

Towards the interculturalisation of welfare work

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“The wisdom to be revealed to us by providing assistance to allochthonous people is that everybody is culturally embedded. It is no longer possible (either) to go back to autochthonous persons in the therapy room without taking into account the cultural dimension. This is the added value triggered off by therapy with allochthonous people: the cultural dimension is also made clearer in the demand for help of autochthonous people” (Meurs & Gailly)

A CRITICISM OF ‘CULTURE’ AND ‘INTEGRATION’

The quote taken from the book ‘*Wortelen in culturen*’ (*Roots in cultures*) (Meurs and Gailly, p. 218), which opens this contribution to the question of assistance to allochthonous citizens, puts the cultural dimension within mental health care in a broad perspective. Learning how to deal with the considerable diversity and complexity in society is a fundamental challenge for the future indeed. This does not only go for assistance to allochthonous people, but also for every form of welfare to autochthonous persons. In this perspective migrants are merely indicators of a wide-ranging, social issue. They confront us with the cultural dimension in our work, both with allochthonous persons and with ‘own people’!

My point of departure is a critical comment on our use of particular concepts. In the past a few things went awry due to the erroneous use of the concepts ‘culture’ and ‘integration’. One can also claim that misapprehension of these concepts was and is characteristic of precarious developments in society. This was linked to the reduction of the ‘cultural’ reality, narrowing down a complex context to simplistic stereotypes.

The cultural (plaster) egg

Partly due to an (often powerless) antiracism (Verstraete 1995), differences between ‘cultures’ and ‘ethnic’ groups were emphasised to such an extent that people actually came to believe in the ‘fundamental’ differing of allochthonous people. All too often an ethnical construction of cultural diversity was propagated. Constructions of that kind contribute to the process of isolating from its social context a presupposed ‘essence’ of ‘the Other’. Allochthonous people receive a common name that marks them as a label, a common past allowing no personal histories, an over-simplified bond with a homeland, a stereotypical interpretation of solidarity, a common culture and identity that are applied as point of comparison. This shifting down to the cultural and ethnical level, cut off from social functioning, deformed the perception and the perspectives of citizenship and solidarity. Thinking of diversity got narrowed down to indicating differences. Community, the universally human dimension and the shared social conditions were only too often forgotten. Yet diversity is carrier of both differences and common aspects.

Any behaviour was interpreted culturally and on the level of ethnic communities. Culture was and still is seen as an a-historical thing, an egg that was laid in a distant past and that has ever since unchangeably determined people and groups. Only a

thorough understanding of this thing would enable communication between people. As a result people started thinking and acting based on an inventory model, by means of which all cultural characteristics could be mapped. This inventory is used as the foundation for the interpretation of behaviour and for communication. We consequently look at allochthonous people through glasses of which the lenses have been polished and tinted with data from our inventory: all North Africans are religious and Muslim, they live according to strictly divided gender stereotypes, ... In itself this would not be alarming, if we also had an eye for the swift evolutions of these gender stereotypes in families and for the crisis this may generate.

The inventory model is getting the longer the less feasible under the present conditions, considering the ever increasing diversity in our society. It moreover leads to specialisms in some or other 'culture' or 'ethnic group'. An ethnic construction of this kind creates the illusion of a total explanation. Personal and social factors, however, are consequently out of scope. We ignore the reality of people who want to prove themselves socially, who want to set up projects for their life, negotiate on this with their environment, make adaptations based on these assessments, ... The pathways of individuals and groups lead no matter what to the diversification of every community and trigger off an enormous social dynamism. As a result of cultural reduction all this is ignored, as well as the interaction between so-called 'majorities and minorities', despite the fact that minority behaviour is also determined by the behaviour of the majority (and vice versa). This interaction is also partly defined by the relative power relations between majority and minority.

Categorial or uniform

Also the vision on integration, and the models derived from this vision, took a wrong turning. Two models (that will be roughly outlined below) have already proven to fail. The first endorses the above-described ethnical interpretation and can be typified as 'exclusively categorial'. The 'multiculturalism' model is a clear example of this. This model starts from a vision on society as a composition of ethnical groups and cultures. The assumption behind this is that cultural identity also governs to a large extent interaction and relations between people and groups. The membership of a particular group automatically implies here that an individual shares not only the characteristic culture of this group (norms and values, language, religion, etc.), but also its specific needs and problems (categorial frame of thinking). A policy built on this vision is therefore highly categorial, which has in fact a segregating impact. Specialised instruments and specific categorial services are developed on all levels. As a consequence responsibilities are shifted from general services on to the categorial sector.

