

Learning from homeless people Social work students at Milan's Central Railway Station

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Abstract

The experience presented here arises from young social work students in the framework of Relational social work education (Donati, 2010; Folgheraiter, 2007) promoted by the University of [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]. Directed by the educator to organize a lesson themselves, the students proposed to leave the University to go to the Central Railway Station of Milan. From their voices, the explicit purpose of this non-conventional lesson was meeting homeless individuals, bringing them food and blankets and trying to talk with them. The opportunity to spend a day with the homeless people was an important educational activity for the students in the first year of their bachelor's degree programs: Most had never before experienced a real encounter with a person in a difficult situation. The educator had no professional expectations. Through classroom discussion and self-reflection reports, it emerged that this real contact with homeless people permitted the students to discover themselves in relation to the need and to reflect about personal meanings, projections and prejudices against poverty and marginalized people. Considerations for social work education creative learning experiences are proposed.

Keywords

Social work students – Relational social work method – Creative learning experiences – Homeless people – Reciprocity.

Introduction

The Relational social work education framework proposed by the Catholic University of Milan is composed of different modules consisting of theory and practice with the intention of providing students with a complete education. The aim is to offer the students professional and also grassroots experiences, from the first year of the bachelor's degree program. One

of the main ideas is to support future social workers in developing personal and professional reflection and critical awareness in their personal and professional growth (Cabiati, 2017). According to the Relational social work method, the aim of this paper is to present an innovative experience that involved younger academic students in the first year of their bachelor's degree studies during the course «Social work orientation workshop» (Cabiati, 2015).

As described in the following, the students decided freely what they wanted to do and managed the experience on their own. Assigned by the educator to organize a lesson themselves, the students proposed to visit the Central Railway Station of Milan to meet homeless individuals, bring them food and blankets and try to talk with them.

During the days before this fieldwork, the students were in a state of preparation, thinking about what to bring to the homeless people, how to organize the visit, how to behave, and how to make contact with them. Subsequently, the future social workers dealt with the reality that they encountered, trying to determine how to «rub shoulders» with someone in a situation that they had only thought about and never themselves experienced.

In accordance with the literature, in the first part of this article, the authors briefly report contributions about the importance of a creative and active learning approach in social work education. These contributions, combined with Relational social work education principles, nourished the idea to propose this project to the students. Subsequently, the genesis of the experience and its development in the field are presented. Working methods and the tools used are also explained. In the third part, themes and issues raised by the social work students are presented. Through classroom discussion and self-reflection reports, it emerged that this actual contact with homeless people permitted the students to learn unusual lessons. At the end of the paper, some considerations for social work education are presented.

The importance of creative learning experiences for social work students

The importance of engaging social work students with an innovative and participative learning approach is discussed by many authors (East & Chambers, 2007; Edwards and Richards, 2002; Tsien & Tsui, 2007; Brew et al. 2009; Parker, 2010; Lewis et al. 2016). Previous studies show that a creative and participative approach to social work education provides various benefits: the capacities among students to act independently and autonomously (East & Chambers, 2007), to work creatively and exercise judgement and discretion in professional practice (Limbery & Postle, 2007), to construct effective ways to respond to people's needs (East & Chambers, 2007), to better use their emotions (Ikebuchi & Rassmussen, 2014), and to act in unpredictable circumstances with which they may be confronted as social workers (Eady & Limber, 2007). In the same way, creative and

participative teaching and learning experiences can also benefit educators, for example, by allowing them to interact with the students as equals (Zapf, 2009).

Some authors (Eady & Limber 2007; Clark, 2006) seem more concerned with exhorting educators to develop creative solutions to social work problems than with devising practical ways through which this can be achieved.

The rigour of a scientific approach to social work education is certainly important; however, there is a range of different ways in which students can be engaged in learning (Scourfield & Taylor, 2014; Zufferey, 2017).

