

Some Initial Thoughts On Establishing “Right Relationship” Between Staff, Professionals, Service Organisations and the People They Assist

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Perhaps the most common complaint one hears from the experiences of people who find they must rely on formal human services is that they do not feel particularly well treated. Sometimes this takes the form of decidedly overt and obnoxious conduct on the part of someone, but more often it expresses itself in more subtle ways that are nevertheless just as distressing. The rise to dominance of human service organizations in the past several decades has placed these organizations into a controlling role in the lives of the many thousands of people who have no choice but to rely on them for support. This control has greatly accentuated these underlying concerns about getting the relationship “right” between them and the people supported by them.

The obvious temptation would be to whinge ever more loudly about how unfair this all is and undoubtedly such a temptation is regularly exercised. The more difficult task would be to ask ourselves what the alternative is to being treated badly and to begin to sketch out a different vision and ideal for what a proper relationship ought to look like. In essence, to develop a theory for reforming the mentality and structures of everyday service practice. Such a view would have the advantage of offering a kind of roadmap or design for the kind of advocacy and change agenda that will guide us in the years ahead.

It would be natural to assume that when the word “relationship” is used that it refers to interpersonal interactions and this would certainly be true up to a point. Nonetheless, a lot of the difficulty that service users will experience is due to factors that are actually somewhat impersonal and relate more to the ways that bureaucracies work. The net effect of these is still poor treatment but one cannot blame the individuals involved in quite the same way as if it was only their actions that were at stake. The classic example is where a decision is made about what is to happen to a service user that does not properly involve the individual, but instead is made by people in the bureaucracy. Such an action may not involve any malice or personal feeling whatever but rather derives from the way the particular bureaucratic system is set up to operate.

The remedy in the case of both interpersonal and impersonal relationships is actually similar. This involves the identification and internalization of ethics suitable for the establishment of a “right relationship”. By “ethics” I do not mean the usual kinds of ideals or values that are so routinely expressed by organisations, as these simply reflect their sense of what they wish they could be. Rather, it refers to the habits of conduct that they oblige themselves to make part of their daily practice.

In this sense “ethics” might be thought of as values that have taken hold in people in some enduring way rather than just being abstract preferences. When people hold rather rigorously to an ethic it tends to guide their conduct and becomes part of who they are. This applies whether the ethic is a worthwhile one or a poor one. For instance, some measure of lying and deceptive conduct can become habitual in many environments. It is internalized in the make-up of the people involved such that one

can see that the pattern of conduct is actually being guided by an ethic. The ethic itself when it gets spelled out in plain speech says that it is acceptable to manipulate others to get what you want. In a more honorable setting the opposite would be true in that people would tend to see deceptive conduct as unacceptable thereby revealing a quite different underlying ethic.

Impersonal or “Structural” Ethics

These terms refer to the way a relationship with a service user gets “structured” in the way an organisation operates. It typically will involve a pattern that repeats itself with great regularity and thus establishes over time a kind of “normal” way of operating. These might be thought of as organisational ethics in the sense that they are embodied in the design of the organisation and its daily practices. The difficulty with these is that they are commonly seen as an unchangeable “given” by both the people who work in the organisation and by those who receive assistance from it. Yet it is usually the case that these kinds of ethics are changeable wherever there is the will to do so. However, the will to change might not exist if there is not the imagination present that permits people to envision how a worthier ethic might work. What follows are some examples of organisational ethics that are very common in today’s technocratic culture of human services, as well as a description of alternative ethics.

The Ultimate Authority Regarding a Person’s Life and Supports Being Given to Managers or Professionals

This refers to the common practice of granting to professionals and managers final decision-making authority (as so-called “experts”), at the expense of leaving as much control and influence as possible in the hands of service users and those people who are close to them. This is not meant to suggest that professionals and experts do not have valid contributions to make, but rather that their insights and biases ought not to override those brought by the more “ordinary” people of this world. In this sense the “better” ethic would be to buttress our current respect of professionals and those in authority with comparable respect for ordinary people and the many valuable contributions they could conceivably bring to their lives and communities.

It is clear that all professionals are not virtuous as a matter of definition so it should not be thought that all ordinary people are either. Nevertheless, this should not at all diminish their status as being co-deciders in their fate and future. There is no advantage to capitulate to the view that professionals or managers automatically and unquestionably “know best”. On the contrary we need an ethic that permits a kind of egalitarian partnership to evolve that sees the person receiving assistance as a decisive agent in his or her own existence. Their capacity to act accordingly ought then to be a secondary factor that would influence the relationship, but not fundamentally deprive the person of their autonomy.

Even in those relatively infrequent instances where a given person may be indisputably established to be impaired in their judgment and capacities, there may well be ways that their security and that of others could be assured that do not involve the total suspension of their autonomy as a person. "Right relationship" would require treating the person as an equal authority in his or her own life. The act of deferring to professionals and managers would be done voluntarily by the person on its merits rather than this being a foregone conclusion. In the most practical terms possible this ethic would mean providing supports or assistance "with" the people affected rather than "on" or "to" or even "down to" them.

Creating Service Delivery Arrangements That Permit Service Users Sufficient Powers So As To Be Able To Meaningfully Shape How Service Is Rendered

The average user of services typically lacks the core authority to imagine and plan optimal supports; the ability to refuse plans prepared by others that they believe do not meet their needs; the ability to propose and negotiate their own plan; and the ability to control to a large extent the resources allocated to their support. These powers are commonly held by other people and often by organizations. The individuals affected do not have much say except to either reject service entirely or offer comment from an "advisory" footing since it will be others that hold the decision-making power. This arrangement is typically predicated on the assumption that those who hold the power are the optimal people to decide on the individual's best interests.

This classically paternalistic pattern may have its origins in clinical presumptions about the service user's inherent dysfunctionality or incompetence. These would in turn justify the transfer of the person's normal powers to decide their life to third parties. Yet when one looks at how services work where the service user and their family are in a position of comparable or equal power (to managers and professionals) they work quite well. This may be true even where the principal person concerned is actually significantly disabled but still very keen on being a factor in his or her own life. Thus what is revealed is that there is no good reason to set up a system that reflexively strips people of normative control and influence in their own life. On the contrary, "right relationship" ought to begin with a commitment to preserve maximum and normative personal autonomy unless there is some compelling reason to limit it.

Keeping Services Small, "Grass Roots" and Non-Bureaucratized As Much As Is Possible

If power and resources are moved "outward" and downward from the professional and managerial hierarchies that limit their use to only the small elite that control these, then one can expect there to be a need for various entities that would replace the current "top down" service delivery patterns. What these would look like would vary, but one could correctly expect that any number of small community-based and -controlled bodies would occupy this role. Normally these operate in rather more informal and non-bureaucratic ways so as to better reflect the character of the people and communities

that compose them. Not uncommonly the cultural, linguistic and religious identities of communities and sub-communities express themselves this way.

There has been much written about what exactly characterizes a “grass roots” way of operating but all of the following attributes could usefully add much to what might be meant by “right relationship” in this regard. These include an emphasis on participation, dialogue, informality, and relationships more than structure or bureaucracy; flexibility; personal knowledge; “bottom up” decision-making etc. In such environments (usually small and not overwhelming) ordinary people maintain a fair degree of personal influence, can see where they wish or need to participate, can achieve any number of variations on practice that reflect their values and preferences and autonomy and can establish intentional safeguards in addition to those that might be imposed from without.

Such a description of a “grass roots” styles of operating only describe a small percentage of our current services but it does make one wonder why there is not more of this sort of option made available for those who would prefer it. These options are practical, affordable and are largely uncomplicated both fiscally and bureaucratically. Surely, these approaches offer something that is missing in terms of the kind of roles and relationships handed out to service users in more technocratic models of support. After all what is to be gained by being made “small”, disempowered, devoid of positive capacities to shape the character of one’s supports and hostage to the vagaries of bureaucratic ambiguity and vested interests. Small will not be perfect by any means but it does serve to make “small” people a bigger factor in their own lives.

Reluctance To Use Standardised Approaches In Favour of Flexible and Personalised Ones

It is much too tempting in bureaucracies to resort to any number of approaches that would result in standardised practices, systems and thinking. The difficulty is that a responsive service and therefore one with the “right relationship” with people will be one that does what is necessary and relevant for the person i.e. will “bend” or adapt towards the person. A poor quality service will tend to require the person to fit to it rather than the reverse. Such adaptations on the part of the service user are not normally all that burdensome or constitute much of a disadvantage. Nevertheless, it is important to remember which ultimately exists for the other if “right relationship” is to not go entirely out of focus. The proper relationship ought to be that the service’s needs do not dictate the design of service.

