Can the "How" Be Equivalent for Worker and Client in Postmodern Social-Work Practice?

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> Abstract • I argue that there is an imbalance in social work between work focused on social change and helping individuals. Taking the "how" for the worker to be equivalent to the "how" for the client to approach co-created work does not seem to function when backgrounds, preparation and familiarity with institutional processes are so different between worker and client. Establishing equal power, whether as an avenue to social change or for focused individual work is an under-estimated task. There seem to be multiple interpretations of the term "companion." The concept of allied companionship could be a fit for the goal of co-created practice.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

« 1 » Lea Šugman Bohinc has presented compelling explanations of the contrast between traditional modern practice and postmodern constructionist approaches to social work and psychotherapy. In presenting the method of postmodern practice, Šugman Bohinc identifies the complexity of a collaborative relationship where the intent is to make power relations more equal. Šugman Bohinc lays out the dangers of traditional approaches that may become impositions and have the potential to displace indigenous ways of healing (§9). She identifies the dual focus on social change and on helping individuals to alleviate distress situation by situation as having been a struggle in the history of social work. Finally, she asks and to some extent identifies how the professional worker can address this tension.

« 2 » A key goal for postmodern work is that the "client's theory of change [should be equal to] the helper's theory" (§9). Drawing upon the work of Paulo Freire, the definitions of collaboration and complementarity are interpreted by Šugman Bohinc as a form of the cycle of work and insight that he named "praxis" (Freire 1973, 1989). Praxis represents "critical consciousness which involves an understanding of the encompassing social-structural context of human problems and has its roots in the collective field activities developed in Latin American under Paulo Freire's leadership" (van Wormer & Link 2018: 30). Šugman Bohinc offers an exploration of all elements of the cycle of critically conscious thought and action, which focuses more on interpersonal dynamics than the context of social change. Elements of the cycle include problem definition and solution finding, from individual to family, group and organization and the interaction of calm observer-observed, participation, action, and reflection. In her article, she raises several questions, however, in relation to the slow evolution of practice, shared power and "how" the recognition of the lived experience is mutually achieved. Therefore, the focus of my commentary (and questions for the author will unfold during the narrative) will be:

- the history as presented of postmodern work and the time it is taking to achieve plausible, transformational goals;
- the concern of the "how" from the client's perspective, whether it is reversible, that is, equally applicable to client and worker;
- the difficulty of language, especially "companion" in an international context.

« 3 » The final summary also critiques the tension Šugman Bohinc introduces by the term "lagging behind" (§39) in relation to social work and psychotherapy. In contrast to this suggested imbalance, I see potential for increased power for social change when the disciplines collaborate and lobby for resources, together with clients.

« 4 » My comments on the history of collaborative constructionist social work are based on lived experience. After 40 years in social work, I have seen clients both flourish under the encouragement of postmodern approaches, and flounder. The research into "parent participation in family centres" included my work (Link 1995) interviewing family members, mostly mothers, about their roles at the British family centres. The workers had been encouraging client participation in the running of these multi-purpose centres for families, including fundraising. In a wider study of the centres (Stones 1994), parents reported having increased self-esteem, feeling they were heard, and expanded parenting skills. Crucially these skills included avoiding violent discipline and working on a variety of ways to respond to difficult child behaviours. The collaboration took time and focused conversation. At times, tension arose amongst workers concerned about use of resources, for example when clients (called service partners) were given a meeting space or funded to attend a conference. While innovation eventually flourished, there was a constant backdrop of acute economic and political challenges.

« 5 » In a similar early effort at the Southside Family Nurturing Center in Minneapolis, in the US, clients were helping to organize outreach. This included their idea of a Tuesday quilting group where they invited social workers and administrators to participate. Easy conversation of co-equals flowed (not quite co-equal as the clients were more skilled quilters) during this common task. It was proposed that at least two parents become members of the Board of Directors. In response, one of the clients commented, "But I don't even know what an agenda is" (Link & Ramanathan 2011: 37). Šugman Bohinc refers to being respectful of the client's "lived experience" (§10), but tension arises when client experience has not been framed in traditional structures (such as the language of interpersonal communication, a Board, or protective services).

