Relationship network as a basis for efficient problem solving in clients with specific requirements

(overview essay)

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Abstract: *The article presents the current movement in the field of care for clients – persons with specific requirements included in the social services system or special education system. The paper presents the view of the basic philosophical and specified theoretical base for the use of dialogue and relationship networks as well as a practical example in form of an anticipation dialogue. In conclusion, the article provides reasons for efficiency of the application of anticipation dialogue in solving difficult situations of clients with specific requirements. Subsequently, recommendations for practice are specified considering the conditions specific for this client group.*

Keywords: *dialogue, networking, dialogical practice, client with specific requirements, anticipation dialogue.*

1 Introduction

In the system of care for persons with specific requirements, the conditions and approaches to solving various difficult situations are constantly changing along with the developing approach and view of the persons with specific requirements themselves. We, as professionals, increasingly arrive at the conclusion that the objectivized or generalized instructions and procedures are applicable in particular cases only to a limited extent, if at all. We find that the efficiency of solutions is linked directly to the particular persons and their individual perception and assessment of the situation. In order to increase the efficiency of work with clients in general and with clients with specific requirements in our conditions in particular, we need to realise the philosophic, theoretical and the resulting practical changes in the approach to working with people. For more than 30 years, the methodology of work with clients

has been shifting from the individual view to the so-called relational, multivoiced and dialogical one. This shift has been related to changes and challenges in the practical approach to performing supportive, counselling, therapeutic and similar activities provided for persons in difficult situations. At the moment, one of the most recent challenges in working with clients with specific requirements is the application of relationship networks (networking, network – dialogical practice) (Anderson, 2002; Trimble, 2002; Seikkulla, Arnkil, 2013, Shotter, 2016, Barge, Little, 2008)

2 Relationship Network

Nowadays, the term of network is connected to multiple aspects, including new directions of functioning, working, sharing and making contacts. In recent years with Humanities, we hear more and more frequently about networking, relationship or social networks as well as network practices. This is a professional approach to solving problems of individuals with respect to the humanistic approach utilising the knowledge from constructivist, social constructional or postmodern approaches in psychology, psychotherapy or psychiatry.

In the areas of special education or social work, these approaches to solving client problems are still in their early days. However, some of the professional groups, especially the ones focused on psychotherapy, increasingly integrate the relationship- and dialogue-oriented philosophy and procedures into their work. The change is based on the opinion that the knowledge and understanding of professionals cannot continue being perceived as an objectively valid truth about the world and the functioning thereof, since there is no objectively given way or view of exploring the world and of evaluating it (Rober, 2002). People explore the world, objects and persons in relationships and as stated by McNamee (2004 in Pare, Larner, 2004) this is rather an exploration of meanings and relational meanings in particular instead of a fixed valuation.

If we want to understand a client's problem and solve it efficiently, we need to perceive the client as a person as well as the client's problem or situation itself as multivoiced and relational. Increasingly, the psychotherapeutic system of working with clients has been applying the methods of working with a group of persons close to the client. Therefore the interest is focused on the opinion and view of all persons involved, related to the client, who are also the active and supported links in the process of solving the client's problem. In professional work with clients with specific requirements, i.e. in particular in social work and special education, the network-oriented dialogical practice (Seikkula, Arnkil, 2013) is not applied by professionals efficiently. However, as shown by several attempts carried out in individual projects (e.g. the "Guidance" project), perception of the client and his problematic situation as a relational and multivoiced phenomenon helps to find more constructive and

flexible solutions compared to the ones offered by the long-established system. As described by Seikkula and Arnkil (2013), the less common means of perception and communication regarding the client's situation or problem would bring less common but often more efficient and complex solutions.

In accordance with Shotter (2016) and Anderson (1997), the basis for change is the respect for diversity of views of a single problem and acceptance of the need of dialogue in order to recognize the nature of the problem as well as to find the solution suitable for the particular group of persons creating the client's relationship network.

