

From Interpersonal Links to Webs of Relations: Creating Befriending Relationships With Survivors of Torture and of War

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(originally published in the Journal of Social Work Research, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2001 © 2001 Springer Publishing Company)

Survivors of torture and of war have experienced a fracture in human relationships resulting from violations of their human rights. How can services contribute to building the capacity for reconstructing relationships and reclaiming community ties with this population? This article reports on the results of an exploratory participatory study conducted between the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT) and two academic social work faculties that documented the successful practices of the Volunteer Befriending Program at CCVT. We identify features and levels of intervention that are effective for this reconstructive work, providing insights for the design of appropriate practice evaluations.

Torture is practiced widely in the world. The U.S. Committee for Refugees indicates that 13.5 million refugees crossed borders in 1998, and 30 million were internally displaced (USCR, 2000). Conservative estimates assess that, on average, between 20%-30% of those refugees are survivors of torture (with higher figures for certain countries), and a larger number has been exposed to war situations. The figures on torture are higher still, once we include those who have not fled (The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims, 2000). Canada is one of the resettlement countries that, in 1998 and 1999, granted permanent residence to respectively 22,663 and 24,363 refugees. These figures include convention refugees, the humanitarian designated class program, and privately sponsored refugees. They do not include persons seeking

asylum, or special emergency programs, such as the evacuation of the Kosovars (Canadian Council for Refugees, 1999).

The circumstances of collective violence raise the unique challenge of understanding how best to serve populations that have experienced a deep fracture in human relationships as a result of fundamental violations of their human rights. The issue we address here is: how can programs contribute to building the capacity for reconstructing relationships and reclaiming community ties with these populations? We report on the results of an exploratory participatory study documenting the successful practices of a core settlement program for refugees who survived torture or war. The report alerts us to the complexity of the task, and begins to identify features and levels of intervention that enter into such reconstructive work. It leads us to reconsider how to design appropriate practice evaluations for such programs.

The Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT) is the leading non-governmental organization in Canada and the first such centre in North America. Located in Toronto, it was founded in 1977 by a group of physicians, educators and community activists as an offshoot of Amnesty International and incorporated in 1983. Historically, the centre has served groups from Southern and Central America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia, and recently from Bosnia and Kosovo, providing services to more than 10,000 survivors since its creation. In 1998-1999 alone, more than 700 clients originating from 60 different countries were served by the Centre (CCVT, 1999).

The CCVT has deliberately chosen a community approach: it responds to torture as a collective disruption, and fosters community building to counter the effects of trauma and dislocation. A founding member of the Canadian Network for Health and Human Rights of Survivors of Torture and Organized Violence, and member of the Canadian Council for Refugees, CCVT works to create awareness of torture in Canada and internationally. It provides direct services through counseling, mutual support groups, crisis intervention, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL), art therapy, and a children's program, complemented by a network of medical and legal staff, and ties to mainstream services. CCVT relies on an important network of volunteers and includes a Volunteer Befriending Program matching volunteers with clients.

A research partnership between CCVT, the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto and the School of Social Work at York University was set up to study the nature of social ties and community building among survivors of torture, and the responsiveness of programs. This led to the 1997-1998 study of the Befriending Program, entitled "Link-by-Link: Creating Community with Survivors of Torture."

By "creating a therapeutic bond with the community" (Abai, 1994), the Befriending program plays an important role in resettlement and integration. It focuses on the ability of survivors to establish new ties. It is also a mechanism for introducing and socializing newcomers to everyday activities in the host community, and for making connections with local institutions. This is its mandate.

The initial information available to us was that the program was a core service whose practices had never been documented. Its functioning rested on the implicit knowledge of staff members

accumulated over years of practice. The study was to document the actual realities of how the program operated, reflect on the findings, derive recommendations for making improvements, and disseminate the learnings. All we knew was that at some undefined stage, a client and a volunteer were matched by staff. Each case was dealt with individually. Volunteers seemed to come from word of mouth or after being exposed to a public education event. There was a structure in place for them. They were screened for their motivation and given an initial orientation and training session, and received a volunteer guide. Periodic meetings with volunteers were held throughout the year around issues of concern with invited speakers. The staff spoke initially about the vulnerability of the survivors, little was known about the responses of the volunteers, or the staff's actual input.

