

The coach and the professional soccer player

by

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With this paper I will defend the thesis statement “*Social constructivism can help strengthen the identity of the social professional.*”

I shall introduce the social constructive view, in order to discuss this statement. Next, I shall state that a social professional has to act within the confines of different logics, especially the logics of the system and the life world. I will use this exercise to explain what is distinctive about social work and what constitutes its main strengths; i.e. the establishment of relationships with a wide variety of people; the survey of the environment for resources, and how to bring these together on behalf of the client; negotiations with various individuals, groups and organizations and how to mobilize their energies; and enter other worlds of meaning in order to offer help (Parton & O’Byrne, 2000)¹.

To illustrate this position, I will discuss three contemporary examples. Firstly, I will draw attention to two features of the presence theory (Baart, 2001). Next I’ll demonstrate how Family Group Conference can cooperate with institutions and finally I’ll introduce constructive social work as a method in which we can remain within the life world of the service user. Once we have looked at this guide, I’ll discuss the rigid way social professionals are presently controlled by computer systems to get financial credits. I’ll introduce a trust model, which is more suitable to accountable social work. Using this view, it becomes clear that:

1. A service user has to have faith in a social professional.
2. This is only possible if a social professional has confidence in his own merits as an individual.

¹ Parton & O’Byrne (2000) *constructive social work* Palgrave, Hampshire/New York

3. That is only possible if the management of the institution in which he works has confidence in the professional's good qualities, and if society entrusts the management.

We will explore the methods in which trust can be gained on all these levels. With this paper I will propose some suggestions.

The social constructive view

All of us are born in a given society and in a give epoch. We are formatted into this particular time and place on earth and we have to use the language that is spoken by our parents. As we grow older, we learn new words and new meanings by talking and doing things with our neighbors and friends. Not only do we learn the ordinary meaning of words, but we also develop our own connotations to words. Personal experience colors this connotation. By using words with a subjective connotation people construct their own reality.

A young woman who is sexually abused by her father has a completely different connotation of the word man than a young woman of the same age who has not been abused by her father, for example, but had a warm relationship with both her parents. The former probably interprets signals differently on seeing a male than the latter.

People of the same generation growing up within the same culture, share (to a certain extent) the same experience. Because of that, they also share more or less the same meanings of words. The Dutch word 'welzijnswerker' for example, refers to lefties and softies for plenty of the baby boomers. Maybe that's why, these days, we use the English word 'social worker' in the Netherlands. So a cluster of people who share the same experience can share the same words, and the same meanings, but this is not a rule. However, women of the same generation share (to some extent) the same experiences with men. They also have specific experiences, because of this, they probably have a specific connotation for a word like menstruation.

By debating the position of the professional between people and politics (using new words) we all construct more or less the reality we perceive.

In social work, both the social worker as well as the service user, more or less constructs

their own reality. By interacting, for example, in a conversation or by doing things together, for example, participating in a survival, both a social worker and the service user change the construction of their social reality. By doing so, they bring together their reality. It is impossible for a social worker to help if he can't come to some agreement about what he/she is allowed to discuss.

People not only effect each other's constructions of reality by interacting, their constructions are also influenced by the organization they are working for and by the contemporary political and economical situation.

In the seventies, behavioral theory was not done in the Netherlands. In psychosocial care Freudian and Marxist theory and methods were used. In the eighties, the liberals introduced financial cutbacks and the ideology of the free market. Freud and Marx went out, and Pavlov and Skinner came into the psychosocial arena. At that time, many children's homes used operant and classic conditioning procedures to increase social competence in children and adolescents.

Dissimilar logics

As personal occurrences effect the subjective construction of social reality, shared forms of education and shared roles in organizations, affect the way those people react to challenges. Because of their shared construction, they develop their own logic. The distinction Habermas makes between system and life world, is very distinguishable. Systems like the government or service organizations are fully rationalized. The principles of rationalization are efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. By the life world Habermas means 'the shared common understandings, including values, that develop through face to face contacts over time in various social groups, from families to communities. The life world carries all sorts of assumptions about who we are as people and what we value about ourselves: what we believe, what shocks and offends us, what we aspire to, what we desire, what we are willing to sacrifice to which ends, and so forth'.²

The social professional is active between the rationalized organization and the free

² Frank, Arthur W. (2004) Notes on Habermas: Life world and System, <http://www.ucalgary.ca>, university of Calgary

market ideology of the government on the one hand, and the life world of the service user on the other. As long as the social worker refuses to choose, he will not be taken seriously by his manager or by the people.

