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THE CASE OF MARC: APPLYING THEORY TO PRACTICE

Introduction

In this final chapter I discuss the case of a social worker who is involved in supporting a socially vulnerable middle-aged man. The case serves as an illustration of how the social worker connects to the man, to social policy, to the profession and to herself. Through this case we encounter the elements discussed in the former chapters in a concrete situation confronted in practice. To begin with, let us meet Marc and Lisa; the user and the social work professional featuring in this case.

Multiple connections

Case: Marc Wiggins

Marc is 48 years old. His biography is characterised by a difficult youth, and a whole range of placements and treatments. Marc was not able to adapt to school and never obtained any qualifications. He moved through a number of relationships from city to city and wife to wife, but was not able to sustain any of these. He also encountered several professionals, who came and left. The same variability goes for diagnoses; Marc has been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, ADHD disorder, autism and depression. He has experienced youth care, mental health care, social work and prison. During the last few years, however, he has started living independently again, though supervised by a social worker. His house is in great disorder; it smells. His debts are increasing; bailiffs are regularly ringing the doorbell. The small garden in front of his house is a mess. The neighbours are fed up with him, the stench, the noise and his maladjustment. Lisa is the new social worker, one in a long line of social workers, entrusted with the task of supporting Marc.

Four essential connections

Social workers are always balancing the user's interests and the interests of the society and communities. Lisa has to be loyal to Marc, but also to the agency she works for. She faces several expectations with regard to Marc's case, both from the financier as well as the society in general. As a social worker, Lisa thus has multiple, often ambiguous, connections with four main actors: 1) the user in his context; 2) society; 3) the profession; and 4) herself.

Connecting with the user and his (or her) context

In social work you cannot lay down the user on the operating table to cut him (or her) open and get rid of the malady. The success of social workers is dependent on the will, cooperation and capacity of the user. The ability to take action, to change and to solve lies in the hands of the user and his (or her) context. Social workers exercise the particular power to motivate, to support, to inform, to do some paperwork, to provide new insights and to create a constructive connection between the user and the context. But for a vast part, social work involves working together with users to improve their situations, behaviour and contexts. To this end, the relationship or quality of the connection between the professional social worker and the user is essential. In the world of management, it is popular to speak of 'co-creation' (Wierdsma, 2001). This implies that changes in organisations are most effective if they are developed and implemented in a cooperative process involving all layers in the organisation. Social work too is exactly like that. However, Marc is distrustful of everyone. Owing to his lifelong experiences and developed patterns, he lacks a belief in long lasting connections. Throughout his life, friends, partners, professionals and creditors have come and gone. At home too, he never felt accepted and loved, and was neglected by both his parents. He has lived in material and non-material poverty his whole life. It is not easy for Lisa to connect with Marc, more so because he is not 'attractive', so to say, and does not arouse feelings of sympathy and empathy. He looks sloppy and repulsive, is always blaming and claiming and is sometimes even aggressive; positive change does not exist in his dictionary. He is seemingly repellent in all aspects; not a person you would want as a next-door neighbour. Lisa, not surprisingly then, has difficulties in eliciting any positivity from her first connection with Marc. His attitude does not open any doors for a relationship at all. How, then, can Lisa approach this arduous task of establishing a constructive relationship with Marc?

It takes two to establish constructive cooperation and a balanced relationship of giving and taking. However, in Lisa and Marc's case nothing is in balance. Marc is faced with problems and deficiencies in all domains of daily life: finance, employment, educational capital, social capital, behaviour and attitude, health, abuse and conflicts with neighbours and family. His self-reliance thus fails him in all domains of life. Probing deeper into his lack of self-reliance, we can question his social efficacy or capacity to cope with daily life and social complexity. If this social

efficacy is in disorder, or is too weak or blocked as a result of lifelong developed patterns, managing finances, relationships, work and health, all fall under pressure. On the other hand, the ability to deal with these societal demands also depends on the strength of an individual's contexts, like family, workplace, neighbourhood, friend networks and society as a whole. Unfortunately, Marc arguably experiences the world around him as unreasonable, demanding, not understanding and not accepting of him. Consequently, he lacks any belief in the future and direction towards positive change. His life is empty, without relationships and with strong feelings of vanity and senselessness. He derives no pleasure from it. Family, friends and partners are all out of sight for him, particularly in a society where you have to seek and define your own position; other people do not come seeking you if you do not fit into their world.

