

«The future is now»: An experience of future dialogue in a community mediation intervention

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Abstract

This paper aims to present an innovative intervention of community mediation in the context of council housing. The described experience, as organized by an Italian voluntary organization, included the use of a dialogical approach known as Future Dialogue. This method has been shown to be useful when coping with high conflict situations within families that live together in a council housing building. Dialogicity, respect for others, and the participation of service users in the construction and development of their assistance path, facilitated by the Future Dialogue method, allowed for the positive mediation of the conflicts between the inhabitants. Furthermore, through this dialogical method, it was possible to support the development of preventive action and foster a sense of cooperation and good neighbourliness. In this paper, the efficacy of Future Dialogue, as described by the methodological steps, is explained. Finally, the author highlights several points of contact between the Future Dialogue method and Relational Social Work.

Keywords

Dialogicity – Dialogical approach – Future Dialogue – Community mediation – Relational Social Work.

Introduction

By their very nature, humans are born into relationships, and within these relationships, dialogicity is consistently created. Dialogue involves speaking, listening, answering, confronting and thinking together. Dialogue is spontaneous when the situation in which we are speaking is calm, but when we perceive concerns or danger, the dialogue becomes more complex. Generally, in situations of uncertainty and concern, we react by attempting to control what is happening around us and the people with whom we associate. It is easy to fail to recognize that there are as many points of view as observers. The anxiety of not

knowing how to handle a concern sometimes causes people to disregard and disagree with the opinions of others and instead attempt to impose their own ways of thinking.

This can also be observed in social work practices in which social workers, in encounters with the service users, focus on problems and difficulties and then plan out the action that is needed to solve the problems. Situations have occurred where social workers, when discussing complicated family situations, gather «behind the service users' backs» to decide the best solution and what they could do to improve matters. In these cases, social workers and service users are not in dialogue with one other; this is a monological discourse of the social worker, where the service user may experience the feeling of being judged negatively and perceive the social worker's intervention not as an aid but as an imposition.

This paper aims to describe an experimental intervention of «community mediation» in the context of council housing residents. The presented experience includes the use of a dialogical approach, the «Future Dialogue» method (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006), to handle a concerning situation involving strong conflict within the families living in a council housing building.

The Future Dialogue method

The Future Dialogue method, which is of Finnish origin, was created to solve confusion arising from the multiplicity of professionals and services engaged with users and so-called «multi-problem families». This dialogical method has been developed over the last twenty years by the National Institute for Welfare and Health of Helsinki.

Future Dialogue is a method that encourages collaboration between a network of people linked to the users and a network of professionals when a situation of growing concern about a specific state arises.

This method is suitable for all situations that fall into a «grey area» of concern (Eriksson & Arnkil, 2009). In other words, this method appears to be functional in cases where professionals perceive a growing concern, sometimes marked concern, together with the diminishment of confidence in their own ability to create positive change. Therefore, action by someone who can help manage and/or control the situation is needed so that it does not deteriorate.

When one is in a «grey zone», the anxieties connected with feelings of being in an impasse, are likely to transform communications between professionals and the people who are directly involved in an authoritarian monologue.

Social workers who intervene to reduce the level of concern feel the need to maintain control of the situation such that strategies to control the thoughts and actions of people in trouble are often implemented, followed by a proposal of possible solutions to the problem.

This approach undermines the dialogical space because it asks people to understand, recognize and internalize what is being communicated without the meanings interpreted differently.

Dialogical methods represent an opportunity to think together in which an understanding is created between the participants as something that moves beyond the capabilities of a single person. Opinions are generated and transformed during the dialogue, and each participant actively takes part in the construction of such meanings. Future Dialogue sessions have a fixed structure that is composed of two main phases: an interview from a future perspective and the definition of a concrete project in the present. Professionals or family members who are in a grey area of concern may propose a meeting between the family, along with significant others and the professionals involved in the case. The family is encouraged to invite all people in their private support networks to the Future Dialogue session.

The Future Dialogue method also involves the presence of two external professionals who are not connected to the situation to facilitate the discussion. The facilitators do not give advice but merely facilitate the dialogue in a structured way. During the dialogue, a facilitator asks the participants specific questions while another person transcribes the discussion, ensuring that the transcription is visible to all.

