

**RELATIONSHIPS IN SOCIAL COMMUNITY WORK  
AS SEEN IN THE LIGHT OF THE PARADIGM OF UNITY.  
AN EXPERIENCE OF THE *UNITA*' COMMUNITY CENTRE IN BUENOS AIRES**

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I am a social worker, specialized in the promotion of community work. This experience which I will briefly present to you, relates to social promotion work which I am carrying out, together with a numerous and varied group, alongside my work at the national Ministry for Social Development.

It has to do with a Community Centre which was founded more than 15 years ago, in the province of Buenos Aires (Argentina), in the locality "La Matanza", which has a population of 1,500,000 people, 70% of which live below the poverty-line. The project is being developed in a community of six districts where 16, 000 people live.

It is a complex project towards the development of the community, which has as a reference the experience and perspective of unity, which is also the inspiration of this congress.

The most daring aim which we aspire to achieve is to satisfy not only material needs, but also fundamental human needs, which we have grouped in the following aspects: work, social relationships, the search for direction and self realization, health, a place where to live, learning and communication.

At the basis of all our work we have placed personal and social relationships, which we try to establish between social workers and the persons and groups within the Community. In this context, the fundamental categories which have guided us were, among others, the following: persons, relationships, unity/distinction and reciprocity.

### **1. THE PERSON: BEING IN RELATION.**

We started by trying to put into practice the principle of human dignity, by trying to have a profound respect for each person, of his potentiality, capabilities, self determination, looking for his full participation in the management of his own promotion.

This perspective in our professional intervention made us break away from the way which social workers may at times look at the person to whom help is offered, when the person is only looked at as a client, as one being assisted, as a beneficiary, or as a simple object for whom one has to intervene. We are convinced that the other person cannot but be the leading subject of his transformation and growth, the "co-subject of the social action" – as we like to call him

This not only helped us avoid all attitudes of paternalism and welfarism, but also any patronizing manners which, at least in our country, always tempt political parties when implementing social policies.

We find it is of utmost importance to maintain this behavior in the aspect of employment: in Argentina the situation is really difficult, where more than 20% of the working population is unemployed and 40% of those in activity work without a permit, which leads to exploitation, insecurity and default in pension contributions.

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In our Centre we organize professional formation courses and we can say in all frankness that those who participate in the various types of courses always declare that they are enthusiastic about them. In the course for waiters, for example, we tried above all to give rise to constructive relationships amongst the young participants. The atmosphere created there was so positive that the participants found a lot of motivation and new energy to find a way to get out of their situation of unemployment. After two months of the conclusion of the courses, 27 of the 50 young participants found work (an unusual occurrence for our country). This confirmed once more how important groups and relationships are to establish self-esteem, a just self-evaluation and to promote initiatives to find solutions for seemingly insurmountable situations. All persons remain touched by the behavior we maintain among us agents and with them, because of the deep sense of fraternity that is established among all.

Recently we asked a lady who followed a course for bakers why she had come to us. She said: "Here I find a different atmosphere". The word "atmosphere", I believe, is significant to understand how the people of the Community perceive the type of human relationships that we try to build and which helps them in their fulfillment as persons.

At the beginning of the year, Alfredo, a member of the Community, asked to work as a volunteer in our Centre, saying: "I have always dreamed of doing something to help the unemployed find work; now that "the office for employment" has opened in the Centre, I felt that the time has come to fulfill this dream". And so Alfredo started to commit himself as a volunteer with us. His enthusiastic commitment brought about a very positive coincidence: some time back, an ex-colleague of his was going into pension. Inspired by Alfredo's enthusiasm, he decided to pass over to him his list of clients, in which he found by chance one of the most important employment agencies in our area. This agency is now gathering the *curricula* of many unemployed members of the Centre and is doing everything possible to find work for them.

Another thing that keeps us particularly busy is our aid to small entrepreneurs. In helping potential small entrepreneurs of the Community we realize how they remain touched by the firm commitment with which we carry out this task. Until now we have supported five small agencies: a pizza shop, a small sewing factory, a confectionery, a carpentry shop and a shoe factory. All their employees, about forty, were students of our formation course for small entrepreneurs and these activities have become solid firms.

## **2. THE RELATIONSHIP.**

The *mission* of our Community to work for the well being of society corresponds also to try to approach every person "being the other", in trying to understand his life conditions, seeking to forget our way of thinking and our own cultural background, to enter into those of the other person. In this way we direct all the techniques and professional instruments that we use, from the very initial professional interview.

This effort to try to understand really well the other person is an attitude which can be stated as "to be one with the other", to put oneself "in the other's shoes", to be in his situation, "to transfer ourselves" in him, by forgetting all that we are, so that the other person feels that he is welcomed with all his problems, taking on us all the other person's situations so that we can together find a more adequate solution.

Such an attitude demands a preceding condition: it consists in "creating an emptiness", or rather to chase away all our thoughts, ideas, opinions, possible alternatives, which come to our mind, to put aside all prejudices. Only in this way is it possible that the thoughts and the needs of the other

person can penetrate profoundly in us and find a place where they are well received, and so the other person can fully express himself. We realized that, behaving in this way, when the other person has finished talking, we generally find together the appropriate answer, and at times we end up agreeing with the ideas of the person in front of us as the one and only solution.

Countless times we have seen that when in our work we establish a sincere fraternal relationship, the result is not only a greater knowledge of the other person, but also a type of “surplus” an additional knowledge of the reality; it constitutes a lot of understanding, a well founded creativity in the searching of solutions to the problems faced, and produces results that would never have been thought of before.

Another particular problem felt in our country is that of youths and children. We have thousands of “street children”, exposed as one knows to all types of danger, from drugs to criminality to violence, and so on. Because of this a particular attention is dedicated to these problems of our times in our Community.

We have set up a games room as one of the activities to deal with this situation. It started as an activity run by the teenagers themselves with the help of some of our workers. The programme they follow is always open to a dynamic and creative process. The participation and commitment to the various activities, including the scholastic programme, is worked out in a spontaneous and natural way, even during free time and recreation.

The social impact that the fraternal relationships built with these youths can be identified through various effects: socialization, getting used to keeping order and cleanliness, learning to co-operate, to take the initiative (starting to offer themselves spontaneously to collaborate in activities), openness to new subjects, the sense of belonging in one big family, showing respect to the environment and rules, self management of their own projects, overcoming traditional formal relationships such as teacher-pupil and assistant-child.

### **3. UNITY AND DISTINCTION.**

The central components of our work are the dynamics of unity and distinction, which result in the relationships established social workers and the persons of the community. The fundamental criterion for every project, every objective, goal or activity, is expressed by the question we ask ourselves: “Is this project we are proposing an aid towards building unity between the persons and the groups within the community?” If the answer is no we understand that it is not a valid or sufficient project. This principle always guides us to try and see clearly the way to undertake in planning and carrying out our projects.

To sum up we can say that our social work has a double objective: on one part it seeks to resolve social problems, and on the other hand it tries to reach as far as possible the profoundest unity with the persons of the Community. This unity is a means and, at the same time, the final goal in overcoming all social problems.

Even the wisdom of the simplest persons confirms that this is the way to follow. When we started our work in the Community, for example, a lady told us: “Here, it is not enough to give food to the people, (even if the majority live in sheer misery); what people here need most is solidarity, to be friends with their neighbors, to be able to overcome separations, to succeed in solving our problems and be able to go forward united”.

We always try to keep the relationship of social-worker/person as one of unity and distinction, maintaining the strongest possible bond without ending up in uniformity, so that each part preserves and grows in one’s own identity. This has helped us to face the other person by

respecting his singularity, since singularity and the ability to socialize are mutually involved. The more we took in consideration singularity and the respect of the individuality of each person, the more unity grew among all, and the more we tried to generate singularity and interpersonal and group relationships, through meetings, events, etc., the more the singularity and the identity of each and everyone came to the surface and the talents and the capacity of each person could be seen.

It is not surprising that 50% of those responsible for the activities we carry out emerged from the Community's reunions: they offered themselves spontaneously to help the Community in holding courses, workshops or activities to promote solidarity.