Although the program is rather unique, it shares with others the building of ties among strangers. Currently, the building of community ties does not take place only among proximate neighbours. Increasingly, social networks develop between people who are initially strangers (Wellman, 1999). They are “rather loosely bounded, sparsely knit, ramifying networks of specialized ties” (Wellman, 1999, p. 18) that change with circumstances. Growing trends in migration amplify this phenomenon. Social networks are seen as a useful mechanism of support, and Befriending programs have been designed to strengthen vulnerable populations in the community - such as the voluntary befriending of young mothers to assist them and their children (Cox, 1993); volunteers befriending the elderly to ease emotional distress and prevent suicide (Law, 1997); befriending persons with learning disabilities (Hughes & Walden, 1999), or women with chronic depression in the inner-city (Harris, Brown & Robinson, 1999). Here are indications that such programs are successful (see also Klein, Cnaan & Whitecraft, 1998), particularly when they complement professional interventions. Some authors highlight the need for closely monitoring these relations (Hughes & Walden, 1999). However, the difficulties of establishing befriending relationships between newcomer refugees, survivors of torture, and volunteers who are generally members of the host country still pose a unique challenge.

The resettlement literature persistently indicates the essential need for community support for refugees during their initial phase of settlement (Beiser, 1999; Moore, 1982; Stein, 1986). Jerusalem, Hahn and Schwarzer (1996) showed how East Germans who had moved as refugees to West Germany, prior to the country's unification, responded to the dislocation of their old networks and accompanying sense of disruption, by actively seeking new ones. This example underscores the link between interpersonal ties and shared collective bonds. When the collective fabric is frayed, or radically transformed, the basis for interpersonal ties is seriously shaken, and relations need to be rebuilt on a new basis. Yet, people who come from communities at war may not have a readily accessible community, or will avoid segments of the community that have been on the opposing side of the conflict (e.g. Takeda, 1997; Wahlbeck, 1998), making the building of ties a complex question. Beiser (1999) explicitly warned against imposing forms of ties that may not be appropriate with the experience of trauma, nor culturally adapted.

Befriending programs with refugees have not been assessed, yet they provide an opportunity to understand patterns of relationship building with the population and design appropriate responses. Our research aimed to identify the necessary features of an effective befriending relationship with survivors of torture and of war, and the service components that facilitate and sustain these relationships; and conversely, the conditions under which such relationships fail at

an early stage or are simply discontinued. The questions raised by the Link-by-Link study were: Under what conditions and in what ways can befriending relationships take place with survivors of war and/or torture? What are the activities and dynamics of these relationships? What meanings do these hold for clients and for volunteers? What are staff practices and roles in establishing and supporting these relationships, and what is the broader contribution of the agency? Lastly, how does befriending facilitate the development of ties in the community, and does the community context sustain or constrain relationship building?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This was the first time the Centre had allowed research to be conducted out of concern for the safety of the participants. Our research partnership built upon a long-standing relationship between CCVT and the academic researchers. The project adhered to the Ethical Guidelines for Research developed by CCVT (CCVT, 1996). Research activities were to be congruent with the mode of functioning of the agency to ensure the participants' safety. We adopted the principle on non-intrusion and avoidance of retraumatization. We did not explore the specifics of traumatic experiences, nor did we set up activities that could trigger memory associations. Initial team meetings between the university/community researchers and the volunteer program coordinator were held to operationalize the study. An Advisory Committee was established, consisting of 3 clients, 3 volunteers, and 3 staff members. Staff were consulted on all phases. The initial phase underscored the necessity of building trusting relationships. A detached researcher stance being antithetical to this orientation, the team developed instead an ethics of engagement or witnessing (Chambon, Abai, Dremetsikas, McGrath, & Shapiro, 1998a; Simon & Eppert, 1997).

Participants were contacted by staff and only those willing to participate did so. Staff excluded clients who were too vulnerable to engage in an exchange with unknown persons. Staff does not to include the most recently arrived clients. The clients who participated had been in Canada a minimum of three years, up to ten years and told of relations that, in some instances, reached a span of several years. Staff invited participants who had shown different patterns of relations and experienced various circumstances. This is what we were looking for in our exploratory study. The findings yielded rich case material on a wide range of befriending relationships, although not technically "representative" of the full spectrum of situations (as is the case with non-random samples). To avoid over reporting successful cases, the Advisory Committee members included participants who had experienced non-successful befriending relationships. Volunteers who took part in the focus group had befriended more than one client and reported on diverse experiences. Additional in-depth interviews targeted non-successful befriending relationships.

