*Respecting Otherness in the Present Moment*

# Open Dialogues in Relational Practices

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*Dialogicity is what we humans know best. Relations are what people and societies are made of; we are born with an innate capability to initiate dialogue. Respecting otherness is easy when there are no worries, but challenged when things seem to be going wrong. One wants to prevent unwelcome consequences and control situations. There is the temptation to take a shortcut and try to control how the other think and act. Tom Erik Arnkil explains the fundamentals of a particular way of understanding social work, based on respecting others, dialogicity, agency. In this perspective, the profound relational and dialogical character of life would be made the base of social work.*

**Parole chiave:**
Dialogicity – Respecting others – Agency – Social work.

People enter dialogues the moment they are born, and they live their life in relationships from the first breath to the last. If this fundamental fact of life was made the base of social work practice, the consequences would be profound and have decisive effects on the quality of work. Relational dialogicity does not solve problems like insufficient resources, but, I am sure, without making relational networking and responsive dialogues the foundation of practices there will never be enough resources. In the following I shall discuss some of our experiences in developing social work through three decades.

## Working appropriately differently

Let me begin with experiments in redefining the position of social work. Positions are neither fixed nor unilaterally determined. People position themselves and each other all the time, and while social workers have a mandate with rights and

obligations, many/most people have only vague guesses of what social workers actually do. Does the client view the social worker as a supporter or a threat, for example? This will be determined along the process, and never unilaterally. The client may or may not begin to trust individual worker and may or may not have confidence in the institution. Any social worker will also have experienced that other professionals try to delegate them tasks they want to get rid of — typically tasks of controlling people. However, as there are no power-free relationships in social life (Foucault, 1980), delegating control tasks generates hidden power games. A day care worker or the school teacher is worried about a child and suspects substance abuse at home but fearing to take up the worry s/he asks the social worker to keep an eye on the family — and pretends s/he has nothing to do with it. Besides control tasks social workers are handed over tasks of «tailor making» services to better fit the everyday life. Their work-load is filled with residuals left over by primary services. Societal modernization brought about differentiation into specialized systems (Luhmann, 1989). Schools produce «education services», health systems «health services», etc. The «Fordist» mass production of services slices the comprehensive everyday life according to professional specialization and provides more or less standardized packages in time-restricted dozes (Arnkil 1991a; 1991b). The clients/patients/pupils/families are expected to adapt, the pressed service systems have no time for tailor making according to individual needs. That is left for others — including social work. Clients face the overwhelming task of tying the fragments together, and social workers try to help — without a mandate to steer the whole. Social workers are between a rock and a hard place: If they do not supplement the «Fordist» system, the clients will be in trouble; if they do, the primary services are let off the hook — they can go on unchanged, not learning to tailor make themselves. Societal structures are reproduced by societal actors (e.g. Giddens 1984) — and social workers are among of them. Unwillingly or not, they take part in constant *structuration* of the service system.

What if social workers refused to do reproduce the division of service labour? We tried something like that. The only thing, however, social workers — or anyone else — can change directly, is their *own activity.* Doing more of the usual you keep up contacts but achieve no change. Doing something very different you risk breaking up contacts and making work for change all the more difficult. Thus, try to do something *appropriately different!* This was what we experimented in an 80's project. Instead of simply taking on the delegated tasks, the social workers *regarded every contact as an invitation for cooperation.*

To do something appropriately different you have to analyse what is «more of the same» — the figure of activity you have been reproducing for your part — and you are doing social analysis on structuration. To vision what would perhaps be too different you have to try to see your activity through the eyes of the others — and you are on the way to reciprocal dialogicity. *The target of change is no longer «out there», «others», it is your own action in your relations.* You will get both intended and unintended consequences. It is not possible to control relational situations unilaterally; the social world is too complex for that. In our 80's project

the social workers refused to accept the division to «my clients» and «your clients» and insisted on dialogues of doing something together with *our* clients. The attempts were partly successful, partly not, but nevertheless, they taught us a lot about the — many — possibilities of redefining social work.

## Becoming alike and trying to act differently

In the 90's we focused on client relationships in child protection social work and youth psychiatry (Arnkil & Eriksson 1995; 1996). The daily routines were very different in these two practices. The psychiatric team had a joint, organized calendar and there were no problems for finding time for reflections with us researchers. The social workers were in and out of the office like firemen to sites of crisis, and it was next to impossible to find common times for reflection — and at those precious moments of thinking together there was a tsunami of urgent administrative task trying wash away the space. Schwartzman and Kneifel (1985) argue that teams working with very closely knit families tend to be more or less enmeshed too, while teams working with very loose family relationships tend to have difficulties in finding common time and keeping up agreed structures. The very different teams tried to find appropriately different ways of working with their clients — the one team trying to facilitate space for independence in the families, the other to facilitate closer care relationships. But how does one know what is appropriately different? One does not, beforehand.

