



The Magnetism of Power in Helping Relationships. Professional Attitude and Asymmetry

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Summary

What makes helping relationships - or social interventions in general - so sensitive to abuse? These problems are directly related to the nature of the helping relationship. The core of this relationship is the inequality, the asymmetry, between the helper and the person being helped, and the dependence of the latter. Asymmetry is the driving force behind every social intervention and at the same time its weakest point. Handling asymmetry in an appropriate manner constitutes a major part of the work of the intervening party. This asymmetry makes heavy demands on the professional attitude of the intervening party i.e. the helper. Is s/he capable of dealing with dependence in an acceptable way? Is s/he well-versed in her/his profession? This article contains a comprehensive sketch of many of the possible dangers and pitfalls which beset asymmetric intervention relations. At the end it will be argued that, for a better understanding, the proximity of helping and power has to be taken into account.

Keywords:

social intervention; social work; professional attitude; asymmetrical relationships; therapy

Introduction

The helping relationship has been described and analyzed many times (see a.o. Weiss 1973; Spielberg 1980; Streaun 1986; Bornstein 1994; Hepworth 1993; Witz 1992). In this article, we examine a familiar theme, namely the abuse that is made of this relationship. Critical opinions about social intervention and helping relationships usually begin by analysing the unequal motives of those giving assistance. The providers of help receive more attention from scholars than do those seeking help (Gergen and Gergen 1986, 193-222). In order to break this pattern, we first concentrate on the helping relationship by taking another look at the party requesting the help. Then the roles of helpers will be scrutinised. The problems in helping relationships, generated by asymmetry, cannot be solved by making those interactions symmetrical. The article ends up with a plea for better understanding of the close connection between helping and power.

The following text cites several examples of improper use of the helping relationship by both the help seekers and the help providers. This by no means implies that the author intend to downplay or trifle with human suffering. It is almost indecent to subject the help offered in such emergency situations to a critical analysis. Nonetheless, one sets about doing so here, indeed, with the intention and hope of providing more insight in order to increase the chances of that social intervention being effective.

1. The client under suspicion

Client Power

There are many strategies for manipulating conversations, group gatherings, parties or family life. An effective means of doing this is by trying to play the role of the vivacious “centre of attention”. But a role that is at least as effective is that of radiating the “all-time low”. The attention one gets for one's trouble will be no less. Problem behaviour – as we know from system theorists and directive therapists – is extremely effective behaviour, and is termed functional behaviour (Minuchin 1974). Asking for help in these cases can be seen as a power strategy to get something – attention, status, recognition or material gains – that cannot be acquired by other means.

There are cases when a person with a problem does not elicit sympathy but indeed, can still be exceptionally clever and adept in getting his environment to do his bidding. A drug addict is in a position to tyrannise the family he is part of so that the problem case in the family dominates all the relationships within that family. Everyone is concerned and worried, it costs family members significant amounts of money, meal schedules are adjusted and so on. Paradoxically enough, the addict is consequently the most powerful individual in the family.

Women who have been deprived of their function in society, or who have never been allowed that function, can take revenge on their socially successful partners with the socio-medical behaviour of the invalid, and thereby manipulate or “sicken” their lives to an important degree (Paykel 1991).

The person seeking help does not need to be aware of this power. Even more poignantly, almost no one would reasonably choose the role of the client from a power strategy standpoint. It is more often an acquired, learned behaviour, which has evolved out of interaction with the environment, and one which appears to be functional for the person in question.

Advantages of the Sick Role

Parsons drew attention to the advantages of the “sick role”. He views being sick as abnormal behaviour. The advantage of the role of the invalid lies in the fact that he or she is relieved of obligations to society, but also that such abnormal behaviour is tolerated by the environment. “Illness is predominantly a withdrawal into a dependent relationship, asking to be “taking care of”. It uses disability as the basis of legitimizing this claim, ... provides ... "leverage" for social control....' (Parsons 1951, 285). Norms can be transgressed without sanctions being imposed. Who has not made use of this strategy when they cannot pass an exam or keep an appointment? In his research on participation in the labour movement, Klandermans came to discover that the numbers of workers absent due to illness was disconcertingly high at the moment when people really had to participate (Klandermans 1981).