Connecting with society

Social workers are mostly employees, often in service of the public sector and NGOs. In that sense, they represent their agencies or institutions. They observe the aims and rules of their organisation, and are part of a team and department, and perceived by their users as representing the state or social institution. It is often said that professionals are imprisoned in the rules of the bureaucracy or new management approaches, which restrain room for professional action (Tonkens, 2008). Nevertheless, professionals are creative in finding room for their own ideas, methods and approaches (Lipsky, 1980). Another issue affecting professionals, and as a result also users, is the constant change in organisations, rules, people, missions and even the names of the institutions and services they represent. This ongoing process of constant change leads to professionals encountering yet another new manager, or another idea or another approach all the time.

In the last decade, pressure from new management, risk management and the atmosphere of distrust towards professionals have come to dominate the social political climate. It can be difficult for social workers to serve society and social policy if they have to start from this context of intense pressure and debatable political points of view. How can social workers derive power to resist such societal pressure and how can we create room for professional action in line with the social work profession? In some fields, e.g. in medicine, professionals have a more dominant say in defining the professional standards and competences. In other fields, such as those linked to the police and army, professionals are highly steered by the system. In the case of social work, however, it remains unclear how the profession comes to be defined. At its best, it is an interactive process between professionals, citizens, management, scientists and social policymakers. In complex societies, we are increasingly dependent on creative, constructive and interactive processes, and that goes for positioning and developing a profession as well. This, however, is not the case in Lisa's professional context. Her manager expects quick results within a prescribed number of sessions and expects her to use a protocolled method in accordance with evidence based principles. Society, as represented by neighbours,

media and local politicians, are meanwhile complaining about the increase in the number of people made dependent by existing social services. They want lasting action and thorough measures.

What Lisa needs is a social mandate which is not blinded by a narrow focus on finding quick solutions to complex social problems with complete disregard for social vulnerability. She needs a management and community aiming at supporting people to cope with social complexity, a social approach focusing on sustainable contexts and belief in small improvements. It is hard for social workers like Lisa to connect with users with special needs if the wind blows in the other direction. Lisa has to find a way around or out of the management prescribed approaches and community pressure. Social workers often use their discretion more or less hidden from management. Sometimes though, social workers also stand up and appeal to their agencies and the political discourse to accept 'hopeless' contexts and social vulnerability as a reality that we are living with, and to try to make it liveable for vulnerable people and communities.

Connecting with the profession

A profession possesses a strong foundation if it is based on a recognised body of knowledge. This body of knowledge includes connections to public values and common goods, such as health, safety, cohesion and emancipation. The professional codes and ethics help professionals in choosing their actions within ambiguous contexts. The body of knowledge comprises the methods, the explicit knowledge, the skills and the attitude needed for carrying out work within a certain profession. The world of professions provides plenty of illustrations of both well-prescribed and well-ordered bodies of knowledge that strongly define their profession on the one hand, and more open and ambiguous bodies of knowledge on the other hand. The social work profession falls into the latter category of possessing a rather open body of knowledge. In most countries, social work is a domain replete with different (sub-)professions, rather than being a clearly defined recognisable profession of its own. In this context, the social work body of knowledge is fragmented and dependent on national, local and particular contexts. As a consequence, many social workers operating within such a professional context construct a rather layered professional identity. They are indeed social workers, but at the same time they identify themselves with sub-professions, such as being a youth worker, community worker, mental health social worker, social pedagogue and so on. Moreover, a third layer of their professional identity could represent their actual functions within sub-professions, like social pedagogue in a youth care institution, or a counsellor in debt relief. It is thus complicated to identify with one strong professional identity in the social work field. Moreover, social work is often seen and felt as a helping profession, which bears the risk that social workers forget their own grounding in serving citizens, society and management.

The core assignment of social work is to support citizens in their social material and non-material needs. It concerns people's behaviour and interaction in society

and in their communities. Its unique position is that it acts from the broader social perspective instead of the more specific health, educational, security or economic perspective. Too often I meet social workers and social work students who are not only seen but also see themselves as the extended arm of other professions. They carry out plans developed by psychiatrists, psychologists and social policymakers. Moreover, social workers are mostly neglected in delivering diagnoses; this is considered a task of the 'experts'. The competition between professions calls for a more independent professional awareness and attitude among social workers, not just to defend their profession but also because the social perspective on people is much needed in times of social complexity. It is essential for social workers to stand for their social model and social perspective.