Overall, 51 adults participated in the study (31 women and 20 men), out of diverse national backgrounds: Afghanistan, Benin, Bolivia, Bosnia, Canada, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Gambia, Germany, Great Britain, Guatemala, Iran, Jamaica, Liberia, Mexico, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Tanzania. All 18 clients were foreign born. A regional breakdown shows that 8 were from the Middle East and Asia, 4 from Africa, and 6 from Central and South America. The staff members were just as diverse: 2 were from the Middle East and Asia, 2 from Africa, 3 from Central America, 1 from Eastern Europe, and 2 were Canadian-born. The volunteers were the least diverse; 18 were born in Canada (Anglo-Canadian) and of the remainder, 2 were from Asia and the Middle East, 1 from Africa, 1 from Central America, and 1

from Western Europe. These types of profiles are typical of the constituencies at the Centre. The numbers were too small to tease out cultural or cross-national differences in the findings.

The exploratory design was initially planned with a naturalistic-type methodology, but the methodology was adapted to fit in with the workings of the organization. It became more interpretive and process oriented and incorporated an explicit dialogical dimension (Kvale, 1996). Data were collected through several procedures:

1. A focus group meeting was held with each of the constituencies: clients, volunteers, and staff, to elicit their distinct perspectives. Clients and volunteers were asked about their connection to CCVT and their involvement with the befriending program; the development of the befriending relationship (expectations, stages, activities, and meaning); cultural issues; help seeking around befriending; the role of staff; and what facilitated or inhibited the relationship. The client focus group had 11 participants (7 females, 4 males), the volunteer group had 14. Staff were asked about their involvement and key decision points, their general views on challenges and obstacles to befriending, and on successful versus non-successful relationships. Eight staff members participated. A feedback session was held with each group for validation and complementary interpretation.
2. Seven “triadic interviews” were held with befriending pairs (5 female, 2 male) and a staff member. This format was chosen because it replicated the befriending relationship. Participants were asked to reflect on key moments and circumstances in their relationship, and on the meaning of befriending. The interviews elicited unique episodes and rich narratives.
3. Two individual interviews were held with volunteers who had experienced unsuccessful relations to examine some of the obstacles to befriending.

Given the diversity of the participants in the group situations, the interviews were held predominantly in English. Interpreters were available (except for 2 triads) and intervened whenever participants switched languages. In the triadic interviews, the use of the English language replicated the actual situation of the befriending relationship which takes place in the host language. Interviews with volunteers and staff were audiotaped and transcribed. Interviews with (or including) clients were not taped, in response to the clients’ requests and following the advice of staff. Instead, note taking was allowed during the meeting, complemented with field notes.

The data were analyzed through a combination of means. Qualitative categorical coding was conducted and the coding scheme revised, following a grounded theory approach, until a recurrently consistent structure was achieved. Data and the analytical categories were entered in the compatible software program, NUD·IST (Weitzman & Miles, 1995). Since the weakness of any coding system is that it decontextualizes units of meaning, key narratives were identified in the text and analyzed concurrently to capture context. The analysis was conducted phase by phase by a minimum of two researchers who met to share their interpretations. Dialogue among researchers was primarily used to enhance the interpretive work and not simply to verify interpretations (Kvale, 1996; van Manen, 1997).

In summary, the data were obtained and analyzed from the perspectives of the various constituencies. Positive and negative case materials were examined to identify helpful and unhelpful conditions for best practices, with some informants acting as “controls” in relation to their own experience of successful and unsuccessful relations. The diverse national backgrounds of the participants widened the cultural scope of the study. The participatory approach enhanced its contextual relevance. The exploratory nature of the study helped bring out a wealth of findings. The limitations of the study are related to the conditions of its feasibility and the sensitivity of the issue. It is unclear whether such populations can be “studied” in more conventional ways.