It is commonly known that for students to become effective and morally upright social workers (Banks, 2008; Barnes, 2006; Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1995; Schön, 1983; Thompson, 2002), their abilities must be both human and technical (Trevithick, 2012). Without denying the necessity of providing students a complete education, including a range of disciplines, paradigms and techniques, the Relational social work method (Folgheraiter, 2007) has, in recent years, opened education to a new perspective. The Relational social work method (Folgheraiter, 2007) suggests that non-conventional methods of social work could benefit both education and practice (Cabiati, 2015; Cabiati & Raineri, 2016). The main idea of this approach is that the possibility of increasing well-being in critical life situations stems from relationships between motivated people with good intentions (Folgheraiter, 2007). The aid is co-constructed in a relationship of reciprocity: The social worker acts to be helped by the user in helping himself.

Based on the principle of reciprocity, the Relational Method of social work education teaches that a student's development of the expertise to become a social worker is not only in the educators' hands (Cabiati, 2017). Reciprocity indicates that not only do teachers influence students but that students also influence teachers (Aultman et al. 2009). To promote and realize this idea, innovative methods of social work education are welcome. In the Relational Method framework, innovations in teaching and learning styles are guided by such social work principles as reciprocity, empowerment, peer-facilitation, valorization and involvement of service users, following a participative approach (Parker, 2010; Samson, 2016).

Social work students in action: description, methods and tools.

The endeavour presented here was carried out in December 2015. In the framework of a social work orientation workshop in the first year of a bachelor's degree program at the University of [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process], a group of 30 social work students were asked to independently organize and manage an activity.

The students received only three instructions from the educator: organize a learning activity involving all of the class members in the planning through a democratic process, choose an activity that fits the aim of the workshop (a learning activity consistent with the first-year curriculum of the bachelor's degree program), and use creativity. Total

freedom was given to the students regarding all of the remaining related aspects of the assignment. The students expressed both enthusiasm and concern about the assignment but showed great initiative. The educator had no professional expectations. The students were given three weeks to organize the activity.

A few days before the activity, the students shared their idea with the educator. In brief, their idea was to go to the Central Railway Station of Milan to meet homeless people. It is usually easy to find homeless people or other people in need at this location. During the period in which this experience took place, the mezzanine floor of the station housed dozens of Syrian families fleeing the war, becoming in the course of time a shelter where people spent the night.

Encouraged by the educator to better explain the meaning of the activity, the students expressed their intention to meet homeless people to donate food and blankets and to try to talk with them. The educator had some concerns about this idea but decided not to voice them, giving confidence to the students; her concerns regarded the complexity of the situation, the setting and the fact that for most of the students it was the first time they met people in difficult.

The educator was invited by the students to join them on the morning of December 15th, 2015, at the Central Railway Station. The students arrived at the station with many gifts for the homeless people. With the support of the educator, they decided to break into small groups of 5 to 7 members to better interact with the people. The educator advised them to act in a respectful manner and not to take unnecessary safety risks. After two hours, all the students and the educator reconvened at a coffee shop at the station and then returned to the university.

Later, the educator asked the students to reflect on the experience in two ways: Each student wrote a self-reflection report (Rai, 2008; Grant et al. 2014) within 5 days after the experience and participated in a dedicated group discussion facilitated by the same educator. For the self-reflection report to the students was only requested to describe the experience: the aimed was to freely collect their opinions, feelings and comments.

The discussion, which lasted two hours, was audio-recorded. The purpose of the discussion was to elaborate the experience, collecting the students' opinions, doubts and feelings, reported below. In the discussion, the educator maintained a role of «relational guide» (Folgheraiter, 2007), helping the students to go in depth, encouraging discussion and confronting.

Five lessons from homeless people

The reflections briefly reported here arose from the social work students' opinions and feelings expressed in both their written reports and the group discussion. Reflection reports were analysed focusing on the main contents (Padgett, 2017).

