Oded Manor

THE HOW BEFORE THE WHAT -
Activated learning of effective communication in a local authority office.

Writing about the effect of humanistic psychology on social work? At first
I replied with an enthusiastic 'yes'. Then came the doubts. Can I, really?
Social work is a vast area of diverse activities. Humanistic psychology is
so loosely defined nowadays. Yet, among other things, I have been trying
to marry the two for at least five years now. I have tried to do this during
the practice of group-work in a local authority office. There have been
times when humanistic psychology has filled some noticable gaps in social
work.

So, perhaps I could just tell people about some of these situations; examples
of how we actively worked on communication in four projects. But, because
of the current terminological limbo, I shall have first to say something about
what I mean by 'humanistic psychology' and by 'social work'. At the end
I may try to play the wise man. I shall want, simply and subjectively, to
mention some guidelines that I have found useful in applying humanistic
psychology to social work. So, first –

What are we talking about

I think it may help to know that I have been working in quite a specific setting.
It is a typically busy local authority office of inner city, London. People
who come to the office for 'help' have usually grown up, or are struggling
to grow up, in poor and crammed accommodation. They know more about
street mugging and the hazards of unemployment than the latest interesting
film at the West End, or the controversy about air pollution. They seem
to be interested in the *immediate effects* of what they or others *do*. So
would I, if I had to cope with so much unpredictability. Most of them have
reached formal 'O' level education or less. These are people with strained
resources who ask for help in coping with their children, the elderly, or their
intimate relationships, with learning to make more friends or coping with
adults and so on. Social workers try to meet their needs in quite diverse
ways. At times they have to remove a child from home against the parents'
wish. At others they are called to be there as a permanent shoulder to cry
on. Yet, in many more situations there is also a genuine wish for change
with which the worker tries to help. It is on such social work that I shall
concentrate here.

What can humanistic psychology offer them?

Well, I doubt if that includes regression work and the breaking down of defences.
Whenever I have tried to connect what they have wanted to achieve to a

390

'technique' which may help them to get it, the answer has seemed to have
to be more immediate than that. Having listened a bit I learned to respect
their wish to be told what they could DO and to see change NOW. Of course
I did not have answers, so what was left? One thing seemed relevant. It
was to offer them ways in which they themselves could keep checking out
what to do best. They could learn, as I had done, a helpful order of expressing
feelings, describing what triggered them, requesting that others behave
differently towards them and sorting out what corresponding changes they
might have to make in return. They can go on and learn to show more clearly
that they listen and follow what the other says. With experience they may
also realise that it is more important to praise achievements than to condemn
failures.

I have found it less difficult to show them how such 'training' may have immedi-
ate effects on their life. It simply did. Luckily, I did not have to start from
scratch when going about it. There is, of course, a solid body of knowledge
in humanistic psychology that helps. It is concerned with *effective inter-
personal commuunication* (Becvar 1974, Egan 1975). But what may be the
best way of conveying this to them? As we have been working with our
'clients' it became clear that they too assimilated change more quickly through
'doing' than 'talking about'. Here again there was something to borrow.
Growth games and role-play had been well described (Hoeper et al. 1975,
Blatner 1973) and readily applicable. The emphasis on *activated learning*,
so typical to humanistic psychology, has proved beneficial to us too.

It is not only applicable. It seems more relevant. In an urban industrial
area things change so quickly. Is it not most important to learn to act upon
changes quickly, effectively and creatively? When fixed expectations between
parents and children as well as in loving relationships do not hold, it may
be better to make the most out of what there is – within us and outside.
I think this has to do with what Rogers called 'process orientation' (Rogers
& Skinner 1956). To me, it is the vital part of humanistic psychology.

So, I really mean the development of effective communication through
activated learning when I talk about the application of humanistic psychology
to social work. Let us have some examples now.

ACTIVATED LEARNING OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Of the group-work projects in which I have been involved, four can serve
as examples. These have gone on for long enough and clearly involved
'activated learning of effective communication'. Each of these groups was
led with a social worker, and I would like to thank them here for helping me.

*The personal relationship group.

This weekly evening small group started as a result of making the right noises
to the right people until a psychiatrist in a local mental hospital heard them.
He, like us, felt that people, free of psychotic difficulites, could, at times,

391

be helped without becoming 'patients'. He seemed to be relieved to know
that we would be using active methods such as role-play, gestalt, mutual
feedback and the prescription of tasks, and began to refer people to us.
The choice of methods was influenced by the needs of these people. Most
of them had reached a very alarming state before reaching us. Many had
attempted suicide at least once. Others were talking about being scared
of going out and 'cracking up'. Add to that their poor living conditions and
you'll find little room for instant dramatic change. The methods we had
used were known to protect them against this. These methods lead to involve-
ment from the surface to the core of feelings. They allowed each of them
to control the pace of change. We knew, from our own experience of therapy,
that each of us felt clearly how far we could go in one session. So did they.
They quickly learned to say 'no' to us if, by mistake, we were pushy. I think
that learning to stop change helped them also to take charge of initiating it.
it.
The group has been going on, with changed membership, for three years now.*

*Time-limited family work.