A modern variation of conceptualizing the advantage of being sick is the idea of “sickness benefits”. Being a problem case wins immaterial (attention, recognition) as well as material (money, security) gain. Vroon describes a 1965 German study which produced spectacular results. Because patients received the extra attention while they were sick that they had missed in their normal, daily lives, these patients remained sick. “Someone who has succumbed to an ailment is distracted by it from other problems and is moreover the recipient of all forms of attention from his environment” (Vroon 1988,168).

The Career Client

This explains why many people seeking help opt for a brilliant career as client. Everyone is concerned with or about him or her, but they are unable to discover what is wrong. One can meet such career-makers in doctors' offices. In the world of psychotherapy, the term "shoppers" is used for people who go through one form of therapy after another. It is only when the demonstrated behaviour is effective, which is to say that it produces a lot of attention and recognition, that a client will be capable of really outstanding achievement.

In the novel, *The Magic Mountain (Der Zauberberg)*, Thomas Mann describes the competition among patients in a sanatorium about who is worst off. People compete for the distinction of being the "worst case". Even newcomer Hans Castorp, who comes into the exclusive circle of sick people as a "light patient", abandons his initial scepticism towards the game in order to put considerable effort into the struggle (Mann 1924).

The "Injustice Collector"

In *Justice and Injustice*, Bergler & Meerloo devote a chapter to the "injustice collector", an individual who looks for problems because he – unknowingly – enjoys them (Bergler & Meerloo 1963, 20-25). The psychiatrist authors give a psychoanalytical explanation for the behaviour of people who are "always the fall guy". An injustice collector has become a master of the neurotic defence of psychic masochism, putting him in the position of being able to turn a loss into a victory. Look (victory). at what has happened to me (loss)! "A thumbnail definition of the psychic masochist would term him a person who habitually transforms conscious displeasure into unconscious pleasure, and can thus accept the endless punishments..." (Bergler & Meerloo 1963: 20). Everyone is confronted with injustices which cannot be avoided. According to Bergler & Meerloo, relatively normal people look to see whether or not they can do something about it. If that is not the case, people will, both consciously and unconsciously, either work their way through or reject the situation. "In neurosis, both avoidable and unavoidable injustices are unconsciously sought out and welcomed. On the surface, the neurotic appears to reject injustice as heartily as the normal individual does, but his rejection is not designed to correct or eliminate the sorry situation. His display of counter-aggression is a careful alibi meant to show the inner conscience that he tried, but unhappily could not succeed" (Bergler & Meerloo 1963, 34-35). Bergler & Meerloo concentrate their analysis on the individual who is and always will be – unconsciously – a problem case.

Proof of Illness

Brinkgreve & Van Stolk write about "proof of illness" (Brinkgreve & Van Stolk 1987). Their research focused on somatic patients. These are "people with physical complaints for which no physical cause can be found" (Brinkgreve & Van Stolk 1987, 597). They often have a long medical history behind them, and finally end up at the psychiatrist's door, as patients who have exhausted the other disciplines. The authors come to discover that somatic complaints are not directly traceable to life events which can be localized in the histories of patients (changing jobs, for example), but sooner to "changes in their social network as a result of the persisting complaints" (ibid., 598). Somatic patients invest a great deal in their illness, and once that has happened, there is no way back. Brinkgreve & Van Stolk speak of "the dilemma of the wrong investment": "The longer people wait to accept their loss the greater that loss becomes, but it is precisely that which prevents the investor from then truly accepting his losses" (ibid., 631). Brinkgreve & Van Stolk do make note of the fact that the image of the mistaken investment is too strongly based on conscious calculation and does too little justice to unconscious processes that also lend shape what somatic patients do or do not do (ibid, 631).

Proof of illness, according to them, is the involvement of the social process around its recognition. "Our ill without illness have invested a great deal to be accepted as being sick, and in many cases they would experience an almost insufferable loss of face, also in terms of accepting themselves, if their complaints were, as it were, to vanish into thin air. But it would not only cost the patient his credibility, but the credibility of those who have accepted the legitimacy of the complaints, and those who had acted accordingly will have difficulty in accepting that their concern and care had all been "for naught" (ibid, 627). Brinkgreve & Van Stolk conclude from this that, "Providing proof of illness seems to us to be the most important hidden function of the contact between somatic patients and the psychiatrists treating them" (ibid., 629).

