

EMPATHIC COMMUNICATION AND “MAKING YOURSELF ONE WITH THE OTHER”: A WAY TO CREATE NEW MODELS OF INTERVENTION IN SOCIAL DIFFICULTIES

*Mario Giostra**

For almost twenty years I have been working as a social worker in the area of drug addiction.

At the moment I am working with clients with double diagnoses and am also collaborating on a research project to establish criteria for the empirical revision of results for therapeutic communities.

My involvement in this profession happened almost by chance, as I had in actual fact been reading a degree in mathematics. While I was working as a volunteer, and tried to apply in a very simple way some of the intuitions that Chiara Lubich had on the way to love one's neighbour, I discovered I was able to establish a profound relationship with the young people with whom I was working. I was surprised to see how their therapy and educational development were enriched by this approach.

A few years ago, the results produced by this approach were beginning to attract attention and I gradually became convinced that my experience was not an isolated case. There was rather a precise relationship of cause and effect that brought about those results. I had the impression that I had discovered something new which would have significant potential in this field.

Therefore, I felt the need to study what was happening and try to express it as a theory, as a model with a certain structure, and then to formulate appropriate strategies of intervention.

Over these years I have reflected a lot on these ideas, but perhaps the sociological concept that has been most useful in this research is that of empathy.

The sociologist Achille Ardigó, for example, describes empathy as the capacity of a person who intentionally puts himself in front of another human being with the purpose of creating a relationship. Therefore, this person has to become deeply aware of what the other person is living, without comparing this to his or her own experience and without reducing it to one's own frame of reference, but rather acknowledging it from the other person's point of view.¹

Empathy, therefore, is not seen as a mental act, but rather as an experience through which a social being goes beyond his or her own daily experience and opens up to other experiences, including relationships with other people.

Carl Rogers is one of the authors who have contributed most to the understanding of this term. He describes empathy as “the ability to live the life of the other person for a few moments.” In 1959 he states that this means “to perceive the inner frame of reference of the other person with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto, as if one were the other person.”²

* Mathematician, sociologist; expert in community rehabilitation in particular for drug addiction and psychiatric co-morbidity.

¹ A. Ardigó, *Per una sociologia oltre il post moderno*, Laterza, Bari 1988, p.132-136.

² C. Rogers, . *A theory of therapy, personality and interpersonal relationships, as developed in the client-centered framework in Koch (ed), Psychology: A Study of A Science*, ed. Koch, McGraw Hill, New York 1959, p 341-384.

It's almost impossible not to see the evident similarities between empathy, as described here, and what Chiara Lubich expresses in her spiritual expression, "make yourself one," which is a fundamental idea in the relationship of reciprocity as she understands it. It is an expression that is already present in several authors, especially those of the school of phenomenology and yet, in this context, it is enriched with new meaning. Among the many talks in which Chiara Lubich explains this concept and the technique for living it effectively, I have chosen a few quotes:

*"To love the other person 'as you love yourself.' The other person is me. And so I love the other as myself. The other is hungry, I am hungry. The other is thirsty, I am the one who is thirsty. The other needs advice, I am the one who needs advice."*³

Another quote: *"You need to stop and feel with your neighbour: to become one with him or her until you take on their painful burden or experience together the joyful event... This making yourself one demands a continual death to oneself."*

And another: *"To make ourselves one with every person we meet: to share their feelings, to carry their burdens; to feel in us his or her problems and resolve them as if they were our own ..."*⁴

*"To make yourself one it is necessary to be totally detached from yourself, for the whole time you are in contact with others. In fact, we know that there are those who do not listen right to the end, because they are attached to themselves or to something else. These persons do not die totally in the neighbour and instead want to give answers as soon as they come into their head...."*⁵

In this way, it is easier to explain what Carl Rogers and his school of thought call the "techniques of empathic understanding," which to date are still very widely used in counseling and are applied by many social workers.

It would take a great deal of time to describe them adequately, and so I will only underline some of the essential characteristics. Empathic understanding is based on three fundamental suppositions, which are empathy, congruence (the therapist is congruent in the relationship) and positive regard toward others. These assumptions are not only very present, but even indispensable for all those who want to make themselves one with another person. The approach of Rogers also considers a whole range of nonverbal attitudes that serve to put the other person at ease, to make him or her feel relaxed, to make them "feel important." These gestures include one's posture, one's facial expressions, and even inner silence to make room for others. These nonverbal expressions, as we said, are indispensable, and are especially evident in someone who is "making themselves one" with another. We could give numerous other examples about this.

However, we cannot ignore a fundamental and profound difference [between Rogers and Lubich], that is the need "to die to one's ego" which Chiara repeatedly mentions, describing it as a necessary, obligatory step. In this way she develops a vision that we can call "other-centred," a vision for which it is not enough to merely put oneself

³ C. Lubich, *Dialogue with the Town* (transcription), Loppiano, (Incisa Val D'Arno – FI), 5-5-1989

⁴ C. Lubich, *Santità di Popolo*, Città Nuova, Roma, 2001 p.74.