2.1 Dialogue as the Basis for Creating and Maintaining a Functional, Potentially Healing, Relationship Network

Dialogue is the new relation. Not so much else is needed. (Seikkula, 2002, p. 284)

Dialog is a way of being in language and relationship with others. (Anderson, 2002) In its fullest sense, dialogue is a particular kind of conversation in which participants engage with each other in a process of understanding, a process of learning how the other makes sense of something and the meaning it has to them. Through this process new understandings and meanings begin to emerge in the space between people. The process is what Anderson (2002) calls a mutual or shared inquiry or what Seikkula (2002) calls a "joint deliberation".

As Seikkula (2002, p. 265) suggests, "Dialogue becomes both the aim and the specific way of being in language."

When solving a problematic situation, dialogue becomes a significant part of the set of tools. As stated by Anderson (2003), more important than the product produced through dialogue was having a space for dialogue and participating in the process of dialogue. The opportunity to constantly evaluate what was heard and compare it with one's own view and opinion provides the freedom of reflexion and change in one's own problem perception. The dialogue and processes of internal and external voices of all participants enable a more complex view of the problem and at the same time unification of the language and meanings of the problem in the lives of individual persons creating the client's relationship network in order to become graspable and better understandable for everyone. The dialogue involves reflexive, intertwined process of listening, hearing and speaking. (Anderson, 2003) Having the opportunity to hear, reflect and shape the meaning of individual factors comprising the problem, we may arrive at the so-called "dissolving tidal waves") (Anderson, 1997), i.e. the contents of the problem to the point that we will stop seeing the problem itself and only the activities efficient in the given situation will remain.

Presence of the persons creating the client's relationship network is the result and at the same time a significant prerequisite for the dialogue, which may be healing (i.e. problem solving in our understanding). If there are several voices involved and the client's problem is discussed using the reflexions both of internal and of external monologue of all participants, it is likely that the varied views of the given situation will be respected. At the same time, if we create a space for personal meeting and dialogue among all the persons creating the client's relationship network in the given situation, the dialogue itself invites and requires of its participants a sense of mutuality, including genuine respect and sincere interest regarding the other. While at the same time, dialogue invites a sense of belonging and ownership (Anderson, 2003).

Especially in case of clients with specific requirements, it is almost always possible to identify the situation in question as a multi-issue and therefore also a multi-professional one. Many professionals from different areas participate in solving individual aspects of the problematic situation. In order to solve the client's problem efficiently, cooperation of the involved professionals is often necessary. However the differences among the systems individual professionals are operating in which significantly restrict or even disable the efficient continuity of care. As stated by Seikkula and Arnkil (2013, p. 16), "the contexts requiring involvement of multiple services are complex, however such complexity does not reflect the situation in the family itself. Efficient combination of varied components may stagnate even if the individual professionals perform their jobs well." Unless the problem areas correspond to the segmentation of the support system, there is a problem in coordination as well as resulting efficiency of the client care.

The dialogical approach utilising the client's relationship network consisting of close persons as well as professionals involved in the situation is one of the options how to challenge the system structures for greater flexibility. Anderson (2003) describes such situation as an attempt to understand by participating in and responding to what we think the other has said. Presence of several professionals along with the client and persons close to them has considerable impact on the rhetoric and language whereby the individual facts are described. The respect incited by the presence of individual persons in the dialogue enables to establish deeper mutual relationships and perceive the client and their problem as more personal. It also enables to make a distinction between responses such as questions to participate in the storytelling that in turn helps to clarify, expand and understand and responses-such as questions-that seek details and facts to determine things such as diagnoses and interventions or seek to guide the conversation in a particular direction.

Active and responsive listening, hearing and responding to client is not just a technique how to lead a dialogue, it's a way of being that invites a metaphorical space which is a gathering place for the relational process of dialogue (Anderson, 2003).

3 Anticipation Dialogue as One of the Forms of Network – Dialogical Practice

In the situations causing tension and uncertainty in the form of questioning the correctness of actions or the problem "diagnostics", it is difficult to create space for an open, respectful and constructive dialogue. Each member of the client's relationship network has an ideological base (including preconceptions, prejudices, experiences and anticipations) that is unique and that influences the construction of his/her view of the problem and the story about it (Anderson, 2003).

The dialogical approach aims at a different process-a process in which the potential resources of the patient and those nearest him/her start to play a more important role in determining how to proceed. (Seikkula, 2002) Every individual involved in the dialogue tries to reflect not only their own view of the issue but also to understand the views of others. Nevertheless, the client's perspective is the most important and crucial one for the efficient solution.