Findings were clustered along three dimensions that can be thought of as concentric circles moving outward from interpersonal links between clients and volunteers to larger webs of relations at the organizational and the community levels. They will be reported in this order, drawing on the participants’ own words.

THE BEFRIENDING RELATIONSHIP

Befriending is a unique relationship that is “constructed” in the context of settlement. It is artificial at the outset, an encounter between strangers who would not otherwise meet, a tie forged between individuals who do not share a common collective history. It is the circumstances of the collective trauma that led the newcomers to seek asylum in the host country. The challenge of befriending is that, given the constructed nature of this relationship, it aims to make “something like friendship” happen.

Volunteer/befriender: This is like a constructed friendship, as opposed to one that’s sort of organic, the way it normally is in life.

Volunteer/befriender: You can’t decide in terms of other (friendships). [It’s a] more delicate process, certainly starting out. It’s all improvised. Confronted with those kinds of choices, [I] hope that I do the right thing.

Each relationship is unique. What people do within that relationship varies widely. There are no set agendas. Befriending relations are characterized by a broad mix of activities and sharing, including:

- Socializing, drinking coffee, sharing recreational activities, celebrating holidays and birthdays;
- Being there, listening to difficult tellings of experience; staying together when there are crises and working through resolutions, being available to any emotional or instrumental need;
- Orienting newcomers to resources and services, accompanying them. This often turns into becoming activists, advocating for newcomers, recruiting professionals and other resources, whether during immigration hearings or any other critical institutionally based situations.

Client/friend: She started to teach me things. She helped me with immigration, office forms, school registration for the kids, how to buy cheap clothes.

Client/friend: He encouraged me to get licensed and encouraged me in my course. "Don't stay home and think about the past. You have to think about the future."

Client/friend: She pushed me and I was shut up so much and I didn't want to go out. She has given me so much confidence... She took me out for pizza and to play ice hockey. She'd say, "There is a life out there." She and (staff) have given me lots of confidence.

Trauma and Befriending

Befriending survivors of torture is different from establishing any friendship. Torture, and other forms of organized violence, constitute a "fracture" in people's lives, as our respondents have told us (Chambon et al., 1998b). The issue of trust is central to the notion of self. It informs a personal sense of belonging, and a collective sense of community (see Herman, 1997). As discussed by Sveass (1994), torture and war create havoc in the organization of meaning about the self and the self in relation. This is the cognitive and existential nature of this violence. Collective trauma creates a deep mistrust in relating. This affects relationships in ways that people are not always aware of while it is happening. In the course of befriending, the shadow of trauma can block the sense of availability in daily activities. These effects are not constant, they shift. Clients have mentioned how important it is to understand their fluctuations of mood and to demonstrate patience in the relationship.

Whereas service providers were primarily concerned with the vulnerability of clients, the study revealed that parallel processes take place between the survivor and the volunteer around safety and trust. This question is very much present during the initial meeting. It lingers on and can always be triggered at later points through new events.

Client/friend: Some people have suffered at the hands of friends who betrayed trust. It could be very scary, because bad things happen. If I'm trying to trust you and you're telling me come close to someone again, you may not see me next time... People have suffered there through what they told someone, so let me see who's this friend and what they going to offer.

Client/friend: Sometimes you can't trust people because you're new in this country. You don't know what is good, what is bad, what is happening. These volunteers almost take my hand.

Connecting-Disconnecting.

Primary insecurity and lack of trusting relations create a disconnection at the individual, group and community levels that have a ripple effect on later dynamics of engagement, disengagement, and the troublesome nature of reengagement (Barclay, 1998; Levy, 1999; Moore, 1982). In our study, we found that the past connections and disconnections survivors have experienced affect new connections they attempt to make. Survivors are particularly sensitive to various forms of disconnection. This requires a flexible yet supportive and sustained pattern of relation.

Volunteers can also become highly invested in establishing secure connections with their friends, seeing this as their major task. Fluctuations in the quality of the ties with their friends can affect

them deeply, and lead them to question their own usefulness. This complex dynamic was made visible during the research itself.

Telling and Listening.