To facilitate the dialogue, facilitators use the reformulation technique (Rogers & Kinget, 1969; Mucchielli, 1983; Carkhuff, 1987) as follows: after listening to each participant, they attempt to express as concisely and clearly as possible what the participant has just expressed. This reformulation is also useful because the facilitators express what they think they understand, with the option for others to add to or correct the statements and then record what has been said.

During the meeting, speaking and listening occur at structurally separate times so that everyone present is heard and rich internal conversations are stimulated (Archer, 2003).

The meeting opens with the sharing of concerns on the part of the person who requested the dialogue session. The first step is to define the time span during which one might envisage a change for the better that would involve a «less worrying» situation. Together, the next positive future is defined (a few months, six months, one year, etc.) when the situation is imagined to have improved.

The facilitator, starting with the service users and family members, asks the following questions:

1. Some time has passed, and the situation is going well. How is it for you? (What are you especially happy about?)
2. What did you do to bring about this positive development? Who helped you, and how did they help? (What can you, at least privately, be proud of?)
3. What made you worried «then», and what has reduced your worries?

The professionals are then interviewed from a future perspective. They are asked only the last two questions to ensure that the best well-being conditions are defined and decided by those directly involved. The questions to the professionals are the following:

1. As you heard, things are going quite well in the family. What did you do to support this positive development? Who helped you? How did they help?
2. What concerned you «then», and what has reduced your worries?

Subjective concerns and difficulties are then identified and described from a future perspective, as if the participants were already experiencing a future that is better than the current situation. Effort is required by the participants to «recall» what each has done to achieve a better future and what has contributed to decreasing their concerns.

The meeting leads to the scheduling of a concrete plan that is structured based on «who will do what and with whom» in the near future. The plan brings together all actions and commitments to be implemented immediately. After the meeting, a verification time is set, and the time and location are then determined.

The participants return to their daily lives with realistic and plausible hope that the current situation will improve due to the contribution that they and the other participants have committed to implementing (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006).

History of Future Dialogue

The community mediation intervention, organized by the voluntary organization «La casa davanti al sole», was launched in January 2015 by the Local Authorities of a town with 6,000 inhabitants in Northern Italy.

In the last year, a major conflict arose between families living in public housing, which is owned by an agency known as A.L.E.R. (Lombardy Residential Construction Company). The allocation of dwellings owned by A.L.E.R. is managed by the Local Authority.

The purpose of the intervention, which was organized at an early stage with a Local Authority social worker, was the conflict mediation and prevention of other possible tension between the families who live in council housing accommodation. Secondly, the intervention promotes positive and collaborative relationships to develop mutuality and good neighbourliness.

The intervention was encouraged by two social workers from the voluntary organization in close collaboration with a Local Authority social worker and the Deputy Mayor for social services of the town.

Background

In January 2015, the Local Authority social worker contacted social workers from the «La casa davanti al sole» voluntary organization discuss conflict resolution between the families living in a council housing apartment block and methods of preventing further conflict. The idea of requiring the intervention of an «independent body», such as the voluntary organization, was also motivated by the growing conflict between the inhabitants of the apartment block and the Local Authority. Last year, there were numerous requests for assistance submitted to the Local Authority by the families to resolve high tension situations and to communicate the need for structural interventions in the apartment block. Despite the aid provided by the Local Authority, the still-present concerns reported by the Local Authority social worker involved the strenuous relations between the dwellers and the difficulty of dialogue between certain families that could result in dangerous situations.

Initially, a meeting of knowledge and sharing of the community mediation proposal was set with the eight families, including 5 Italian families and 3 families of Moroccan origin who were living in the apartment block. Through home visits, the social workers were able to observe the living environment, meet the families, listen to their concerns, and identify the problems as well as the resources and positive aspects of the situation.

The apartment block is a three-floor structure that was built in the 1960s and 1970s and was still in good condition. There are large common areas (garden and porch) outside that were did not appear to be utilized . In general, there were no indications of building degradation.

From the home visits, a strong conflict between some of the Italian families and the foreign families became apparent. The Moroccan families complained about the unwelcoming and racist attitudes from the Italian families, who in their turn criticized the lack of care of the common areas, noise and overcrowding in the homes of the foreign families. The conflict had become so intense that police intervention was necessary to resolve the fight.

