

Responsive understanding from within conducting social investigations in social work

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Abstract

This is about exploring dialogical coaching and social investigations on children and their families in social work from within action research. The dialogical interplay in use changes the participating social workers' approach in relation to clients, one another and others. The investigating social workers have traditionally been trained to seek neutral approach and *external* clarity (cf. Bakhtin, 1986). In these studies the social workers started to invite the children to participate as partners in conducting the social investigations creating increasing mutual involvement in dialogical interplay and responsive understanding (Bachtin, 1984, Shotter, 2004a). In the studies the inquiring researcher was also the social workers' coach introducing systemic and dialogical practice emphasizing the perspective of and the importance of involving the children concerned.

The living idea in the studies was that the conducted coaching and research should have the same *style* as was expected from the social workers to involve and invite the clients into partnership and collaboration. It became both about to co-create sustainable reflexively learning capacity and to infuse an approach of dialogue for everyday use and life. In the intertwined actions of the coaching and emerging research, the participants reflected together with the coach/researcher on both the social work practice and the systemic coaching practice as well as on the dialogical practice in both. This became *reflecting in an ongoing practice*, ongoing processes of improving our dialogical orientation.

Introduction

These studies of action research exploring dialogical coaching and social investigations on children and their families in social work include and have been conducted from many

different aspects, dimensions, views, perspectives and positions, where ethics was the most important. During four years I followed 55 social workers in seven municipalities and two years later in a new study I followed 15 social workers closely as coach and researcher. The first study is accounted for in books (Olsson, 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b) published by the County Administration Board of Scania/Skåne (represents the state in the southernmost county in Sweden) and became further explored in my doctorate dissertation (Olsson, 2010) on the contexts where the study started from – strengthening the voices of vulnerable children. In this paper, I make summarizing reflections about and from within both the studies focusing on how ideas and utterance of Mikhail Bakhtin can support and supported an dialogical inquiring and reflecting from within social work practice as well as from within action research practice. Reflecting is here used in the meaning of reflecting both on something already narrated and on something growing and expanding in the reflections here and now. It could sometimes be heard as if I repeat myself, however:

An utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing and outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable, and, moreover, it always has some relation to value (the true, the good, the beautiful, and so forth) (Bakhtin, 1986 pp. 129-120)

In the light of what has already been said, written, read and heard before, it could now, in a new context, be said, written, read or heard differently, with new angles of approach, in relation to the earlier utterances created meaning and influence. Any utterance begins, is preceded, by earlier utterance of others, wrote Bakhtin, and the speaker ends his utterance in order to relinquish the floor to the other or to make the room for the other's active responsive understanding (Bakhtin, 1986). So, when I write this I am following and responding to something already heard and at the same time orientating towards the responses of others, towards their active responsive understanding, I simultaneously imagine. This ...

... can assume various forms: educational influence on the readers, persuasion of them, critical responses, influence on followers and successors, and so on. It can determine other's responsive positions under the complex conditions of

speech communication in particular cultural sphere. The work is a link in the chain of speech communication. Like the rejoinder in a dialogue, it is related to other work-utterances: both those to which it responds and those that respond to it. (Bakhtin, 1986 pp. 75-76)

Background

The social worker's consideration and respect for a child's own view could be crucial when assessing what is in the best interest of the child conducting social investigation on a child and the child's family. Not involving the child imply that the social worker choose to abandon the child's own strategies risking both missing useful ideas and recourses as well as losing the child's interest in the adults' concerns for the child (Olsson, 2010). Children's participation is associated with their citizenship and rights but also motivated as increasing the possibilities for validation of children's difficult experiences and, following from that, the support for children's recovery after violence and abuse (Eriksson, 2009). The commission of the social workers in the Swedish welfare system in conducting social investigations is to offer and provide preferable early interventions securing the best interest of the child. Measures are supposed to be offered on a voluntary basis wherever possible. Parents are welcome to apply for support and so are young persons according to the Swedish social welfare legislation. Both the communication taking place within the social investigating process and in the written texts of investigations, could be seen as participating in co-creating, constructing the reality of its participants, their identities and increasing their self-awareness (also as clients and social workers) in new narratives (or life-stories (Lundby, 1998, Linde, 1993)). The social worker's documentation could be seen as co-creating new life stories/narratives of the clients (Hydén, 1995) and as biographical (Bernler and Bjerkmán, 1990, Bernler and Johnsson, 1993). In this complex interaction between old and new stories and narratives, the social workers are expected to catch, or rather reflect the reality, in a few pages of investigational text about the client/child, compress his/her life story and narrative, and what's more, give a prognosis about future risks and opportunities – assess the strengthening opportunities (Turnell and Edwards, 1999). The meaning of a text, the meaning created in an investigation, is not only created by the author. It is also very much created by the reader. The dialogue continues in reading of a text (Bakhtin, 1997). Readers will also participate in the co-creation of meaning in a similar way to how we do in listening.