## Anticipating, Otherness and Agency

Humans anticipate what happens if I do x or y or nothing at all. Orientation is what the psyche does — all the time. For this continuous and mostly unnoticed «guessing» one uses all the cognitive, emotional and moral resources of orientation one can put to use (Galperin, 1969). People have «tacit knowledge» of what is appropriate in their culture (Polanyi, 1958); they know *from within their relationships* what those relationships are like (Shotter, 1993). However, every person occupies a unique place in their network of relationships — even identical twins are in relationship with each other — and things look and feel different from those places. Subsequently, *there are no identical views into situations and the world of relationships.* There are only subjective views, no one human can be objective, and one can never acquire a subject-less «birds-eye view» into situations. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998) emphasizes that each actor occupies a point in the social space, which is the ground for the gaze, the *perspective* that opens for that person, and the form and content of that perspective is determined by the objective position the person occupies. (Perspectives are subjective, and that is an objective fact!) The best I can acquire is a *richer subjective view,* a manifold picture, an understanding that the same objective facts mean more or less different things

to other people. (If my leg breaks, this objective fact poses a different problem to me, my doctor, my social worker, my wife and my boss. A heat wave is welcome to the sunbather but not necessarily to the one with a heart condition. A divorce is a fact but maybe a relief to some and a misery to others. There are no common problems, only problems that connect.)

A social worker and a client view each other from their unique places in their relationships and anticipate each other's responses, and can never share exactly the same view. To do something appropriately different in relation to others you ought to see yourself through the eyes of the others — which, ultimately, is impossible. Nevertheless, *trying to be responsive to the other and better understand what were appropriate in her/his situation you enter into a dialogical relationship instead of «monological» attempts to control the other.* What is called for, is generating dialogical space, and the most important dimension in that is *allowing the Other to be heard.*

Being genuinely heard strengthens one's agency. According to the Russian theorist on dialogues Mikhail Bakhtin «For the word (and consequently for a human being) there is nothing more terrible than a lack of response» (1984, p. 127). The simplest core in relational practices is safeguarding that the persons are heard and responded to. However simple this is, it requires that the social worker — or any relational worker — is *present in the very moment,* and not only «as a professional person», but also as the human being s/he is. If you are thinking «ahead» how the client should change, you are not listening to him/her *now* but your normative ideas and preferred next steps; if you are thinking what choices s/he should have made in the past, you block your hearing in the present moment of time. Have you been genuinely heard? In not, you know what being left without a response feels. If you have, you know how empowering it feels. The philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1969) emphasizes that *the Other is always more than one can ever grasp.* It is this *asymmetry,* this difference, that makes dialogues *necessary* — and asymmetry also makes dialogues *possible.* «In what way would it enrich the event if I merged with the other, and instead of two there would be now only one?» asks the Bakhtin (1990, p. 87). «And what would I myself gain by the other's merging with me? If he did, he would see and know no more than what I see and know myself […] Let him rather remain outside of me, for in that position he can see and know what I myself do not see and do not know from my own place, and he can essentially enrich the event of my own life».

Generating dialogical space calls for accepting the Other unconditionally and meeting him/her in the present moment of time — as s/he is. This does *not,* however require that the other person's actions are accepted — and social workers certainly encounter deeds totally unacceptable. Yet the unique otherness of the person needs to be respected, the Other who is more than one can ever grasp has to be acknowledged. Being genuinely heard opens gates for hearing oneself, the different voices in the inner dialogues. We are all someone's children, perhaps parents, too, siblings, friends, colleagues. We are born into relationships and live in inner and outer dialogues. When we ask the client about the persons close to

her/him, these persons join the conversation through the inner dialogues of the client — and echoes of their voices are there even if we don't inquire about these people. The client also brings into the conversation the professionals they have been in contact with. The empowering potentials of such polyphony of voices are multiplied if the other persons are actually invited into the dialogue. If the relational and dialogical dimensions of life are taken seriously, the smallest unit for work is three or four rather than two, the client with her/his best friend and the social worker with a colleague. Network dialogues are all the more powerful — but also challenges are multiplied. Multi-actor encounters easily turn into blaming.

In child protection there are moments where the child safeguarded immediately and there is or seems to be no time for dialogues. However, social work does not end with immediate actions. Let me approach the critical events of safeguarding the child from earlier phases in the process — the moments of smaller worries — and then return to the challenges of dialogism in alarming situations.