In a multifunctional organization of childcare the management has invested a lot in an intake program. The family having problems with their child is encouraged to follow the program of the institute. The goal of this intense agenda is to reach an agreement about what is to be done by each of the actors. International congresses present the program as innovative. Due to time constraints and the urgency of the situation, it happens more and more that a child is placed without following this program first.

The youngster that is removed from home doesn't know anything about investments in modern intake programs. He only knows one thing: "This is shit. What am I doing here?" His logic is full of emotions, desires and personal meanings.

The manager, often not knowing the youngsters personally, is concerned about the weakness of the financial situation of the organization. His construction of reality is: "when I don't accept this urgent placement now, I risk bankruptcy." To prevent economic failure he makes a rational decision: "These urgent placements without the family following the intake program, avoids liquidation".

The perspective of the social professional is also justifiable. His logic is: "If I can come to an agreement I can offer an appropriate arrangement and the family is more motivated". The professional is trained to empathize with real people. However, because the manager is more powerful in the organization, the youngster is placed without following the program. The social professional is split by his loyalty to the organization and the needs of the youngster.

The identity of the social professional

The identity of the social professional is trapped between the requirements of the system and the life world (Kunneman, 1996; van Vliet & Plemper, 2003; Tonkens 2003). Social workers are increasingly subject to detailed procedures, targets, outcome measures and managerial oversight. There is hardly any time left to do the work they are trained for; helping people. In a registration system like KISIT, family workers have to score, even where their interventions are concerned.

Some time ago, a practitioner told me she makes randomly some notes after each visit. Once a month, she enters the data into the computer.

These types of control are so exaggerated that a family guide in the Netherlands at the moment can only use 17% of his time for contact with his clients³. A family guide in this situation is no longer a social professional, but a civil servant. This subjection to the system, not only takes increasingly more of the civil practitioner's time, but also undermines its own identity.

Recently the Medical Care (AWBZ) financed part of the informal care. To get paid a formal screening is required. Practitioners working with the homeless not only have to spend time to fill in the required documentation, but they are also forced to focus on the weak points of the homeless. This is directly contrary to the empowerment approach they developed.

Because social workers lacked an answer to this kind of situation, they developed the Calimero-syndrome.⁴

Beyond the crisis

To rediscover his identity, the social worker first has to realize how to operate within the confines of different logics. The social constructive view is useful when analyzing this approach. It also helps him to realize that the focus of his work is in the life world of the client. This fundamental choice can return to the social professional his identity, and self esteem. It's the faculties of higher education's job to train self-confident social professionals. Apart from analyzing these positions, students need to gain insight into the normativeness of theoretical constructions, and take their own ethical position (Kunneman, 1996). Institutes of higher education do succeed these days in doing so.

These days the cognitive behavioral approach is highly appreciated by managers and politicians. Students are not only trained in cognitive behavioral techniques, they are also stimulated to research the presuppositions of this approach.

³ Dullen, G. (200.) *Deltaplan geeft gezinsvoogden als proef lagere caseload*, Perspectief, ministerie van Justitie)

⁴ Laan, G. van der (2002) *Moderne technologie als metafoor* Fontys Hogeschool, Eindhoven

Instead of fixed programs, institutes of higher education organize realistic situations in which students experience the conflicting logics. They operate in virtual institutions and they have several training periods. They are asked to analyze the positions of the managers and the clients and under supervision they are encouraged to reflect on their moral choices.

The professors of colleges of higher vocational education recently introduced can support the development of the identity of the social professional.

The core business of the social worker

The fundamental choice for the life world of the client helps to push back the exceeding rationality of the system. By connecting with their attributes within the context they have to live in, social professionals can empower people to overcome their problems the most appropriate way; their own way.

In this section I want to demonstrate three recent methods in which the social worker makes this fundamental choice. Firstly, I would like to draw your attention to two characteristics of the present theory: normativeness and the fundamental choice for the life world (discourse) of the client. Next, I will use an example in which the Family Group Conference can cooperate with child welfare services. Controlling their own world and assigning meaning to their experiences is fundamental. Finally, I will discuss some aspects of Constructive Social Work.