Dialogical practice

Dialogical conversations create new understandings and meaning, new relationships and actually re-create people to new people (Seikkula, 1996). We have the power to change and create changes in communication through the language (Watzlawick et al., 1967, 1996). In narrating and in communicative acts we co-create and becoming aware of our social world of our identities – narrative identities (Lang, 1999). In every utterance we are co-ordinating the meanings of several contexts reflexively influencing one another (Lang, 1991, Cronen, 1994, Pearce, 1994). The words said and heard are given their meanings in the unique flow of use in the language (Shotter, 2005, Bakhtin, 1986).

Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. (Bakhtin, 1986 p.170)

The meanings of the words and language in use are living, moving and changing. In a new place, in new relationships, in new conversations, in new investigations and in new assessments we have to re-orientate ourselves into the unique moment of time, context, relations and language in use. As one of the children I interviewed in the first study, about talking to social workers she said: – You have to be careful. You never know how or what you have said or told is going to be understood from another person's view and used in another context in the future (Olsson, 2007a). This makes it even more important to really listen and make every participant's voice heard in every unique situation and conversation of the social investigations about children and their families in focus in this study.

Social work practice and social investigations

Social work is a communicative practice (Kullberg, 1994) and social workers' most important tool is communication. Thus, it is not a surprise that all the social workers I met

seemed like very good communicators, delivering living expressing narrating in the coaching. They narrated about their dialogues of inner voices as well as outer voices (cf. Seikkula, 2008) in meetings with clients. On the whole, the social workers' own participation in relation to the clients, had seldom been in focus earlier nor had there been any expectations on the social workers to account for the interplay with the clients of what had emerged in the social worker – client relationship or the family – child – social worker relationship or to others in the child's network. In the investigations (including the texts) it was not customary to give any account for either for the relations between the social worker and the client or what had unfolded in their interplay (or how). Some of the participating social workers started to include also these aspects in their investigations. However this was seen as very different. I connected this to how the social workers' contributions seemed to be undervalued also in other aspects, especially by the social workers themselves. With increasing self-awareness in the dialogical coaching and how we in the systemic practice had focus on what we, ourselves co-created in the present – here and now – the social workers also began to highlight their contributions in relation to clients. However, the absence of the social worker's part in investigations, is probably also connected to other ideas in use. I am thinking of the idea of objectivity, which has dominated the investigational paradigm for many years. The most rational and effective may seem to be to collect information about the case in question, analyse the data and "package" it in the customary way – that is, to account for the direction, give the reasons for the decision. In this tradition, the social worker becomes a neutral tool used as an investigational instrument. Nobody is seen as influencing or being influenced by the circumstances. This form of social worker-ship results in meetings other than dialogical.

Dialogical Participatory Action Research

The research was conducted from within the practice of social work and dialogical coaching and vice versa – the practice was conducted from within the research in an ongoing flow of actions. The researcher was the coach and vice versa, and an experienced social worker. The reflections made and the learning from within the coaching were strengthened and brought further in other meetings in the studies, where the participants came together, stopped, looked, listened (cf. Arendt, 1978, Dewey, 1938, 2007) on the development and the progress on the whole, comprehensive. In all, 70 social workers in seven municipalities participated in

what became told about as a Dialogical Participatory Action Research (DPAR) in two studies, developing coaching and improving the dialogical interaction in social investigations. In this dynamic flow of dialogical collaborative joint actions we found the direction how to go on reflecting in and on (Schön, 2002) and learning by doing (Dewey, 2007) in new efforts, in alternatives, exploring, dreaming, designing and delivering (Trajkovski et al., 2013), again and again, with new reflections and actions in an ongoing circular process and flow giving new orientation. These ideas emanated from ideas of action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2006, Whyte et al., 1991) as well as of dialogical (Shotter, 2008a), social constructionist (Gergen, 2001), narrative (Gergen and Gergen, 2006) and systemic (Lang et al., 1990) practice including Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). The studies also included interviews with 12 children, exploration of 181 written investigations and inquiries together with social workers working with measures for adults with misuse and dependency problems about their work and their clients' participations. The focus was into what works and how analysing special events identified as striking examples (Shotter, 2000, 2008b) or as Bakhtin could have called them, once-occurrent events of Being (Bakhtin, 1993) – moments creating a difference that make a difference (cf. Bateson, 2000) for future orientation.