Most families reported the need to agree on the cleanliness and order of the common areas, to take action to fix the telephones, mailboxes and gates, which had been broken for quite some time, and to resume contacts with the agency owning and managing the council housing to forward the maintenance requests.

The families welcomed the social workers and immediately declared their willingness to participate in the community mediation intervention, demonstrating that all parties needed to address the current problem. Understanding the point of view of the addressees and their perceptions of the problem allowed all parties to identify the shared purpose that would orient the intervention in a participatory way: to improve the living conditions.

The interviews were also an opportunity to highlight the positive aspects of living in the building, a sense of belonging in their homes and the good neighbourly relations that were already present.

Looking for a strategy

In the second step of the intervention, social workers participated in the analysis of the information collected, highlighting the critical issues and positive aspects reported by families, and then shared them with the other professionals involved (the Local Authority social worker and Deputy Mayor for social services of the town).

Given the high level of conflict and low confidence in the change of the situation by the residents, it was decided that a typical apartment block meeting would not be organized as the risk of tense situations among the participants was high. Instead, an experiment involving Future Dialogue was used.

In the conflict situation described above, it was considered essential — not only due to the conviction of the goodness of this approach but also necessity — to work to promote dialogicity, open relationships, non-prescriptive action, and respect for others and for each individual's intrinsically subjective point of view. Using dialogical intervention, the participants were allowed time and space to sit and listen carefully to each other's views, to generate a common language and to contribute resources (Arnkil, 2014).

The meeting was carried out on a Sunday morning in April in a «neutral» place, a day care centre run by the voluntary organization. This centre is a friendly place that is known by many and is easily accessible to all, including the two social workers of the voluntary organization, the facilitators, the Local Authority social worker, the Councillor for Social Care Services of the town and 6 resident representatives. The day, time and place were decided by collecting the opinions and availability of each household to facilitate the participation of all.

After an initial moment of difficulty (resistance to sitting at the same table, little confidence in change, claims made to the representatives of the present institutions), the meeting was held without tension or conflict in a participatory and proactive manner. The families sat at the table, accepted the proposal of the Future Dialogue and were informed of how the morning would be structured and what the rules to follow would be.

The meeting opened with the sharing of the concerns that had motivated the intervention of community mediation by the social worker.

The facilitators asked the Local Authority social worker, «When do you think you may see a change for the better towards a situation that would be less concerning for you?». Her answer was three months, which defined a future time when all participants, with some effort, had to imagine themselves in.

The future meeting was scheduled for mid-July. The weather would be warm, school would be finished, and the situation would hopefully be improved significantly. Thus, the task of imagining of what should be done to achieve this better future was launched.

The facilitators asked each of the participants, starting with the families, to imagine themselves in the established future and, as provided by Future Dialogue, to attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Some time passed and things are going well. How are they for you? (What are you especially happy about?)
2. What did you do to bring about this positive development? Who helped you, and how did they help? (What can you, at least privately, be proud of?)
3. What made you worried «then», and what has reduced your worries?

The meeting was then closed by asking the professionals only the last two questions, which was to reiterate that the prospect of improvement was defined by families and not by professionals. The social workers listened to the families who, in a reflexive manner, spoke about the past regarding their concerns, hopes and commitment to the near future, as if the positive future had already been achieved. This allowed the professionals to connect to the impulses and available resources with which they could integrate their professional resources.

In the experience described, the group was decided to transcribe what was being said on a computer and project it with a video projector that was placed in the centre of the room and was visible to all.

The meeting ended by returning to the present with the participatory drafting of an intervention plan in which it was decided who would do what, with whom and at what pace in the near future to improve the situation in the building.

Two apartment block referees were elected by the families present, with the spokesperson reporting to the Local Authority and being responsible for the common fund. The plan was written and delivered by the two facilitators to all families.

During the meeting, it was decided to set a meeting after about two months to see how the situation and commitments made by each of those present were proceeding.

Carrying out and monitoring the intervention

From the very beginning, people respected the agreements and took steps to carry out the maintenance work and the cleaning and care of common areas. There were some difficulties with the two families who did not take part in the meeting. This demonstrated the value of the participation in the decision making which, when lacking, can lead to a boycott of the entire intervention. Although the shared plan was also delivered to the

families who were absent from the meeting, it seemed that these families did not agree with the decisions because they were perceived as having been «decided by others», originating from the top, and therefore could not be shared. The social workers of the voluntary organization attempted to ease tensions between the families by continuing make home visit and organizing network meetings with the other families.