The second model can be labelled as 'inclusively non-categorial'. The 'melting pot' model, with its range of derivatives and variants, is an illustration of this. Diversity does not exist as it were. The existence of cultural differences and ethnical groups is merely recognised as characteristic of an initial stage, that will in the end 'melt' into a new cultural entity. Singularities are to fade and are merely tolerated in private matters. Integration triggers off uniformisation, Americanisation and is anti-diversity.

Inclusive and negotiated

A third integration model is at once inclusive and partly categorial. This may sound contradictory and sometimes dichotomies are involved indeed. The model assumes a pragmatic perspective, focused on negotiation. Not categories, but situations are taken the cornerstone. On the one hand the model is inclusive: each and every individual or group is seen as full member of society, regardless of origin, cultural background or status. This implies that they can have an active part in social debates and political decision-making, without however having to abandon their singularity. Of course a number of principles that constitute the cornerstone of a civic, democratic society also apply in this perspective: the right to equal treatment, equal opportunities etc. An inclusive policy aspires to provide service, as far as possible, to all individuals and groups via general institutions and provisions that at the same time take into account the diversity of society.

On the other hand, scope is left for limited interference of cultural autonomy, allowing a restricted and additional categorial approach. In order to organise intercultural integration, it is necessary to negotiate with different parties. The pragmatic aspect is to be found in the fact that objectives and perception of the ideal social model are not determined a priori, but made subject to the course of the negotiation process. Yet the principles of negotiation as a strategy for problem-solving or decision-making and of inclusiveness (no wrongful exclusion from participation in the negotiation) are fixed and not negotiable.

In short: it is not sufficient to recognise the ‘cultural dimension’ in the sector of assistance. Certain visions on ‘culture’ and ‘integration’, as described above, are contraproductive and pin people and groups down to a passive position. Culture is not a (plaster) egg we absolutely have to hatch out. It is rather a process that enables us to give significance to the world in and around us. We obviously have acquired this via learning processes involving preceding generations. Yet culture is also dynamic and linked to the pathways of our lives, negotiable with others ... Together and in a pragmatic way we are able to put a meaning on social phenomena and projects we want to develop for the future, starting from situations and not from categories.

This is of crucial importance for social and cultural workers, as their work is pre-eminently linked to the act of ‘giving meaning’. Many participants or clients, whether they are allochthonous or autochthonous, are actually trying to find a place and meaning for their lives. Culture – in the proper sense of the word – is therefore no matter what a focal point of all this work. Especially centres for ‘general welfare work’ should be aware of the fact that a range of socially embedded reductions affect their policy towards (potential) allochthonous and autochthonous clients.

DEVELOPING A BROADER VISION

Also the authorities must guard against incorrect reductions of reality. To demonstrate this we refer to the term ‘policy’ for ‘ethnic-cultural minorities’, which is applied in the new decree for the integration sector. This label seems rather ill chosen for reasons that are explained above. We should quite the reverse explicitly broaden the policy vision, if not, the authorities will sow precisely what they claim to avoid in the field.

Pluralism of lifestyles

Allochthonous people are merely indicators of a much wider ranging social issue. An important factor is that our direct environment – and therefore also the operating frame of welfare work – has become particularly multicoloured. This is the case on minimum four levels. In the first place our environment is revealing the longer the more its multicultural dimension. People, men, women and children from other countries and continents come and live in our cities and confront us with other ‘cultures’. These cultures are ‘processes of attributing meaning’. They show us that reality can also acquire meaning in different ways than we are used to.

Secondly, we are living in an increasingly plural environment. People have the longer the more autonomy to shape their lives. Restraints imposed by rules and tradition are growing weaker in many fields. Hence we are surrounded by a diversity of ‘lifestyles’ that are all of them the expression of personal and individual styles.

This has a positive impact as it increases our chances to become a subject, i.e. actor of our own lives, both individually and in a group. But it also pressures us to take our lives in our own hands. Because we thirdly moreover live in an environment that shifts to diverse gears and displays inequality of opportunities. Social-cultural background and personal history continue to be contributory to whether or not people get access to the social sphere. And finally, there is also the European dimension, which gains in importance on a policy level. Also in this respect social and cultural shifts are at stake. On this level the game of majorities and minorities is played differently. In a European context Flemish people are a minority.... Every day we are thus faced with cultural and social diversity and alternatives for our way of thinking, acting, attributing meaning and feeling. This multiplicity of colours creates expectations and appears to be a challenge. However, there is also another side to the picture.

