4 Surviving in hardship**

Renjan: How are you, Salin, today?

Salin: Ok.

Renjan: Are you really ok, or feeling bad?

Salin: Why are you asking like that?

Renjan: You shared on your bitterness in the streets, last time.

Salin: That's right. Still the picture is the same.

Renjan: Are you still facing hardships?

Salin: Yes.

Renjan: It's so bad.

Salin: Two days back, I was sleeping in a street corner. Two black guys came and kicked me and pushed me to the road. I was about to be hit by a car. It was so horrible. I tried to resist. They wanted to take my things. I don't have any valuable thing but only some clothes and a bag.

Renjan: So sorry about that incident.

Salin: This time it happened to me, but it is common in the streets.

Renjan: Did you see similar incidents.

Salin: I saw a few incidents, but I can't help. Those people are rude and ugly. They will kill me.

Renjan: Are these incidents really disturbing you?

Salin: I hate to live in streets, but no way to go, no place to go.

Renjan: Do you think that all the people in the streets are ugly and bad.

Salin: No, there are good people, but they have no power. If I am in trouble they can't help.

Renjan: They are in the similar condition like you.

Salin: Yes, but we can help each other in simple things.

Renjan: In what ways can you help other people in the street?

Salin: When I get some food I can share it with those who have no food. I have three sets of dress, if anybody is in dire need I can give one.

Renjan: With those acts of sharing can you change the streets into a better place.

Salin: I don't think so. But I can be changed and they can also.

Renjan: A positive change will result.

Salin: Of course.

Renjan: Did you practice it and see the changes.

Salin: Yes, I am trying sometimes, and surely change is there.

Renjan: Are you comfortable with that change and satisfied with that?

Salin: I don't have a problem with that. I have to do more. I will tell others to share. Then only it will make some changes. I think some of the people do that in their life in the streets.

Renjan: That is good.

Salin: There are hardships, but in the hardships these experiences give me joy and love.

Renjan: It strengthens you to survive in the hardships.

Salin: Yes, I have to survive. I know that one day I will go away from the streets. But I can help others wherever I would be.



Renjan: You have the hope for the future.

Salin: Yes I have.

Renjan: Good luck for that.

Salin: Thank you, see you.

#### **4.4.5 Needs guidance and assistance**

Roul: How are you, Pastor?

Renjan: I am fine, how are you doing?

Roul: Fine.

Renjan: Did you find some job?

Roul: I got some piece jobs. So I am surviving.

Renjan: Because of those piece works you managed to survive.

Roul: Yes, but that is not enough.

Renjan: Still you have struggles.

Roul: It is so difficult to get food every time and everyday. Nobody will give money.

Renjan: It's so difficult to manage the need of money in the streets?

Roul: That's why I am thinking about mother. I wouldn't fight with my mother.

Renjan: You have still that feeling of guilt.

Roul: Yes, I have.

Renjan: So what name you will give to your problem?

Roul: Guilt feeling is my problem.

Renjan: What is your relationship to your problem?

Roul: When I starve and struggle in the streets, that guilt feeling comes to me again and again.

Renjan: How does it affect your daily life?

Roul: It really disturbs me. When it comes I will not talk to anybody. I will be so gloomy.

Renjan: That guilty feeling knocks you down.

Roul: Not completely. After sometime I will change my mood and come back to the normal.

Renjan: What makes you to change your mood?

Roul: When somebody talks to me lovingly or when I listen to Bible devotions I change my mood.

Renjan: You can change your mood in such occasions. Thus you can make another better relationship with the guilt feeling, that it may not knock you down.

Roul: It's so difficult.

Renjan: You think it's so difficult. At the same time you can change your mood as a response to good relationships and good Bible devotions.

Roul: Yes, I can [Silence]. That guilt feeling catches me and put me in a different mood.

Renjan: So?

Roul: I want to escape.

Renjan: What can you do to escape from the problem?

Roul: I will kick it away when it comes to knock me down.

Renjan: Like a soccer ball.

Roul: Yes, with prayer, with God's power. For that I need assistance. Your devotions are helping me a lot.

Renjan: Thus you can keep the problem away for ever.

Roul: I want to write something. After sometime I will come back to you.

Renjan: Ok, Roul.

