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Respect, empathy, the ability to handle conflict, and dealing with insecurity: Attitudes of intercultural social work.

There are two different ways in which locals often perceive immigrants: one can be described as “understanding”, the other as “demanding”. “Immigrants are discriminated and it is made hard for them to really arrive in our society”, emphasize the understanding ones. “Immigrants themselves have to take the first step to integration. In the long run those who don’t show any effort to integrate have no place in our country”, reply the demanding ones.

These two attitudes towards immigrants can be seen as necessary oppositions that complement each other. They can be compared with the factors empathy and authenticity in Carl R. Rogers’ person-centered therapy. Rogers describes empathy and authenticity/congruency as necessary poles complementing each other. Empathy for others and congruency with the ones self is crucial, as there is something like pseudo-empathy and an obstinate insistence on ones own position: It is not a sign of empathy with their culture or religion when schools let Muslim parents excuse their daughters from swimming class without an argument; it is merely a comfortable way of avoiding conflict. And it is not a sign of clarity when Muslim women are told their headscarves is a symbol of suppression and therefore they should either take them off or leave Germany; it is simply ignorance, Muslim women may have many different reasons to wear a headscarf.

What we need for social work to operate efficiently in a society largely influenced by immigration are professional intercultural competences on three levels: theoretical knowledge, practical concepts and an ethically based attitude. Practicing attitudes that enable people to act professionally become ever more important for the studies of social work during the changes to bachelor and master studies. In the new German curriculum reform studies are not so much oriented towards subjects but towards competences. Attitude-competences have become just as important as knowledge-competences and acting-competences. In the following I will write exclusively about the competences concerning the attitude and the behavior. I will describe empathy and the ability to handle conflict. I will speak about respect, and “tolerance for ambiguity” (meaning here bearing of different beliefs, belief systems) as attitudes in intercultural social work. Furthermore I will explain how such attitudes can be achieved and practiced.

Respect

Every human deserves to be treated respectfully, no matter what he or she might think, do or feel. Respect for another human being expresses dignity that is within every human being.

Dignity is a sign of regard that humans owe each other because of their being human (Margalit 1997, 72). The reason humans deserve dignity and regard is that they have the ability to give their lives a new meaning at all times. They deserve respect, even when they become criminals: “Even the very worst criminal deserves respect, be it only for the possibility that he may question the life he has lived in the past and change his ways to live a dignified life from now on. Thus, treating someone with respect also means to never give anyone up, as every single person is capable of changing their life radically for the better.” (Margalit 1997, 92)

But how can I have respect for a person whose behavior seems culturally strange to me, maybe even revolting? How can I feel respect for someone I don't even understand?

A first exercise is the pure perception, without interpretation or analysis. We are all quick to mix what we see with images we already harbor in our minds (I've seen it all before). The Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has described the importance of simple perception and wonder, and has criticized premature categorizing and judging. Writing from a perspective of Jewish tradition Levinas has criticized the occidental way of either assimilating or excluding the strange and unfamiliar, instead of guarding and protecting its secrets. Levinas believes that it is a fundamental human impulse to look your interlocutor in the face. But still the face of ones interlocutor stays mysterious.

In it, there is the transcendence of God, the same one who in Jewish tradition keeps his secrets and answers the question: “who are you?” with the ominous “I am, who I am.” The Other one, whose face I've seen provokes me. (Levinas 1987, 245 f.) According to Levinas he provokes me to act ethically, whether I understand him or not. The other one will always stay a secret to me. To understand someone else is possible only in a limited way. Here the task is to endure that, what is ominous and strange to us, whilst maintaining a respectful attitude.

From the point of view of Psycho-analysis it is also important to endure and respect the not understood, ominous, sometimes even annoying sides to oneself. People suppress difficult childhood and life-memories into the subconscious. Sigmund Freud called the subconscious the inner foreign country. We need to recognize and accept those parts of ourselves that we conceive as alien and uncomfortable. Only someone who treats him or herself respectfully is capable of treating others with respect too. He who doesn't accept the fact, that even the parts of his personality that are difficult and strange, belong to him will suppress

them and project them onto others. When we fight people who are strange to us, we fight our subconscious (Kristeva 1990, 2008). To find and accept the alien and strange parts of us “may be the only way not to persecute it on the outside” (Kristeva 1990, 209)

