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LEARNING FROM MEMORIES

This paper developed from an initially brief but subsequently ongoing project involving collaborative work between two academics from the School of Health and Social Welfare at the Open University, England and the leader of a group of social work teachers and students in the city of Gyumri. The focus for the collaboration was the investigation of the possibility of developing appropriate reminiscence-based activity. The project had two main aims:

- the practical demonstration of a helpful and creative approach to working with older people.
- the identification of issues in developing skills in one- to- one and group work with older people and other service users.

While the project aims were necessarily practical they were also rooted in an extensive literature, drawing on research attesting to the contribution which a biographical approach can make to the care and support of older people, particularly those living in institutional care. There is now widespread support for the view that biographical and reminiscence-based interventions have positive outcomes, not only for older people but also for the people who work with them. Practitioners in the United Kingdom have developed a range of ways to facilitate people in talking about the past and are increasingly aware of the need to provide appropriate support to people who are troubled by their memories. Those interventions include group sessions with prompts such as objects and images, one-to-one talk, drama, exhibitions, writing and life story books.

The work in Gyumri suggested the possibility of developing work along these lines in an environment with quite specific challenges. It also brought an opportunity to review some of the assumptions attached to the literatures of both reminiscence and trauma. Given the situation which many older people in Gyumri, and possibly in Armenia generally face, the question arose to what extent it would be possible to encourage reminiscence in a context where the well-known narratives of collective community and national trauma might deny legitimacy to the telling of individual and personal stories. Further, to what extent would the status attached to old age in Gyumri enhance or hinder the aims of the project? Before we go on to outline the project and discuss its outcomes it might be helpful to provide some background to the work. As it is now well-known, Armenians have experienced successive catastrophic events, both natural and human in origin, and have a long history of disruption, dispersal, loss and destruction. People in Gyumri have perhaps experienced the most unhappy combinations of all these events. Gyumri is the original Armenian name of what had until the end of the Soviet Union been Leninakan and before that Alexandrapol. The erstwhile cultural centre and second city of Armenia, it experienced major destruction at the time of the 1988 earthquake. Fifty percent of the city was destroyed and ninety percent substantially damaged. A conservative estimate of the number of deaths gives a figure of 15000 people of the 25000 who died in the whole of Armenia. Since the earthquake, the sudden decline of the Armenian economy following the break up of the Soviet Union and a three year blockade of the country during the war with Azerbaijan compounded an already extreme situation for the people of Gyumri. These events of the late twentieth century followed the trauma of the massacres in 1915, and an earlier earthquake in 1926. Indeed one group of researchers has suggested that:

... the earthquake in Armenia has resulted in a multigenerational psychiatric calamity for the survivors. The repercussions of this event, superimposed on the psychic scars left by the 1914-15 genocide and intensified the ongoing political and economic turmoil in Armenia, may very well alter the individual and social character of the people of the region.

The Elderly House, a residential home for a mixed group of older people, disabled people and homeless people where it was planned we should work, in population and appearance, provides in miniature an immediate sense of the enormity of these difficulties. Altogether there are just under 100 men and women residents. These include disabled people who have lived in institutions since childhood, elderly refugees from Azerbaijan and western Armenia. ex-prisoners, people dispossessed by the earthquake and people whose families are unable to accommodate or care for them since the earthquake destroyed so many homes.

Though attitudes towards older people in Armenia emphasize shame and dishonor if children abandon their parents, we were told that the economic situation had led to a steady and continuing demand for places at the Elderly House. From what we had been told in advance and learned from the visit, anyone who is a resident at the Elderly House is there because of some traumatizing experience, either as an abandoned, disabled child, a displaced refugee, or an elderly survivor of the 1988 earthquake. Under such conditions it might be thought that reminiscence work could be inappropriate or unwelcome.

However,

In Armenia, old people used to be surrounded with their sons, grandchildren, relatives. At the earthquake thousands of people were killed and the number of older people increased. They live with their memory they used to have important roles in their families and nobody wants to take their opinions into account and the way of supporting people in talking about the past would be very useful to them. Added to the experience of the earthquake is the issue of political generation. Older people, we were told by some of the younger people taking part in the project, tend to want to hang on to times which are now politically discredited. If they talk about the past it is only to regret the present. In this situation what might be regarded as a normal intergenerational distancing has been exacerbated by the effects of political change and the identification of older people with a political regime which has left a mixed legacy. The stories and accounts which have been generated through these rather different approaches tend to share certain characteristics, and in this way are similar in terms of topic and time focus to those older people in societies where life has been more stable. Significant figures are parents, brothers and sisters and there are accounts of seasonal customs, courting and marriage. However there the similarity ends. For several of these childhood accounts are also punctuated with stories of bread shortages, political oppression, war and the two earthquakes of 1926 and 1988. Many of those who lived in the elderly house described institutional childhoods, problems with education and the refugee experience. The accounts are interesting and instructive on a number of grounds and perhaps point to a more optimistic and inclusive role for older people's remembering than was anticipated by some of the younger project participants. In summary we make the following observations:

- many of these older people had experienced of successive traumas in their lives yet appeared to welcome an opportunity to give an account of themselves in ways which were inclusive of both positive and negative events;
- it may be that many years after the earthquake they now feel able to shift the focus of their remembering away from collective and public memorializing in favor of more personal memories which highlight changing family and social relationships;
- by participating in reminiscence activities the younger people reported a change in their own attitudes and understanding of the older people in their midst as well as those living in the Elderly House.

Besides we would suggest that the workshops were effectively intergenerational activity which enabled those concerned to draw on a variety of resources (biographical, professional, interpersonal performance) and to share them. At the outset we had been nervous about the dangers that the workshops posed in terms of the vulnerability of the older people and re-exposure of the recent trauma that all participants had shared. But

the group seemed able to manage the resources both individually and collectively to produce an event which was positively received by everyone.

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Այժմ լայն տարածում ունի այն կարծիքը, որ մարդու կենսագրության ու հիշողությունների վրա հիմնված միջամտություններն ունեն դրական արդյունք և՛ ծեր մարդկանց, և՛ նրանց հետ աշխատողների համար: Մեծ Բրիտանիայում մշակել են մի շարք միջոցներ, որոնք ծեր մարդկանց կմղեն խոսելու իրենց անցյալի մասին՝ քաջ գիտակցելով համապատասխան աջակցություն ցույց տալու անհրաժեշտությունն այն մարդկանց, ում հանգիստ չեն տալիս իրենց հիշողությունները:

Ծրագիրը Գյումրիում առաջարկեց իրականացնել մարդկանց հիշողությունների վրա հիմնված աշխատանք՝ նպատակ ունենալով հանդես բերել ծեր մարդկանց հետ աշխատելու օգտակար և ստեղծագործական մոտեցում: