

Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice –  
2013- Volume 22, Issue 1, pp. 4–20  
URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-114395

ISSN: 1876-8830

URL: <http://www.journalsi.org>

Publisher: Igitur publishing, in cooperation  
with Utrecht University of

Applied Sciences, Faculty of Society and Law

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Received: 25 September 2012

Accepted: 1 February 2013

Category: Practice

## DIALOGICAL PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK – TOWARDS A RENEWED HUMANISTIC METHOD

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### ABSTRACT

#### **Dialogical Practice in Social Work – Towards a renewed humanistic method**

As we know contemporary social work is facing many complex challenges. In this context it is important that we remind ourselves of, and return to, first principles. What are we doing when we do social work? The recognition that we are working with human beings may seem an obvious, even banal observation, but given the managerial emphasis on performance, targets and efficiencies we may in fact lose sight of this. That we work with human beings provides us with a core axiom around which we should orient and judge our practice. In this article, I suggest that one approach, tailored to the reality of the human being, is that of dialogue. This primarily means *listening to* and *responding to* the words and experience of the other person. A dialogic practice is challenging and disruptive of our contemporary managerial approach. But the test of this is

effectiveness. Not only can it be shown to work but I think it can also be shown that a dialogic approach in itself restores humanity to both client and worker.

### **Keywords**

Social Work, managerialism, dialogue, humanization

### **SAMENVATTING**

#### **Dialogische praktijk in social work – naar een hernieuwde humanistische methode**

Zoals bekend wordt het hedendaagse social work geconfronteerd met complexe uitdagingen. In deze context is het belangrijk dat we onszelf herinneren aan, en teruggaan naar, de eerste beginselen. Wat doen wij bij social work? De erkenning dat we werken met mensen kan een duidelijke, zelfs banale, observatie zijn maar gezien de bestuurlijke nadruk op prestaties, doelstellingen en efficiëntie kunnen wij deze erkenning uit het oog verliezen. Dat we werken met mensen geeft ons een core axiom waar wij ons op zouden moeten oriënteren en onze praktijk op zouden moeten beoordelen. In dit artikel stel ik de dialoogbenadering voor, die afgestemd is op de realiteit van de mens. Dit betekent in de eerste plaats *luisteren naar* en *reageren op* de woorden en de ervaring van de andere persoon. Een dialogische praktijk is uitdagend en tegelijkertijd storend voor onze hedendaagse bestuurlijke aanpak. De vraag is of dit effectief is. Er kan niet alleen aangetoond worden dat het werkt, maar het kan ook aangetoond worden dat een dialogische benadering op zichzelf de menselijkheid herstelt van zowel de cliënt als de sociaal werker.

### **Trefwoorden**

Social work, managerialisme, dialoog, humanisering

### **INTRODUCTION**

In response to a number of contemporary challenges confronting social work I want to present one possible method for a renewed yet effective social work practice. I call this dialogical practice. It is a practice which places as its central activity an authentic dialogue between worker and client. Dialogue in this context means above all *listening to* and *responding to* the words and experiences of the other person. It is grounded in the objective of giving people the power to define and solve

their own problems as uncovered in the very process of dialogue itself between the person, their family and supporters, and relevant professionals.

There are many methodological approaches for achieving and describing dialogue. These include ethnomethodological, interactionist, cognitive, structuralist or constructivist frameworks (see Markovà, 2006, p. 126). I want to outline one such approach in this article which has a specific application to the practice of integral social work (for a more detailed presentation see Garavan, 2012). I will outline it very broadly and briefly in terms of assumptions, principles, method and implications. A dialogic practice is challenging and disruptive of the contemporary “managerial” approach and therefore can be contrasted with many of its key assumptions (for a helpful overview of the concept of managerialism see Exworthy & Halford, 1999). As I indicate below, it requires time, non-judgmental acceptance, genuine communication and a willingness on the part of the social worker to encounter the person they are working with on the plain of our common humanity. But the test of the value of this approach is effectiveness. Not only can it be shown to work but I think it can be shown that a dialogic process in itself restores humanity to both client and worker thereby allowing us to address our ultimate purpose in social work – the transformation of subjects and society (cf. definition of social work [www.ifsw.org](http://www.ifsw.org)).

In outlining such an approach I make no claim to originality. Indeed, I shall briefly outline how dialogue is central to many fields of human thought and practice. While my direct experience is necessarily limited to an Irish setting, and therefore to debates and issues current within Ireland, I suggest that the method outlined here is one that can be universally applied though of course to be moderated in accordance with specific individual, group, social and cultural circumstances.

The rationale for seeking new descriptions of social work practice lies in the recognition that contemporary social work is beset with many challenges. The current economic crisis has led to reduced funding for social provision and, in many countries, to a contraction in the scope and extent of the welfare state. As a result, social workers are facing greater problems but with less resources with which to respond. The dominance of a neo-liberal political ideology in much of the Western world has led, as John Harris has well explained (2003), to processes of marketization, consumerization and managerialism which have had a significantly negative effect on both the theory and practice of social work. Managerialist monitoring of social work activity has led to a distorting emphasis on performance measurables, target achievements and output deliverables. This has encouraged a focus away from the mutually subjective quality of social workers’ interaction with their clients towards a concern to “objectively” demonstrate the achievement of

pre-determined outcomes. In many instances, relationships have become secondary to results. In addition, the practice and reputation of social work have been further undermined in many countries by scandals involving finance, standards of care and abuse of varying degrees.

These various problems add greater difficulty to the already challenging nature of social work, an activity with sufficient inherent complexities and challenges of its own (cf. Blok, 2012). However, while this is a testing time for the profession it is also a time of opportunity. Crisis offers the possibility of renewal. Therefore, I think it is important that we remind ourselves of, and return to, first principles. What are we doing when we do “social work”? What is our objective? How should we do our work? How should it be judged?

### **HUMANISTIC APPROACH**

In approaching answers to these questions we need, I suggest, to stand on solid ground. I consider it a core starting point for any coherent and professional understanding of social work that we recognize that in this practice we are working with human beings. This may seem at first sight an obvious, even a banal, assertion. However, given the contemporary managerial emphasis on performance, targets and efficiencies the intra-human mutual relationship core of social work is not at all obvious and, indeed, has become quite obscured in much of today's managed practice. Hence, it warrants being (re)asserted. That we do in fact work with human beings provides us with a core axiom around which we can orient and judge our practice.

In operationalizing such a seemingly trite axiom we are immediately challenged with the need to identify a radically holistic and accurate understanding of what constitutes the human being. Genuinely addressing this challenge leads us, I suggest, inevitably into sharp conflict with today's dominant neo-liberal framework. Such an exploration of our humanity involves us in thinking psychologically, sociologically, politically, philosophically, psychoanalytically and ethically. This investigation allows us to unravel the deep complexity of influences and factors which constitute our shared social universe and to undermine the simplistic version of ourselves suggested by neo-liberalism's image of the “self-interested rational actor”. Human beings are not objects. Their behaviour is not always predictable. They are not units within a Newtonian universe who respond equally to the application of similar “forces” or “inputs”. They are not like pieces of geology to be shaped and managed. They do not always clearly and immediately understand the motivations, traumas or underlying causes for their own conduct. Yet today's dominant managerialist ideology assumes the homogeneity and predictability of people who require similar sets of “incentives” in order to do “the right” things.

Going back to first principles allows us unmask the constructed and ideologically determined view of the human being contained in this picture of the self-interested rational actor. This image initially emerged as central to the workings of economic theory but, more worryingly, has invaded other social sciences and social domains (see for example, Parker, 2002; Gallagher, 2012). It has become at least implicit in many contemporary approaches in social work. Given its reductionistic and simplistic conception of the person, methods of working with people based on this model simply will not work and will lead to frustration and failure. This is indeed what we are seeing across the arena of social work today.<sup>1</sup> The temptation in this context is to blame the clients for being “difficult” and “unresponsive” and, as a result, to further reinforce modes of oppressive practice. However, I want to argue that often the failures we are experiencing lie not with the people we work with but with the inappropriate methods we are following.

Thus we need to think deeply about what is the most effective way of working with human beings as they really are in order to better work with them in solving life's inevitable problems. In doing so, we need to acknowledge that human life, contrary to the managerialist assumption, is not only lived out on a rational plain in which we calculate the costs and benefits of our actions. Life is often messy and unclear and uncertain. As a result, people's choices and actions are not just driven by self-interest but by multiple and complex motivations. Nor do people simply act as solitary individuals. They are nearly always involved and embedded within social and cultural networks of family, friends and community. In exercising agency, they therefore have to negotiate within multiple fields of opportunities and constraints.