Limited capacity

People are still not getting equal opportunities within society, due to their social and/or cultural background. This does not need further argumentation. It is clear to everybody that there continue to be entire groups that can only overcome marginality provided that many efforts (and sacrifices) are done: generation determined poor people, travelling communities, handicapped people, homeless people, drug addicts, psychiatric patients, and often also migrants. We cannot separate the social-cultural background from the economic position and the relative power entailed by such a position. The danger of absolute culturalism consists in the fact that it indeed recognises cultural diversity, but isolates it from its social context. You get the right to do your ‘thing’ but only within the strict limits of the margin where you belong .

There are also more and more people who pull out and try to ‘escape’ the ‘tyranny of possibilities’. They turn to magic and myth: new religious movements, television families, shortsighted nationalism, ... A multicoloured social context imposes many extra demands for which we are not always sufficiently prepared. We have to make choices and get nothing for free. There are quite some people who want to come to grips with this complexity by falling back upon traditional values, norms and structures. They are therefore sometimes called ‘new moralists’.

Anyway, it is clear that our vision and practices on a political level, related to welfare work and education, are not always in lines with the new social context, or still: the ‘new social question’.

The fundamental question for the future is therefore: “How can we learn to deal with the growing diversity and complexity in society?” And this applies among other things, and not in the least, to welfare work.

BRAINWORK FOR WELFARE WORK

The challenge for welfare work could be phrased as follows: “What meaning do welfare workers give to the concept ‘pluralism’ within the new social context marked by diversity and complexity?”

A taste of one’s own medicine

It is not possible to brew a medicine with a general and abstract presentation of a question. In other words: in order to avoid being bogged down in philosophical discussions, it is advisable to formulate somewhat more specific questions with regard to welfare work. Are the social-cultural stepping-stones and instruments applied in welfare work adapted to the present context of complexity?

What (intercultural) competencies are required from welfare workers faced with a diversity of target groups and clients? Are our methodologies sufficiently differentiated in order to cope with this diversity? How can the welfare sector negotiate with clients and target groups on its offer and methodology so as to enable a question-based approach? How can the wide range of target groups be guided towards participation and what platform is needed to this end? Which channels would enable the sector of welfare work to inform all citizens of its offer of services and how can these be made actually accessible to everyone who would like to make use of them? And in particular: how can welfare work in its turn support its clients to cope better with social diversity and complexity?

These and similar questions ensure that the welfare sector will continue to look for an updated answer to new challenges within a changing context. And this does not imply that they are to be solved in a trice. The authorities should therefore support the search for answers, possibly in consultation with universities and colleges. This support could then consist in research, development of methodology and training.

As mentioned above, two key concepts will most likely play a role: interaction and cultural competency. Interaction speaks for itself for it is to be taken as the point of departure for interculturalisation. We are referring here to concrete actions on different levels: between relief worker and his/her client, between welfare services

and their regions, between policy workers and citizens, ... Quality interaction is a means to improve welfare but it is also a goal in itself.

Intercultural competency

This competency is described [Sierens, 1998] as an entirety of skills, attitudes and knowledge that allow an adequate and flexible approach of diversity. Intercultural competency is consequently not merely focused on allochthonous people but on all subjects and actors within a society. It therefore also entails intergenerational aspects: how does the older generation competently deal with young people? In this respect two components are important. We firstly have a knowledge component. The realisation that knowledge is a social construction is of central importance here. It reflects the reality as we experience it and is tied to social positions. Culture stands for the entirety of acquired processes that create meaning. On the second place we have a relational component. This component integrates skills, attitudes and contents that enable us to function adequately and in a flexible way. There are minimum three points involved:

To be able to switch from one code to another: recognising and applying various verbal and non-verbal codes, customary ways of communication used by people in their interaction.

Flexible dealing with behavioural alternatives: to be able to apply different strategies as an alternative, in case previous attempts with traditional strategies have failed.

To be able to have an empathic perspective: being able of putting yourself in the place of the thoughts and feelings of others.

We can acquire 'intercultural' competency through learning in interaction. As for general welfare work we would translate this for the relational component in a number of objectives and activities. It is necessary to better observe which different codes people apply in interaction in general and with the welfare worker in particular. We need to be capable of switching codes, whenever necessary. It is important to observe with a keen eye what communication channels people use and which ones reach them. We have to be flexible so as to be able to negotiate with the client on the most suitable methods and strategies. We need to have permanent and thorough attention for empathy and the diversity of perspectives through which people approach themselves and their environment. The points of attention implied in the knowledge component correspond with this: systematically checking what kind of knowledge of the client can be made useful so as to empower him/her to solve his/her own problems, within his/her own context. In addition, the institutions need to increase their knowledge of the region with regard to diversity by mapping it more accurately.