Some time later Roul came back to me with a poem written on a piece of paper which he had collected from the street ministries' office. He recited the poem to me. As he started reciting, others of the homeless people came near and listened. At the end everybody applauded Roul for his poem. It reads:

I GIVE ALL I HAVE  
I JUST THROW ALL AWAY  
4 A CHANCE 2 WALK WITH YOU  
THROUGH THE HEAVEN'S GATE  
THAT'S WHY I'M THANKING YOU  
4 YOUR LOVE AND GRACE  
I DON'T DESERVE THESE BLESSINGS  
THAT YOU GAVE TO ME  
DEAR GOD, AS A HUMBLE MAN  
I COME TO YOU LIKE A CHILD,  
IN NEED OF YOUR KNOWLEDGE,  
YOUR GUIDANCE AND YOUR PROTECTION GOD  
I KNOW IAM SINNING.  
I AM A MAN  
DEAR GOD IT'S ME  
I'M SORRY, SO SORRY  
4 NOT LIVING FOR LORD  
I PROMISE FROM THIS DAY ON  
I'M LIVING 4 YOU GOD  
WITHOUT MY MEAN, NOTHING WAYS.

#### **4.4.6 Who will help me?**

John: Hi, Rev!

Renjan: Hi, John, How are you?

John: Fine, thank you.

Renjan: Did you go to Centurion?

John: I was planning to go, but I didn't get money.

Renjan: So you dropped the plan.

John: I didn't drop the plan, if I get money I will go.

Renjan: You want to seek other possibilities to get a job.

John: Yes, but who will help me?

Renjan: You worry that nobody is there to help you. Did you ask somebody to help you?

John: I asked some people, but they didn't help me.

Renjan: You think that nobody will help you?

John: I don't think so.

Renjan: If somebody helps you what would be your life then?

John: I will go to Centurion. I am sure that I will get a job there. Then I will go to my wife and kids.

Renjan: Then you can have the fellowship with your wife and kids.

John: Yes, I am missing them now. I have to go back and see them. But now I can't go back. I don't have money to travel; I don't have money to buy food for them.

Renjan: The money matters, is it?

John: Really. Without money we cannot do anything, even we cannot move.

Renjan: Is that money is the most important factor in life?

John: No, love is important.

Renjan: You love your family?

John: A lot.

Renjan: Do you love your situation now?

John: No, I love a better situation for me.

Renjan: Better means?

John: Having a job, having money and taking care of my family.

Renjan: So there is such a possibility.

John: I believe that. Somebody will help me and I will go to Centurion and will get a job.

Renjan: You love that better situation more.

John: Yes.

Renjan: How did this conversation help you?

John: Before this, I was thinking that nobody is there to help me. Now I have a hope that somebody will help me and I can find a job.

Renjan: You changed to a better attitude.

John: I affirmed my conviction to go to Centurion. It will surely help me. Thanks for the support.

Renjan: It's my pleasure. May God bless you to find the means for your better life.

John: Bye-bye.

#### **4.4.7 Finance matters**

Mzwasi: How are you Pastor?

Renjan: I am ok, and you?

Mzwasi: I am fine, thank you.

Renjan: Did you make some progress in your plans?

Mzwasi: I made some calls to some companies, but they have to take decision and will call me back. But where to call, because I don't have a cell phone.

Renjan: I can do onething; you may give my cell phone number to them. I can receive your calls and inform you.

Mzwasi: That's great. It will help me a lot.

Renjan: You think that everything will be sorted out?

Mzwasi: No, first I have to provide the uniform to the security personnels and to have an office to coordinate the things. For all these things finance is needed.

Renjan: Your problem is finance. How you will manage the finance?

Mzwasi: I know that once I get started the finance will come. I believe that some generous people will help me for the initial investment. Or I will work as a security personal for a while and earn some money for that.

Renjan: Thus you can control your problem.

Mzwasi: Finance is a problem not only for me; it is a common problem of the people in the streets.

Renjan: So you are not alone.

Mzwasi: Yes, I am not alone. I want to help some people in the streets. That's why I wish to start the company.

Renjan: The lack of finance makes you in the similar position with your friends and create a concern for them?

Mzwasi: Yes, I have to help them.



Renjan: Did you share your attitude and vies to them?