In particular, from the students' opinions, five relevant themes connected to social work education emerged: the impossibility of knowing in advance what people truly need; the importance of listening; orienting oneself between stereotypes and blurred boundaries; the right to choose; reciprocity.

I bought cakes and sweets because I know that you will appreciate it: the impossibility of knowing in advance what people truly need

The students arrived at the railway station with many bags full of cakes, biscuits and chocolates, motivated by the desire to give these gifts to homeless people. Regarding this intention, what in fact occurred that morning was a surprise for the young students. In more than one situation, a homeless person refused the sweet offered by the student. The reason for this was the real surprise. Confused, the students asked if the homeless people were refusing their cakes or biscuits because they were diabetic. In affirming this, those individuals asked for another type of food, for example, fruit. The young students, loaded up with sweets and expectations about the chance to give them away, received an unexpected answer. Confronted with homeless people who expressed that they were diabetic, the students could not provide the desired aid. They had only sweet foods in their bags. Both in the station and after the experience, the students expressed regret, a sense of limitation and frustration. This unexpected answer was a great lesson for the social work students. This lesson is connected to an important concept of social work: the impossibility of knowing in advance what people actually need and the inability to provide answers in a concrete way. In this experience, the students supposed that they knew that homeless people would need or like sweet foods. Undoubtedly, their prediction was guided by good intentions but did not identify the real needs of the people that they would meet. Using only their interpretation or deduction, they risked not only giving people something unnecessary but even giving them something dangerous. This simple episode showed what can occur if helpers act to help another person without considering their individual and unique needs, aspirations, and wishes.

I have always given money, but is it fair to give that to them? The importance of listening

Before this experience, the students decided not to give money but instead a bit of practical help to homeless people and others in need. During the discussion group, among the students emerged the need to better understand the difference between giving money and other items, such as scarves or food. At the beginning, the students said that the reason that they did not give money was because they were worried about

the possibility that homeless or other people would waste it or spend it in an unsafe way, buying drugs or alcoholic beverages. During the discussion, the class group's reflection shifted from the need to control how this money could be spent by the recipient to how the donor thought about what to give. This change in perspective from the recipient to the donor helped the students reflect mainly about themselves and the way that they act also in their ordinary lives. In fact, what came out in the reports written by the students about the experience was that they had always encountered homeless people, whether or not they had given them money, but that after meeting them, the question always arose: Is it right? The students highlighted that if one gives a gift to someone, one must first think about it, but if one gives money, one does not have to think about it. It is an issue of time. How long does one want to devote to another even before one meets him? Through this experience, the students had committed themselves to thinking about the needs of others by preparing in advance, going to the supermarket, making tea and cakes, and collecting clothing and blankets; in one word, they donated time. Moreover, it became clear to the students how the issue was related not only to the material gift but to the need expressed by the people to be heard and met. *«I was struck by how these people, more than the food (which was absolutely a necessity), had the need to confide in someone and tell their stories»*. This type of thinking led the students to explore the experience of listening as a way to become closer to people and stay with them, as a gift that was not cake or money: *«I said I was sorry ... he had the signs of war ... I didn't know what to say and how to help him ... I know I have listened ...»*

They do not have a sign on their heads: Are they homeless or not? Orienting oneself between stereotypes and blurred boundaries

During the field experience, the students more than once found themselves wondering whether they were moving closer to someone who was *really* a homeless person. The students tried to determine that by examining people's clothing or checking to see if they had luggage. Indeed, in that moment, the boundary between who was and who was not homeless was no longer clear. During the discussion group, the students had the opportunity to reflect on what it meant to recognize someone in need and how this type of question is often associated with a certain type of stereotype. In the same way a doubt is sparked: They wondered if they had not offered food to someone who was in need because he had a «normal» appearance: *«Maybe they are many and I have seen only six»*. The key question for the students was «who is normal?» The students also reflected on how they would feel if someone offered them cake, confusing them with a homeless person. Through reflection, the students concluded that one cannot always recognize people in need at first glance. It became clearer to the students how suffering has a thousand dresses that are not always recognizable.