These reunions are held every month and they serve, amongst other things, to build and reinforce relationships amongst everybody, to report to all about the activities being held in a way that all programming is transparent and shared by everyone as much as possible.

One of the signs that show we are moving in the right direction is that when people get to know us they do not look at us in a detached way or with a sense of inferiority, but they look at us as being "part of them". Without any doubt this presumed superiority of the agents is one of the most difficult barriers to overcome, because it is very easy that a wall of diffidence is built. But, the fact that one tends to, always "be one with the other" has helped to overcome this barrier, and today I can assure you, that in our Centre this type of difficulty does not exist any more. Some masons, for example, who work at the construction of a hall for formation courses told us: "Some persons study to be more than you are, to make a fool of you and to show you that they are above you; you do not make this difference but are equal to us, you treat us well, you come near us, you talk to us, you take interest in what we are. And you do so with everyone!"

In a few words, we discovered how distinction, diversity in duties and even in situations, instead of building barriers can enhance the building of unity in the Community.

One of the practices which helps our work, is that which we have called "reflection together". We are sure, in fact, that putting in practice the relationship of unity and distinction in the process of social promotion, must involve not only the action, but also the thought. We noticed that the way we do things as well as our way of thinking must start only from these dynamics of unity and distinction. Our experience tells us that reflection together is reached only when each one does not try to impose on others, but offers one's own idea to the other, having understood that even thinking is something that has to be given, if one wants to build a relationship of unity, based on empathy, on service, on co-operation and reciprocal collaboration.

This way of putting our thoughts together in the weekly meeting of the workers' group, together with the local persons, has become a fundamental routine. It generates new ideas, diminishes the margin of error remarkably, and improves programming, increasing the effectiveness in finding solutions and in the choice of strategies and actions to be undertaken according to the different circumstances. The "general understanding" is so much superior, more intense and profound than that which we reach when we analyze the cases alone. Such procedures made us generate a methodology and to find time to "analyze together" with an interdisciplinary form of approach.

Naturally, we realized that to arrive at unity of thought is not easy, we have learnt to keep in mind that progress in communication and reciprocal comprehension are often slow, and entail at times tensions and conflicts that arise not only because of lack of internal disposition of each person, but above all because of the fact that complex questions are generally faced the solutions to which are not easy, and for which prospective and different procedures are possible (or at least debatable). But our experience tells us that, when one puts into practice an adequate relation based on reciprocal profound and respectful listening, presenting one's aspirations and ideas in a

clear but serene manner, communication is more effective and the ideas will be appreciated for all their true and positive content.

Once, a doctor who knew us offered himself to work with us in courses of health prevention. A little later, the government of our Region requested him to open a pediatric outpatients' clinic. He proposed to open this clinic in our Centre. We had never thought of opening an outpatients' clinic in our Centre, because there already was some kind of sanitary assistance in the area and we thought it covered the basic needs. But we said: "We should know how to listen to the needs of the local people and see what they think". So we shared this proposal with the working group, trying above all to arrive at that type of relationship amongst us that generates "reflection together". After a moment of this reflection with the people and among us, we decided to open this clinic. Today our outpatients' clinic is one of the most successful activities of the Community, with a turnover of about 200 children each week. Through this and many similar experiences of this type, we have learnt that in community development one never needs to fossilize, one must always be open to new situations and needs expressed by the Community itself.

#### 4. RECIPROCITY

Reciprocity is another strong decisive point for all our work. In considering the other as a subject and not as an object has permitted a relation of interaction, in two ways, "going and coming back", and this has produced unexpected consequences and developments, since it has already been experienced, that when the 'I' goes out of oneself to go towards the other and this happens reciprocally, a third reality is created, a "*tertium*", that surpasses and goes beyond both of them.

We make it a point that such reciprocity amongst social workers and co-subject, is present in all the phases of the methodical process of intervention: in the diagnosis of the situations, in the planning stage, in the execution and the appraisal of the projects and in all the work we do, we always try that this reciprocity constitutes the typical style of our relationships, and this forms every aspect of our community life.