In considering what an effective method of social work might be, we also need to keep in mind what the ultimate purpose of our practice should be. I suggest that it is the “humanization” of the person. The notion of humanization is multifaceted and elusive but includes notions of maximum possible autonomy, agency, well-being and self-realization. The American psychologist Carl Rogers described it in terms of achieving one's authentic identity:

[I]t appears that the goal the individual most wishes to achieve, the end which he knowingly and unknowingly pursues, is to become himself. (Rogers, 1989, p. 108)

Thus, our practice should be grounded in the objective of facilitating and supporting the person to be exactly who they are as determined by themselves. It is precisely to address this challenge that a dialogic practice offers itself as an appropriate response.

## CENTRALITY OF DIALOGUE

Traditionally, social work has focused on the “intervention”, which is based on evidence and on an assessment of the client’s needs. The suggestion that dialogue – understood as an interactive mutual process of *listening* and *responding* – might be the optimum mode of engagement with people is derived from both theoretical and practical grounds. This is not to suggest however that dialogue replaces intervention. Rather, the proposal is that dialogue (as outlined below), serves as the critical context and framework within which mutually agreed interventions can occur. The rationale is that a focus on dialogue best ensures a comprehensive understanding of the issues, the full participation of the client, and the effective mobilization of the client’s own resources and those of professional support networks. All of this better protects the humanistic, democratic and human rights values of social work and promises the most effective possible results. Ultimately, the criterion by which we measure our work is that of effectiveness. Is the client’s life genuinely made better, not in accordance with a pre-determined target, but as defined by the client and his/her family and social networks?

## THEORY OF DIALOGUE

Theories of dialogue have their sources in a wide number of disciplines including philosophy, psychology, anthropology, psychoanalysis and modern neuro-science. What these varieties of sources share in common is the recognition that human sociality and the search for meaning involve subjects in communicative interaction with others. Dialogic theories therefore suggest that understanding and sense is to be found *between* subjects rather than being contained *within* the solitary subject or imagined as involving a transfer of knowledge from one to another. Communication occurs within a relationship dynamic. Consequently, communication is not an exchange of data but a phenomenon which shapes and transforms inter-subjective reality. Thus, Ivana Marková claims that:

Dialogicality, it is hypothesised, is the *sine qua non* of the human mind. Dialogicality is the capacity of the human mind to conceive, create and communicate about social realities in terms of the “Alter”. (2003, p. xiii)

The great exemplar of the dialogic method in Western philosophy is the Socrates of Plato’s dialogues. Socrates presents truth not as the result of a private, intense introspection but of an engaged search undertaken within a question and answer interaction between enquiring subjects. Truth is not revealed but rather uncovered in a process of dialogue, typified in the schema question-response.

## DIALOGICAL PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK – TOWARDS A RENEWED HUMANISTIC METHOD

This emphasis on the dialogic engagement with the other has informed the work of many modern philosophers. These include Buber, Levinas and Habermas. For Buber, human inter-subjectivity comes prior to individualization. In his well-known terminology the relations I-Thou or I-It precede the I itself. Buber's work explored the significance of mutuality and dialogue in determining the modes by which we encounter each other. Openness and attentiveness to "meeting" the other allow us to relate to the other as to a *Thou*; being enclosed within our experiences and uses of the other leads us to relate to the other as to an *It*. Buber proposes that our very personhood is determined by the manner of our relations with others.

A person makes his appearance by entering into relation with other persons. (Buber, 1984, p. 62)

The Russian philosopher of language Michail Bakhtin was a central figure in a significant investigation of the concept of dialogue among Central and Eastern European scholars such as Voloshinov and Medvedev. For Bakhtin the notion of dialogue as primarily response to the word of the other is at the heart of what is involved in dialogue.

For the word (and, consequently, for a human being) there is nothing more terrible than a lack of response. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 127)

Indeed, Bakhtin sees dialogue as far more than mere technique – it touches on the essence of being human and of humanization.