If I were cold, I would not care about the colour of a scarf: Who has the right to choose?

The students described a particular encounter they had with a woman they met at the station during the learning experience. When they offered a scarf to this woman, she asked them if it would be possible to have a scarf of another colour (the offered scarf was red). When the students explained that they only had the red one, she refused it.

This woman's reaction was a subject of debate among the students. During the discussion group, they discussed whether her behaviour was appropriate, justifiable or inopportune. At the beginning of the discussion, some students firmly espoused the view that «if one person is in real need, he/she must accept the given help without questioning about subtleties». In this delicate discussion, other students challenged this notion, encouraging their colleagues to widen their perspective. In particular, they reflected on the idea that all people, even those in difficulty, have the right to make choices for themselves. This particular situation permitted the students to think about «the freedom of choice», a key and universal aspect of social work, as discussed by several authors and official documents (IFSW, 2014; Steffansson et al. 2016). Engaging directly in the conversation with this woman, the students created for themselves the chance to overcome the idea that people in need must accept any aid offered. They seemed to enhance their perspective with such universal concepts as parity and dignity between human beings.

At the end, who received a gift? Talking about reciprocity

The students reflected on the importance of this experience in terms of meeting others—a meeting that was not only represented by the material help that they gave them. The students tried to move close to the homeless people to understand their needs, as well as those of people who did not want any type of contact. Using the words of the social work students: «*They were surprised to be seen, we were surprised to be welcome*». This meeting took the shape of reciprocity in which the students tried to understand the right distance or proximity and see others beyond the first impact. They learned the stories behind the faces. They were surprised to meet people who were willing to talk about themselves and share some details of their lives. The meeting was mutually generated; together, they found a way to talk to each other, even if sometimes they did not know the other's language. The future social workers reported their wish to improve their relational abilities and found it useful to stay with and listen to others. Others' stories allowed the students to reflect about themselves and their ways of acting in everyday life. Their initial hesitation gave way, thanks to the people they met, to an awareness of being able to connect with other people from whom they traditionally feel apart.

Conclusion

In conclusion, considering the students' reflections after the creative learning experience, connections with social work education are briefly proposed. According to Samson (2016), social work educators have an obligation to ensure that students are adequately prepared to assume the challenges of practice and are equipped with the ability to think critically.

As reported by many authors (Walsh, 2006; Ferguson, 2014; Trevithick, 2012; Thompson, 2015), the challenges of social work practice require social workers to be highly mobile, act creatively, overcome institutional limits, find solutions where there appear to be none, and maintain a positive attitude in coping with others' suffering. This confirms the importance of giving students the possibility to know, enhance and express the ability to learn in a challenging way.

It is not enough to recognize and mention the importance of creative and participative methods in social work education. To educate social workers so that they are able to live their professional motivation with creativity, it is important to develop teaching and learning methods that can inspire both educators and future social workers. From the students, it clearly emerged that a positive element of this experience was planning and living this experience with their classmates. The group allowed them to live this experience without feeling lonely and to be able to discuss it with others.

The experience presented here shows that if students' creativity and initiative are stimulated, they can not only express their personal abilities but also facilitate educators exploring new paths of learning. As suggested by Alexander & Charles (2009), when stimulated in a non-traditional manner, students change both internally and in their relationships with colleagues and educators.

The conversations between the students and homeless individuals led to instructive reflection. The most significant lessons learned from the homeless individuals concerned the impossibility of knowing in advance what each individual needs, suggesting the importance for social workers of acting in order to be helped by the user in helping himself recognizing and respecting their life experiences. Furthermore, the real contact with homeless people permitted the students to more deeply discover themselves in relation to the other individuals' needs and to reflect on their personal meanings, fears and projections. For most of the students, this self-managed experience was their first real contact with people living in marginalized situations.

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