Torture and war are highly emotionally charged experiences though they often remain invisible. The sensitive tasks of telling and listening are a source of deep concern for clients and volunteers. Clients worry about what volunteers want to know about them. Volunteers are concerned about what they need to know in entering this relationship. The rule of the program is that the decision to disclose has to come from the individual survivor to make telling safe. Staff offer the following advice:

We are not going to tell you about the client's experience (which would create) a sense of being a voyeur. If you are patient enough, give them the time to adjust. Some experience made them leave their country. When volunteers are willing to hear from their friend, somebody [is] willing to listen to the client, it validates their experience of trauma, injustice. It shows that there is somebody who is concerned.

Volunteers worry about being able to listen, and wonder how best to respond. Listening is a powerful experience:

Interviewer: What's the best part of your friendship? Client: She is a good listener.

Volunteer/befriender: When I met my friend at the CCVT, it was totally spontaneous. And where she started to tell me about her life experience, and she was crying. And I didn't feel like stress, I just felt like this friendship required that I listen. And that I just encouraged her and it was very comfortable. We just felt that bond and at the end of our conversation, we just laughed and talked and agreed that we wanted to be friends.

At times, clients have expressed their reluctance of transmitting too heavy a burden to the listener:

Client/friend: (to befriender) In the beginning, I was afraid to share my feelings in a negative way and that could harm you. If it happened, I'm sorry.

Listening with respect is a way of breaking isolation and validating the person's experience (Herman, 1997). From the participants' responses, it is important to pace listening so as to avoid pressure.

Giving, Receiving, and Mutuality.

Befriending is not a service relationship. Although it is asymmetric, it cannot be uniquely one-directional, with the refugee as sole recipient. Participants have told us that those relationships that are maintained are ones in which there is some reciprocity and mutuality. This finding is consistent with studies on the delicate balance of friendship (Krackhardt & Kilduff, 1999). Sharing can take many forms, from inviting each other to coffee, to having joint activities, sharing ideas, feelings, or wishes; it can involve the personal or the spiritual realms. Often, it is after some time has elapsed that each partner is able to reflect on the mutuality of experiences, and comes to realize that each one has given and has received.

Staff: They show respect, yes, they show respect that they have for each other.

Volunteer/befriender: My friend was very friendly, when I brought my kids to the day care. She had some colourful hair clips for her granddaughter. My daughter liked them. She bought some more clips - I still see them. She was very friendly.

Volunteer/befriender: He had shared about prison and we thought about writing about it - the spiritual something that happens in surviving in prison. I don't know where it comes from, but just being able to share something on a spiritual level meant a deeper level. Meeting his family, feeling his support around personal things for me. And another thing is humour - we have the same sense of humour it turns out and it cements friendship. So I have been taken into a world that surpasses anything in my world. The thing we've talked about doing is to go to (friend's country) together, to share his world, his culture.

Negotiating relational boundaries is understandably a recurrent issue that needs to be understood in the context of befriending. In their deep wish to heal the relational fractures and undo the harm that was done, volunteers may try to be fully available to their friends. In doing so, they struggle with the need to set clearer boundaries to their role and to limit their availability.

Dissatisfactions and failures in befriending relationships often stemmed out of the difficulty for the participants to transform their relationship from a constructed tie to one of friendship. Unidirectional service-type exchanges without a shared interest did not fare well over time. Befriending relations did not survive incompatible expectations or troublesome negotiations over interpersonal boundaries. Volunteers could become overwhelmed by the burden of carrying the shadow of the trauma, while survivors might experience that too much was asked of them.

Cultural Dynamics

Culture is another dimension which plays into the collective trauma. Patterns and meanings of friendship are very much shaped by culture and affect the befriending relationship. For clients who come from cultures in which socializing relies on the in-group, and is not conducted with strangers, a befriending relation deviates from this pattern. The expectation of intense network activity for some participants may not correspond with the volunteer's habits. Patterns of interaction can lead to misunderstandings, such as in times and schedules. Patterns of gendered relations can also be an area of contention.

Cultural difference can engender mutual learning and sharing for clients and volunteers. Conversely, cultural distance can engender "cultural diffidence." The study showed that cultural values and life styles between client and volunteer that are too wide apart, may not be easily bridged. Some befriending relations have broken down for that reason. As volunteers encourage the client to join them in certain activities and environments, the client can feel pressured to adopt ways which are not compatible with her/his own, and is left wondering whose cultural agenda is being met in the relationship. These cultural responses compound the previously discussed dynamics of connection-disconnection based on trust and betrayal.