[A]uthentic human life is the open-ended dialogue. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293)

Bakhtin's influence has extended into many fields. Of particular practical interest has been the emergence of "open dialogue" as an innovative but highly successful methodology in the treatment of mental illness. Its leading theorist is the Finnish psychologist Jaakko Seikkula. His very important work co-written with Tom Erik Arnkill (2006) *Dialogical Meetings in Social Networks* elaborates a theory and practice of dialogue. This approach is further developed by him in more recent articles:

For as I see it, dialogue is not a method; it is a way of life. We learn it as one of the first things in our lives, which explains why dialogue can be such a powerful happening. Because it is the basic ruling factor of life, it is in fact very simple. It is its very simplicity that seems to be the paradoxical difficulty. It is so simple that we cannot believe that the healing element of any

practice is simply to be heard, to have response, and that when the response is given and received, our therapeutic work is fulfilled. Our clients have regained agency in their lives by having the capacity for dialogue. (Seikkula, 2011, p. 185)

The claim that dialogue, in itself, is effective in personal transformation is one that is at the core of the Rogerian therapeutic approach, an approach encompassing person-centredness and non-judgementalism which has been of huge significance in social care generally in the English speaking world.

Good communication, free communication, with or between men, is always therapeutic. (Rogers, 1989, p. 333)

Outside the realms of philosophy and psychology the concept of dialogue has been critical in shaping a series of approaches in community development, community work and progressive pedagogy. The most influential theorist in this realm has been the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire. Freire places the contrast between dialogics and antidialogics as central to his theory of education. Dialogue for him is the key instrument of human liberation by which human beings discover and name the world and imagine how that world might be re-constructed. Antidialogue is an instrument of oppression by which human beings are instructed by those who claim to know and whose voice is thereby silenced. Thus, antidialogue (or monologue – one person speaks and the other listens) reduces human beings “to the status of things” (Freire, 1986, p. 99).

Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world ... If it is in speaking their word that men transform the world by naming it, dialogue imposes itself as the way in which men achieve significance as men. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. (1986, p. 61)

It can be seen in this necessarily brief overview that dialogue rests on a wide number of theoretical sources and inspirations. Critical to all of these is the notion of mutuality. This idea stands in contrast to the currently dominant ideological matrix exemplified in the Ayn Rand individualistic heroes of such books as *Atlas Shrugged*. This ideological construct of the neo-liberal subject is presented as the self-contained author of his/her own life, who speaks his/her own word without disturbance from the word of the other. In opposition to this empirically doubtful claim, the theory of dialogue accepts human inter-subjectivity and inter-dependence as the arena within

which human transformative agency is realized. Interventions within this arena are best achieved dialogically therefore rather than in a didactic or monological manner.

If this theoretical claim is valid then the challenge before us is how to translate this into a viable and working social work methodology, one that is conceptually grounded in an accurate understanding of the person yet is practically applicable. That is what I shall now attempt to do.

## **A DIALOGIC PRACTICE OUTLINE**

The fundamental approach in a dialogic social work practice is to take the problems that people have and turn them into questions, and to turn these questions into platforms for dialogue between clients, their supporters and professionals. Thus, problems become questions, questions become dialogue. Questions, properly framed and authentically addressed, give us the orientation we require to locate answers. They are solution-focused. The location of an answer is a collective endeavor. It is in this manner that dialogue becomes a mode of discovery in which the professionals too must be fully engaged as equal participants with their clients and support networks.

A dialogic practice can be described in a number of steps. These include its purpose, its underlying principles, its goals, its core assumption and its working methodology. Let us briefly examine each aspect of this approach in turn.<sup>2</sup>

### **Purpose**

The fundamental purpose of such a dialogic process is to permit the individual or group that we work with to have the power to both define and resolve their own problems. Crucial here is the power of definition. The capacity to name and identify the problem at issue is a key mode of social power (as clearly elaborated by Foucault in, for example, *Madness and Civilization*, 2003). It is here that the authority traditionally exercised by the professional becomes most apparent. A truly liberating practice acknowledges the right and capability of the client to exercise control over definition. This itself is achieved in a dialogical process. Much error and indeed abuse has arisen in professional and social work practice from imposing definitions of problems on people rather than engaging with them to achieve a shared understanding of what needs to be resolved. As Foucault so clearly showed in his genealogies of sexuality and insanity, this is particularly apparent in the domains of labelled deviance whether in crime, sexuality or madness where, for example,

emotional distress due to personal and social experiences is often re-defined as an underlying psychiatric category requiring medication.