Mzwasi: Yes, I did. They are also interested. They cannot support me financially, but they are supporting me morally and mentally.

Renjan: You like that support.

Mzwasi: Yes, I cannot do a business on my own and alone. I need support of others always. There are people to support me. But the government is not supporting me. When I approach the government offices for some loans for my business, they need this document and that, which I cannot give. I am a homeless person.

Renjan: You have regret towards the government.

Mzwasi: They are supporting people who have money.

Renjan: Do you think that government is for the rich people.

Mzwasi: May not be fully, but they are not good to the poor people.

Renjan: Do you like your life as a homeless person?

Mzwasi: I don't like it. I want to have a home as my own. I hope I will.

Renjan: You like such a life having a job, having a home and having supporting friends.

Mzwasi: Yes, that is my hope.

Renjan: I wish all the success for your efforts.

Mzwasi: Thank you.

#### **4.4.8 Hope of companionship**

Renjan: Hi, Patrick!

Patrick: Hellow, how are you?

Renjan: Alright and you?

Patrick: I am ok.

Renjan: How you are managing your life in the street?

Patrick: As I said last time, I am making use of all the opportunities to get food from different organizations.

Renjan: Did you find some friends?

Patrick: Not at all. I am alone.

Renjan: You will not talk to any body?

Patrick: Yes, I am talking to many people, but it is not good to have some friends. God is my only friend.

Renjan: God is your friend and you are God's friend.

Patrick: Yes.

Renjan: If God is your friend, then God is the friend of other people also, isn't it?

Patrick: [smiling]. That's a good idea, so?

Renjan: It is easy to make friends from the company of your friend, God.

Patrick: That's right, but I could not make friends.

Renjan: Are you satisfied in such situation having no friends.

Patrick: I am not satisfied actually.

Renjan: So it is better to have some friends.

Patrick: Good friends should have some qualities.

Renjan: What are the qualities you mean?

Patrick: They should listen to me and to my problems. They should be caring, not cheating. When I share something they have to help me to sort out things, not to put me in a trap.

Renjan: What is the approach of other people when you deal with the people around with your views about friendship.

Patrick: They don't want to be my friends. They cannot promise me hundred percent faithfulness.

Renjan: Your relationship is so demand based and conditional. So what do you think for having friends?

Patrick: I don't know, I have to find good people.

Renjan: In what ways good?

Patrick: I have to make some friends and select good friends from them.

Renjan: That's a great idea. For that you have to make friendships without conditions.

Patrick: I have to; otherwise people will not mingle with me.

Renjan: Are you satisfied in doing so?

Patrick: I am not comfortable, but I think I have to. My loneliness is so severe. I have to have some good friends.

Renjan: Your heart is longing for friendships.

Patrick: Not so much, but it is better to have good friends. They will listen to me and support me in my troubles.

Renjan: Then you will not feel lonely.

Patrick: Fellowship is essential for a healthy life.

Renjan: That is why you feel that it is better to have good friends?

Patrick: Yes.

Renjan: How does this conversation help you in your decisions?

Patrick: This helped me a lot. Before this I didn't even think of having friends.  
During this talk I was changing my mind slowly, that I know now.

Renjan: Are you comfortable with that change of mind?

Patrick: Yes, I am. Thanks for that.

Renjan: That's good. Keep it up.

#### **4.4.9 Seeing a little light ahead**

Michael: Hello! John, how are you?

Renjan: I'm ok, and you?

Michael: Not too bad.

Renjan: Did you visit your family?

Michael: It needs one hundred and twenty Rands to go there and come back.

Also I cannot go to my mother and to my children empty-handed I have to bring something for them. I don't have money.

Renjan: Did you get some job?

Michael: I got some piece job, only for survival.

Renjan: What about your family?

Michael: They are in big problem. I don't know what to do.

Renjan: Can you explain it a little more?

Michael: I said to you that my uncle is making problems. My family believes in ancestors and such things. We are Christians, and have beliefs that my father will disturb us, if we are not pleasing him. He is no more, but his spirit is here.

Renjan: Why should the spirit of your father disturb you all?

Michael: We have to do some rituals to please him, otherwise he will be angry. That is not good.

Renjan: When you think like that, it haunts you?

Michael: My sisters died because of my father's anger. My uncle did that. My father was using my uncle.