Settlement

The circumstances of settlement further shape the participants' responses. The primary concern for the refugees is whether they will be granted legal status from the Immigration and Refugee Board. This critical decision shapes the future course of settlement.

Volunteer/befriender: The immigration was a terrible time, very difficult, very stressful. She was afraid they would keep her youngest child and send the others home.

Obtaining immigrant status is a turning point that reorganizes the befriending relationship. The status of the refugee is enhanced. For some, the relationship can continue on a more equal footing, and acquire greater stability. Befriending has shifted from a tentative tie to a form of friendship. Others may choose to discontinue the relation at this point in time. For them, befriending has run its course. It has functioned successfully as a transitional relation but is no longer needed as the refugee joins society more fully. These terminations are not comparable to abrupt disconnections that are not accounted for. These distinct patterns respond to different expectations and require differential assessments of what constitutes "success."

LARGER WEBS OF RELATIONSHIPS

Staff and the Centre as a Holding Environment

The befriending relationship occurs within a web of relations that extends beyond the two individuals concerned. Considering the role of staff raises the following questions: What is the place of staff in this relationship? What conditions do the staff provide? At what points do staff intervene and how?

Befrienders and staff take on complementary roles:

Staff: The benefit of this program is tremendous, it helps us because o certain things in the social service field, we would never be able to provide, which a client actually needs, an environment of support. S/he doesn't need just a social worker to tell you: "Fill this application, send it over there, this will give you the right, you have this right and that right." They need this social support and environmental support. This kind of program provides this.

Staff: The befriender program really complements the work I do as a therapist. One of the important things that happen initially is that the client tells the detail of his or her experience and externalizes it, but then they are really ready to go out and begin to relate to people and to live in this country. It's pretty hard for many of them to just strike up a conversation with somebody on the subway or the streetcar. It's wonderful if I can refer them to the befriender coordinator.

Staff offers a bridging role. They contribute to establishing and maintaining the befriending relationship.

Staff: You have to be there in between...one (makes gesture linking two small circles with fingers), is too scary, what if I make a mistake. Can't risk if there is no staff. A befriender can't always hold the relation...Links, whether links of two, can't seem to happen without the circle.

Staff are involved at all stages of the relationship. At first, staff screen the clients' and volunteers' readiness for entering these relationships, and provide initial training and matching. They have acquired an understanding of differentiated needs:

Staff: Some clients don't want to be in the community. Often, especially at the beginning, they are getting to trust. That changes without knowing how, all of a sudden they feel differently, ready to meet people.

Staff: ...there are different groups. Certain clients would need a befriender to access the services. And that's as far as they want it to go. They don't want to share any intimate information, religious practices, nothing... There is another group of clients, they need a shoulder to cry on. There is another group of clients who need nourishment; they are survivors who have to be introduced to a new way of life, for example, rape victims. In their country there is a stigma that if you're raped then your future is completely destroyed. They have to be matched with a strong feminist who knows how to handle or to introduce them to a new way and give them a string...so that they can be able to survive in this society and believe in themselves more than anything else. So it's our rule to see which category this client will fall in and which befriender could suit and match the best to provide the things that we want.

Matching involves interpersonal, social, cultural, or political compatibility. Staff look out for common features in the pair, such as professional background, interests, or spiritual orientation. As with friendship, successful matching includes finding a common ground.

Experiences of befriending are emotionally laden. The initial contact and beginning phase raise expectations and uncertainties for volunteers and clients about whether they can connect and establish a meaningful relationship. Staff are responsible for preparing and facilitating the first meeting, and for monitoring and sustaining the relationship over time. They help respond to queries, uncertainties, and crisis situations. Staff most generally speak the language of the newcomer, and they act as cultural mediators. In that sense, they are closer to the client than the volunteer.

Volunteer/befriender: So you're never alone, whenever you befriend someone, everyone works together, there's not problem. You can always get help. We always work as a team.

Volunteer/befriender: If I had a friend, I wouldn't hesitate to call - names three different staff - any hour of the day or night, if it's that kind of guy out on a ledge going to do something, you know, you can sleep some other time...if it's that kind of crisis.