⁵ Ibid, p.85.

in the shoes of the other, but requires instead a revolutionary operation of self-annulment. I believe that this is the first time that the relationship with the other is based on removing one's ego from the first and primary place.

Many modern approaches to social work insist on the idea of reciprocity, which can run the risk of being a bit inflated. But, I must say that none of them come close to the purity and depth of Chiara's concept of reciprocity.

However, in my opinion, we cannot fall into the error of considering these reflections solely from the speculative point of view, since these ideas can be applied in numerous ways in daily life, and even more so, therefore, in the professional activity of a social worker. In my case, for example, these ideas made me totally change my way of carrying out an interview with clients, helping me to develop techniques that are very effective and easy to apply. I experienced many times that the very act of removing my ego, as we just described, allows the individual in front of me to give more of him or herself, because they find "emptiness" in a person who is open to them, an emptiness waiting to be filled. In this way, the person who needs help loses, so to say, the feeling of being in an inferior position, with respect to the person who is helping them. He or she feels they are the protagonists of their life, and this can help them set aside their reticence and defence mechanisms and open themselves spontaneously and with greater depth. Very often, when people who are defensive and closed in on themselves meet with someone who is empty so as to listen to them out of love, they seem to "unwind" and manage to open up.

I think it is important to add that this process does not in any way diminish the role of the therapist as someone who supports others, but actually, through this type of communication, that is so effective, the role is reinforced, since annulling one's ego out of love is not a way to disappear, but rather a deep expression of "being."

Besides, I have experienced that it is possible to draw a relationship between these methods, or to use a term that is not quite precise, to "merge" this new approach that we are describing with theories or techniques that already exist, and thus reach very interesting results with great value for the sociologist and the therapist. In this case, we cannot speak of one way being superior to the other, but rather of a fusion of two paradigms that gives rise to a "third way" so to speak, enriching both with new beauty and new meaning... In our case, for example, "making yourself one" can enrich and facilitate the application of the techniques of empathic listening, which on the other hand, can offer very effective instruments to the act of "making yourself one."

Another aspect to be underlined, which is at the basis of all we've said, is that these techniques and approaches, which before were the exclusive patrimony of a few experts can now be transformed, with due caution, into effective instruments in the hands of many.

To explain myself better, I will tell you something that happened to me a couple of months ago.

It had to do with the grandson of one of my friends, who had lost his father at an early age and had started to show signs of being a troubled child. He had left school, seemed totally indifferent to his future, was completely closed in on himself and was demonstrating the first symptoms of the use of "light" drugs.

When the mother's relatives, worried about how quickly the situation was deteriorating, tried to open her eyes to what was happening, the woman, as often happens in these cases, reacted violently against them, rejecting what they said. She accused them of passing false judgment on a situation they didn't understand and of ordering her around. She insisted that the boy was just going through a normal crisis of adolescence and did not need anyone's help. She accused them of being spiteful, devious, etc.

This is more or less the picture I got of the situation. It seemed obvious that any intervention on my part or of any other social worker would run the risk of an even greater explosion. What could I do at this point? My experience led me to think that probably the best way to reassure the woman would be to use the method that is often used in these cases, which would be to express one's point of view not through an objective truth, which could sound like an accusation, (using phrases like "your son has a problem"), but rather from a very personal point of view (through expressions that are undoubtedly true but are subjective, like "you know, I'm worried and this worry is making me sick"). Having said this, I would still need to explain this technique to a person who normally doesn't engage in this kind of counseling.

And therefore, I thought it could be important to start by advising my friend about how to "make himself one" with his sister, and in this I was helped by the fact that he already knew what I was talking about when I said "make yourself one." In doing so, he could say he was sorry for what had happened, have his heart open to receive her pain, and listen to her right to the end, without giving any advice.

Only after doing all this could he eventually bring up the problem of the son, but presenting it as something that worried *him*, and not as an objective situation. Here, too, the fundamental passage had to be the act of "stripping oneself" of one's ego so as to lose completely any attitude of a "wise and brave person" in order to go to her with great humility and give her the possibility of expressing herself freely.

The result was amazing, because in front of this unexpected attitude of interior emptiness, his sister felt the impulse to fill this void with her own love and as a consequence she opened up, pouring out all her worries and her desperation as a mother, seeing the situation of her son slipping out of her control.

I think that in this case what happened is exactly that dynamic that I spoke of a moment ago. The empathic approach was understood and effectively applied because the person who used it started off with the attitude of "making himself one." At the same time, however, the person who wanted to make himself one right to the end was able to do so in the best way by applying intelligently the technique that was explained to him. The result was a new technique, which included the strengths of both approaches, and resolved the problem.

One important element to emphasize is that this was the experience of a person who had no previous experience in helping other people in this kind of relationship. However, since he was an "expert" so to say, in the art of "making himself one" with others he was able to use this spiritual resource, and also (and in this case, above all) his educational background that helped him to understand a methodology which he was not familiar with, successfully applying it and creating a relationship of reciprocity, based on empathy.