Results

When the social workers participated in the dialogical coaching words flowed. They reported, commented and expressed their view in detail of occurrences, actions, reflections and actions. They emphasized what they had heard from different perspectives and from other participants including from different positions. They reproduced the dialogues and depicted the progress as they had heard and experienced the conversations unfolding in meetings. Well, to be quite honest, this narrative from within coaching is more justifying to how coaching emerged after the social workers had participated in coaching for a month or two. In the beginning, I was more active in interviewing, asking for details and so on. But, thereafter this was the dominating scenario in dialogues. In the narrating, the participating social workers elaborated further on their use of systemic ideas and dialogical interplay, tested and explored alternatives, revised and adjusted their contributions and ideas on how to go on. From within the dialogue in the coaching the participants seemed to become more and more aware of their own talents, skilfulness, abilities, strengths and knowledge. They developed their learning on

how to learn to learn, you could say, and to develop further according to what you experience in working both from you own view and the clients'. In the used ideas about focusing on the "here and now" in dialogues, staying and exploring the co-creation in the present, emerged mutual learning both for the clients and the social workers as well as for me, using our different perspectives and points of view.

In the studies, not surprisingly, different meanings in use unfolded from within the investigational social work. In studying and developing investigations on children I summarized two dominating directions:

- Investigations are mainly an instrument for social workers to get to know and understand a child, the child's family and network, in a moment of the child's life through collecting information, investigating the parent's capability and child's needs, make risk and safety assessments and prognoses for making proposals and decisions on how to assist/help the child and his/her family.
- Investigations are foremost an instrument for social workers to facilitate for a child in relation to his/her family, family members and other persons in the child's network, aimed at improving their understanding and communication so that those involved come to notice, understand and agree on how improve the conditions for the child and their own listening to the voice of the child.

The latter was the emerging meaning in use in the two studies. When we explored the work of social investigations from a view of dialogical collaboration and co-creation an investigation process becomes not about collecting information *about* the child, submitting evidence, but to explore and improve relations and communication *from within* (cf. Shotter, 2004b) in the child's/client's network. The social worker asked to be invited into the child's/client's life of relations and narratives. The social worker approached the child in purpose to learn to know the child and his/her network, relations, conversations, story-telling and narratives – take part in narratives about important occurrences exploring the meaning in use. In the best of worlds, the social workers' inquiring and exploring bring and open up new possibilities for children/clients to re-narrate old stories of occurrences into new orientation,

new adventures, in the future. In the coaching the social workers began to tell more and more how they screw up courage to involve the clients and ask for their assistance. All this, learning by collaborative acting, asking and exploring is living knowing and aimed at improving both present and future users.

An example

In one of the first coaching sessions in this study, the participating social worker told me how a little girl, whose parents, together with the social worker, had worked out and reached an agreement about how to participate in a family-based treatment, burst out, when the social worker happened to mention the plans to the girl:

– But what about me? Who is going to help me?

Approaching the daughter in the family, the social worker had been rather pleased with the result of the investigation. However, seen and heard from a child's perspective, this became something quite else.

– This is how we have worked. We have turned to the parents and hoped that this will lead to an improvement – the best for the child – through the parents.

This girl had not seen family treatment as something that was concerning her, or something she was assisted by, the social worker continued. The girl had felt that this was only something for her parents, which it probably also would have been, said the social worker. The girl felt that she once again was abandoned and the social worker had to re-open the investigation, make a new start in relation to the girl. The social worker had had conversations with the girl in the investigational process but had not, so far, invited the child to participate and influence the investigational work to the full; on the whole: how to conduct the investigation, for example, who to invite, when and where and how to hear, listen, assess and write, as well as what is going to happen further on, the suggestions, plans and decisions – listening to the children's view in every phase and step as well as keep the children informed in every aspect of the investigation. To put the matter in a nutshell: to keep a *living dialogue as partners* in the investigations. This was what the social worker and her

colleagues developed in relation to the dialogical coaching during these studies. They started to involve both the parents and the children in the investigations and, as they realized further on, also *became more and more involved themselves with increasing awareness about the importance of their own participation and contributions.*

Discussion

When the social workers addressed the children, inviting the children and their families into a mutually involving dialogical participation, exploring and inquiring about both the risks and the strengths of the child's relationships, the social workers wanted to obtain a *responsive understanding* (Bakhtin, 1991, Shotter, 2004a), that is, getting an understanding from *within* the family system and the child's perspective. In dialogical conversations with the child, where the child is invited to participate and his/her requests about and choices in the participation (for example, where to meet, with whom, how and other things) are respected, it becomes easier for the social worker to be invited into the narratives of the child *from within* his/her perspective. Hearing the voice of the child, in the way the child chooses to narrate and tell his/her stories, gives the social worker an idea of the lifestyle and conditions of this child, from the child's point of view, including the child's strategies in managing his or her life conditions and family situation. This emerged from ideas of Bakhtin about how every unique speech experience is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others' utterances which "... carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (Bakhtin, 1986). The social worker approached in purpose to learn to know the child and his/her network, relations, conversations, story-telling and narratives – about his/herself and one another, about important occurrences and which different meanings they were using. In the best of worlds, the social workers' exploring and inquiring bring and open up new possibilities for children/clients to re-narrate old stories of occurrences into new orientation, new adventures, in the future.