Cheating the Welfare State

If in fact one is in possession of his proof of illness, he can take advantage of special arrangements and facilities to take care of his needs. Such arrangements frequently fall under government management. Needs can be satisfied in different ways. In industrialized countries, people can obtain goods and services through the general market or the authorities. The allocation of goods via the market means that people with a given income can purchase social goods such as housing, education and health care. The second possibility is via government regulation. People then obtain such goods and services by means of rent subsidies, scholarships, public health insurance, tax breaks, care services and so on. Mishra sees the authorities or political structure as an alternative for the market. Both the market and government are aimed at satisfying those needs (Mishra 1981). Shlonsky also views government policy as an allocation mechanism, defining government "welfare" as "a mode of allocation of resources – goods, services, rights, benefits, etc. – which does not rest, theoretically at least, on the recipient's duty to reciprocate" (Shlonsky 1971, 415).

Just as individuals attempt to glean profit from the market, it is lucrative for individuals to amass as many material and immaterial benefits as possible via government regulations. With proof of illness in one's pocket, clients can try to profit as much as possible from these "secondary allocations" in the community.

Client Passiveness

We now move from the client who undertakes initiative to the type who follows an opposite strategy. It also happens that help seekers are unwilling to make decisions of their own. Here, looking for help is the same as refusing responsibility. Directive therapists in family therapy are acutely aware of this mechanism and turn it around, so that the therapy is aimed at allowing the client to take on responsibility. It often happens that a problematic family or clients put pressure on the helper to solve the problem. Describing the resulting situation, "If the therapist allows himself to become a 'healer' or a 'fixer', the family falls into dysfunction and waits until the therapist has completed the task" (Verhey 1979, 37).

Asking for help makes people unsure and fearful because they do not know what is going to come out of it. This fear is the driving force behind clients' efforts to put the responsibility in the hands of the therapist. Clients cling to the therapist in the same way tourists in a strange country slouch along behind their tour guide. Group workers in Germany have an appealing term for this phenomenon: 'Anklammerungstendenz' (the cling tendency) (Brocher 1976).

Inspiring Fear

People and groups in need can openly demonstrate their power by making use of a power strategy. Threatening another, who fails to respond, can be an important condition or prerequisite for getting help. In the 1960's in Western Europe and the United States, civil unrest in major cities was initially responded to by sending in the police. When this appeared to have the

opposite effect to that intended, democratic consensus projects and community workers were made available to population groups concerned (Waddington 1979). The method used by Alinsky was illustrative of the power strategy of "community organizing" in the United States. The tactic of mobilizing the public was intended to develop power from a weak position. No means were eschewed. Landlords, for example, who refused to maintain their property, were attacked in their personal lives. Folders denouncing their negligence were printed and distributed in the neighbourhoods where the landlords lived and handed out at the close of services at the churches they attended (Alinsky 1972).

2. The helper as suspect

What motivates the helper? Why do individuals, groups or organizations apply themselves to helping other people, groups or countries? This question has been – and still is – frequently asked in the literature on helping. There are countless possible answers. In this section we will look at the authors who have raised questions about the motives of helpers, or the points that have led people to be critical of helpers. The literature is widely diverse, both in terms of theoretical approach and the respective level of analysis. In order to view it in structured form, we have arranged this material into three categories. The first group of authors ascribes the urge to help to *fear and helplessness on the part of the helpers*. The second group explains helping as *self-interest on the part of the helpers*. The third group includes those authors who attribute helping to *the need for social control*, which in their opinion explains a great deal of charitable activity.

A FEAR AND HELPLESSNESS AS MOTIVE

"In Treating Them, we Cure Ourselves"

