Relational Social Work

The principles and key ideas of Relational Social Work

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Abstract

Relational Social Work is an approach and a method for professional social work practice developed in about 15 year of theoretical analysis, field experience and empirical researches. Relational Social Work is connected with Constructive Social Work, Anti-Oppressive Social Work and Anti-Discriminatory Social Work. In Relational Social Work view, well-being and solutions to social life problems can arise not from individuals, but from coping networks' reflexivity and action. Social workers are seen as «relational guides» of these networks, and their helping tasks are based on the reciprocity principle. In this article key-ideas of Relational Social Work are briefly illustrated, and the role that Relational Social Work proposes for practitioners is discussed.

Keywords

Relational Social Work – Coping Network – Reciprocity – Relational Guide.

Relational Social Work's key principles

Respecting humanity

A first, and counterintuitive, principle of RSW is about social agency (i.e. intentional free action). This first principle is that social problems may often have solutions, but they can never be «solved». People may change (as they constantly do) but they cannot ever «be changed» (Prochaska, Di Clemente & Norcross, 1992). A social worker is not allowed to manipulate people so that their lives comply with want she or he wants them to be (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006; Folgheraiter, 2004). It is not allowed either methodologically — because in this way the intervention does not work — or ethically — because in this way

the principle of self-determination is violated. No professional can unilaterally eliminate problems in other people's lives just because she or he knows what needs to be done. Nor is this possible even if the expert shrewdly adopts the tactic of associating with other colleagues in a «multidimensional team» — which is like forming a phalanx to deal with social problems.

This is because expertise derived from scientific knowledge is only one of the factors — and not the most important — in determining the effectiveness (measurable or otherwise) of professional helping practices. When a social work intervention had a certain effectiveness, it has occurred above all because the people involved in the helping relationship have «taken each other by the hand» and together generated — each remaining distinct — a certain additional human energy (greater than the sum of the energies of the two parties), which gradually, and unpredictably, alters the situation and produces the shared value that Donati calls a «relational good» (Donati, 2000; Donati & Solci, 2011).

A relationship undertaken with the praiseworthy purpose of changing the other for the better, or with the intent to make the other «conform to my idea» of him or her (Lévinas, 1982), puts the social worker in a state of solitude as a «solver». A certain distress, at times even a burnout, results from the impossibility of being in authentic contact with the person being helped. Although this is formally the «object» of social work, he or she is a subject.

Reciprocity

A second principle, which is also counterintuitive, is that generating well-being in complex existential situations requires each person involved to leave the role of user or client (i.e., the role of manipulated) to assume that of therapist or helper (Folgheraiter, 2000).

As long as one considers oneself a victim assisted by superior beings — however, compassionate or, as denounced by Ivan Illich (Illich et al., 1977), conceited or self-interested — one will never be able to 'feel well.' The principle of reciprocity (or of parity or mutuality) — which is the core of the relational approach — states that users can receive true help (as prescribed by their role) only if they can give themselves help to those from whom they accept it (Freeberg, 2007; Petterson & Hem, 2011). Likewise, social workers can give help (as prescribed by their role) only if they know how to ask for and receive it, primarily from their "needy" interlocutors. Literally, 'helping relation' means that the help arises from a relation: that is, from a synergy between two or more agents engaged with equal commitment and dignity in achieving shared improvements (Folgheraiter, 2004).

This claim recalls the concept of relational empowerment. This is a re-balancing of therapeutic and manipulative power in which the party with most of it (generally the professional practitioner) cedes some to the less empowered interlocutor so that she or

he becomes more autonomous and active in dealing with the situation. This operation is not zero-sum. The power surrendered is not lost but 'invested' in social relations so that it yields high-interest returns for the social worker.

The helper therapy principle

Another important principle is that of self-help. The assumption of responsibility for others has an automatic beneficial effect on the person who offers the help, in conformity with the helper therapy principle (Riessman, 1965), which says that when I help another person with a problem, I also help myself.

