

The Core in the Perspective of Care

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The Story of Mike Skill and the Will Family

Mike Skill didn't go to work one night, so his bakery had to be closed the next day. The family next door, Mr. and Ms. Will, offered to stand in for him and make the bread themselves, following his instructions. He thanked them for their kind offer, but refused. He knew that it is one thing to make bread at home, and quite another to bake 14 different kinds of bread in a proper way to satisfy bread-eaters.

This short story marks the difference between professionalism and volunteering. They are both reliable, significant and valuable. But they are different. The same difference exists when providing services for people experiencing homelessness, poverty and unemployment.

The difference is based on a cultural dilemma, which seems to be a mix between an inheritance from the old Victorian benevolence and a basic need of the 21st-century economy. In the Victorian age, the ultimate duty was to care for the weaker part of the population: a matter of conscience applied to social gaps. This led to the development of charity and applied in as many fields as possible, within a social dimension which was considered progressive in some of its forms.

Now, a structural aspect of the 21st century is that the world we live in is basically a profit-driven one, and it needs poverty to conserve its status quo.²

By defining the perspective of services working with homeless people as a cultural position, we mean that to serve the general interest we are asked to question our vision of society, to focus our position and the mission that will follow, the movements and actions that we will establish pragmatically to satisfy a change of status for the people we take care of, who are individuals experiencing poverty before being users, guests or clients.³ On the one hand, we notice that homelessness is a very complex issue based on multi-levelled problems often stratified and interrelated, with the resources and time available tending to be inadequate. The perspectives for intervention risk being emergency-based rather than being pragmatically oriented over a long period in order to offer structural change. In such a scenario, there should be more than one means of intervention.⁴ By given nature in many EU states, the social actors of such intervention are, generally speaking, social workers, volunteers and/or benefactors.⁵

The Will for Skills: Another Story of Mr. Will and Dr. Skills

When our teeth hurt, we go to the dentist, Dr. Skills. We expect him/her to be professional. The net expected result is that Dr. Skills takes care of our needs, there is no pain anymore and our teeth will be better. There are no expectations of amusement, socialisation or fraternisation, as there are with Mr. and Ms. Will. Those are valuable results in themselves, but they are side-effects. Even if we gain new friends but our teeth still hurt, we would not recommend the dentist to anyone, and would only go back ourselves if we were desperate.

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2 In his recent book "Contra el cambio, un hiperviaje al apocalipsis climático", Martin Caparròs points out a situation that sounds familiar in many EU countries, where «...in my country, the poverty of one third of the population is a requisite to maintaining the political system based on flattery and patronage and on dependance on subsidies and charity, that leaves people in a situation of permanent crisis, of social and political anomy, of extreme dependance/addiction to the State and its policies, of life under constant control based on the power to give or deny those subsidies that keep them alive...».

3 There are basic differences between the position of user, of guest and clients, which relates to linguistic notions. Instead of the concept of "client" mostly used in English-speaking contexts, when referring to persons experiencing homelessness, I use the word "user", referring to the status of someone who is entitled by human right to use a certain service.

4 When we hear that there is enough of an offer of help based on "good will", we should remember the structural need of poverty in our society and not just that good will and volunteering are precious, valuable, inspiring. Volunteers are not necessary skilled. And when we hear that any service is there to offer personalised professional support, we should bear in mind that it might be partial, and that experienced and/or book-skilled personnel are not necessarily able to be responsible for their core praxis: the care relationship.

5 I put under the category of "social workers" all professionals who have specific expertise such as social workers, educators, psychologists, doctors, etc; by "volunteers" I mean all individuals who invest part of their time, efforts and resources in various activities which do not necessarily relate to their skills; by "benefactors" I mean those professionals who offer their specific skills without any purpose of personal gain or salary.

Equally, everyone deserves and has the right to receive the same treatment, whether their teeth hurt, they want some freshly-baked bread or they are experiencing poverty, unemployment, homelessness or any other social hardship.

They have the human right to find someone who has the skills to match their needs on the basis of his/her professionalism, and help solve the problem. This is not a radical view, we are just saying that a baker is there to make bread, a mechanic is there to fix cars, a dentist is there to cure toothache, and a care-giving professional is there to offer care to people in need ...

The key question is: what are the critical skills and qualifications required to work with people experiencing homelessness in order to ensure that they can fulfil this basic human right? I propose to go straight to the central aspect of what we basically do. Working with people experiencing homelessness is primarily an intervention of care, where its basic elements might be reduced to the “setting”, the “offer” and the available “tools”.

“**Setting**” is the place or type of surroundings where care-giving takes place. Wherever an intervention takes place will have its own setting: it might be a shelter, a park, a social service...

“**Offer**” is the expression of readiness to do or give something if it is desired. This includes everything that we do or give, but only if it matches the user’s desires, aspirations and will. Otherwise, it’s not an offer but a mandate or a requirement.