This short-term contractual approach to family work (Weakland et al. 1974),
nicknamed by us 'the Family Workshop', started when one social worker
came and said that it seemed to her hopeless to offer families open-ended
contracts - could we try to be more task oriented. She had been at it for
long enough. I trusted her conviction. By now we seem to assimilate at
least four models in our work - the awareness of communication patterns
(Satir 1972), the Structural approach (Minuchin 1974), the Strategic stance
(Haley 1977) and the behavioural one (Peine & Howarth 1975). Here again,
we go with families from surface to core. We do not try to resolve it all.
What matters is that family members increase their capacity to communicate
effectively and negotiate the continuous changes that are part of family life.

*The consultative group for social workers.

Social workers in our office, who do group-work in various ways, meet fort-
nightly for an hour. In these sessions we compare notes about our work
with the groups. When a group is stuck, we don't just analyse the reasons
for it. We take the roles of the group members ourselves. The worker con-
cerned works with us as she would with the group. She then has the chance
of doing it differently until the block is resolved. I have been surprised
how warmly had social workers been receiving this more direct and active
way of learning.

*The communication workshop.

This project started after discussion of the whole office about difficulties
in handling the mentally ill. We simply suggested that we tried together
some of these situations. For two years now we have run an eight session
series of exercises in communication skills.* Selected skills (Egan 1975)

392

are first described and demonstrated. Each is then practiced in a variety
of simulated situations which social workers enter with their 'clients'. It
has been heart-warming to be with workers of all ranks, and together role-
play how to communicate with children, adolescents, couples, the elderly
or mentally ill, at various phases of our interaction with them.

Well, well – these look like finished packages of action. They are not. They
are only examples that emerged as we had been facing some rather puzzling
situations. Each situation seemed to need fresh experimentation. So, the
juggling goes on. Still, some safeguards seem to have stuck with me. I thought
I would offer them in case they were more generally relevant.

THINGS I HAVE FOUND HELPFUL

There is, of course, the need to learn about the general hassles of setting
up a new group (Hodge 1977), getting the 'clients' to come to it* and handling
the legal and liaison duties that social workers have.* In addition, I can
now see at least four points that seem to have made my work more constructive
in this set-up (mistakes may need a separate paper). I'll briefly mention
these here.

a. Play down Encounter - respect transference.

It now seems to me that because of the authoritative brief of social workers,
they are very unlikely to avoid entering paternal roles. Yet, very rarely
do they have the conditions to resolve the 'transferential' feelings that these
elicit. It may be better to rely on effective communication. In this way
transference is repeatedly invalidated. I don't really believe that it can
disappear if ignored, or that social workers can allow the deep release of
transferential feelings that may be facilitated in Encounter.

b. Openness to scrutiny by other workers.

I've found that in order not to be persecuted I should stop acting secretively.
The use of active techniques still looks alarming to many. It seems better
to work on alleviating these well founded anxieties rather than discard them.
Trying to do so has seemed to be helped by detailed descriptions of sessions
and 'clients' reaction to them, by asking for feed-back from supervisors
about wider effects of the use of the techniques, by inviting other workers
to use the methods with me, by monitoring and reporting the effects on
'clients' and by offering jargon-free rationale for the use of each technique.

c. Doing more than advocating.

It seems that support for this way of working has followed the starting of
new projects and showing how they work (see b) more than going into long
cognitive debates about the political values and the philosophies behind
them.

d. On being seen as relevant.

For other workers to catch on with such techniques they need to see their
relevance for themselves and to understand it. While sitting in on case discus-
sions it has been quite acceptable for me to say 'I don't have anything to
offer here' at one point. Later, as simply as I can, I may suggest that we
try some specific intervention. In my better moments I may even offer
to demonstrate it.

I have found that my mistakes, while doing this, have been as helpful as
the good moves. They made the risk lower for others so they could more
easily join in. I also learned to be low keyed with high jargon. If I had some-
thing to offer, I'd just say what, on top of the worker's present skill, can
be added. I'll do it in terms that *the worker* had used (I still have some diffi-
culty with the word 'support' though), and add new ones only when they are
really needed.

I would, for instance, try to put it this way:

> "O.K. you are trying to get the client to talk about the options
> she has. The goal makes sense to me. It's just that, as we've
> seen in the role-play, this woman is so pent up with feelings that
> she may not be able to think straight. Would it help to give her
> space, to allow her to vent her feelings and have these validated,
> to find out what you feel about it all? I wonder how I would have
> gone about it. Can I take your place for a minute?"

As I play the worker's role (well, to the best of my ability of course) I comment
on what I do. I don't elaborate a lot about 'empathy' or 'self-disclosure' (I
offer references to those who want them at the end). I just do it, as genuinly
as I can, and we look at the effect. Other members offer more alternatives
as we go on. My experience is that it is more often a case of the workers
adding to their existing skills, rather than chucking out a lot. Frequently,
it is a matter of change in the order of interventions and inserting a new
one in-between. For instance; feeling first, process commentary later, and
in-between more accurate use of empathy. I may be wrong, but we do have
a go at it first and see what happens.

We have had some good happenings that I have not described. Here, I'd like
to add a final note. Many social workers seem to know WHAT they aim
at. Humanistic psychology may offer them more when it comes to HOW
to go about it, and that's quite a lot.

Yes, I am aware of it that all this may not sound very revolutionary to some.
It doesn't feel like a revolution to me either - more like day-in-day-out struggle
and mutual taking in of new experiences.

*Handouts or summary reports have been prepared, but are not yet ready
for publication.*

406