When working with the client's relationship network, we have to assume the conditions when the family and a social network system does not have an understanding or a language, however each member has their own. We are always working within a polyvocality. The challenge becomes how to invite and maintain room for each voice and in a way, that the descriptions and opinions develop into the joint process. Through the professionals participation, as Seikkula (2002) suggests, new language emerges for every participant of client's network (Anderson, 2002).

In the situations addressed by Seikkula and Arnkil (2013) as multiprofessional, there are usually several parties trying to modify the actions of the client and their close ones. The professionals' view focuses on the client from different perspectives and each professional tries to modify the client with respect to their own professional framework. In order to support such situations, the anticipation dialogue has been developed. As stated by Seikkula and Arnkil (2013, p. 34): "Between the participants, a dialogue may create mutual understanding, as a joint creation not possible to be reached by any of the parties alone." During network sessions, we have to take into account that everyone present also exists in additional relationship networks. If talking to the client, we think about these additional relationships, the content, form and language of our dialogue will change.

However, the network sessions naturally tend to turn into monologues of individual participants, who usually "shout over each other" and try to enforce their own opinion. As stated by Seikkula and Arnkil (2013, p. 35): "When professionals are present, perceiving a particular issue from their own perspective (according to the focus of their work), they do not communicate only on the 'issue itself', however also on who they are when defining the issue." Their mutual relationships are determined by the system established. For the client, the challenge for the network session with

subsequent effect is to define the mutual relationships in the "no man's land". These relationships have to be negotiated. For the utilisation of the client's relationship network during sessions to have a healing effect and to be dialogical, it is necessary to install a certain structure and conditions for the dialogue.

An anticipation dialogue is based on working with two of the client's network concurrently. At the same time, during a single session, the network of the close ones, family, acquaintances, etc. is present, providing information as well as support to the client on site and at home. Information from these persons as well as their reactions and ideas provide a varied view of the client's current situation. In the case of clients with specific requirements, it is often the case that these persons who provide for services, care, independence of the client and improve their quality of life in general.

Along with this group, a network of professionals, specific experts coming into contact with the client and participating with them in solving individual areas of their issue, shall be present at the session. The network of professionals may be joined by practitioners who will be potential cooperators, whom the client's problematic situation might concern in the close future.

Both groups of people comprise the client's relationship network with regard to the problem or situation currently to be solved.

The key method of anticipation dialogue, as explained by Seikkula and Arnkil (2013, p. 17) is the "anticipation of the results of own actions". All the information obtained by the process facilitator in form of an open dialogue first held with the client and their close ones and subsequently with the professional group, represent the answers for their assumptions on the change of situation. The problem is viewed from the perspective of close future (1 year) and all the solutions and procedures are proposed and planned with respect to the positive impact discussed. As stated by the authors (Seikkula, Arnkil, 2013), during anticipation dialogue, the clients first come across a situation when they are discussing the problem with professionals in a positive way. Jointly, led by the specific questions of the facilitator, they contemplate about how it would be if the situation turned for the better. Who and how has helped them or is helping them (the rhetoric corresponds to the transfer to the close future and view of the problem with the hindsight of one year). This way, the client and their close ones are able to express how they would like the situation to turn out, not talking about the particular steps to be taken in order to change something. They are speaking from the perspective of a positive change already having occurred. This tuning significantly influences the client's frame of mind and their faith in healing and problem solving. The approach also significantly impacts the tuning of professionals to mutual cooperation and their ideas of possible changes in the systems they are working in, which they couldn't see as flexible up to now.

The session results in planning the specific actions based on understanding of the needs of the client and their close ones, as well as on the actual possibilities of the

participating professionals. Since all the session participants are invited to mutual listening, hearing and responding, the language describing the issue is modified. This changes the "distance" between the professionals and the client, and brings a closer relationship originating, based on understanding and responsibility for the result. The relationship between individual professionals changes as well, since they can see the area of mutual cooperation and understand the reasons and actions of their colleagues better based on the respecting dialogue, which subsequently impacts their work (compare Trimble, 2002).