In an article on professional identity in social work, Polansky uses the above quote from Erikson in the following context. "Part of what holds us to the task, then, is the experience of solving and resolving our own problems over and over again in the lives of our clients." (Polansky 1959: 304). What he is referring to here is the conscious or unconscious motivation of professional help workers in providing help or care. It is easier to allow another to express a problem that you yourself also face than to dig into your own soul. The January 1989 issue of "The Atlantic Monthly" published an article by Thomas Maeder on "Wounded Healers" (1989, 37-47), in which he pointed a finger at helpers. "Altruistic people, who work hard to help others, should not be suspected ipso facto of harbouring ulterior selfish motives. Nonetheless, the 'helping professions', such as nursing, charitable work, the ministry, and psychotherapy, attract people for curious and often psychologically suspect reasons.... Such people may be lured, knowingly or unknowingly, by the position of authority, by the dependence of others, by the image of benevolence, by the promise of adulation, or by a hope of vicariously helping themselves through helping others" (p.37). Maeder states that many psychotherapists have themselves been emotionally damaged in their own upbringing, and have therefore become narcissistic, whereby they have learned to have considerable talent for being able to understand others. "Thus the peculiar miseries of the narcissist's childhood encouraged him to develop a sensitivity to other's needs.....The very same qualities, however, ultimately hinder the therapist's ability to help patients or to raise children who are free of emotional problems, because the empathy and altruism are basically false" (p.45). The empathy or altruism expressed evolves from a unilateral concern on the part of helpers for their own ego. Narcissism is an over-accentuation of the ego, but it arises from a weakness of the ego (Baars 1987, 124-125).

The "Hilflosen Helfer"

Schmidbauer likewise seeks to explain the help provided by professional helpers through pathological motives. He refers to the "helper syndrome", and his analysis is a sobering one and indeed, cynical. Schmidbauer sees helping as a defence against fears and inner emptiness, using psychoanalysis as his theoretical starting point. According to Schmidbauer, problems can arise in early childhood (the oral phase). that can later be found in the so-called "helper syndrome", where one altruistically offers oneself for others in order to repress one's own need for help. The helper syndrome is expressed in the fact that weakness and helplessness, admitting to emotional problems is only welcomed and supported in others, whereas one's own self-image must on the contrary remain unsullied. The inner condition of someone with the helper syndrome can therefore be described as that of a neglected baby behind a beautiful, solid façade: like a small child, I hunger and thirst for affection and security, but I am not able to admit it. Schmidbauer gives the following definition of the helper syndrome: "An incapacity to express one's own feelings and needs that has become a personality structure, coupled with an apparently omnipotent, unassailable façade in the area of social care" (Schmidbauer 1977, 12). The medical profession is referred to as a helping profession with helper syndrome. According to Schmidbauer, research has shown doctors to be relatively frequently addicted to drugs and alcohol, which can be ascribed to the oral needs of these helpers.

Badcock is another writer who describes altruism from a psychoanalytical perspective (Badcock 1986). In Chapter II, "Kin Altruism, Identification and Masochism" of "The Problem of Altruism" he quotes Anna Freud's opinion of people offering themselves. "Humane people are good out of the badness of their hearts." Altruistic sacrifice, according to Anna Freud, is less altruistic than people might expect. Altruism can arise from egotistical motives. The most important psychological mechanism that can play a role here is identification. One takes himself as the standard for identification (one projects one's own emotional needs onto another). and in the case of altruistic behaviour, does everything possible in order to satisfy the other person.

B SELF-INTEREST AS MOTIVE

The "Helper Therapy Principle"

Riessman has drawn attention to the fact that by helping others, helpers come to feel stronger and more powerful. He called this the "helper therapy principle" (Riessman 1965), which has become a universally accepted concept in the professional (health). care professions, but it is also used in studying informal help. Gottlieb reports that informal support groups develop specific mechanisms. "These principles revolve around the normalizing effect produced by the sense of universality gained through meeting others in the same boat; the heightened esteem and confidence gained from assuming the role of helper, a phenomenon that Riessman (1965) has labelled the "helper therapy principle" (Gottlieb 1985, 64).

It is common knowledge in social psychology that helping can be a good remedy for a bad mood. "Although a positive mood can be a potent source of helping behaviour, some researchers believe that under special conditions a negative mood can have the same effect. For example, it is sometimes possible to change a sad mood by doing something for someone else (Kidd and Marshall 1983). Attention then becomes focused on others and their pleasure, not on one's personal doldrums. This means of coping seems especially useful when people think they are responsible for their own bad mood" (Rogers et al. 1982; see Gergen and Gergen 1986, 199, 201).

The Professional Altruist as a career

Feeling better, healing oneself as a result of helping others does not necessarily have to concern the intra-psychic or interpersonal domain. There is also glory to be had for helpers at the broader society level. Helping can even be a very appropriate way of gaining financial advantage. Helpers with high social status (psychiatrists, psychoanalysts) are frequently holders of an impressive bank account. One can be none the worse off for devoting your professional life to the service of others. Lubove has devoted a book to the subject, with the telling title, "The Professional Altruist: The Emergence of Social Work as a Career" (Lubove 1972).