As a matter of fact, the social work profession is heavily based on values and comprises both an internationally and nationally extended code of ethics. Social work is concerned with social justice, supporting people in their daily lives and creating respect and openness in society towards the socially vulnerable. The social work body of knowledge includes thousands of methods and instruments and comprises knowledge from a range of disciplines, next to social work theory. But what does this imply in Marc's case? What do social justice and respect signify in his specific context? If social workers first and foremost identify with the core assignment of solving problems and achieving social justice, it becomes very hard to cooperate with very vulnerable citizens, like Marc, in complex situations. There is no clear way out. To be honest and pragmatic, Marc shows no intention of changing himself into a participative and model citizen; neither are there many possibilities to improve his context. His social efficacy is too weak and too impaired to expect remarkable changes. The question then is if social workers are also just as involved when change, problem solving and social justice are hard to achieve. Are social workers willing to support 'hopeless' cases, trying to alleviate their situation and help them create connections and bring structure to their lives? Social workers should not be ashamed if the most they can do in certain cases is just keep the context in order, alleviate deprived situations without being able to create 'great' solutions or at least visibly fight for social justice. The simple fact that someone is taking notice of their situation and doing something to prevent further deterioration can prove to be invaluable for marginalised people and their families.

Connecting with oneself

The international code for social workers states that social workers should also take care of themselves and their personal circumstances. The social worker is dependent on his or her capacity to deal with social problems and to act appropriately in difficult contexts. This relates at least in part to inborn social efficacy and tacit knowledge. The embedded capacities, experiences and knowledge help steer social work professionals in their work and are essential for upholding the quality of professional action. Moreover, this professional efficacy is closely connected to personal efficacy. The social profession requires expertise in coping with social life

and, in that sense, it is a domain that includes all people. The social professional thus cannot take refuge in a separate expertise domain. This interweaving of professional and personal identity and capacity complicates the social work profession and places an extra burden on the shoulders of the social worker. The involvement and engagement, ability to connect competences and in general the whole person of a social worker is called forth in providing social support to citizens.

With Marc it is a real challenge to come to an open attitude based on involvement and engagement. Marc does not appeal to our empathy and is not willing to accept help readily. Social workers are motivated by the will to help and to solve problems. Marc, however, does not want their support and feels that it penetrates his private life. This may lead one to experience feelings of fear, disgust and repulsion when faced with the task of having to support Marc. Professionals who work with people in very complicated and rather hopeless situations are often overwhelmed by feelings of uselessness. Nevertheless, all they can do is just carry on. Doing something in this case is dependent on the willingness and motivation to connect and be supportive. However, it becomes difficult to connect with users if they feel or notice that you don't really accept or respect them. A social worker cannot fake support; social work is not a game. The professional attitude is based on and is inseparable from the personal attitude. The art is to change the feeling of simply carrying on into the belief of slowly heading towards a certain direction. Within all the swampiness of the situation, social workers must thus try to find some sense, some direction and some improvement.

Ingredients for coping with social complexity

Reflecting on Marc and Lisa's case, I discuss some recommendations below that can aid in coping with social complexity.

Connecting knowledge

In the first chapter I characterised our (post-)modern society as an ongoing process of the fragmentation of knowledge, professions, agencies, products, laws and regulations. Most professionals and craftsmen are focused on a restricted specific area within their field and they deal with their users and/or material as perceived from this specific focus area. When facing complexity, however, such restricted focus is often inadequate and fails to address key issues. In complex contexts and systems – like communities and human beings – we often need more contextual approaches that analyse problems from different perspectives and recognise the complex interrelationships between factors and actors. Problem setting in the social domain confronted with social complexity thus requires knowledge gathered from different disciplines. It needs a level of insight into systems and the way they work, the effects of marginalisation and the impact of a defect, disorder or impairment. It also requires an ability to identify the resources inherent in the person and in the context. Finally, it needs the knowledge and skill to be able to oversee an entire

range of methods and theories in order to comprehend the normative aspects of the situation, i.e. the common goods, ethics, human rights and so on. A social worker is thus a generalist professional in the social domain who oversees a broad fragmented field of knowledge, and who is able to connect these fields and employ them in order to appropriately identify and define the problem at hand and address it adequately through professional action. This process of overseeing, combining and constructing knowledge and action is the core of the social work methodology. Some studies show that most social workers are hardly aware of the knowledge they possess. They perceive themselves more as co-creators, enablers and supporters rather than experts. Social workers are part of the daily lives of the people they work for, and cannot take an outsider position. The quality of their professional expertise is tested in real life contexts and processes.