4 Recommendation

In these kinds of relationships and conversations the encouragement and possibility for transforming and newness are inherent. (Anderson, 2003) "Perhaps the (only) thing we should focus on in the very first meetings in a crisis is orienting ourselves to create dialogical exchange of utterances: How to listen, how to hear, and, what is most important, how to answer each utterance of our clients." (Seikkula, 2002, p. 283) The aim of treatment should be to break the isolation of the client, which may originate in the moments when the client feels to be misunderstood, unaccepted or insignificant. Focus on the dialogue itself: How to create a language in which all voices can be heard, both the client's and those nearest the client, at the same time (Seikkula, 2002).

Anderson (2003) provides several recommendations, the observation of which incites the creation of dialogical and relational approach to the client:

Be respectful – have and show regard and consideration for the worthiness of the other. It is communicated by attitude, tone, posture, gestures, eyes, words, and surroundings.

Be genuinely curious about the other and sincerely believe, that you can learn something from them.

Listen and respond with sincere interest in what the other person is talking about-their experiences, their words, their feelings and so forth. Listen, hear, and speak to understand.

Frequently, the language of professionals when identifying or describing the client and their problem, is de-personalized, technical and full of evaluations and "judgements", which label and generalize the particular case excessively. Such communication method is based on the established means of evaluation, without necessity to comply with the classification of the client and their problem under the rules of the particular system. As explained by Seikkula and Arnkil (2013), the language is also

based on the need of individual professionals to anchor their position in their respective professional systems. This keeps the professionals at a certain distance from the client's problems, preventing them from entering the emotions and close relationship with the client. This is how the appropriate professional ways of behaviour towards clients used to be described and often continue to be nowadays.

However, if we consider the application of the client's relationship network as the support mechanism capable of finding new efficient methods of work by mutual dialogue, we have to assume the ability of the involved professionals to create and maintain an efficient relationship with the client. Thus, the level of distance is given by the ability to view the situation with hindsight and to reflect everything addressed during the session. An adequate hindsight enables to listen with respect and to ask questions with interest. It is no longer needed as a condition of objectification and diagnostics.

As we have described above, if we were to perceive the client and their problematic situation as a multi-issue and multi-professional one, the varied perception and less common description of the situation will provide more flexible possibilities of solutions than those which are generally used in the original systems. With respect to the communication traps the professionals working with clients with specific requirements are exposed to, Anderson (2002) recommends that the comments of professionals as participants were neither judgments nor veiled hypotheses; questions were not information tools or idea seeders (Anderson, 2002).

As Anderson further puts it (2003), give the other person time to finish. And give yourself a moment to think about what you are going to say and how you will say it. Do not look for or think in punctuations such as dialogical moments-significant, memorable, or critical moments. The whole or overall relationship and conversation is what counts and makes a difference. The most focus on the process, rather than on its content (Anderson, 2002).

The consequences for the practicioner who respects and believes in the client's reality are enormous. The typical hierarchical professional system and relationship dissolve into a more mutual and equal one (Anderson, 2002).

Hoffman (2002, p. 271) calls Seikkula's approach an "emphasis on speech rather than symptoms." This initial perspective concurs with Seikkula's notion that there is no way to make sense of one's experiences and to cope with experiences-to construct a rational narrative about them (Anderson, 2002).

5 Conclusion

Work with clients with specific requirements is very diverse, often including participation of several professional systems. The necessity of mutual interconnection of professional systems organized differently brings about the risk of inefficiency in

helping the client. In this regard, Seikkula and Anrkil (2013) write that "the confusion arises when the problems do not fall into pre-defined categories of specializations within the system". In this respect, the authors provide a very fitting theory of so called "junk categories", also described by Donald Schön (1973 in Seikkula, Arnkil, 2013). These are the categories of clients and their problems not possible to be classified in the systems as they are organized. According to the authors, in the case of clients with specific requirements, we could talk about the so-called multi-junk category.

Working with client's relationship networks and application of constructive dialogue as described herein, minimizes such risks and creates space for efficient solution of the client's problematic situation from the perspective of multiple professions. At the same time, it assumes the establishment of good bonds and relationships between the client and participating professionals based on the respectful language and understanding.

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