Renjan: How do you come to know about this?

Michael: We have that belief in our community and my uncle told us that my father is angry. I know that he will kill my mother also.

Renjan: How does your mother and your family respond to this?

Michael: I phone them always and ask them not to go with my uncle to anywhere. But if they have some sickness, there is nobody to help. That is a problem.

Renjan: In this situation how do you experience being in the streets and away from home?

Michael: I am really struggling. I am struggling to get a job here and I have to go back to my family.

Renjan: Now you don't have a job and you are unable to go back.

Michael: Yes, but yesterday one of my friends said he talked to a man in Cullinan, a suburb of Pretoria, and he is trying to arrange the job of a gardener for me there.

Renjan: If so what would be your story?

Michael: Then my story will be different. No doubt, I will get money and I can go back once in a while to my family and can take care of them.

Renjan: Then what about your relationship with your uncle?

Michael: If I am there he will not make much trouble. I can handle him. But he is not good – very cunning.

Renjan: You can manage your uncle, but will be careful.

Michael: Sure, he is dangerous. If he gets some opportunity he will kill all of us.

Renjan: Now you have a ray of hope that you can lead a better life.

Michael: Without money we cannot survive. Also in the streets it is not good.

There is no dignity. I love to work in the garden. In my home there we have agriculture-maize, vegetables and flowers also. Not too big, but small. I like working in the field. If I get that job in Cullinan, it will help me.

Renjan: May God help you to have a better life.

Michael: Pray for me. Don't forget to pray for my mother and my sisters.

Renjan: Surely I will pray.

Michael: Pray for my uncle that he may become a good man.

Renjan: We can hope for his change.

Michael: Thank you.

Renjan: Bye, Michael.

#### **4.4.10 One day, I will**

Sam: Hi, you are back?

Renjan: Yes, it is good to see you again. How are you Sam?

Sam: I am fine and you?

Renjan: Ok, how is your life now?

Sam: I was waiting for you to talk to you. I asked to Lizy yesterday when you would come. She said you will come today.



Renjan: How are your kids and your mother?

Sam: My kids are growing, they are smart girls. My mother is still struggling to cope.

Renjan: She is recovering from the shock.

Sam: Getting Ok slowly. To bring up two kids together is really a struggle.

Renjan: You are experiencing that struggle.

Sam: One day I was washing my kids one by one, one of my friends came there and said 'you are good with children'. Then I said to him 'if your wife die leaving two kids to you, you will also be good with children'. I really cried by saying that.

Renjan: What was your feeling at that time?

Sam: He doesn't know my struggle. I know that it was cruel to say like that. But he talked like that and probed me.

Renjan: Did his comment really disturb you.

Sam: It was so painful for me. I was struggling to earn money for my kids and taking pain to help them to grow.

Renjan: Are you regularly going home?

Sam: Almost all the weekends I am trying to go home.

Renjan: How does your mother and family see your experiences?

Sam: Even if they have grief, they are supporting me. They cannot compare my loss and grief. I lost my good wife. It was so painful.

Sam: No doubt. It affects all my life. I changed my life style. It changed my attitude. I was a drunkard, now I am not. I am working hard for my kids.

Renjan: Are you comfortable with this life situation?

Sam: I think I will never be comforted, because that is a great loss.

Renjan: You think it is irreparable.

Sam: Yes, but now I am satisfied that I can live and work for my sweet kids.

Renjan: So you have the dreams about the future of your kids.

Sam: Yes, I have dreams that they will grow as good people. I will work for that. In the midst of all my mental and physical struggles I will do my maximum for them.

Renjan: You are imagining a bright future for them and through that a meaningful life for you.

Sam: My everything is for them.

Renjan: Now your life has some meaning.

Sam: Yes.

Renjan: Are you satisfied in talking to me.

Sam: It is so lovely and nice to talk to you. You are moving with me to my hopeful life.

Renjan: That's good. See you next time.

Sam: Thanks for listening, see you.

Renjan: Ok, bye.