## **Principles**

A dialogic practice is guided by a number of fundamental principles. Meaningful and authentic dialogue disrupts the hierarchical temptation to overly demarcate between the professional expert who “is the subject who knows” and the lay client who “is the subject who needs”. Instead, both must engage in the search for shared meanings, shared understandings and shared approaches to addressing problems. This is a fundamentally democratic endeavor, one that recognizes the legitimate wisdom of each participant. The hopeful perspective opened up here is that people can in fact be trusted to make the right decision. In other words, given the right information, adequate resources and professional support, people will almost inevitably come up with the appropriate decisions. So much of our contemporary managerially-based systems are built around an inherent distrust of clients, a facile assumption that without adequate constraints or incentives they won't act in a positive manner. Hence, we have numerous social and institutional systems of control and predictability well described by George Ritzer in his *McDonaldization* thesis (Ritzer, 2000).

Critical to the development and enhancement of this culture of trust is the process of dialogue itself. As Freire and others cited above have observed, the act of dialogue is itself constitutive of humanization and liberation. It in itself builds capacity and resilience. Indeed, a proper focus on a *process* that is liberating through meaningful dialogue almost always ensures that the *outcome* will take care of itself. Again, this concern with how we work draws attention away from a frequently mis-placed concern with the outcomes or outputs of our practice. Once more, managerialism's obsession with measurable performance indicators forces social workers to prioritize visible deliverables that often are of minimal or transient benefit to our clients (e.g. the quantity of meetings held rather than the qualitative consequence of those meetings). Instead, concentrating on building an authentic dialogic relationship oriented towards enhancing the client's own solution capacity seems a far more fruitful way to proceed. In this way, dialogue can be seen as more than mere technique or method – it is rather a way to come to know oneself and the world. Instead of pre-determined output targets and menus of service coverage into which each client must fit irrespective of their individual circumstances and reality, dialogic practice permits us to be open to the as yet unknown answer that can only be uncovered in the process of our dialogue. We need therefore to be willing to work within this initial uncertainty and unknowingness.

## **Goals**

This is not to imply that our work should be purposeless. On the contrary, the goals of our work should be clear and well-defined. What the specific goals are and how those goals are to be achieved requires elaboration. But this is itself the outcome of dialogue. The problems faced by clients should be turned into generating questions, i.e. questions designed to generate solutions. In one year's time how would I like my life to be? How shall I find work? How will we address the issue of young people's lack of facilities in our community? These questions emerge in the dialogue following a grappling with understanding and defining problems. The questions can then be used to launch the search for answers in further dialogic unravelling involving professionals, clients and their supporters. The ultimate goal, within which all other goals are contained, is the humanization of the participants. This humanization process and ethic underscores the more practical processes underway so that even if immediate goals are not realized or are partially realized the participants are not reduced in their basic humanity. The dialogue itself has been a progressive experience, one that in itself creates resources, capacities and resilience that can serve into the future.

## **Assumption**

The fundamental assumption framing this entire method is that those affected by issues are the best sources of knowledge about what needs to be done. This includes not just those with an identifiable "problem" but those also more widely affected by that problem – family, friends, community. We do not say that they are the *only* source of knowledge but they are the best source. This is because it is they who live within the holistic existential reality of the issue and have therefore access to far greater data and understanding than anyone outside of this reality. In this way, our model of expertise may need to be refined. The professional is not someone who necessarily "knows" but rather one who must learn. The expert is actually the one affected by an issue and is thus the one who must disclose the meanings of what is happening. By listening and responding, the professional comes to insight and knowledge but this is not available to him/her prior to a dialogic engagement. To suggest that it is to claim superiority over the meaning and words of the other.