Social Work and Women's Emancipation

Careers and professional helping are historically closely allied. In the Netherlands, but also in other countries, the emergence of professional social work was directly related to the emancipation movement of women from the wealthy bourgeoisie. In around 1900, this group attempted to create paid jobs outside the home with a certain social status. It is an intriguing phenomenon that people who want to emancipate themselves elect mastery over a group of people who are worse off than themselves. The "helper therapy principle" would seem to apply here as well.

Lords of Poverty

One frontal attack launched at those who better themselves by way of the troubles and destitution of others is at the hand of Hancock in *Lords of Poverty*, pointing out "the freewheeling lifestyles, power, prestige and corruption of the multibillion dollar aid business", in government-sponsored international development aid and its institutions (Hancock 1991). Hancock claims that official development aid produces no results – is even damaging – because it is based on the wrong principles. The international "aid business" wastes no breath on what those seeking aid know or need. It is paternalistic, condescending help that, whenever the World Bank and the IMF are involved, comes down to obliging those countries requesting aid to apply western economic models (structural adjustments) (ibid, 56).

"It would seem, then, that official development assistance is neither necessary nor sufficient for 'development': the poor thrive without it in some countries; in others, where it is plentifully available, they suffer the most abject miseries. Such suffering, furthermore, as I have argued throughout this book, often occurs not *in spite* of aid but *because* of it. To continue with the charade seems to me to be absurd. Garnered and justified in the name of the destitute and the vulnerable, aid's main function in the past half century has been to create and then entrench a powerful new class of rich and privileged people. In that notorious club of parasites and hangers-on made up of the United Nations, the World Bank and the bilateral agencies, it is aid – and nothing else – that has provided hundreds of thousands of 'jobs for the boys' and that has permitted record-breaking standards to be set in self-serving behaviour, arrogance, paternalism, moral cowardice and mendacity" (ibid., 192-193).

The "official aid industry" is realized outside the control of the taxpayer. External control, but internal control as well, is virtually non-existent, according to Hancock, because it is concerned with disaster relief, food relief, medical help, in short: with helping. It is not appropriate in the presence of all that misery to question or criticize the helpers who, in professional and paid positions, go to foreign countries in order to assuage the needs of others. "The charitable impulse at the root of much aid-giving is at its most potent during disasters and emergencies. It is, however, a double-edged sword. On the one hand it raises lots of money. On the other it stifles questions about the uses to which this money is put – and makes those who ask such questions look rather churlish. Criticizing humanitarianism and generosity is like criticizing the institution of motherhood; it is just not 'the done thing'" (ibid, 5).

At the beginning of his book, Hancock quotes Ross Coggins's poem, "The Development Set". These are the first two stanzas:

Excuse me, friends, I must catch my jet -
I'm off to join the Development Set;
My bags are packed, and I've had all my shots,
I have travellers' cheques and pills for the trots.

The Development Set is bright and noble,
Our thoughts are deep and our vision global;
Although we move with the better classes,
Our thoughts are always with the masses.

Povertocracy

In an article on poverty, Engbersen noticed that poverty generates work, not only for researchers, but also for the professionals participating in those poverty-programs. "In the Netherlands, we see a significant growth in the number of employment and education projects, but the effects of this new poverty industry in improving the lot of welfare recipients and long-term unemployed are this far very limited" (Engbersen 1991,18).

Cultural and Social Capital

Returning to what motivates some of the bourgeoisie to become involved with those less well off, publications on stratification research explain that people distinguish themselves from others through the social position they fill in comparison to those others. This comparison in social rank (stratification). takes place on the basis of the three criteria of 1. income/profession, 2. culture, and 3. social contacts. In the literature on stratification, people with a lot of money are called "capitalists", people with a lot of culture are called "culture capitalists", and those with a lot of contacts "social capitalists" (Bourdieu 1986, Ganzeboom et al 1987). People are therefore not concerned with money alone. Status can be acquired in many ways. There are not only possibilities available in business or in government for people with initiative, but initiatives in the "service of others", "the general good", or "humanity" also offer great potential in this context.