## **4.5 METHODS OF FACILITATING**

### **4.5.1 Cultural difference**

Cultural diversity can be an advantage or a hindrance in the counselling process. In the narrative way of counselling it surely offers a wide range of possibilities, because such diversity allows the story teller to dictate his/her own meaning. In the context of a single culture, no effort is needed to learn cultural stories and particularities. McLeod says of his experience with counselling, "In my own life and work, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of culture, rather than individual psychology, as the starting point for making sense of my own, and other people's, behaviour and actions" (2006:57). When different cultures come together, however, the differences may also be overemphasised. A counsellor has to strive to avoid both extremes, and have broad cultural knowledge and an open mind and so appreciate the values of other people even when those values differ from his/her own. This requires a deep and empathetic understanding of individuals and of the environment in which they have been brought up.

Ethnic and cultural diversity is one of the characteristics of South Africa. This is why Archbishop Desmond Tutu called South Africa the Rainbow Nation. This imagery rightly signifies the cultural and ethnic diversity found in the country and

its ideal blending together. In the apartheid era, cultural diversity was exploited for the benefit of the oppressive minority. “[T]he political ideology of apartheid was designed precisely to exploit the reality of ethnic diversity to further the socio-economic and political interests of the dominant whites” (Maimela 1996:89). Freedom in South Africa has opened the immense possibilities of cultural diversity. How far these have been and will be used for the development of the nation is a matter for debate.

The people coming to the Street Centre are homeless people from the streets. They come from different parts of South Africa, or from neighbouring countries. They represent a range of cultural backgrounds and ethnic identities. Their responses to their problems are moulded by their identities and particular cultural backgrounds. I am a facilitator from another cultural background which is entirely different from South African culture. My Indian cultural background, of course, did create some problems and hindrances in my communication with the youth, but was not a total barrier to communication; in another way it helped me as facilitator and the young people as story tellers to open our minds to the wide possibilities offered by other cultures. “South Africa is a country of astonishing creativity, and it offers almost endless opportunities for the traveller interested in the arts. Perhaps this artistic richness has something to do with the country’s traumatic past, but most certainly it has been stimulated, too, by the country’s huge cultural diversity” (Gordimer 2005:7). Conversation between two persons from different cultures opens up possibilities for constructing a variety of meanings. A reader, for example, reads and understands the meaning of a text according to his/her cultural and social expectations. “A reader interprets the text – finds meaning in it – on the basis of how it fits or challenges her expectations. In constructing the text’s meaning, she finds her horizon of expectations changing as well” (Griswold 1994:83). In conversation and counselling interviews the story teller reads his/her life text, finds new horizons of expectations and searches for the meaning of his/her experiences through alternate stories. Thus

the stories of other cultures can help the story teller to see the problem differently and equip him/her for a better relationship with the problem.

#### **4.5.2 Confusing identity**

A sense of identity is one of the essentials in the personality of every human being. “Identity” is the sum and substance of the sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops. “During adolescence, individuals sense more clearly their uniqueness as people and at the same time experience more intensely their relatedness to a larger whole” (Xavier 1987:131). As a person develops through various mental stages, he/she experiences a variety of issues related to friendship, sexual orientation, career, group loyalties, value systems and religious identification. Each person has to find suitable roles in these experiences and integrate them properly. Particular experiences which are not helpful for proper integration into social experiences can result in identity confusion.

In the South African context, many people who are now youth were born under the oppressive regime of apartheid, and were adolescents when of the country gained and began to come to terms with freedom. Their identity formation thus involved a shift from slavery to freedom. This freedom was gained, contrary to the expectations of many black people, not by war but through peaceful negotiation and a policy of reconciliation, instigated largely by Nelson Mandela. Black South Africans regained the cultural legacy of thousands of years. But this transition was not without confusion, not necessarily in a political sense but rather in a psychological sense, which was the beginning for the healing process of the community. “As we seek to know the truth about our divided past nothing is more painful than confronting the terrible hurts that we inflicted on each other during the last decades of apartheid rule. But the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has shown us, beyond what anyone could have foreseen, the power of the truth to heal” (Mandela 1997:81).