The presence theory

Since Baart published his 'theory of the presence' several publications followed.⁵ I would like to draw your attention to three features of his approach: his moral choice for the vulnerable people in society; the presupposition that there are several logics, in his

⁵ Baart, A. (2001) *Een theorie van de presentie* Utrecht, Lemma; (2002) *Aanzetten tot een theorie van de Derde Partij met behulp van de presentietheorie* Landelijk centrum Opbouwwerk / Actioma, Den Haag (Lezing door Andreis Baart op de Vakconferentie Opbouwwerk in 2001); Kal, D. (2002/2003) *Radicale aansluiting. Over de presentiebenadering en de geestelijke gezondheidszorg* Bundeling 8 artikelen 'ggz en presentie' Actioma-bericht, Den Haag

words discourses; and the position of the social worker as a lawyer for the vulnerable.

The family group conference

Some years ago the Family Group Conference (Eigen Kracht Conferentie) was introduced in the Netherlands. Next I will demonstrate how the FGC can work together with child welfare organizations.

Hans (7) has severe behavioral disorders. He is obsessive, aggressive and he demolishes things. His parents are exhausted. Hans is placed for some time in a crisis shelter. His parent want him to live with them, but they are afraid they can't manage his behavior.

Normally, parents in the Netherlands experiencing these kinds of problems with their children go to the regional childcare service. After screening the child, a diagnosis follows. After a waiting period of several months a child like Hans is often placed in a foster home, day care centre or residential care. Often the parents are ashamed because they think they have failed. The social workers are supposed to find a way to manage Hans.

In this particular case however, a Family Group Conference was organized. All people who were significant to Hans and his parents were invited to the conference. Twenty-one people were involved: some were cousins of Hans, some were friends, uncles and aunts of the parents and the parents of the mother. After the professionals gave relevant information the family group chose to support the parents and Hans by the following:

1. Certain people were selected by name to function as a support network to the parents when necessary.
2. A roster was drawn up concerning fixed evenings to baby-sit each week.
3. The parents of the mother were always available as backup, if appointments didn't work out.
4. Several weekends were preset for the parents to refresh. If needed, the parents could use the cottage of the parents of the mother.

Also, specialized treatment was requested for Hans at an institution associated to an university. After school care was also arranged for Hans.

It is quite possible that the regional childcare service would have come to the same conclusion as far as the specialized treatment and after school care was concerned. However, it is likely that the parents would have experienced loss of control instead of the support of their family and friends. There's also a chance that the treatment would have cost more time, because the parents might have been less highly motivated, and their endurance would have been lower because of the lack of family support. Research is required.

Constructive Social Work

Parton and O'Byrne⁶ were inspired by Shazer⁷. They wanted to develop theories *for* practice "to help both practitioners and those in the social work academy to *(re)value* the importance of developing detailed and critical analysis of the meaningfulness of language and narrative to construct change". The word 'Constructive' is not only chosen because it refers to the constructionist and narrative approaches, but also because it refers to the literal meaning 'for the core idea of *construction* (...) i.e. *building or putting together*.

The first characteristic of constructive social work is the focus on language.

Often service users begin by outlining all their problems. The attitude of the practitioner is one of 'not knowing'. He doesn't use his own ideas as a template to master the story. As an anthropologist he respectfully asks questions to understand the view of the service user. As soon as it is appropriate, he focuses on the strong aspects by asking whether there were moments in the client users life in which there were no problems, and what they did to make the difference.

Another technique is to request solutions instead of conversing primarily about problems. "For example, if some one reports having a bad argument last night, we can wait for an opportunity to ask 'How did you end it?'"

Within this approach, the service user is seen as the person with most experience of the

⁶ Parton, N & P. O'Byrne *Constructive Social Work. Towards a new practice* Palgrave, Hampshire, New York

⁷ Shazer, S de (1988) *Clues: Investigating Solutions in Brief therapie* Norton, New York/London,

problem and of the exceptions. The social workers possess the expertise required to ask helpful questions.

What do you think your wife will say How should it be as

He also helps to co-construct new stories that make solution-building possible.

'Suppose that when you leave here, you go out and do what you have to do, you get home, have something to eat and later go to bed; and while you are asleep something miraculous/magical happens and the problems that brought you here vanishes, in the click of the finger; but because you were asleep you don't know this has happened. When you wake up in the morning what will be the first thing you notice that tells you this has happened?'

A story like this helps to articulate the differences. It helps to construct solutions without discussing the problem. Of course people don't live in a fairy tale. They have to deal with others. To help them consider another's viewpoint, you can ask questions from the perspective of others.