But there is a deeper lying relationship involved: that with oneself. When an Ego that feels inadequate decides to become different from what it is now (i.e., to change), we may say that Ego enters a relationship with an otherness (other from the self), which is what Ego wants or hopes to become.

This internal game of mirrors starts more easily if a person takes on responsibility for others. Furthermore, by assuming responsibility for others, that person simultaneously accepts that others assume responsibility for him or her. This reciprocal reliance of persons on one another is what is commonly called «mutual help». At its basis there must be trust, which is the «glue» of social relations and which, by cumulating, creates what is generally termed «social capital» (Folgheraiter & Pasini, 2009).

Not individual action, but networks' action

In RSW view, well-being and solutions to social life problems can arise not from individuals, but from coping networks' reflexivity and action.

As mentioned, a «coping network» is a set of relationships between people concerned about a shared aim, for example the aim of sorting up a social life problem.

When one acts with other persons, this common action constructs relational patterns of varying complexity. Many of them are merely functionalist meetings of various kinds (like multidisciplinary teams, or case management panels, or technical planning boards). Only if they are truly dialogical, we call them «coping networks» (Folgheraiter, 2011).

The acting members of a coping network may play different roles, both informal and formal. But they have largely the same status and are autonomous in their action, able to express their voice in the reflexive coping in which they are engaged. A coping network may consist of «homogeneous» people who share a common problem (in which case it is a self/mutual aid group). Or it may be mixed, when it consists of persons with different roles and sensibilities; for example, a family-carer, a user, a voluntary worker, a health practitioner and a natural helper.

Freedom of action and creativity

For displaying an effective shared reflexivity and action, a coping network need to be really such, i.e. dialogical. This dialogicality requires pluralism and freedom.

A network is — to use Lévinas's expression — a «pluralism which does not fuse into unity» (1979, p. 15): a pluralism of voices and intentions in which each one is respected, a contrivance that does not attempt to coordinate or hierarchize or to impart orders or engineer individual abilities, and so on. In a network, there is no pre-established coherence but freedom (Sen, 1999), indeed a squared freedom, of higher order, because it is the amplified result of multiple freedoms. The only coherence, if everything goes well, is with respect to the coping aim that unites all the network's members in its pursuit. The freedom and creativity that spring from the unpredictable are therefore necessary if one is not to remain caught in ex ante schemas, which may be intelligent but are more often proved wrong by concrete experiences.

The greatest degree of freedom is perhaps given by a certain degree of «ignorance». Not having the initially precise knowledge that constrains future action is, paradoxically, «freedom». More specifically, when the lack of knowledge is due to pure negligence — that is, if the precise knowledge is available but not known — that lack is deplorable. But when the knowledge does not exist, and cannot exist, or when it exists in abstract but has no reference to the specific contingency, then admitting ignorance is not just an honorable surrender. It is a necessary strategy.

Pretending to know is the frequent unconscious bluff pulled by modern experts. Admitting not to know like Socrates, as the necessary premise for mobilizing every resource in search of a truth or a certain good, is the authentic moral (and therefore operational) basis of social work. The term «coping» denotes the effort made to resist and actively combat an evil without knowing «how to do so» in advance. By managing as best as they can, but with an open mind, all the network's members hope to learn together along the way (Folgheraiter, 2011).

Social workers as networks' relational guides

According to RSW, therefore, a social worker is a professional who tries to produce as yet unknown solutions by associating the people motivated to seek them. S/he endeavors to create or strengthen trusting relations that are sufficiently «intimate» and profound to help her or him to pursue the elusive aim that s/he is paid to achieve: the «creation» of human well-being. In negative terms, a social worker who merely redistributes the standard provisions of an organized welfare system is not a relational practitioner. The classic functions of redistribution and social control are important, but they can be much more

effective if they are performed «relationally»: that is, by creating and supporting associated and cooperative action among the subjects involved (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012).