Such experiences will with or without their knowledge affect the development stages of the people of the nation. This may result in identity confusion. One symptom of this confusion is the tendency to violence so common among South African youth at the moment. A sense of community and their role in that community is needed to resolve this identity confusion. "The real legitimization for this can only be effected through a culture of rights in a humane society that is respectful of individuals and groups; a culture of peace between its diverse communities that is sustained by consensus not force; a sense of community that gives persons a feeling of individuality, participation and agency in the human community" (Heredia 2005:653). In some African traditional cultures various rituals and feasts mark the beginning of adulthood. Circumcision of young people is an accepted initiation rite in many African ethnic groups as the entrance to their adulthood. Youth is the preparatory stage for this maturity. However, these practices of orientation to adulthood and to the community have been greatly weakened because of the effects of modernity and urbanisation, with consequent negative effects for many of South Africa's young people.

Many of the young people I talked with suffer from identity confusion. But most of them have not turned to crime or violence. They are struggling to be better and trying to define their identity. Some of them have resolved this confusion with the help of the community around them, and now have the personal understanding to withstand difficulties. Most never had enough opportunities in their adolescence for proper role integration and healthy community experience. One result was that they became homeless and jobless. Part of their struggle to redefine their identities is retelling their stories, through which process they gain a new consciousness about their selves and hope for alternate and better life experiences in the future. My experiences with the young homeless people taught me that they are aware of their responsibilities to their families and society, but are powerless to integrate these various roles. Through the helping sessions many of them were able to envision a new role and its life possibilities.

Exactly how and to what degree they resolved their identity confusions is not important here. Through the narrative journey they are moving towards a better identity and better self. They are growing to a better relationship with their problems and equipping themselves to deal with these. These processes will surely create a stronger sense of self-worth in them and give them a sense of direction in life.

#### **4.5.3 Towards a better understanding**

The problems faced by the young people are becoming an integral part of their personality. Their cultural and social setting teaches them to think that these problems are part of their lives and that they are fully responsible for these problems. This can lead to their forming a negative conception of their character, nature and worth. Various terms used by the homeless youth, such as “powerless”, “helpless”, “no dignity”, “no other options”, “loneliness” etc. show this thinking. “When people experience hardship within our culture there are many invitations for them to see themselves as the problem, as deficient in some way, and to take on a dominant story about themselves as a ‘failure’ or being ‘to blame’” (White & Denborough 1998:3). This dominant story then begins to dictate their behaviour and their relationship with society following a negative pattern, and leads to further “powerlessness”, “helplessness” and “hopelessness”. In narrative counselling, the facilitator helps the story teller to see the problem as separate from his/her personality. Through the helping process the story teller enters into a new relationship with the problem. The basic concept behind this new relationship is that the person is not the problem; the problem is the problem. This process is called ‘externalization’. “Externalising conversations, which occur all the time in narrative therapy, are ways of speaking that separate problems from people” (Morgan 2000:17). By helping the person to name his/her problem, the facilitator gives him/her the opportunity to deal with the problem properly and move to a new alternate story for his/her life.

The homeless youth in Pretoria face various problems which have brought them to the streets. Problematic cultural, ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds may dominate their stories. These scripts and understandings form the discourses that control the young people's attitudes and life narratives. In my experience with the young people, I learnt not to try to compel them to name their problems. In some cases this did happen, but in others, this naming would have interrupted the journey. Rather, I found it more useful to listen for the unique outcomes of their stories, which are revealed by key words. These can be taken as the name of the problem and used to tackle the problem. This process of identifying key words is of course not purely objective; it rather evolved out of my journey with each story teller, as my cultural stories and background interacted with theirs.

#### **4.5.4 Language and facilitating**

Language can be considered as a carrier of meaning. "It is the primary medium for communicating the highest qualities of human nature. It is through language that parents convey messages about the world, God, others, and the child herself. Humans talk about needs, values, goodness and sin, goals and the satisfaction of goals. Conversation makes available a world in which the young child can act, and helps the child develop a sense of her own identity" (Johnson 1997:160). As language is the medium for communication, its practical use for communication is important. Here a post-modern approach is useful. According to Derrida, "there is no magic language...The notion of magic language is the notion of a system of thoughts or meanings that stand behind 'natural' human language as the meanings expressed by the terms of the natural language" (Wheeler III 2000:217). This traditional assumption about language is questioned in Derrida's theory of deconstruction. The traditional view of meaning denies the usefulness or even the possibility of further interpretations of a text or experience, because its meaning is fixed. The deconstructive view insists that no



such fixed meaning exists. Words that facilitate the interpretation of experiences allow a conversation to be deconstructed, and various interpretations teased out. Thus using facilitative language does not involve correcting the experiences of the teller according to the meaning desired by the facilitator. Rather, the facilitator helps the story teller to tell and interpret his/her own experiences from different points of view so as to open up diverse and deeper meanings.