« 6 » In 2017, I accompanied Gabi Čačinovič Vogrinčič to the Foster Parent Association meeting in Maribor and witnessed this same dynamic: Vivid lived experience, hemmed in by formal and legislated procedures. Be it the complexity of child protection, a food cooperative in Mexico entirely run by parents with social workers as allies (Link & Ramanathan 2011), or an entirely client-run self-help group for parents accused of abuse in the US with social workers as resources and allies in the background (Roberts & Hokenstad 2022), there have been many efforts by hundreds of social workers across the last 50 years and more. This history raises the question of whether postmodern practice is a response to shifting landscapes everyone is coping

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with, be it the great levellers of pandemics, technology outpacing our imaginations, or extreme politics?

« 7 » Thus, Šugman Bohinc's early paragraphs where she introduces and defines postmodern work prompt the following questions: What are the driving factors that have been the catalyst for this paradigm shift from modern to postmodern collaborative work? Are these factors persuasive enough to be sustainable, that is, aligned with the United Nations "Sustainable Development Goals" (designers included social workers, indigenous participants, and client communities) to respect indigenous traditions and achieve a more level field for practice (Restorick Roberts & Hokenstad 2022)? Q1

« 8 » When the driving factors for the paradigm shift towards postmodern collaborative work can be identified, there is greater clarity for agents of change. Significant areas for change include the education of faculty, administrators and social-work students (especially in their skills and field internships), faculty attention to the vertical and horizontal flow of curriculum (in the past there have been serious disconnects in the way courses fit together), institutional understanding and resources and a multitude of aspects relating to social change, which lead to my second question: Why is it taking so long for the social-work profession and aligned disciplines such as psychotherapy to move away from professional "truth" and "objectivity" (§7) to fully embrace clients/client communities as equals in their humanity as they reach for "collective meaning (§14)" where the "gaze [shifts from the] dancers to the dance" (§§14, 17)? Q2

« 9 » The value of Šugman Bohinc's article shines in the way she emphasizes the interpersonal dynamics of "appreciative, accountable," "curious" (§33) language from the collaborative social worker. It gives teeth to the profound shift needed in the curriculum and education of all professional helpers. The narrative invites a questioning of how educators, students and practitioners may anticipate the needs or concerns of clients and how such anticipation may disrupt the co-creating of work. Furthermore, Šugman Bohinc's article highlights the acute difficulty of staying in the present. It also means further questioning of key concepts, which leads to another question: When Šugman Bohinc refers to clients as "companions of social workers," what is the definition of companion and how does it differ from the term "ally" used in some countries? Q3

« 10 » The word companion seems to imply someone who walks beside, in the same direction if not in unison, and in some cultures, is paid to live with another person. In this context, I would present the term "ally" as more akin to someone genuinely reaching out to understand the situation of another. Also, in this precarious world, there is a misleading dialogic in presupposing a constant professional–client social-work relationship. It is quite feasible for the worker to become the client (in my experience when the child of the worker died, or a social worker/parent needed support).

« 11 » In her extensive research and writing, Šugman Bohinc models the depth of reflection and self-change needed, known as "reflexivity" (§4) to fully comprehend this goal of what we could term "allied companionship" toward transformative work. Her writing invites the pause needed to absorb who we are and who we can be, on this genuinely shared journey of co-creating solutions, including social change. Šugman Bohinc chooses a quote from John Graham and Ken Barter (1999) that is central to this understanding that a social worker cannot be collaborative while carrying an attitude of being in charge: "collaboration may be defined as a relational system where two or more stakeholders pool together resources to meet objectives neither could meet individually" (§2). Similarly, Ken Moffat (2019) emphasizes the "precariousness" of the relationship, where the professional is caught up in self-analysis rather than being present and free of judgment.

« 12 » While the focus of the article is on the "how" for workers, it raises a final question: What is the "how" for clients – how can they be genuinely recognized as having their own perspective worthy of respect and be prepared for formal structures? How can clients be engaged in forging the language of co-creating solutions? Q4

« 13 » In §22, Šugman Bohinc states that collaborative work involves a co-creation of identities, content, processes, and outcomes. Automatic understanding and trust on the part of the client of good intent on the part of the worker cannot be taken for granted, however. Taking the "how" for the worker to be equivalent to the "how" for the client is potentially misleading, since surely the behaviour of a client changes when under suspicion, for example, of child neglect. Šugman Bohinc could expand the "how" in different directions for the co-creators. For example, with increased self-disclosure by the social worker and increased opportunity for exploring motive and questioning power on the part of the client.

