Dialogical approach in client work: towards multiprofessionalism

The debate concerning customer work has, over the past few decades, evolved from an authority-based work orientation to a more customer-based viewpoint. In recent ten years, there has also been a discussion on the importance of dialogical interaction, the emphasis being on reciprocity and mutual understanding within the coaction. In the broad sense, the term “dialog” refers to conversation, discussion or debate. During the last decade there has been a lot of discussion about a dialogical aspect of workplace communication, management, consultation processes etc. Dialogical interaction is also seen as an important part of work competence in the future (Yankelowich 2001, Isaacs 2001). Dialogical interaction has been compared to dancing where both dancers know the steps, but the common improvisation is the main issue. In everyday language we speak about “being on same wave length” or that “chemistries meet”.

The term dialog originates from the words “dia” and “logos”, which, when combined, describe well the essence of dialogicality - “joint accumulation” of the world. Dialog has been seen as a fundamental part of social communication with varying forms in different cultures. The theoretical background of the research of dialogue is mainly based on the work by Michail Bakhtin and Lev S. Vygotsky. Further, Kenneth Gergen, John Shotter and Ivana Markova, Thomas Luckman and, in Finland, Jaakko Seikkula, Tom Arnkil and Mikael Leiman have strongly contributed to applying the theory of dialog in professional practices. All these researchers share a view of intersubjectivity in human life and social interaction. Some of them have stressed that dialogical approach is not a specific method, but more a way of thinking, even wider, a way of life (see Seikkula 2011, Buber 1995). In Finland, the aspect of dialogical interaction is in the core of various methodological tools, such as solution-based approach, facilitation, coaching, case management, network therapy, as well as in the mediation of conflicts. I have been involved in all of these approaches during my career, which all have opened me important perspectives to dialogical client work. The main thing is how we see the common knowledge and the relation between a client and professionals. During the last eight years, I have applied these social psychological tools in the development of programmes in the governmental organization I am working for.

In the first part of my presentation, I introduce various orientations in the discourse of client work. My aim is to discriminate the dialogical approach in professional work both from the authority-based and customer-based orientation in the interaction. Secondly, I introduce five forms of social interaction to clarify the meaning of relationships in the discussion of client work.

Three perspectives on interaction

The interaction of professionals and clients in social and health care can be either expert- or client-centered. The third aspect is the dialogical approach which emphasizes reciprocity.

Expert-based or authority-based orientation can be described as an interaction in which the process is strongly directed by the goals dictated by experts or by the establishment. The expert is, in a way, able to see the true nature of the phenomena, and his or her role is to enable the customer to understand the relation between the different phenomena. Thereby it is seen that the goal is to make the customer “recognize” his or her problems (admit them), therefore enabling the processing of the “core” of the issue. Moreover, a diagnosis places the counselor in a position of authority and imposes a treatment plan. Nowadays there is a tendency to look for a new orientation through dialogical perspective. This summer I taught a course for medical doctors specializing in occupational health and our teaching team had a motto “From Diagnoses to Dialog” in order to enlighten the social psychological approach in dealing with the various processes in work places.
Criticism of expert-centered orientation has been clearly seen also in the discussion on upbringing, teaching or management. The dominance or expert-centered action are not only visible in the attitude towards the client, but could also be seen in the way the professionals attribute the problems of client work. One obstacle to the dialogical interaction is so called attribution bias, which means that the problems in the relationship are connected to the client, while the workers get credit for success. (See Mönkkönen 2002). Although the problems of this kind of orientation are widely accepted, we face them everywhere in professional practices. According to Seikkula (2012), the traditional evidence based medicine or psychology is based on the idea that the expert chooses the proper treatment after the accurate diagnosis of the case without constructing common understanding of the situation together with the client. However, it could also be seen from dialogical perspective. By Seikkula’s words, “right diagnosis emerges in joint meetings”, where the expert and client co-construct common understanding together. New competencies are required, and instead of prescriptive expertise, skills for productive interaction are called for, as argued also by Amkil et al. (2001).

The experts have emphasized for a long time that the experience of the customer should be taken into account. The customer-based orientation is based on the needs and views of the customer and has its roots in the United States of the 1930s. It was first put forward by an advocate of the humanistic approach to psychology, Carl Rogers. The aim was to respect and better understand the needs of the customer. (See Dryden & Mytton 1999.) This viewpoint, despite its good intents, can transform into a situation where the customer viewpoint is over emphasized, and we can lose the idea of the co-construction of relationship. As Shotter (1996) argues: if we see realities socially constructed, it is important that we can all have a voice in the process of their construction, and have our voice taken seriously, responded practically. In my current work, I have been involved in really interesting development processes where workers in different professions are trying to understand each other’s work and way of thinking. For example, in the renewing process of organizations, the best outcome is achieved when the new collective identity of the organization is constructed through dialogue. The approach of dialogicality is useful and beneficial both in the communication of individual professionals, as well as in the process of coaching the organizations (see. Jabri 2005, Mönkkönen & Puusa 2013; Puusa & Kekälä 2012).

Five forms of social interaction

Although language has been in focus in the study of social constructionism, non-verbal communication has a strong impact on creating trust between a worker and a client. This occurred through “internal dialogization of the world”, as well (Bahtin 1984). I regard dialogical interaction as means of communication and relationships and in order to outline the latter I introduce different forms of interaction: 1. presence in the situation, 2. one-sided social influence, 3. game, 4. co-operation and 5. joint action. These elements are originally modified from Carl J. Couch’s (1986) theory on the basic types of social action. I have reframed his theory to these forms and used them in the analysis of narrative data, and gathered stories of different kinds of client relationships. More recently this approach has also been applied in work communities and organizations. When writing short stories about client work or work place issues, people describe different relationships. In my Ph.D. thesis (2002), I analyzed the texts of social and health care workers and clients who were in rehabilitation programs for substance abusers. Form 2, one sided social influence appeared quite frequently in the accounts of both clients and workers. Form 5 joint action occurred to some extent in the stories written by professionals, but by no means very strongly or influentially. In the context of organizations, all the levels were present, but form 5 was seen strongly desirable, and as an indicator of a healthy work community. Anyway, interaction and the relationships involved should not be seen as fixed and permanent but as relationships which involve movement in the different forms (see Luckman 1990, Markova & Gilpesie 2008).

This concept can be concluded by the outline of Satu Roos (2013), where she interestingly presents four different combinations through which we are connected to each other. In every work there are solo artists, who
want to work in individual way. The solo artists can have a concert together, but a real band playing demands much more collaboration, ie. form 5 joint action, where good multiprofessionalism takes place.

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