## **Methodology**

A specific working methodology therefore follows for the social worker. First, is to enter into the process of dialogue with those affected by the issue. In this process the "problem"

is explored and defined and from this a generating question is developed. Thus, as we have said, problems are turned into questions and questions into dialogue. Second, the resultant dialogue about questions is orientated towards finding answers or solutions. Third, solutions need to be implemented as best as is possible. This requires the mobilization of resources and knowledge. It is here that the professional's role becomes important. However, the application of resources from the professional to the client has here occurred following a dialogic inductive process rather than from an "expert" framed deductive intervention. Fourth, it is of utmost importance that, if those affected by the issue define their question and determine its solution, then they are accountable and responsible. The solution to the question does not lie solely with the social worker but much more so with the individual him/herself. Taking responsibility for implementing actions and plans is part of the development and humanization of the person. Finally, social workers and clients must engage continually in a critical reflection on their practice. We need to do this in order to learn and to continually refine our understanding of what is at issue and what needs to be done. Primarily, we need this reflection because mistakes are inevitable. They are part of life, part of being human. No methodology is infallible. It is another managerial fallacy to assume that we can construct and design a system that will eliminate error and fault. This cannot be not least because we are dealing with human beings who do not behave in a predictable manner. The way to address mistakes is to learn from them. As was noted above, "mess" is simply part of the human condition.

## **Requirements**

In order for this dialogic practice to best perform, more than just desire or pretence is required. A real commitment to dialogue requires more than simply a token deployment of communication skills. Dialogue needs genuine listening and authentic response. There are a number of methods to support how this might be achieved but we must acknowledge that one key resource needed is time. Time is our most precious resource. It is truly finite. In contemporary organizations time is carefully rationed and controlled. Yet, meaningful dialogue requires time because talking needs trust, security and the context of an authentic relationship. None of this can happen quickly. Time is needed in order to show non-judgmental acceptance of the other – to permit him to feel safe to express his unique word and thereby gain purchase on himself and the world. This incredible unfolding requires mutuality and the recognition by the professional that in dialogue two human beings are encountering each other in a mutual search to express.

## **Implications**

All of this of course carries significant implications for professional practice. Too many of our organizations are established with pre-set service menus. Clients are expected to fit into these service categories. A dialogic practice replaces this focus on "service coverage" ("our organization provides this service") with a focus on "service response" ("what do you need?"). The challenge of constructing organizations designed around response rather than coverage should not be understated. It requires organizations that are genuinely flexible and smart rather than bureaucratic. It requires practitioners whose central skill becomes those of relationship-formation and the capacity to enter into meaningful dialogue rather than skills of prescription and direction. Social workers must become more democratic, more liberatory, more dialogic. Rather than professional "fixers" they become facilitators of the humanization process.

I have here offered a very rapid overview of what is in fact a complex approach to social work practice, complex because it implicates philosophical, practice and organizational issues. Once again, there is no claim being made here to originality. Elements of what is described here are found in social work practice in all parts of the world. Particularly notable in this regard is the "presence" approach which emerged initially in the Netherlands and has been well described by Andries Baart (2001). Rather, the attempt is to systematize an approach that offers us both method and ethic. It rests on the acknowledgement that we do not know *a priori* but must listen and become partners through dialogue with our clients in order to together seek solutions.

## **Objections**

However, all of this may sound quite fanciful or idealistic. There are objections that can be advanced on conceptual and practical grounds. Many interventions are of course short-term or immediate and do not require drawn out dialogic dynamics. An overly extended dialogic encounter may simply delay much needed action. More fundamental objections might include the important Lacanian insight that subjects are not stable entities and consequently their desires and language are necessarily obscure and uncertain and cannot in themselves form the basis for insight and knowledge. As Verhaeghe has pointed out, in Lacanian theory there is no such thing as a truth which can be completely put into words (1995). It may therefore be helpful to turn to some practical examples of a dialogic practice in action to see how it might be operationalized.

## EXAMPLES OF DIALOGIC PRACTICE

Perhaps the best known global examples of the efficacy of dialogical approaches come from the direct work and later applications of Paulo Freire. Some recent but less expected instances are detailed in Peter Mayo's *Liberating Praxis: Paulo Freire's Legacy for Radical Education and Politics* (2004). One of the most notable applications of Freire's methods in an Irish setting occurred in January 1985 when an educational program was established in Dublin with twenty-four Traveller<sup>3</sup> activists. This was called the Dublin Traveller Education and Training Group<sup>4</sup> and set out to create Freirean-based consciousness awareness groups. These were hugely successful and had a major impact on Traveller understanding of their social position and oppression in Irish society. It is clear that this early Freirean program was a decisive moment in creating the modern traveller rights movement. Until this time, Travellers were characterized by attitudes of fatalism regarding their position, invoking "God's will" as an explanatory framework for their disadvantage. The immediate effect of the program was to change this language. From then, Traveller activists spoke of oppression and characterized their campaigning as a struggle for liberation. As a leading Traveller activist said when addressing the opening session of the National Seminar of Traveller Parents and Learners:

Education needs to be about liberating Travellers, not about domesticating them. True Education will give Travellers the tools to challenge their oppression rather than teaching them how to become acceptable in a settled world.