A particular word in one language has its own particular meaning which can have very different connotations from the word used in another language. Language itself is a product of culture. Culture can be defined as the interactions within a society. Thus language is intimately involved in social interaction, and language differences and the social construction of meaning can be both barriers to communication and social interaction and important possibilities for understanding a diversity of meanings. “People may exist in multiple communities through multiple networks, but along these networks they still share meanings with one another” (Griswold 1994:152). People in specific contexts are able to and should have the right to interpret their cultural objects and assign them unique meanings.

The homeless people in Pretoria comprise people from different parts of South Africa, belonging to various different cultural milieus. Though English was the common language for the counselling sessions, the young people from Tswana, Sotho, Sepedi or Afrikaans culture interpret their ideas of homelessness and their experiences according to these cultures’ expectations, discourses and languages. “Although the homeless have to make up their own culture and identities with few resources and limited precedents, most interactions that transmit culture and form identity call on a known and shared history of the community” (Griswold 1994:56). This community feeling helps meaningful communication, and allowed me to explore the meanings of the young people’s stories through empathetic listening to their descriptive storytelling. Thus the language differences we experienced actually became a blessing in my

interaction with the young people, helping to uncover the different cultural meaning of basic concepts and experiences. The young people all experience homelessness, economic hardship, grief, anger and helplessness share these through their own language and search for meanings for these experiences in a homeless community setting.

Facilitating in this counselling experience does not involve trying to conceptualise and express their experiences and attitudes in another language, Instead the facilitator helps the story teller to envision the meaning of his/her experience in his/her own cultural/language setting and articulate this in the language common to listener and story teller. Of course we have to admit that a concept clearly articulated in one language can sometimes be inadequately expressed in another language. But through continuous interaction between facilitator and story teller, this problem can be minimised as the facilitator learns to read the meaning of a concept in the story teller's cultural world. I was able to maintain such continuous interaction with the homeless youth at the Street Centre in Pretoria.

For the purposes of this report I have described two sessions of story telling with each informant to gives insight into this research project and the themes and meanings uncovered. My search was not selective but rather let these themes and meaning evolve during continuous interaction within the homeless community in Pretoria. The dominant discourses involved were not listened for deliberately, but rather arose through experience as part of my narrative counselling interactions with the homeless youth.

#### **4.5.5 Feedback from the story tellers**

In the Street Centre setting, arranging a session for feedback from the story tellers about this report is not relevant or possible. Some feedback was obtained in the course of the data collection, however, since all the young people voluntarily shared their stories with me, and corrected my understanding and

gave additional information to clarify points when necessary during the course of our sessions. As co-researcher I selected words to communicate back to the story tellers the meanings which I understood from their stories. I tried to make empathetic responses and asked facilitative questions. If the meaning which I had gathered was not correct, the tellers would intervene or respond and correct it. Also, I asked the young people to describe their experiences of telling their own stories and also about their understanding of the story telling process. This gives me real feedback about their stories and their experiences, and helped me to move with them towards new stories.

## 4.6 CONCLUSION

The counselling sessions described in this chapter show the movement from unique outcomes to preferred stories. The description offered here may suggest that this shift was sudden, but this is only an effect of having to give selected excerpts of my interactions with the young people. Though these excerpts are reproduced *verbatim* from the counselling sessions, the sections are stories retold by me for the purpose of this research. I did not consciously twist the sessions or omit important aspects of our conversations. But nobody can construct a story on his/her own; each story has multiple authors. “No one ever fully becomes the author of her/his own story; any such assumption can only lead back into the illusions of control, individual autonomy, isolated selfhood, and single truth. The person goes forth instead to join with others in the universal human action of multiple authorship” (Parry & Doan 1994:43). So the story I present here is a valid interpretation of my experience with and the experiences of the homeless youth. This co-authoring is unavoidable considering the nature of my journey with the homeless youth. As I came to understand the meanings of their stories and shared this with the story tellers, they travelled to new stories with new meanings.