In a meeting with the Community we talked of "Camping for the holidays". This argument aroused a lot of interest because the summer months constitute a problem for the families of the place, because of the difficulty to give a healthy occupation to the children, as well as because of the economical difficulty that does not consent their children to take part in activities for which they have to pay. And so the idea of camping arose. In the meeting in which we dealt the subject we made it known, that we will commit ourselves to give each child an economical help so that he could participate. The parents, in their turn, offered to cooperate by selling typical food which they agreed to cook to finance the initiative. Even the poorest wanted to give the little that they had. They proposed that every child should keep a money box to save and eventually give back whatever the Centre would have lent them. A spontaneous experience of giving and reciprocal help was born.

We could relate endless episodes of this type, where the poor are capable of giving not only what they do not need, but even what is a necessity for them. These episodes are almost a daily occurrence, sometimes moving, and often they are about most elementary necessities, from a bed to a refrigerator, to a door for the poor houses of the district. This type of "sharing of goods" is very important for the people, not only because it satisfies an urgent and immediate need, but above all because it gives faith and hope to all, showing them that fraternity is possible.

But what is more important is that this reality is not practiced only on an interpersonal level, or in families or with neighbors. Now it has become a structural practice over a large area, which has an effect even beyond the circle of the Community in which we work.

Ever since we have tried to put into practice this dimension of reciprocity even among different institutions, we have always kept in mind that all projects needed to have a network approach with other associations to look for significant bonds with all those taking part and all organizations within the Community, with the leaders of existing groups and with the institutions present in the area.

For example, besides others, we give help to a network of 16 community centres of “La Mattanza”, to whom we offer formation courses for their social projects. In return they offer additional personnel on whom we can rely to work with us on a wider scale. In addition we have offered our study of the community and our social diagnosis to this network of associations. This has been greatly appreciated, not only because no such profound work existed in the region, but also because usually each institution is jealous of its own achievements and experiences. Above all this “breaking” of existing models has helped to create a relationship of trust and real collaboration in the region that is proving to be very fruitful.

Together with other organizations we have also formed a network of micro-entrepreneurs to study the possibility of productive initiatives and we will be presenting the national Government with projects for micro-firms to receive subsidies. In all 51 organizations and many entrepreneurs are now launching their projects through us. The novelty consists in proposing initiatives and projects as a network and not so much as single, separate organizations.

Undoubtedly this constitutes an advantage for everyone in a way that even at a political level the proposals for the obtaining of funds and government subsidies acquire more strength and are positively valued.

Moreover in all the other areas of intervention we have proposed to work in a network which for us means in a social relationship of fraternity at an inter-institutional level with the other organizations (schools, associations, NGO’s, unions, parishes, etc.). In this way we have launched a network formed by 15 organizations with whom we meet to think and find together solutions to the numerous problems in the area. Because of this, different initiatives have come into being that are advancing in their work with good results, even at a level of institutional relationships

An important factor in this sense is the Town Council, with whom we have established a relationship of co-operation and with whom we are working on a project for youth entrepreneurs which is being subsidized by the local Government.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion we all well know that, everything we talked about can constitute, always more, a basis for an irreversible comprehension of social theory, as well as social assistance and social politics. We actually think that our experience can be a significant contribution, in respect of two perspectives: on one hand in as much it can help to reaffirm those values that today social professionals are making clear on a level of principles, theory, criteria of action, and methodology; on the other hand it seems to us that it can show a way and offer concrete hope to those who venture on this road, or to others who for years have been working in this profession.

Above all it seems to us that, at a practical rather than theoretical level, our experience can constitute a valid test bed for the principles of social work as a profession, although one must keep in mind some basic convictions, which cannot be renounced, and which I would here like to underline:

- ready-made recipes do not exist: solutions for social problems can be found by the quality and the positive aspect of the relationship that one succeeds to establish with all the others and that always result as new;
- it is necessary to keep in mind that social service consists in going towards the other person, and not towards a social problem;
- the social action consists of three fundamental phases:
  - a) to make the other person's problem your own, as a co-subject;
  - b) to establish social fraternity relationships;
  - c) to face the social problems together with the other person;
- the transmission and the sharing of the experiences is an inexorable necessity, since through the application of ideas, of proposed values and practices, one learns not only verbally, but also through the "vital contamination" of a lived experience.