Empathy

The Word “empathy” describes the capability to place back one’s own thoughts, feelings and desires, and to be with someone else for a time, and to perceive his or her thoughts, feelings and desires. Carl R. Rogers points out that empathy is not a technique that can be learned, used and discarded, if not needed. It is a personal attitude and conviction. It corresponds with authenticity and genuineness. Someone acts empathically if he tries candidly to find a non-judgmental understanding of another person, which is marked by profound respect. It is an attempt to be home in someone else’s way of living. The other ones experience is to really be heard by someone else. To do this, it is not necessary to give up ones own values, only to let ones own position drift to the background, to give the interlocutor room. (Emme 1996, 144). This can only happen in a context of authenticity and genuineness.

For a female Western social worker, who is influenced by feminism, it may not be easy to work with males from patriarchal societies. It can be good for a counselor to voice her own irritations when an Arab father speaks about educational practices towards his daughters that seem overly rigid to her: “It is difficult for me to understand your reasoning, but maybe you can explain to me why you feel this way.” It is important to have an honest, caring curiosity, which allows one to liberate oneself from one’s own expectations (Von Schlippe et al. 2003, 95) It is especially difficult to do this in a situation that is strongly influenced by aggression, fear or stress. We loose our ability to put ourselves into someone else’s position when we are confined by our own pictures and feelings. This is why it is so important that in professional social work, trained workers deal with their own socialization and feelings. Thus supervision has an important role to play in professional practice as well as in academic studies.

The ability to handle and resolve conflicts.

Another important competence for social workers is the ability to accept an honest disagreement with an interlocutor, to say uncomfortable things and to stand up for one’s own beliefs. This should happen with empathy and respect for ones interlocutor. The ability to handle conflict and empathy are an entity: “Empathy and clarity, including the audacity to confront, are no antagonisms but belong inseparably together.” (Emme 1996, 356) This also means accepting the risk of being misunderstood when conversing with partners from other cultures.

On the grounds of developing trust in intercultural relationships, it is possible to confront one's partner with uncomfortable views. Under these circumstances problems don't have to be made taboo.

Usually people are strong in either empathic listening, or the ability to handle conflict in a clear, respectful way. Only seldom is someone equally capable of both.

For professional social workers it is important to develop both: to improve their own strengths and to improve their weaknesses.

Tolerance for ambiguity

A tolerance for ambiguity manifests itself in the ability to accept not-knowing or different interpretations, without offering a premature, unsatisfactory explanation.

Tolerance for ambiguity is an important attitude for social workers in general. In intercultural social work however it is even more so, as here there is a bigger danger than elsewhere to offer one-sided premature explanations.

This may start with language: Words and expressions may have very different meanings in other cultures: In west European culture, "illness" is generally perceived as an endogen disturbance in an individual. Mediterranean and African immigrants may interpret the word differently, as an expression of interpersonal conflict, as a disruption in a relationship or as a problem caused by the casting of an evil eye (Haasen/ Yagdiran 2000, 19). Tolerance for ambiguity makes allowance that people from other cultural backgrounds lead their lives by different standards, and that they can't simply be judged by the professionals own set of moral standards. One can never do justice to another person, if one quickly uses one's own moral standards to judge them. Social work needs a special effort to not diagnose and solve problems prematurely. In this effort there is a chance. For example new possibilities can be found by asking specific questions in counseling. (e.g. "In such a case, what measures would be taken in your own culture?") "The unfamiliar invites us to introduce something unknown, and to use it in the specific context of the other culture. (von Schlipper et al. 2003, 157)

Suggested exercises to train a cultural-sensitive attitude.

Commonly there is a conception that an attitude is something one either has, or does not have. Professionals in social work need to bring certain attitudes, like the ability to handle conflict or empathy with them when they enter their work life, but these attitudes we don't have once and for all, it is important to nurture, cultivate and improve them.

A few exercises to do this will be described here; more can be found in the corresponding literature (see for example Freise 2007, 158-236; Handschuk/Klawe 2004)

- Training of conception

The training of conception is about separating conception from judgment and to formulate one's own perceptions as clear and unjudgmental as possible, before analyzing and diagnosing, which becomes important only later in the process. Marshall Rosenberg (2001) has developed ways to exercise this, within his nonviolent communication. Instead of saying: "I see a group of foreigners hanging out at a café, doing nothing", one learns to say: "I see a group of men, of whom several wear a moustache, sitting in a café, drinking tea."