As decided at the meeting, in July, the families called a meeting with the social workers from both the voluntary organization and the Local Authority and the Deputy Mayor in the apartment block garden. Together, they spoke about what was done, the still existing problems and possible strategies for addressing the difficulties. At the monitoring meeting, the families were present in a large group, and they communicated what had been done as a group. In those months, as required by the shared plan, shifts for cleaning the stairs and common areas had been scheduled, the «common pot» had been restored to handle small maintenance costs, the mailboxes were fixed and repairer quotations to adjust the door phones were organized. On the notice board, rules for peaceful coexistence and good neighbourliness were displayed, which were decided upon at the network meeting. The Local Authority social worker respected her commitment to helping the representatives of the apartment block write to the owner of the building to perform major maintenance tasks. The monitoring meeting was extremely harmonious and involved greater participation by all families. At the conclusion of the meeting, we were also joined by the children and teenagers, who were playing together in the garden. The families had organized a small buffet on the porch for the occasion and had a drink together. Reducing the level of conflict among the adults had a positive effect on relationships between their children, who now shared the common areas, which was once unappealing and unused.

The evaluation of this first experiment in the social sphere of the Future Dialogue method was certainly positive, not only because it proved to be an excellent tool for managing high conflict situations but also because it was a reminder of the communal responsibility to create the desired change.

Usefulness and efficacy of Future Dialogue within a Community Mediation intervention

With the intervention of community mediation, the method of Future Dialogue was helpful, first, to reduce the fear of the social workers with regard to managing open quarrels and conflicts among the participants in the meeting, who were threatened with remaining «trapped» in the original conditions, which was source of anxiety and tension for all the inhabitants of the apartment building. The proposed method emerged from positive action, not the problems, and was based on the idea that a better future was possible, one in which the difficulty had already been resolved.

Another possible risk was that of having to manage the apartment block meeting, in which all participants would accuse one another, blame themselves for past actions without listening, and remain firm in their positions.

The Future Dialogue method takes into account personal points of view, inviting participants to speak in the first person in an atmosphere of absolute respect by the others. Discussing their own subjective perspectives on the future helps to create polyphony: people listen to others, and they are listened to. Thus, this generates a dialogical space and active listening for the participants, an opportunity for reflexivity, and internal conversation with themselves. In this regard, compliance with the rule of «no comment» was essential because they would not only interrupt the dialogue between the participants but also intensify the internal conversation. According to people present at the meeting, it was difficult not to take action when they felt involved in the discussion or did not agree with what the speaker was expressing. All, however, participated and learned to respect the rules and listen to each other as the dialogue progressed.

In a high conflict situation, the use of a structured model, which implies defined steps and the presence of two facilitators with specific functions, did not limit the dialogicity; on the contrary, it stimulated the reflexivity of each participant and fostered the positive relationship and respect for the views of others.

Finally, the guidance given by the facilitator proved to be highly useful in helping the people remember the concrete actions that led them to a better future. The strategies to improve the situation within the apartment building were designed by the parties concerned and were explained concretely in the formula of «who will do what with whom». Future Dialogue helped the families and facilitators perceive an opportunity for positive change and take action personally to improve their life situation.

Future Dialogue as Relational Social Work Practice

The study and experimentation with the Future Dialogue method within the social work has highlighted several points of contact with Relational Social Work (Folgheraiter, 2004). In summary, how can the Future Dialogue be considered a Relational Social Work practice?

- In line with some of the founding principles of Relational Social Work, the Future Dialogue methods are operating practices that counteract paradigms in which the construction of the aid interventions are focused on the experts and instead focus on the strengths and the users' resources rather than on their deficits and shortcomings. Therefore, these methods can recognize and enhance the experiential knowledge of the people who are experiencing a difficult period (Raineri, 2011).

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- The Future Dialogue encourages the participation of the service users in the construction and development of their assistance path. The intervention of the professionals enhances the subjective knowledge of the people involved and takes into account their motivations and their ideas of what is ideal to improve their life situation.
- In conclusion, the Future Dialogue represents real experiences of empowerment because they promote and sustain the ability of the people to take action and offer them a chance to reclaim ownership of the power to think and implement strategies to escape from difficult situations.

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