Staff: Inasmuch as we would like to see ourselves as the staff who act as a bridge between the two of them, sometimes it is the volunteer that is a bridge between the client back to us. Many times, many times, especially during crisis. The volunteer is a bridge to bring back this person for services.

Volunteers told us stories of staff's availability in moments of doubts (role definition, interpersonal communication), and of their active involvement during acute crisis situations,

such as a staff member responding to the volatile situation of a threat of suicide. That situation could not have been handled by a volunteer.

Overall, the nature and intensity of staff's involvement was greater than we had anticipated. Statements made by the respondents, group observations, and our debriefing notes indicated that staff provide a secure, "containing" or "holding environment" (Levy, 1999; Winnicott, 1965). This led us to reconceptualize the befriending relation as a 3-person team in which the staff member is often the spark, the mediator, and the sustainer. Given the multiple challenges of collective trauma, culture and settlement, this made a lot of sense.

As important as they are, the actions of staff do not provide a complete picture of the many ways in which befriending relations are sustained at the Centre. Staff members are themselves supported by a wider web of relations inside the organization. The agency provides the environmental conditions of a "safe house" to counter the sense of betrayal and to enable the befriending relationship to take place:

Volunteer/befriender: It's not the programs, it's the attitude of the place. He (friend) had his identity and his dignity here. I like the parties. Here there's an identity, a community.

The Centre creates a culture of community in which every program is a potential doorway into the other. Befriending is not seen as an isolated resource, but is located within multiple links inside the agency. Clients are encouraged to engage with staff members (ESL instructor, tutors, interpreter, art therapist, or counsellor), and concurrently to seek out a befriending relationship. The agency also organizes informal activities and celebrations that are close to "natural" conditions of socializing in the community. These social events are often the occasion for introducing a befriending pair. The participants do not feel singled out, and instead feel sustained by the collective presence of others.

Volunteer/befriender: That's how my first meeting was too, it was at a party. I think it was a Christmas party. Staff was there and she introduced me to the woman. I knew that she was going to be there and she knew that I was going to be there. And so we got hooked up, but there wasn't a lot of pressure to have a long engaged conversation because there was so much other activity going on. So we just ate together and you know, chatted and exchanged phone numbers, that kind of thing.

A Community Web of Relations

Newcomers are often struck by the lack of tightly knit communities in Canada as compared with their previous experiences. Building these ties becomes essential during resettlement (Fielding, 1999; Frideres, 1997):

Staff: The way people have been living back home is different. When they come here, they are on their own. Here, when you are sick - go see a counsellor, you look for a job - go see a counsellor, you have a conflict - go see a lawyer. Back home, (you go) to community, to a person known by both. Here there's confusion (it's) completely different, the concept of counselling is new.

A web of relationships is created to assist newcomers to settle in their new community (see compatible approaches in Nsamba, Musisi, & Senvewo, 1999; Rahman, 1999). Each link is built, one by one, into a strong, flexible safety net with many points of connection. The befriending relationship can easily include family members through shared activities, particularly when there are children. But there is a limit to which befriending partners will share their informal networks beyond such family ties. A major barrier is confidentiality, the wish to protect survivors from unwanted disclosure. Here again, we encounter the specificity of these relations. We concluded that the sharing of informal networks may not be a realistic indicator of the program's success. What seems to be happening, instead, is a process of transfer. Befriending may not significantly increase the number of informal ties that newcomers gain, but it can increase their capacity to build relations.

Staff: And that's our goal. To pave the way for them to be independent in this society. I mean also that's a door that when they develop that relationship with one Canadian, they know how to develop with others. Because they get introduced to this new culture through that befriender.

Connections to the "outside" include establishing formal links with other organizations. Established links exist through staff, but newcomers may be reluctant to pursue these on their own. The meanings that institutions carry for them are very much related to their institutional knowledge and experiences in their country of origin. Volunteers have thus a definite role to play. By accompanying clients, they facilitate their access to institutions, whether health, education, employment, housing or immigration. Further, institutional arrangements are not always responsive to newcomers. Volunteers act as buffers to a lack of understanding and at times, dismissive, negative, and even discriminatory attitudes from institutional agents (e.g. Potocky, 1996). Volunteers often take on additional responsibility in those institutional encounters, as a natural extension of their relationship:

Volunteer/befriender: Sometimes you have to bang down doors, for people coming new it would be almost impossible to access programs. There was a lot of frustration. We had more luck with two social workers at the child welfare agencies who have been helpful.