Standardised practices, models and systems tend to emphasise the lowest common denominator, or the theory of “the best for the most”. This claim is dubious since “best” ought to be worked out one person at a time rather than be imposed by some method of “averaging” of needs that may be in their essence not at all so reducible to what is shared across groups of people. Better to have many varieties of choices and options available to people rather than to have a single size system that supposedly fits all. This doesn’t work with shoes and it won’t work with other significant human needs.

Systems that are both flexible and designed “from and with” individuals are vastly more likely to actually work for people than those that institutionalise people into standardized patterns. It would still be true that there is a place for a variety of standardised methods where the needs justify them such as in the case of some diagnostic tests, some well proven sequences for learning particular skills and so forth. However, in these cases it is still not the practice that dictates the process selected, but rather the needs of individuals. This is the “right relationship” when it comes to needs.

Reflections

What has preceded this are merely a few illustrative examples of the struggle for clarity about the personal and impersonal “ethics” that ought to guide our search for “right relationship”. What hinges on this exploration are the lives of the many people affected by our broad pattern or paradigm of service here at the beginning of this new century. Whether we like it or not patterns are now in place that shape people’s lives, hopes and the details of what is or is not possible for them. If we find we do not like them or cannot live with them then as advocates, change agents and citizens we need to begin to see what it is that would be worthy ideals that might serve as the base for a better, “right relationship” between those who provide support and those who rely on it. These will be the defining discussions in the years ahead and may well come to dramatically alter what we now understand as being “service”. In Part B we will examine this topic further.

Establishing “Right Relationship” Between Services and Those Who Rely On Them For Assistance Part B

It is clear that our human service agency system is often in deep difficulty in terms of getting its relationships with its service recipients in proper order. People who use services and those who are close to them constantly report feeling overwhelmed by how difficult it is to get services to behave towards them in a way that they feel is helpful and respectful. It is not that there aren’t instances and individuals that they deal with who behave commendably, it is that such conduct is exceptional rather than the rule. Even those who work in such systems aren’t spared the same experiences, as relationships in the technocratic culture of modern agency life are very much strained and even disagreeable. It points to the importance of people getting clear as to what might be the ethics that would provide a guide to what “right relationship” would be if followed conscientiously. This is not only a question for service providers themselves as it also has implications for advocacy, service design, the distribution of power and responsibility and a wide variety of other matters related to our vision of what “better” could be.

One place to begin is to recognize the principle that people should be expected to take responsibility for their conduct. Unless people accept this point there is not much one

can reasonably expect from them except the unbridled pursuit of relationship on their terms alone. This presumptive view of professional, managerial or staff “ultimacy” is common enough and it usually will mean that whatever relationship does occur will tend to be largely on the terms of those who are employed in service. The alternative to this is, of course, the view that all of the people in service provider/service recipient relationships ought to share the power of ultimate decision-making rather than to accord it simply to who is able to mass enough power to impose their will. What follows are some brief statements as to what might serve as worthwhile ethics that could guide relationships into a framework that is more beneficial and which leaves the service user with a sense of influence, dignity and respect. They are only a starting point but a valuable one nonetheless.

Relate “With” People, Not “At”, “On” Or “Down To” Them

Each of these short words expresses a sense of the relationships that service users will experience when they are treated as being somehow “less than” those who are supposed to assist them. Similarly, “withness” is generally viewed as reinforcing the sense of people as being respected, equal, important, credible and resourceful. Even with some recognition that it is valuable to work “with” people the force and power of conventional “top down” and professionalized service delivery arrangements should not be underestimated. These types of patterns may be all that people have seen and experienced and thus reverting back to them even in the face of hopeful rhetoric to the contrary is quite predictable. The wiser assumption is that the establishment of authentic “withness” is likely to be elusive particularly in the early days of attempting such changes. Such changes are highly dependent on personal authenticity and thus extend into realms of human personality that are only partially touched by the usual organizational tinkering and gestures of well meaning technocrats, managers and professionals. It is also quite likely that many service users may themselves have difficulty in imagining what working with people would actually be like since they too are often deprived of compelling examples of this kind of “rightness” of relationship in service contexts.

Negotiate With People Rather Than Impose Answers

The sense that people know what is best for others easily leads to the assumption of control by the one with the answers. Typically, the answers they favour will tend to be imposed since, to the imposer, they are self-evidently beneficial and warranted. What negotiation offers the person affected is the chance to counter the views of the other as well as remind the potential tyrant of the need to respect their will, personhood and prerogative to determine their own sense of what should be.