Encouraged by the first results, I decided to keep going along this way. The next step was to form groups, which would urge the participants to aim at an experience of

sharing and mutual help, based on the success of what I just described. This project began with young people who have often lived for years in a state of total isolation, closed in on themselves, filtering every relationship with others through those forms of self-gratification that are typical of drug addiction.

The literature and the various experiences that already exist in this area came to my aid, furnishing me with particularly valid instruments. I am referring in particular to several groups that utilize interactive games proposed by the school of bioenergetics, and other groups that use the approach of Rogers, or those who follow what is commonly known as the socio-emotive approach.

My idea was basically very simple: to choose several of these instruments and put them together in a socio-therapeutic course to propose to the youth I was taking care of. However, the fundamental idea would be that of sharing, based on that particular interpersonal relationship of the empathic type we just described. Here, too, several of the ideas of Chiara Lubich helped me to enrich these methodologies with new content. I am referring in particular to some “passages” that she proposes and that are particularly effective to help small groups of individuals who want to bring ahead a way of sharing and growth, towards a reciprocal relationship of brotherly love.

The first phase of this course was to make a “pact,” which can be described as a “pact of solidarity and mutual aid.” This requires a fundamental passage, which has the purpose of helping those involved in the process to cement interpersonal relationships with one another and to remove any egocentric attitudes, in order to be actively interested in others. In this phase, which might take more than one meeting, it might be opportune to insert moments in which there is the use of classic instruments, such as sociograms or other interrelational activities, which are adapted and formulated into interactive games that help the participants get to know one another better and enter into more profound relationships. Enriched by the spirit of reciprocity and mutual sharing, these activities acquire new life and new significance.

To give an example, one idea that might appear very simplistic but which, however, has very interesting results is a “game” in which each one draws the name of someone else in the group and during the week tries to give special attention to this person, getting to know them better, being close to them and sustaining them in moments of difficulty...

In this way, each one is transformed into a “tutor” so to say, a supervisor of the life of the other (or as a child would say, to be the “guardian angel” of the person). He or she is urged to go outside his or her own world to leave space for the other. Besides, the name of the person is kept secret and so that contributes to creating a stimulating atmosphere of curiosity. It would be too long to describe in detail all the results obtained, but the amazement and enthusiasm often demonstrated by the participants, not to mention the way in which they manage to concretely help one another, to my mind merits great attention.

One aspect to underline is that, no matter what techniques we decide to use, if the “pact” we talked about happens to become “shaky,” or for any other reason the will to help one another diminishes, these groups, and also subsequent meetings, will be almost totally emptied of significance and lose all effectiveness.

Proceeding in this way, it was then possible to structure other meetings, based on a very intense exchange of feelings and experiences of life.

Here, too, the goal is to help these young people emerge from the prison made up of their egocentric attitudes and to urge them to share their interior world with others.

This can be done in a variety of ways, on condition that the exchange of experiences is not an end in itself, but rather a mutual gift between those who speak and those who listen. Here, too, I will limit myself to just one example. It is a technique that, among many others, has proven to be very effective. It consists in asking each member of the group to give as a gift to the others a "postcard on his or her life," recounting an event that was emotionally significant. This creates an atmosphere of empathy that allows the others to re-live that experience together with the person. Normally these groups deal with strongly emotional topics.

Sometimes, however, it can happen that the empathic atmosphere does not "take off." In these cases, when we asked why, it was almost always because of unresolved conflicts among the youth themselves. This is just another confirmation of the therapeutic importance of having everyone in the group adhere fully and sincerely to the "pact" mentioned before...

Finally, in the moment in which, through this process, the relationship among the people involved has matured sufficiently, it was possible to take a further step ahead, using more demanding techniques. I am referring in particular to a new type of group meeting in which the participants, urged by the will to help one another (which is mandatory), choose a person and under the guidance of a moderator, tell that person with respect, but very clearly, which are the person's defects and those areas that need to be improved for the person to grow and progress, and then which are his or her good qualities and strong points.

It is a moment (which we could call a "moment of truth") to be done with great attention and care, since it is so delicate and because of the possible fragility of the people involved. Similar methodologies are present, with some differences, in various classical approaches, but what makes it different in this case, is exactly this effort to go out of oneself to concentrate on the characteristics and the problems of the other.

I have to admit that I am often moved by the results of these groups. I could never have imagined developments of this type. These youth, who are hardened and corrupted by life circumstances, distrustful of others and reluctant to establish relationships with others, begin to soften, creating this empathic atmosphere, which is so difficult to describe. The amazement and enthusiasm they showed facilitated communication with me and among them, in a way I have never experienced before, and was too obvious to be merely a random happening.

I repeated this process various times, with different types of participants to be sure that the results do not depend on a particular combination of persons, and yet the results were more or less identical. It is clear that an experience repeated so many times with the same results cannot be the fruit of accidental circumstances. We are certainly considering a topic that needs further development, since we are dealing with instruments in an embryonic state. However, in my opinion, these first timid results show forcefully the

effectiveness, and the revolutionary aspect, of the socio-cultural patrimony that comes from the experience of universal brotherhood proposed by Chiara Lubich.