Corporate Foundations and Corporate Philanthropy

The capitalistic character of helping is most strongly apparent in the case of companies which, whether forced to do so by tax laws (the Ford Foundation, for example), or whether out of their own desire to reap tax benefits, establish a foundation for the benefit of social or cultural goals. The Ford Foundation was set up at the point when the private shareholdings of the Ford family were about to be heavily taxed. In Sutton's words, "By the 1930s, however, changes in the social climate brought prudential steps. The first move was to convert the existing stock, which consisted of 172,645 shares, into two classes totalling 3,452,500 shares; 95 percent of these were class A, non-voting common stock, and 5 percent were class B, voting stock. In 1935, Franklin Roosevelt asked Congress for an inheritance tax or a steeply progressive estate tax. The Ford Motor Company, as the most prominent example of a large family-owned industry, became a centre of interest in this legislation, which ultimately became the Revenue Act of 1935. It raised the tax on estates above \$50 million to 70 percent but retained provision for tax exemption of bequests to charitable, religious, and educational organizations. The Ford family responded by establishing the Ford Foundation on January 15, 1936, and, in the next months, Henry and Edsel wrote wills in which they bequeathed all their class A stock to the Ford Foundation and the class

B stock to family members. The Foundation thus became the potential owner of more than 90 percent of the Ford Motor Company, subject to the liability in the wills of Henry and Edsel that taxes on their voting stock were to be paid from the non-voting stock that went to the Foundation" (Sutton 1987, 42).

Again, Piliavin and Charng leave little intact of the good intentions underlying social sponsoring by companies. Based on research in the literature, they ask if there is really any altruism lurking behind corporate philanthropy. "Is there any evidence for corporate 'altruism'? The answer appears to be 'no'.... Our conclusion from the limited literature we have been able to discover on corporate responsibility is that 'enlightened self-interest' rather than altruism is what drives socially responsible behaviour in this area. Normative pressures can increase social responsibility, largely because such pressures lead corporate officers to perceive that socially responsible behaviour is in the corporation's own best interest. Although individual corporate officers may feel empathy or have 'group-oriented feelings', corporations obviously do not. The behaviour of those corporate officers, acting for the corporation, must be largely determined by the self-interest of the company. If altruism is seen as based on those feelings, then, corporate philanthropy is not and cannot be altruism" (Piliavin and Charng 1990, 57).

Helping and "Noblesse Oblige"

In speaking of feudal society in his historical description of helping, Luhmann devotes some attention to the concept of noblesse oblige. Noblesse oblige is an integral part of feudal relationships, and it is not due to the conviction that one gains status through helping others:

Hilfe ist nicht mehr, wie in elementaren Interaktionen oder auch in archaischen Gesellschaften, ein statuskonstituierendes Prinzip; sie drückt einen schichtenmässig gefestigten Status nur noch aus, ist Statussymbol, Standes-pflicht, in mehr häuslich-patrimonialen Verhältnissen auch fürsorgliche Verantwortung - in jedem Falle eine Ventilsitte der Schichtendifferenzierung. Überliefert sind eine Fülle von Berichten über ritterliche Freigebigkeit und aristokratische Fürsorge für die Armen und Siechen - von Berichten mit exemplarischem Charakter und erzieherischer Intention (Luhmann 1973, 29).

C SOCIAL CONTROL AS MOTIVE

Fear of the bourgeoisie

Helpers are often driven by fear. Brunt (1987) studied the motives of the "social explorers" from the English bourgeoisie, who, disguised as paupers, went into the London ghettos in order to describe the lives of the poor. Brunt was struck by the language these "social explorers" used. They used such phrases as "wild men", "barbarians", "cesspits". Brunt terms this the "rhetoric of fear". In these marginal groups, people saw a threat to their own civilisation. By helping, they attempted to lessen both the threat and their own fear.

Forward Panic

Wartime conditions produce a phenomenon that Collins describes as "forward panic". People recklessly attack the enemy in order to conquer the fear in themselves (Collins 1990). "This is similar to the panic retreat, which is the mark (and principal mechanism). of defeat, except that in this case the panic mood impels soldiers forward, into a frenzy of killing" (Collins 1990, 73). The fear of the poor on the part of the bourgeoisie can exert a strong power of attraction towards those poor. The helicopter pilot blindly attacks his enemy, "Yet, he is also attracted by the

danger, for he knows he can overcome his fear only by facing it. This blind rage then begins to focus on the men who are the source of the danger – and of his fear... But this resolve, which is sometimes called courage, cannot be separated from the fear that has aroused it" (Collins 1990,74).