In the coaching, the participants have reflected on the approach, methods and techniques (cf. Burnham, 1992) they used and their reflexive relations, but also in relation to the client and, which the social workers were not used to do, in relation to themselves. On the whole, the social workers' own participation in relation to the clients, had seldom been in focus earlier

nor had there been any expectations on the social workers to account for the interplay with the clients of what had emerged in the social worker – client relationship or the family – child – social worker relationship or to others in the child’s network. With increasing self-awareness the social workers also began to explore also their contributions in relation to clients. For example, we could explore why a certain place was used, the ideas in use in the choice of participants, including colleagues and their participation, use of approach, methods and/or techniques. There was no importance in searching for whatever caused what, but to focus on already chosen ways or strategies in emerging solutions, exploring alternatives, highlighting successful exceptions and searching for unique or striking moments and examples. Using AI, the working idea was that we improve and learn most of all in a spirit of appreciation and curiosity, exploring and examining successful experiences and examples. To raise the level of consciousness, that is, to transfer from the action domain to the language domain, to recreate in your imagination to be able to put it into words, is an arduous task that demands special attention (Vygotskij, 1999). When we are occupied with consciousness-raising of how and what we are doing at a particular moment, this holds our attention. In the coaching, we could devote our time to this act of consciousness-raising in piece and quiet – reflect in and on the actions. Paradoxically, when we are successfully conscious – aware – we also risk becoming so occupied with this that we become not present enough in the moment to be spontaneously responding in the present in relation to others and otherness. Furthermore, the more conscious we become, the more information we will be needing to keep up the awareness (Nørretranders, 1991). Thus, if we become too occupied with the map (or the technique, method, manual, plan) we risk to losing our attention in the present and spontaneous response in communication and interplay with other participants in the conversation and the meeting, letting loose and letting go. Free from these and from so-called conscious actions, follows the acting. Timothy Gallwey, an experienced coach in tennis (Gallwey, 1997) and other contexts (Gallwey, 1981, 2001), said: – The trick is to let go and let what “will be will be”:

Remember you are not your tennis game. You are not your body. Trust the body to learn and to play, as you trust another person to do a job, and in a short time it will perform beyond your expectations. *Let the flower grow.* (Gallwey, 1997 p. 36)

Conclusions

In Vygotskij's words you could say that Gallwey may say: – Let loose from the consciousness-raising. Trust your body's learning and responsiveness in what is heard and needed in the unique contexts. I predict that this could be the essence of the social worker's preparations and performances in social work – social workers act after preparations and training and after that they let go and trust their spontaneous participation in relation to others and otherness in different contexts and meetings. In this *prepared spontaneous-ness within responsiveness*, which might seem like a paradox, the social workers' confidence and awareness in acting increase and they can trust themselves to *let go* into spontaneous responsiveness and *just* do whatever come sin mutual response and appropriate to the unique moment and relation.

Social workers are used to act in acute situations and emergency cases, where reflecting and careful considerations have to take place in the moment – in the action. In this, they take on huge responsibility in action. These situations demand speedy decisions, effective administration and well-implemented performances. This readiness for acute situations may influence them to expect of themselves to live and tell the stories of always being the ones who have to take measures, intervene and step in. Their working directions are mainly in actions and solutions, in doing, planning and taking measures rather than to dwell upon exploring these considerations, reflections and the learning by doing emerging in the actions. With this background, their experiences and the effects of the coaching, were revolutionary: to get and give themselves permission to take time and space for their own person and their own contributions in work.

The coaching was also about how to increase your attention to and awareness that you do not need to know – it could even be more important, at least now and then, to use an approach of (as you are) not knowing (cf. Anderson, 1990, Anderson and Goolishian, 2001), remain in a not-knowing position and act from this position in an inquiring and exploring way. If not we do risk allowing ourselves to be influenced and lead by our own presuppositions, pre-knowledge and/or prejudices. This does not facilitate our curiosity and inquiring and, even worse, without using questions or invitations to joint exploration there will be no space for

others or for new answers, different stories or alternative solutions. Then we risk not inviting the clients or other persons into partnership and joint action to a sufficient degree, and risk missing the clients as experts on their own lives, strategies, suggestions, ideas, alternatives and versions from other perspectives. The social worker should be eager to listen for and to a child's invitation or that the child and other clients accept the social worker's invitation to collaboration and partnership. A person on the outside, as the social worker will become if he/she is not invited into the child's and other clients' perspective, notices and experiences something quite different from a person participating from within the communication, for example, in the child's family. In purpose to hear more the social workers need to keep up the curiosity exploring, leaving the thoughts and ideas about they as professionals already "know" what is best for the child, and listen to the all the voices in the living moment.

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