Next to combining different fields of knowledge, the quality of expertise of a social worker depends on his or her personal, social and professional efficacy. Knowledge on its own is not enough. The social worker should be reliable, trustworthy, self-explanatory and able to make a connection with different kinds of people. These qualities can only be partly acquired through trainings; they mostly stem from within a person and need to be developed and nurtured. Social workers need to use both learned knowledge as well as inborn and embedded capacities in good balance in their daily work. In addition to using the knowledge and experience of the users themselves, this also involves using resources suitable to the context. Such balancing of personal and professional capacities is a continuous process of learning and professional evolution; a social worker is thus a lifelong learning expert.

Accepting vulnerability

Social complexity entails that it is not only justified to perceive people like Marc solely as victims of societal structures and conditions, but also – and perhaps even more – unjust to perceive them as miscreants. Socially vulnerable people lack the inner steering capacity needed to cope with daily life, particularly in a complex society. They often neglect themselves and avoid active participation in society and its communities. Among this vulnerable group, however, we find people who are talented and gifted and who come from rather ‘normal’ families. Nevertheless, they somehow lack a grip over their situation and surroundings, and consequently become passive, or perhaps even resort to forms of addiction that help them escape the reality with which they cannot cope. Perceiving these socially vulnerable outsiders as unwilling to participate, or as mentally ill, will only serve to isolate them further. It is not helpful to push socially vulnerable people towards participation when it is participation itself that they cannot cope with. Furthermore, neglecting vulnerable people who are unable or unwilling to participate in society creates still more pressure on the mental health sector, youth care institutions and prisons, and increases homelessness.

The question we need to answer is how to prevent more people from being excluded or excluding themselves from society, particularly when confronted with

social complexity. Or, as expressed earlier, how do we support someone who is not capable of finding his or her place in a place-seeking society? The solution of standardising active citizenship and excluding those who fail to meet its standards may be a very ‘civil’ one; however, it is hardly humane. We frequently recognise and appreciate differences in financial and educational capital in our societies. When it comes to social capital, however, we overlook the fact that the power to steer and manage oneself also differs from person to person, partly due to circumstances and partly due to inborn capacities. What we need is a social policy that recognises and respects such differences in social capital and social efficacy, and that aims at setting up structures, services as well as a culture that tries to at least afford a place in society for all citizens and to support people struggling with social complexity. Given Marc’s case, for instance, we should accept that he is unable to change himself and his context very drastically. We should accept his vulnerability and, given that, see what can be done to reinforce his capacities and context in a way that makes his life and environment more liveable for him. Our expectations, aims and approach should be realistic; but this does not imply that we should give up trying to support Marc and improve his situation.

Mentoring and socialising

Social work has roots in case work which often aims at solving problems within a limited period of time. When dealing with more chronic problems we need different strategies and methods, which come closer to the tradition of social pedagogy. In this approach, the social worker takes on more of a mentoring role while simultaneously trying to strengthen the person’s context. In a way this approach is less intervention-based and less oriented towards problem solving than social case work; however, it is in no way easier or less important. It is challenging for social workers to contribute to improving social capital and social coping in such an ongoing process that involves complexity. Quite often, this involves ambiguous work with no clear solutions at hand. Thinking in terms of ‘solving’ and ‘healing’ burdens professionals and citizens with high expectations, which are often followed by disappointment. Parents who are hoping for clear solutions to their child’s coping inabilities or disorders not only increase the stress and demands laid on social work professionals, but are also severely disappointed when they learn that there are no simple answers in such situations. To accept a situation as it is and to look for small steps to stabilise, de-stress and unravel the contextual complexity little by little is the most achievable goal to harbour in social work. Hopefully, it also serves to prevent the emergence of a crisis later on and the need for expensive institutional interventions by youth care or mental health institutions or the justice system. As discussed at length in chapter four, therapy and institutionalisation are often not an adequate enough answer when it comes to supporting socially vulnerable people challenged by social complexity. These approaches focus too much on the individual as a problem and on the existence of clear solutions. The keywords dominating the social work discourse nowadays are activation and

participation. However, I think that societal embedment and context stabilisation are at least equally important, if not more so, and are sometimes even the best actions that can be taken in such socially complex situations.