A CULTURAL AGENDA

It is worthwhile to systematically examine which intercultural competencies are already applied in welfare work and what the interaction is like between the diverse clients and target groups in practice. We have to continue, wherever necessary, to support people to make this competency more explicit. Let's be clear however and strike a note of warning. The two key concepts 'interaction' and 'intercultural competency' cannot be unlinked from the socio-economic position people hold, because this entails relative difference of power. Penetration in existing structures and provisions will also continue to be affected by this.

Whichever way you look at it, the general description and analysis of cultural diversity and integration needs to be completed with knowledge of and experiences with and from the sector. To this aim we can draft a restricted agenda of necessary tasks that may stimulate interculturalisation. All levels of the welfare work sector can be involved in this. Some points need to be taken into account by welfare workers in their relation to their clients, other points are of interest to the entire organisation, and still other points are to be situated on the policy level, where further details should be put in. Our agenda is not exhaustive and is primarily intended to be a source of inspiration.

Vision on diversity

A first point on the agenda is the development of a new and inspiring vision on diversity. It is necessary that the team develops in consultation a vision on individual, social and cultural diversity. This vision can be inspiring, provided that multiformity is in the first place seen as a positive factor rather than a source of problems. The best way to tackle this may be by assuming a pragmatic perspective and taking the experiences the organisation has gained as the point of departure. How can we pursue interculturalisation of our organisation, how can we increase our competence, how will our interaction take further shape? Next to the elements that determine welfare work, attention should also be paid to prevention. Learning how to handle diversity is part of a preventive strategy. Learning how to deal in a positive way with diversity is even becoming an urgent precondition for being able to function in the future society.

Mapping diversity

If we want to deal better with diversity, then we first need to observe it. Observation is the starting point of the whole process. Observing in one's capacity of welfare worker implies in the first place looking and listening very attentively to how clients behave in the interaction with the welfare worker or prevention worker. What different codes does he or she use during the conversations? Secondly, we also have to observe ourselves in the interaction. How flexibly can we go along with the codes used and to what degree are we able to take the client's perspective? On the level of the organisation it is necessary to gain insight in the diversity and composition of the population in the region. Also groups or organisations that are active can be part of the picture. It is the intention to sketch a picture of the diversity of worlds of experience and the mutual relations in areas and neighbourhoods. Also the linguistic skills of the different groups need to be assessed.

Based on the data resulting from this observation exercise, the welfare sector can reflect on its regional offer, taking into account the diversity, and on the channels that our used for the announcement of this. How do we inform potential target groups of our offer? What channels are the most appropriate to reach the right persons and groups with this information? A necessary step is furthermore that the target group has a say in the offer and that also in this respect more efficient communication is guaranteed. Finally attention should be paid to the multiformity of decoration and design of the rooms: religious holidays and obligations should be taken into account,

...

Mix of methods

The integration model that we propose highlights negotiation. Also the methods and methodologies that we apply have to be part of the welfare work to be negotiated. That is why these should allow some elasticity and permit the formulation of alternatives. We should depart from the reality of the client, depart from the knowledge and experiences he/she has. Be attentive to the language and language deficiency of people and stimulate them to learn new words that allow a better differentiation. Build on these qualities and skills of the client that are useful in the context he/she is living in. Use techniques that improve intercultural competence and encourage collaboration whenever possible. Emphasise common ground rather than differences. Teach people how to look at a matter from different perspectives. Stimulate own initiative.

Extra training and intervision

If one wants to take new intercultural tracks, then it is necessary for every team to systematically go on an extra training. Team discussions, at which specialists are invited to give support, are a possibility but do not offer a long-term solution. The ability to function in an intercultural way also requires training of most of the team members. It does not suffice that an individual again becomes the specialist of some or other group. The objective is the overall professionalisation in intercultural competence of all collaborators of a centre. Therefore one needs to continue to reflect on the methodology and the methods that are applied. It is in the end no more than fair to look for solutions for individual limitations and prejudices of team members.

Policy recommendations to conclude

The fact is that social evolutions trigger off greater diversity in our environment. Dealing with this increasing diversity appears to be challenging and fascinating, but it also requires the necessary competence and adapted interaction. All social actors – including (general) welfare workers – are faced with this. General services cannot continue to shift responsibility onto rare specialised or categorial services. It is consequently absolutely essential that general welfare work acquires or further develops intercultural competence. To this purpose concrete interaction is to be taken as point of departure and touchstone. If one aspires to realise this, then it is necessary to develop and implement the above-mentioned agenda. A careful process control with the support of the authorities, universities, colleges of higher education and support centres in the field, is (politically) advisable.

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