“**Tool**” is any device or implement used to carry out a particular function, and as our particular function is care-giving, the relationship between the professional and the user is the primary (and sometimes sole) available tool.⁶

The whole movement⁷ defines the core issue under a logical lens:

- social work is the medium for reinsertion strategies for people experiencing homelessness
- the care relationship between the users and care-workers is *the medium in social work*
- communicative and relational skills are *the medium in a proactive relationship* between users and professionals
- the relationship and communication *is the medium*
- the medium is the message⁸
- the relationship is the message, the core, the significant part of social intervention, the sole tool on which any compliance depends.

The core. So complex. So simple.

The Core of Care

Without getting too deeply into the theory of communication, it is clear that every professional has to know how communication works, and most of all, what the basic rules of its dynamics are.

This is of utmost importance because of the specific form of the care relationship, which is implicitly structured on two levels: the user (entitled to have needs that must be satisfied) and the professional (should have something to offer concerning the specific needs which are expressed by the user in that specific setting).

In a thus-structured relationship, its given nature calls implicitly for a power dynamic.

It is self-evident that more critical skills are bound to the inner nature of the relationship between the professional and the user, where one part is structurally supposed to have answers for the needs that the relational counterpart is entitled to bring to him/her. As relationships are at the core of social intervention, the most urgent qualification is the capacity to read what is going on within, which is a work of art.

Within my experience, some capacities and qualifications are needed to:

- be aware of each given relational position and of each possible variation

⁶ The media that we use to produce results might often be misconsidered an available tool (such as support, laboratories or various activities carried out for our users); but they are just parts of the service on offer, where the relationship is the base.

⁷ Dynamics, emotions, power-games, prejudices, lateral thinking, unconscious movements, moral debt, cultural diversity, interpretations, etc. are all part of the care relationship.

⁸ This is the world-famous contribution of Marshall McLuan (1911-1980), who was a Canadian teacher, philosopher and communication theorist whose contributions are considered a cornerstone in media theory and in its practical applications. (*Understanding media: the extensions of man*, McGraw Hill ed., 1964)

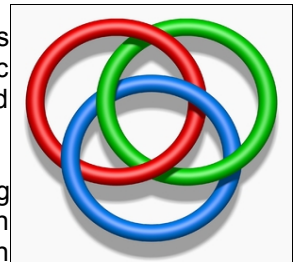
- learn to read the movements of all the actors as part of a dynamic process, reading within the lines of what it is going on and changing our position if the relational situation requires it
- take full responsibility for what it is happening since our given position is structurally higher
- handle with care all power-trips that might happen, often implicitly, in the form of seduction, manipulation, aggressiveness, recklessness, insisting on the rules, total and silent compliance ...
- always doubt our own personal prejudices, and have them as a positive ally to deepen the significance of the relational dynamics and not as predefined discrimination
- remember that everyone is different: there might always be a gap between the solution that we see and the solution that the problems evoke
- approach time differently: when each time is the first time, any previous knowledge represents only a useful point of confrontation to produce positive discrimination
- recognise the dignity of any user's choice to allow them to take full responsibility and be full-subject of their rights; otherwise rights are just abstract concepts
- not give failure any value-driven meaning; it represents a particular stage that requires extra care
- learn to say "No" when we have to, without any sense of guilt, and to mean it
- dismiss our given values within intervention, as everyone is different and every difference has dignity
- clearly see the boundaries to avoid any "donor debt"⁹ becoming part of our care relationship
- develop a democratic environment even if it costs fatigue and self-disponibility¹⁰
- consider our motivation carefully, in order to be at our users' disposal to match their needs, and not to work with our users to satisfy our personal motives...

I often describe the care-worker role as a catalyst: the fundamental role of increasing the rate of people's reactions from their status-quo towards change, without ourselves undergoing any permanent change. It is very easy to represent.

In another way of looking at things, the topological nature of the care relationship appears as Borromean rings:

¹¹

The particularity is that no one of these three rings, as it is wrapped by another ring, is not itself wrapping another. This means that within the care relationship, each dynamic which is not bound is binding, everything that is not brought to awareness and consciousness becomes an action.



It might sound difficult, but it is not: we find it in the ETHOS definition,¹² where each ring represents a domain. They are all bound, and the quality of the intervention depends on how we support a balanced offer of change. If one is missing, the whole intervention collapses.

Very simple. Very complex.

Social workers can apply this to all representations at every level of our work. With regular supervision and constant training, we can learn to manage what is going on at each moment in time within our care relationship,¹³ so as to see what is bound and what is binding, in order always to take responsibility for our intervention.

9 "Donor debt" is the inner call-to-give-something-back, which is a common tradition in our society, and one that almost everyone knows by personal experience: almost everyone has experienced donating, and the warmth and pleasure and heart-warming emotions that follow. But, when we receive, the feelings are sometimes different, as we might feel the cultural call to offer something back. It might be hard to face the position where we want to give something back, but have nothing. This is "donor debt", which if I am weak might lead to develop specific and sometimes dangerous dynamics. When we donate we feel good, and are sometimes unaware of what a simple gesture is doing.