Fear of contamination

In writing about the history of Australia, Hughes also focuses some attention on the conditions of the London poor and the motives for deporting groups of criminals to the "fatal shore" (Hughes 1986). "The final aim of the transportation system, then, was less to punish individual crimes than to uproot an enemy class from the British social fabric (...). However, it failed. Transportation did not stop crime in England or even slow it down. The "criminal class" was not eliminated by transportation, and could not be, because transportation did not deal with the causes of the crime" (Hughes 1986,168).

Burgers begins an article on the city in the 1990s with a look back at the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the urban context (Burgers 1990). According to him, the bourgeoisie specifically belongs in the city, the place where there is money to be earned. They turn the city into a commodity. These economic motives of exploitation and profitability exist alongside those of cultural objectives and social control. Burgers makes a connection between these motives and the rise of shopping passages in the first half of the 19th century. Along with their economic and cultural advantages, the passage offered the middle and upper classes protection and safety from the poor masses, who were the source of their fear of contamination. Due to the urbanization of the 19th century, control and management of the swelling masses became increasingly important. Burgers states that Hausmann, in reconstructing Paris, was guided by the three principles mentioned above: social control, profitability and the desire to shape culture (Burgers 1990, 80).

The wealthy burghers only began to really do something about the (hygienic) condition of the proletariat when they themselves began to suffer from the illnesses of the poor. Public water supplies, sewage disposal, health care and education came about in this period. The flag was raised for the "advancement of the people". In these cases, altruism and egoism seem practically synonymous (de Swaan 1988).

Civilization Work

Kruithof introduced the concept of "civilization offensive" after researching the interventions of the upper classes in the working classes (Kruithof 1980). He means it to refer to the fact that the bourgeoisie wanted to involve the entire population in the advantages of civilization and virtue. Along with improving elementary education, they sought to educate the population in general (Kruithof 1990, 16).

In Review

The above gives examples of the "suspect" helper. From this material comes a diverse range of motives, objectives and values. We have here also looked at different levels of analysis. Some authors limited themselves to the motives of individual helpers, while others focussed on social structures and on the role of social groups involved in social work – the bourgeoisie, for example. It is difficult to draw conclusions from this material. What can be concluded, however, is that in many instances, there is more involved on the part of the helper than purely the well-being of those seeking help. It can do no harm to view helpers with a healthy dose of caution.

3. Asymmetry in helping relationships

In the two sections above, the examples cited of both helpers and help seekers “going wrong” has directly to do with the asymmetry of the helping relationship. In his analysis of the medical profession, Lulofs gives the following explanation for this. “Nearly all authors in this area are of the opinion that the professions are separate from other vocations because they require a relatively high level of systematic theoretical knowledge. This brings with it a market imbalance, because the information at the disposal of the exchange partners is asymmetrically distributed. This has the result that in the first place, the exchange concerns the providing of information and only in the second place the support of interests, the treatment or the therapy. As a rule, it is the supplier who determines the needs of the recipient, whereas the latter is seldom in a position to assess the quality of the services provided. The most prominent characteristic, therefore, of the professional services market lies in the element of trust contained in the exchange relationship between provider and recipient” (Lulofs 1983, 95).

The asymmetry of helping relationships appears in many cases to be a feeding ground for inappropriate motives and strategies. There are two ways that this asymmetry can be wrongly handled. Firstly, as we have seen, the asymmetry can be abused, and secondly, one can avoid or deny that asymmetry.

Avoiding asymmetry: symmetric strategies

Alongside abuse of the asymmetry of the helping relationship, there is also another wrong way of dealing with that asymmetry, and that is by denying it exists or eliminating it. The asymmetry in helping relationships is often experienced as a discomfort for both help seekers and help providers. In these cases, asymmetry, almost as a force of its own, tends to lean towards symmetry. Both parties, the seekers and the helpers, consciously or otherwise, make an effort to bend the asymmetrical relationship into a symmetrical one. To illustrate, we will first discuss a few symmetrical strategies on the part of the help seekers.

Symmetrical strategies of help seekers

What motivates help seekers to undertake efforts to eradicate the asymmetry? Gergen and Gergen explain that from the standpoint of those seeking help, receiving help is not pleasant. They mention three reasons why:

- The recipient feels inferior. Help seekers have not been able to look after themselves and out of pride, people, groups, countries refuse help. They do not want to hold out their hand.
- Help often brings obligations.
- Help can be manipulative. For this reason, poor countries often protest against the conditions attached to development aid (Gergen and Gergen 1986, 215-219).