The Jesuit Christian Herwartz suggests spiritual exercises on the street as a way of spiritual perception-practice. This method is being tried out on students of social work now, too: students visit places in big cities in which inequality is especially apparent. They spend a week with people who are excluded by society. They stay in pre-deportation detention-centres, soup-kitchens, refugee-camps.... "Seeing, hearing, appreciation of the other is the main activity at such places" (Herwartz 2006, 32).

- Meditation

In intercultural social work, as in other fields of work the psychological stress is often very high. Meditation, often but not always religiously motivated, is a way to gather one-self that helps prevent a "burn-out-syndrome". It can also help build an attentive attitude. Through sitting still and concentrating on his or her own breathing the one who meditates becomes self-aware. By freeing oneself from one's own thoughts and feelings and finding one's inner centre (finding God, in a religious sense) one develops an attitude of attentiveness, sensitivity towards everything happening in one's environment. A meditative attitude can also be achieved by experiencing nature, making or listening to music. Burdens, personal or professional, can be let go through meditation, leading a way to inner roots of gratitude, happiness and contentment. Meditation helps us find a way of feeling as one with the world.

For a few years now neuroscientist have been researching the effects meditation has on human perception (Singer 2008). The public interest for meditation however often remains superficial. It mainly concentrates on its practical effects such as tuning out, and the flexibility of the conscious mind. (Bendikter 2006) Those who want to make it a compulsory part of education and psycho-educational work are planning on more. Franz Jaslic, a Jesuit like Christian Herwartz, advises all spiritual advisers and others who work with

people to meditate. He claims it helps “to be all ears. To be truly there. Not only to listen with the mind, but with the whole body, with the soul. To listen to someone else means to eavesdrop into the uniqueness of ones interlocutor” (Jalics 2005, 394).

- Communication-training

The assignments of intercultural social work do not only include counselling, group and community work with immigrants, but also work with locals to diminish resistance against integration and to prevent xenophobia and racism.

In civil-courage-trainings and anti-discrimination-trainings the right response to right winged paroles and discriminating statements can be learned.

Marshall Rosenberg’s (2008) non-violent communication shows ways to deal with individuals, without falling into a spiral of alienating communication, caused by devaluation of your interlocutor. Rosenberg wants to show an alternative to the usual models of communication, which largely consist of defence and attack. For him the goal is not to react with accusations and to blame your interlocutor for communication problems, neither is it to blame yourself, but to listen to your feelings and those of your interlocutor, and to find the real needs that stand behind your and his/her reactions. This is about first to observe unjudgmentally, then to become aware of thoughts and feelings; to decipher the basic human needs and ethics in communication and to name the requirements to the special circumstances. Following Carl R. Rogers he couples empathy and congruency with ones own person, in his practice of non-violent communication: if someone can’t put himself in someone else’s position because he is angry, he may say this, he however may not blame his interlocutor for his feelings. Rosenberg’s approach helps to resolve conflicts without blaming each other, to encounter people honestly with without hurting them and to communicate empathically. Rosenberg image of human-kind assumes that every human being is capable of learning. Violent talk and behaviour is a direct result of loosing contact with ones own inner needs and desires. That contact can be found again.

The importance of encounters in an intercultural context

“All real life is encountering “(Buber 1983, 18). This programmatic sentence by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) describes the core of Buber’s personalism. This is important for intercultural social work too: When we people meet each other as holistic individuals, something happens between them. In an encounter a touching and a being touched takes place. Buber speaks of the present as a power. In Buber’s concept of the “in between” interpersonal relationships are seen as force fields in which creative powers can be released.

It is the ambition of intercultural social work, to create encounters between people of different cultural origins, to exercise dialog, tolerance and respect. Integration into a multi-cultural society is not a one way street: if locals do not have any serious contact to people with a background of immigration, they too are badly integrated into a multi-cultural society. The importance of these encounters is emphasised by modern research of racism and prejudices: Avoidance of contact to people with different cultural backgrounds is the first step to developing antipathy, rejection, xenophobia and racism. (Zick 1997, 151) Only when locals and immigrant meet each other respectfully and when they seek colloquy with one another can integration in the multicultural society succeed.

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