10 A democratic environment requires an implicit specific attitude: the more democratic I am, the more my relational counterpart is allow to disagree with me. And the more he/she can disagree with me, the less authority will remain for my role.

11 In mathematics, quantum physics, various symbolism, logic and psychoanalysis, the Borromean rings consist of 3 topological circles which are linked to form a Brunnian link, meaning that if one ring is removed, the other two become separated.

12 <http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp?Page=484>

13 During supervision and training, I sometimes invite students to do exercises using these rings, such as: setting-proposal-tools; personnel-user-institution; wellness-hardship-symptom; physical domain-legal domain-social domain; biography before homelessness-today's needs-process of reinsertion; inclusion-exclusion-temporary shelter; social policy-SSGI offer-users' needs; experience, skill, reality ... if you represent yourself within these rings, your perspectives might change...

This is a core statement: if we ask someone in need to take responsibility for his/her own life, we should be aware of our own responsibilities.

We all face a variety of considerations, meanings, prejudices, points of view, indications, difficulties and recommendations when working with people experiencing homelessness.

For these and for all of the above, if we want to remain as professional care workers, we always need someone that will gently and warmly take care of the feedback on our work.

We all need a place where we can meet someone that warmly allows us to free ourselves from our doubts, frustrations, fears, difficulties, suffering, unexpected emotions, angst, grief, expectations, anger, will... someone who can take care of our complexity, kick us gently to move forward and build upon all those, and many more. This evidence suggests that before considering any procedural level, the issue is drawn as a cultural challenge. The basis of this challenge is the fact that personnel must be skilled enough to make any possible effort to improve the user's compliance from within the care relationship. We should promote the combination of awareness learnt by experience, knowledge learnt in books and consciousness of what is going on within the care relationship.¹⁴

Each of our users is an individual, each situation is dissimilar, each day we all are a bit different. The challenge is to consider the relationship not solely as a training programme, but as on-going supervision.

Play to Learn, Learn by Playing

Children remind us that we learnt the most complex issues of our life when we were unprepared and unskilled, when we were young. And the ability to learn by playing, to face difficulties, to imagine and create solutions is typical of children...

Consequently, I developed a tool which is specifically designed to achieve such results.

MultiPolis¹⁵ is an educational role-play tool based on the specific methodology of guided role-play that allows the participants to experience themselves as the personification of case studies, of various institutions or of general on-going situations. Starting from a given case-study, this role-play allows players to get deeper into the relational dynamics, guiding participants to take the floor and learn by direct experience what is going on, what are the disparate levels operating, what are the various positions, what might happen from different perspectives, what divergent perceptions and conflicting significant drives around. When separated from complex text, it is easy. It is a game.

The game board is a 16m² octagon which lies on the floor, made of various concentric octagons and an external crown with 24 different cells. Each cell defines a specific location. Participants are the pawns: they take their shoes off and are invited to personify a given-case study, to define one need from the case-study perspective, to find a possible way to satisfy it by reaching a chosen cell.



On each cell there are four different situational cards: two satisfy the needs and two frustrate them. By picking up a card, a situation of care materialises in front of the participants, who are guided to play and experiment it in a protected environment.

Sometimes, participating in a need is different from knowing rationally what it might be like. If this experience passes through the act of playing, we can learn to open new perspectives without perceiving any danger, without any unconscious defensiveness, but under a fresh exploration into new horizons.

After the role play, a general debate between participants allows the conductor to structure a specific summary¹⁶ for the audience.

¹⁴In my personal and implicitly limited experience, staff with long experience are not necessarily skilled, while younger staff members come from high-level education, but lack direct experience. And usually almost everyone considers him/herself as "good enough" even when they "don't really know why this/that works the way it does..."

¹⁵ More detailed information, specific instructions, photos and outputs from workshops and comments from participants are available on the web: www.multipolis.eu

¹⁶ Some outputs and summaries are available in the section "workshop outputs" of the web site.

I have used MultiPolis in training and supervision in various social services since 2006 in Italy as well as in workshops around Europe.

So far, one comment from others has touched me significantly. We were in a building usually used as a shelter; some users asked me to observe a training session for social workers coming from various cities. They just asked me to observe, and not to participate.

During a coffee break, one of them came over, and told me these exact words: «I don't know what they will make of it, but for the first time ever I've seen something that pushes the social workers to experience what it really means to be homeless...».

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I've been working in the field of social exclusion since mid 90s in various roles and in different contexts before ending as a trainer and supervisor. Some I still do. I read books, reports and analysis. And write some myself. In my limited experience, I've rarely heard talks on the almost sole responsibility of the "rich profit-driven world" as a creator of poverty.

It's time to question ourselves on the order that gives stability to an economic structure which allows and produces lack and poverty. Otherwise any effort risks to be part of a business, looking for more resources, more shelters, more medals. All valuable. We should skip from the position where what we do is always the possible best, that we risk to lose if we don't conserve and protect it. So conservative.

We should learn back the children ability to train our capacity of imagining a change in reality through the invisible. To see through the invisible. Of this we should remind to care of. Simple. And clear.

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