Giving Gifts

Hospital nursing staff are inundated with cakes and flowers. Older people give valuables away in exchange for help and attention. With these gifts, help seekers try to counteract the asymmetry by modifying the helping relationship towards an exchange relationship that is more symmetric in nature.

Intimacy

Another strategy is to become more personal with the helper. One appears to know the helper personally, or in other situations, to be observing the helper. In the break during a lecture, the teacher is generally surrounded by enthusiastic students expressing their loyalty, asking for additional explanations or wanting to discuss things further. Focussing attention on the more

“personal” brings the help seeker to a more equal position with the helper than that of someone who is dependent. A personal relationship is more symmetrical than the helping relationship.

Proto-professionalizing

Help seekers can also reduce the asymmetry by adapting themselves to the helper. Research by Brinkgreve, Onland and De Swaan into psychotherapy practices in Amsterdam resulted, amongst other things, in the concept of “proto-professionalizing”, characterizing the adaptive behaviour of the client to the therapist. Clients formulate their questions or problems already phrased in therapeutic jargon in order to be better understood by the therapist (Brinkgreve et al. 1979, 17). This way, the help seeker enhances his own position. The dependent party learns to redefine himself and his or her situation in therapeutic language.

Symmetric strategies of helpers

For their part, helpers can be inclined to become similar to their clients. In time, the behaviour of “outreach workers/street corner workers” becomes indistinguishable from that of the people they were working with. They hang around interminably in pubs, dress identically, even their schedules are adjusted to those of the client groups. Local development workers and community centre workers in impoverished urban neighbourhoods often show the same patterns of imitation. They are hardly recognizable in the role of helper, and have also adopted an appropriately modified “radical philosophy” for their job. Police arrest teams look no different than the “dangerous and volatile” criminals they have to arrest.

4. Helping and power: professional attitude and asymmetry

Although the asymmetry of the helping relationship can lead to all sorts of abuse, as well as to strategies for symmetry, helping cannot exist without asymmetry. Social intervention is only possible with asymmetry and inequality: someone wants something that he does not have, and the other has it. It is precisely this difference between the third and the one being helped that makes change possible.

Because it is asymmetric, the social intervention relationship greatly resembles another asymmetric relationship: the power relationship. Van den Berg has focussed his research on the relationship between helping and power. According to him, the exciting issue about the helping relationship is that in terms of asymmetry, it is absolutely identical to the power relationship, but where it concerns the objective that the relationship strives to achieve, it is precisely the opposite of the power relationship. Van den Berg has taken this comparison as a foundation for his theory of helping (Van den Berg 1963). After citing Van Doorn’s definition of power as “the possibility of a person or group, according to its own purposes, to limit the behaviour alternatives of other persons or groups”, he presents his own definition of helping: “Helping is the possibility of extending the behaviour alternatives of other persons or groups, according to the purposes of that other person or group” (Van den Berg 1963, 20). The phenomenon of helping has been analyzed as a theoretical reversal of the phenomenon of power (Van den Berg 1963, 15-16). In the definition of helping, all of the elements of the definition of power have been reversed, except for a single aspect, namely that power relationships and helping relationships are both asymmetrical. “In both relationships there is influence being exerted on the behavioural alternatives of others” (Van den Berg 1963, 20). In being asymmetric, the helping relationship shows great similarity to that other asymmetric relationship, the power relationship. *Through this circumstance, the helping relationship is easily turned into a power relationship.* Power and helping are widely removed from each other, but they are also very close to one another. Van

den Berg has referred to this comparison. "Both power and help presume inequality (...). Both the possessor of power and the provider of help have an advantage in that they are allowed entry to the less accessible values of others" (Van den Berg 1963, 19).

Being able to deal with this inequality places strenuous demands on the integrity of the helper and the professional attitude.

Social intervention is about maintaining the tension of an adequate, appropriate asymmetry in terms of the problem and not succumbing to the quicksand of power, or on the other hand escaping into symmetry.

The ultimate purpose is indeed the eradication of the asymmetry, namely in the fact that the help seekers become able to handle their own problems. The helping relationship was specifically created to achieve this objective.

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