Some of the most researched and best known work in developing dialogic approaches has been developed in Northern Finland by academics and practitioners such as Jaakko Seikkula (cited above) and the community mental health services centered in Keropudas Hospital in Finnish Lapland. Their approach is based on immediately responding to people in emotional distress through convening an open dialogue group comprised of the individual, their family and supporters, and at least two professionals. This approach, as outlined by Seikkula (2011), involves:

(1) an immediate response by having the first meeting within 24 hours after contact; (2) a social networks perspective that in all cases invites relevant members of the client's social network and all the professionals involved in the actual crisis; (3) flexibility and mobility by always adapting to the unique needs of every client and family; (4) guaranteeing responsibility, so that whoever is contacted in the professional system becomes responsible for organizing the first meeting before any decision is made concerning the treatment; (5) psycho-logical continuity

by integrating staff from different services, like child psychiatry, outpatient mental health and so on, if needed — to work as an integrated team for as long as required; (6) tolerating uncertainty and generating a process for the new conversational community to “live” and talk together; and (7) dialogicity as the primary aim in the joint meetings, to increase understanding about the actual crises and the life of our customers. By “dialogism” I mean both, responsive understanding and taking family members into explorations they would not otherwise undertake. (Seikkula, 2011, p. 184)

This model, based on the principles of flexibility, person-centeredness, integration of response, tolerance of uncertainty and dialogism offers potential far beyond the confines of mental health issues. For example, again relying on the Irish setting, numerous social intervention programs now base themselves on dialogic approaches. A notable instance is the ASSIST program which is a training system equipping participants to respond to the threat of suicide by becoming attentive to the “invitations” made by the intended victim either by words or actions. The many telephone helplines for children and victims of emotional or sexual violence centralize dialogue in their approach. Community development initiatives are routinely operationalized through “bottom-up” participative dialogue engagements. Family Resource Centres which are distributed throughout Ireland offer venues and training for facilitation and dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This brief presentation of a dialogical practice is not intended to lay claim to a new departure in social work. Much of what is outlined here already forms the core approach in social work and is entirely familiar to social work practitioners. Centralizing dialogue is a claim rather to a way of conceptualizing our work so that our theory and practice are better described. It does not do away with social work’s need to address the social and political world with its various structural inequalities. On the contrary, a dialogical practice offers a way to address political ills using a participative, bottom-up method that is transformative of social relationships and power. Furthermore, a dialogic practice is subversive of social work’s modern mode of organization under neo-liberalism’s managerialist framework.

The rationale for a dialogical description of our work is not to provide us with a new fanciful terminology but rather to better ensure our effectiveness. Ultimately that is the only criterion. Does a dialogical approach better achieve humanization for our clients? I wish to argue that, in many or indeed most cases, it does. It does so because it is grounded in an understanding of the

human person as constituted by relationships and social mutuality and by an appreciation that human beings will act in their own interests once they are listened to, respected and provided with the resources to do so. Dialogue is therefore not merely a method. It is a way of achieving and enacting our humanity, a way that is ethical and collaborative, one that involves the social worker in an authentic engagement with the voice and life of the other.

## NOTES

- 1 For example, *The Irish Times* on May 15<sup>th</sup> 2012 reported on “high levels of burnout” in child protection staff due to their frustration at the system within which they had to work. In a letter published in *The Telegraph* newspaper in January 2012 more than 60 UK government advisors, charity workers and independent experts described England’s social care system as failing, leaving 800,000 elderly people “lonely, isolated and at risk”.
- 2 Please note again the necessarily summative nature of this presentation.
- 3 Travellers constitute an indigenous Irish nomadic ethnic group. They number some 40,000 and are subject to serious systematic discrimination in Irish society (cf. McGréil, 2011).
- 4 This later became in 1995 Pavee Point.
- 5 One might even be tempted to instance contemporary political activism at a “grassroots” level in which participative dialogue has become almost the defining feature, such as in the recent “Occupy” movements worldwide.

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