Relational social workers realize that the «social» (the part of society coping with a problem) can act as their ally in finding the solution. Contrary to positivist or clinical traditions, social workers do not seek technically to repair a disaster that has already happened and perhaps hardened into a rigid structure. Rather, they help a meaningful potential alternative to evolve in a social context. In general, therefore, relational social workers are facilitators of human relations — expressed in networks with varying degrees of organization — able to produce the ethically directed thought typical of every deliberate coping action. They seeks to fluidify the positive elements embedded in difficult or deteriorated situations, however scarce they may be. Networking takes shape as a professional method when a social worker does not directly provide help, but supports helping as it comes into existence (Folgheraiter, 2004).

The coping network does not constitute «hard» reality. It is a mental construct created by the social worker/facilitator. Coping actions and contacts between network members are almost always initially dispersed in space/time dimensions. At the start, the social worker connects them up in his/her mind. Then, by means of networking practices, s/he may get them to meet physically and facilitate a reflexive development of their identity as a network. This comes about with an increase in connections and equal exchanges, and perhaps with an increase in openness and mutual trust among persons, as well as in their capacities for action. This means an increase in social capital, which consists of the intelligence and sensitivity of social relations in a given micro social context.

The social worker joins the social relations already working in the same direction as s/he is. S/he looks at certain relations, and identifies those that «work» and produce a positive power in the coping process. From this perspective, the social worker acts as a facilitator, or a «relational guide». S/he greases the wheels of a social dynamism that is already oriented towards a solution, but which is currently blocked or insufficient. The intention is to increase the resilience and capacity for action of the social relations already activated, or which can be activated, in a coping process. As a relational guide, social worker's action is second hand, so to speak: s/he does not act directly, but instead facilitates the action of others. By acting in this way, a social worker does not look back to identify the causes of present dysfunctions. The worker looks forward to an open future and guides/stimulates people to do likewise.

The relational social worker does not seek to modify the internal structure or structured behaviors of people, according to his/her standards. S/he acts as a mirror so that relations already directed towards the solution are able to see more clearly what they are doing and how they are doing it. S/he acts responsively to what the network has shown that it wants to choose or do. But this does not imply that his/her professional presence is not also proactive. S/he respects people's decisions, while they remain within the broad direction of the general aim and are not destructive or harmful to the social interactions

within the network. His/her role as facilitator entails that s/he must foster any creativity that leads forward, and block or ignore everything that leads backwards, or causes the process to stall.

As a relational guide (or a facilitator), the relational social worker gathers the motivated people together and, on an equal footing, encourages them to interact and take decisions. To 'facilitate' is not to lead, coordinate, or command. The relational guide accompanies the action of these people and supports them in all the displays that they deem to be able to mitigate the problem. Even more so, she or he must be able to support action in directions that she or he would have never envisaged alone. The relational social worker sometimes sees the emergence of decisions or opinions that she or he thinks are wrong or ethically debatable. But s/he does not directly dispute those decisions or opinions. Rather, she or he «acts as the devil's advocate» by stimulating further and better discussion on the matter. The relational social worker does not provide answers and does not give advice — not even when requested to do so — but provides reflexive feedback by referring to the network everything that she or he sees happening to it and that instead the network does not perceive.

The most important elements to be monitored during a network session are the dominance of one particular personality or the marginalization of another, reluctance and fear to talk, covert or overt conflicts, the loss of logical coherence, time-wasting chatter, and so on. In all these cases the facilitator, by using the basic techniques of narrative counseling (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Milner & O'Byrne, 2002), reports what she or he observed to the network, so that it addresses every single issue.

Conclusion

RSW presents a challenge to social work theory and practice. It asks to adopt a strength-based approach to helping. Individuals needing support or experiencing difficulties are seen as holding the capacities and capabilities within their social network to achieve the change that is required. Historically social work practice is rooted in a deficit model — it assumes that, because the need for help arose, the individual and their network require assessment of weaknesses and remedial interventions. RSW suggests instead that the emphasis is placed on capacities to achieve change and harnessing social networks to promote and support change.

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