Constructing anchors

Certain moments and persons can serve as anchors to socially vulnerable people, enabling them to achieve certain regularity and structure in their lives. Marc, for instance, can greatly benefit from having such anchors to support his embedment and socialising. For example, a person could serve as an anchor and accompany him once a week to check his mailbox and to take action together with Marc if needed. It is quite possible that one of the family members would be willing to take on this role, particularly if they know that professional support will be close at hand if required. If no one from the family is willing to take on this anchoring role, a volunteer can also step in. Further, during this weekly ritual of dealing with the mail, the anchor can attempt to strike up a conversation with Marc to ease the relationship between them. Because the volunteering anchor is not a professional, Marc might find him or her more easy to talk to. Another anchoring role could be served by a cleaning person who drops in once a month to help Marc clean the house. Again, it is good to first contact the family network for volunteers, and if that doesn't work, to proceed to ask people residing in the neighbourhood, or other voluntary agencies.

As the professional social worker, Lisa too serves as a kind of anchor to Marc. She visits him regularly every month for an hour. Lisa's role in this case is not only about directly supporting Marc, but also reinforcing his context by letting the neighbours, for instance, see and know that someone is trying to help Marc and address the mess, garbage and noise that he is creating which inconveniences others. Further still, Lisa can try to gain the understanding of neighbours so that they complain a little less and maybe even offer to keep an eye on him. Of course, Marc is not great at connecting with others and coping with daily life. But employing such anchoring and creating some stability and structure around him can improve his situation and behaviour little by little. One of our current societal problems is the lack of stability that was earlier provided by recognised local front-line professionals, such as the family doctor, the minister, the local police officer and the head of the school. I think we need to re-invest in once again creating a recognisable first line of basic professionals in communities: family doctor, nurse and social worker. All the other care and social professionals and services should be part of the second line of support, working as specialists and service providers who step in when called to aid by the local front-line professionals.

Unravelling complexity

Problem setting (Schön, 1983) is an essential competence for social workers. It comprises the art of overseeing a complex situation, finding ways to deal with the

most urgent needs and finding specific strategies that are in line with the capacities of the user and the context. It is not about reducing complexity to a clear diagnosis, based on just one or two aspects of the situation. In fact, complexity entails continuous change, which social workers need to recognise. Social workers need to show responsiveness to urgency and momentum and affinity towards taking small steps and not overburdening themselves, and the users and their family. Social workers do realise that the most predictable factor of their work is its unpredictability; however, they do sometimes still observe certain patterns in resources and possibilities presented by certain contexts. A whole range of studies show that social workers know how the situation of chronically vulnerable people is often alleviated not due to professional interventions, but owing vastly to a particular person being there at the right moment and providing support in the right way (Wilken, 2010). Social work is therefore often slow work.

Final remark

I hope this case and the theoretical and methodological reflections presented in this chapter are recognisable as well as useful to social workers and social policymakers. Of course, social workers often work with citizens facing less complex and intensive problems. Vulnerability in many cases is often experienced only temporarily. But there are also cases that ask for endurance, resilience and modest expectations with regard to outcomes. There is, however, no reason to exclude such socially vulnerable people and place them in institutions, or to neglect them or give up on their situation. In this case, I presented some alternative approaches that can serve as ingredients to help cope with social complexity. These involved relationship-building between the user and volunteers, and if possible also the family and neighbours. I am aware that this is a rather optimistic view to propose in a complex situation such as the one elaborated. Nevertheless, I am convinced that thinking in terms of liveability instead of solving and healing, and a lighter form of support through acceptance, anchoring and connecting instead of intensive treatment, is what will lead to more lasting solutions with better social and economic impacts. This direction should form the essence and challenge of social work.

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