In order for people to successfully operate in the context of negotiated conditions it is necessary for those in authority to unequivocally grasp that the whole service process for the person would in theory come to an end if the person concerned (as well as their authorized allies) decides that a particular proposal as to service is unacceptable. This is quite a bit different from giving the person veto authority over established service

authorities since “negotiation” presumes mutual agreement to proceed rather than the alternative of unilateral authority resting on either side of the relationship.

Create Mutual And Shared Ideals of “Right Relationship”

It would be decidedly inaccurate to say that staff, managers and professionals do not have their own ideals for what their relationships with people they support ought to be. Without such worthy ideals much that is good that we now enjoy would not have been possible. Nevertheless, why cannot these ideals be developed mutually? It is quite feasible for there to be considerable reciprocity in the evolving of relationships and one must always wonder why this important process is omitted from consideration when it is actually quite “natural” in its own way amongst people who see themselves as equals.

The answer is not unsurprising in that people in roles of authority in the service world are not schooled to see such a sharing of the setting of goals, ideals and priorities as being either possible or necessary for the achievement of good results. Instead they are systematically reinforced to see that their ultimate “duty of care” is a responsibility exclusive to themselves and their colleagues. Thus making decisions apart from those they are supposed to assist seems quite “natural”. Similarly, the presumption that the people being assisted ought to be part of sorting out what good support and care might be is rarely reinforced.

Rejection of the Theory of Professional or Managerial Ultimacy Over Service

It is unlikely that most professionals or managers are indifferent to the wishes of the many people whose lives they encounter. In fact, it would be unwise to typify them at all as they vary tremendously as individuals. However, it is quite possible to study most service systems and see that these same people hold in their hands the discretion of making the ultimate and important decisions of service design and delivery. It is highly unusual that service users are in a comparable position of ultimate authority.

If only one side of the relationship between those assisted and those doing the assisting has the final say on important matters then it is predictable that at least some of the time the less favored party will be subject to the domination of the one with greater authority. This would be intolerable to many managers and professional if they were subject to the dictums of those they assist yet they may fail to see this same effect when the roles are reversed since this is the dominant pattern in service relationships at present. What may not be clear to such persons is that the authority over service could just as easily be shared between service recipient and provider. It would certainly mean fundamentally different styles of operating from what we now see but quite achievable nonetheless.

Relate To Each Person As Unique in How Services Are Designed and Operated

The rise of increasingly standardized or uniform service and agency practices has greatly intensified the tendency to treat all service recipients as being somehow like all other people who share their label or who are in the client role. The preferred behavior would be to give each person a chance to reveal the many ways in which the person they are is similar to or different from others. This is in contrast to relating to them only in terms of a generalized stereotype.

The implications of such a starting point are many but certainly one of the foremost is that the practice of designing a service in the abstract and the forced fitting people to such invariant models would need to cease. This is easier said than done given that almost the majority of services are of this "fixed model" variety with almost all key elements "rolling over" unchanged from year to year. Nevertheless, there are endless examples of services that rely on an ethic of "one person at a time" service practices that belie the alleged impossibility of flexibility. It is also notable that there also exist many bureaucracies that quite competently manage services in ways that permit high degrees of flexibility and individualization at the personal level.

Leaving the Core Decisions of A Personal Nature to the Person Served

There has been a trend within modern technocratic human service systems towards increasing degrees of invasiveness into the lives of the people served. Often this results in the formal service usurping much of what historically would be considered private or at least very personal matters. Perhaps the most evident mechanisms that people may be familiar with that do this are the many varieties of formalized individual service planning processes that abound. These are often well intentioned but it is nevertheless remarkable the extent to which these have insinuated themselves into even the most intimate of matters in people's lives yet maintained their character as largely public processes complete with a documentary trail. Even the dreams and hopes of people are forced into the public record in ways that would be considered none of anyone else's business were these people not hostage to the system i.e. in the client role.

It is an important advance to return to people the greatest degree of control of their lives that may be possible. This would begin with a commitment by service providing authorities to a policy or premise of non-invasiveness particularly as it relates to matters that are generally recognized as personal and private by most of the public. This is not to say that any given person served might not voluntarily relinquish some aspects of privacy as suits their interest but this would be done under reasonable conditions of authentic voluntariness. It would also mean the absence of compulsions to the contrary. These conditions do not usually apply in the case of most formalized planning systems (even with most that are described as "person centered") as they are usually compulsory and accessing service resources without participation in them is unusual. Hence, most people feel they have no choice but to participate as instructed even at the price of deep erosion of their personal space.