*I can imagine you're angry because of the decision of the juvenile court judge.....
I can understand you want your child living with you again. I can't change the decision, but I can help you reach your goal. What do you think the judge wants to see you doing in order to change their decision? What do you do that makes a difference? Imagine what your wife thinks when she sees your behavior
What do you think your daughter will see? ... what would she think of it?*

At this point, I will not discuss more about this approach. Those who are curious, and want to know more about constructive social work, I will refer to the authors.

By sketching some features of the presence theory, the family group conference and social constructive work, I wanted to give you an idea about the way in which social professionals can connect with the life world of people. To realize this approach the contemporary system of control has to be replaced by another type of accountability. In the next paragraph I suggest a trust-model.

The trust-model

The excessive way in which the government tries to measure the results of social work is increasingly expansive. At the same time it doesn't satisfy. Registration software and the

figures it delivers, have the appearance of accurateness but it gives no insight on what really matters, the question is whether or not the service use is satisfied. This system of control puts the social workers on the defense. The implicit message to both the practitioner and the service user is 'we don't trust you'. It is obvious that social workers must be accountable, but there must be other ways more suitable for social work and less expensive.

To find an alternative to the strong impulse of the rationalized system that seeks to control the social professional, I suggest the trust-model. To be legitimized, social professionals have to be trusted on all levels. I will suggest some options on how to gain trust on several levels. I'll start on the level of the service user. Next I'll give some options for the social professional. Then I'll discuss the way organizations in the field of care and welfare can gain confidence. I'll finish with the level of society.

The service user

When people don't trust social professionals they will not visit them for sure. Unlike measuring the quality of a computer, it is not easy to comment on the quality of the service you get from a social worker. Recent studies even suggest that the client plays a prime role in the therapeutic process. Instead of therapy being a function of the therapist, it is now becoming ever more apparent that the client plays a prime role in the therapeutic process. If the client does not absorb, utilize and follow through on the facilitative efforts of the therapist, then nothing happens.⁸ Linking to the live world of the user seems to fit with these findings.

The social professional

Without self-esteem it is cumbersome for the professional to gain trust both from the service user and the manager. A clear identity is essential. A fundamental choice to the service user helps to clarify his position. A suitable model, an appropriate training and a moral code are necessary. Education and research must be present.

⁸ Brian Rodgers: *An Exploration into the Client at the Heart of Therapy: A qualitative 19 perspective Person Centred & Experiential Psychotherapies* (WAPCEPC Journal) Vol 2, No 1 2003

Instead of putting codes in a computer, it is more suitable to account for his activities by case discussions, interpersonal case discussions and assessment by colleagues. The professional also uses the client feedback to improve his work.

The organization

Many organizations for care and welfare give the impression of a soccer club with a strong manager who cuts down costs by sending the coach home. Planning and control is guaranteed, but the soccer players aren't trained. They increasingly lose matches. The stake holders lose confidence and the market value decreases. To cut more costs the best players are sold You all know how this story ends.

To regain the confidence of both the people and the politicians, organizations have to invest in good coaches. By reshuffling the tasks that a social worker has to do and providing more time to discuss cases, the organization sorts out the problem of dissatisfied social workers. It also invests in the self-esteem of its practitioners.

Within the framework of quality control the organization arranges all kinds of client feedback. The results can be used to increase the quality of the professional.

Like the manager of the soccer club, the manager of an organization for care and welfare is responsible for the financial situation. He is also responsible for the quality of the social professional.

The society

To justify the money spend in care and welfare, every fourth year visitations are conducted. Research on effectiveness is part of this visitation. Improvement is emphasized.

Summary

To prevent the social worker being jammed between the economic and rationalized logic of managers and politicians on the one hand, and the life world of the people on the other, he needs to develop a healthy identity. The social constructive view can help to overcome the identity crisis the social professional is in. It offers a model to analyze the

conflict a social professional has to deal with, and forces the social worker to make a clear and moral choice for the life world of his clients. This view seems also suitable to develop an indigenous body of practice theory for social work. The presence theory, the family group work and constructive social work demonstrates the possibilities.

To regain confidence from both the people and the politicians, the rationalized system of planning and control has to be replaced by the trust model. To develop this model we have to find ways to justify the money used in this sector.

Questions to discuss in the workshop

- a. Do we need the social constructive view to develop the identity of the social professional or are other existing model as suitable or even more suitable
- b. What elements are necessary for a trust model to be as accountable as the contemporary model based on quantity analysis?