« 14 » In summary, Šugman Bohinc's article is a powerful catalyst for a deeper review of the progress of postmodern social-work practice. It raises questions, some of which can be answered by the author and some that may currently be too dynamic for ready analysis, including the political landscape in countries of the European Union and the US. There also seems to be a tension that I am wary of since it has the potential to disrupt or slow progress. This is when Šugman Bohinc implies a hierarchy of progress for practitioners of psychotherapy and social work. For example, she refers to social work as "lagging behind" (§39) psychotherapy without adequate definition of lagging. It seems to me that there are increasing international examples (some offered in this commentary) of social workers practising alongside "their fellow travelers" to achieve improved quality of life and understanding of social forces affecting them. In some countries such as India, social workers are almost entirely concerned with community development and co-creating solutions (Ramanathan & Link 1999). Also, such interdisciplinary tension seems to be a contradiction of the inherent value of balancing power, curiosity, empathy, and respect that are the hallmarks of postmodern work.

« 15 » My conclusion is that the target article is a compelling, fluent, and reflectively researched presentation of postmodern social-work practice. Its author raises questions for further dialogue concerning: the "how" of practice; the barriers to progress toward a more integrated postmodern mode of practice; definitions, for example, of companion and ally; and sets up the recognition that there is much more to be done before we see an outcome for community members of significant social change.

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How to Prepare Agencies and Social Workers to Work From a CSW Perspective

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> Abstract • I discuss the shift in social work in the Netherlands from an individual stance towards collaborative and network-based approaches due to financial cutbacks. I highlight the challenges social workers face in tolerating uncertainty and adapting to collaborative methods while emphasizing the need for practice-based knowledge and the importance of relational skills in working with clients and their social networks.

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« 1 » With great interest, I have read Lea Sugman Bohinc's target article. Specifically, the second part of the title made me curious because it is a quest for social work in the Netherlands. When collaborative social work (CSW) bridges the gap, how does it look, and what does it require from today's social workers, agencies, clients, and their networks to co-construct actions so that, together, the individual and society find suitable ways to go on?

« 2 » After decades in social work, where the main emphasis was on individuation, nowadays social workers need, due to financial cutbacks, to reorganize their way of working. One of the main tasks of social work in the Netherlands is to work actively with the client's social network. This way of working requires local governments and agencies to adjust to a new method. This transformation includes a promotion of self-reliance, informal caregiving from family members, and a social network or volunteers (Dekker & Van Dieren 2016). In Van Dieren & Clavero (2022: 1f), we state that social workers' actions should involve coaching the clients to develop themselves in relation to their social environment and within the socio-cultural context (Van der Mei & Luttik 2018). However, research acknowledges that more practice-based knowledge is needed on how to apply informal network approaches in daily life practice (Hooghiemstra, Van Pelt & Van Yperen 2020).

« 3 » In our research projects, we train social workers on how to collaborate with clients and their social network from a collaborative and dialogical perspective. One of our first findings before we started the training was that social work leans heavily on structured approaches or methods to bridge the gap between the individual and their social network. As Sugman Bohinc states, in §10, it is more common for agencies and governments to trust the knowledge of the professional over the client's daily life experiences to find ways to understand or control complex systems (§30). As a result, social workers set, together with families, SMART[1]-formulated goals that the clients/families need to reach. When they do not reach these goals, those families often experience a sense of incompetence. When we asked those families what they desired, the answers were not SMART-formulated but were desires connected with their daily lived experiences (De Bruin, Dekker & Van Dieren 2023). During the training, social workers are encouraged to work proactively with the client and their network to co-create new ways to move forward together.

« 4 » One of the hardest things for social workers is trusting uncertainty (§36). This is also one of the hardest aspects for local governments, local agencies, and professionals. In our research, we work together with agencies to see whether and how principles of open dialogue (Seikkula & Arnkil 2006)[2] can enrich social work with families. Most agencies acknowledge the importance of these principles and want to work together with clients and their social networks. However, in day-to-day practice, it seems hard to change their current practices. One reason is that institutions often promote this way of working, but lack a vision of how to make

1| SMART stands for: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound formulated. The goals are often requested by the local government to control their finances.

2| The open dialogue principles are: (a) responding immediately; (b) including the social network; (c) adapting flexibly to specific and varying needs; (d) dealing with uncertainty; (e) guaranteeing psychological/psychosocial continuity; (f) taking responsibility; (g) dialogicity.