Volunteer/befriender: I think when you're a friend you're an advocate!

Volunteers may recruit professional resources from their personal network of acquaintances. They may seek to educate professional staff about newcomers in the school system, for example. Some become active in collective advocacy around immigration and resettlement issues.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our study of the befriending program for survivors of torture and of war at CCVT raises important questions on how to assess the effectiveness - the meaning and measures - of what can be defined as "success" in such programs. Integration in the community means working with people whose past experience has been deeply disrupted by a severe breach of trust in social ties. Such settlement programs aim at much more than facilitating a surface process of adjustment and the development of new ties. Their activities move toward the re-construction of relationships - building the capacity for establishing interpersonal relationships and reclaiming community

connections. This is the complex landscape that is to be evaluated. The knowledge that is assembled needs to bridge the interpersonal dynamic of the befriending relationship with the organizational processes that sustain it, and the outside ties and obstacles that are encountered when reaching out to community resources (Potocky, 1996).

Micro and macro levels are equally implicated in understanding the issues of past betrayals and dynamics of rebuilding, and in developing responsive programs (Martin-Baro, 1989; Wenzel, Pritz, Farkas-Erlacher, & Wurbel, 1998). Evaluating practices entails assessing nested units of analysis: personal, interpersonal, or dyadic, the triadic relations with staff and other sustaining programmatic features, and beyond, the web of relations in the community. The role of staff is essential to facilitate and sustain the link, while more extensive webs of relations within the agency and outside of it are important for integration to take place. While each unit (or level) of analysis can be examined separately, the program's overall effectiveness should be assessed by examining the interdependence of these multilevel dimensions.

At the level of the individual survivor, "success" can take many forms - from the ability to establish ties and draw upon the web of supportive relations, to the capacity of becoming autonomous, moving outside the web and establishing new relations, including the ability to tolerate disruptions. Different measures of success need to be developed to correspond to the different functions and uses made of the befriending relationship (as a mechanism to promote initial adjustment or longer-term friendships). At the interpersonal level, measures of success would need to document the reciprocal dynamics between client and volunteer, their complementary tasks, challenges and strategies. The next level of investigation would be the sustaining exchange between the befriending pair and the staff, assessing the specific skills and mechanisms of support provided by staff (including screening, training and monitoring), along with complementary mechanisms of the organization. Lastly, the community-level network of relations would entail assessing the needs, activities, community responses, and strategies of the participants and the agency in facilitating linkages and overcoming obstacles. The cultural dimension of specificity and difference needs also to be tracked at the interpersonal and institutional levels. In summary, we have identified intersecting processes, both collective and individual. We suggest that designing and evaluating effective practices requires such a multi-level approach. From a resource perspective, resources - and time - are indeed needed to recruit and train volunteers and staff in the complex task of assisting the reconstruction of social ties with survivors of torture and of war. Future research could pursue any of these aspects.

A longitudinal design that would track the befriending relationships would be very helpful to understand the challenges of settlement. Comparing the experiences of clients from different national backgrounds would also be helpful, differentiating them further along gender and generational lines. Pursuing the interface between the micro-level dynamics of the relationship with the "external" informal and institutional ties seems important as well. Further examination of staff strategies (which may also be culturally informed), would also be very useful.

The study has also revealed some significant methodological implications for the conduct of research with this population. Building trusting relationships with the participants was crucial to the inquiry. Placing trust at the centre of research has procedural and attitudinal implications. We recommend: (a) avoiding to elicit traumatizing material; (b) establishing a safe space for the

participants to share their subjective experiences; (c) enhancing the sense of ownership and empowerment of the participants through a participatory approach (Ristock & Pennell, 1996) inclusive of staff; and (d) adopting the engaged stance of researchers as witnesses rather than observers or interrogators.

NOTE

¹ We wish to thank the Toronto Centre for Excellence in Research on Immigration and Settlement for funding this research. The Link-by-Link project can be consulted at www.icomm.ca/ccvt/research.html.

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