## Worries and dialogicity

Dialogicity is what we humans know best. Relations are what people and societies are made of (Folgeraither, 2004; Donati, 2010); we are born with an innate capability to initiate dialogue (Trevarthen & Gratier, 2007). Respecting otherness is easy when there are no worries, but challenged when things seem to be going wrong. One wants to prevent unwelcome consequences and control situations. There is the temptation to take a shortcut and try to control how the other think and act. («I will tell the client/the parents/the child how things are and what they should do!») Dialogical space is lost, others are supposed to listen.

*Authoritative discourse* demands that the people acknowledge it and make it their own; the utterances of authoritative discourse are finite («*this* is how things are»). *Dialogical discourse* invites other voices to join in; thoughts do not become «ready» without thinking together («this is how I see it; help me see the situation better»). Authoritative discourse is necessary in life and especially understandable in urgent situations, but nevertheless, the wish that others could actually make my thoughts their own is based on a massive error. Seeing things as I do would entail that the Other shares my life history and the present place in my relationships, which, of course is not possible — yet even small worries can tempt me to forget the otherness of Others.

In a project in 1996-1999 my colleague Esa Eriksson and I followed heated debates where professionals — especially teachers and social workers — tried to persuade the others to change. Teachers blamed social workers for not doing anything in worrying cases they tried to hand over, and social workers invited teachers to come and see truly worrying cases, telling teachers they could do a lot more themselves. We decided to develop a method for the professionals for taking up their worries from their particular place in the relationships instead of

insisting that others should see matters as they did. Hesitating to take up one's worry with e.g. the parents of a child is understandable; one anticipates that the parents will be hurt. The worry is not taken up - and it grows. We designed a method that would help the professionals to take up their worry dialogically. The approach can be summarized in the simple but radical core: instead of telling the parents/the client/the patient, etc. what their problem is and what they should do, the professional asks for help in making her/his worries smaller. It is the professional who has the problem — e.g. the teacher in relation with the pupil and the parents — and the professional needs their help! Since the 90's we have trained hundreds of multi-professional training groups to train thousands of professionals all over Finland and also abroad, and the response is excellent. (There is a manual in English: Eriksson & Arnkil, 2010.)

People *invite* responses, our utterances and deeds are not just unilateral impulses or reactions as if we were passive objects. In monologic discourse we invite obedience, in dialogic discourse we invite the unique voice of the Other into the polyphony. Taking up one's worry by asking for help is an attempt to do something appropriately different — leaving dialogical space for the Other to join in.

## Getting unstuck

Social workers are certainly acquainted with situations where the work by professionals from various sectors and agencies seems to be getting nowhere. Frustrated parties expect change from one another and social work is both expected to practice miracles and treated with mistrust. We developed a set of methods called Anticipation/Future Dialogues for getting the involved professionals and the family and their private networks into fruitful dialogues (see Arnkil, 2011 in Italian). Facilitators interview the family members and their personal network people they have brought to the meeting, as well as the involved professionals, and talking and listening is separated to allow all the voices to be heard and all the participants to have rich inner dialogues. Matters are viewed from a near future perspective as if people were already «there». The focus is on «recalling» from a relieved perspective what each and everyone did to get there and what lessened their worries. A very concrete plan is summarized at the end: who does what with whom next. People leave with plausible hope; they know how they and others can contribute (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006; 2012).

## Dialogicity in alarming situations

There is an excellent social work method «Family Group Conferencing» (FGC) that foster dialogicity in alarming child protection situations. The child's and family's significant private network persons are summoned to make a plan for safeguarding the child. The private network (family group) is informed by the

involved professionals of their views and actions, after which the family group discusses the situation between themselves and comes up with a plan for the social to accept. S/he is, of course, responsible for making the official agreement. If s/he cannot accept the proposal, the family group is informed about the reasons and asked to make another proposal (see Burford, 2011).

What is common in the approaches described above is the respect for all the voices. From the first emotions of slight worries to the situations of great worry it is important to make space for listening and being heard. The methods do not do the dialoguing, it is the people — and dialogical methods are not something done *upon* people but *with* them. Methods can, however, help to keep the eye on the ball: the most important thing is to ensure that all the voices are heard, and this calls for acknowledging the unique otherness of each person without pre-conditions. Such encounters are precious and powerful in themselves, not only for reaching plans and agreements. The strengthen hope and empower agency.

## Appropriately different social work

What if social workers regarded every contact as an invitation to dialogic cooperation — and the management encouraged and supported that? Every child protection notification would be taken as an initiative to have dialogues between the significant private and professional persons. Every move in and out of foster care would be the case for network dialogues. Every attempt to delegate social work tasks would be responded by congratulating for the marvellous idea of doing the work together. Every desire of change would be met with the reflection: who do we need to dialogue with to do that.

This would mean that the profound relational and dialogical character of life would be made the base of social work. It would, I am sure, also mean a profound change not only in social work but also the structures social workers take part in structurating. It would bring about further steps towards dialogic practice culture.

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