



The social worker–client relationship— a Sartrean approach

by Björn Blom

Several theorists argue that a close and mutual relationship between social worker and client is the 'core' of social work practice. However, this relationship is not examined in a profound way. In the article, the assumption of the essential relationship between social worker and client is scrutinized, using Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological, existential philosophy. The aim is to see what Sartre's theory can bring to the discourse about this relationship as a central aspect of social work as a field of knowledge. Ultimately this is of importance for intervention as well as evaluation.

Relationships—the core of social work practice

What makes people change? Which are the efficacious ingredients in social work practice? How can change mechanisms in social workers' interventions be described and conceptualized? These are questions that social workers and researchers constantly deal with, in one way or another. For obvious reasons, it is important that social workers have conceptual guidance in their work, and that evaluators are able to evaluate interventions on adequate theoretical grounds.

A common theoretical answer to the question of what 'works' in social work practice is the relationship between social worker and client (cf. Payne 1991; 1997). Empirical support for this claim is quite convincing. Several researchers have given accounts of different central aspects of this relationship that are of importance for human change. A number of studies about effectiveness in social work show that, in order to be successful, social workers must establish a relationship of commitment, trust, caring, genuineness, empathy and acceptance (Howe 1987; Kristiansen 1999; Miller and Rollnick 1991; Patterson 1986). Frank and Frank (1991) argue that the single most important factor is an emotional and trustful relationship.

Nevertheless, these accounts do not really explain how human change is brought about. At best, it is possible to see a correlation between these aspects

and a change in the client, but such a correlation does not offer a profound explanation of the causal mechanisms within the social worker–client relationship (cf. Pawson and Tilley 1997).

Like most social phenomena, social work is an activity that can be looked at in several ways, depending on the observer's perspective (cf. Howe 1987; Payne 1997). Social work is carried out on different levels, e.g. community work, group work or case work. Differences also occur in the observer's view of society. For example, is social work about helping people to adapt to established social systems, or is the aim emancipation from social oppression?

In this article I focus on the micro level, and suggest that an important aim of social work practice is to help individuals or groups achieve self-fulfilment. Thus, my view can be categorized as what Payne (1997) calls the reflexive-therapeutic perspective. Obviously, important social work can be pursued grounded in other perspectives. Payne called these the socialist–collectivist and the individual–reformist perspectives. Examples of the first are anti-oppressive and empowerment approaches, and examples of the latter are cognitive-behavioural and task-centred social work.

Even though social work, in a global perspective, has been broadened towards social and community development (Midgley 1995) as well as empowerment and advocacy approaches (Rose 1990; Solomon 1976), a great deal of social work—at least

in the Nordic countries—is reflexive–therapeutic or individualist–reformist, where social worker–client relationships are essential (Bernler and Johnsson 2001; Bernler *et al.* 1993; Kokkin 1998; Lenner-Axelsson and Thylfors 1999; Morén 1994; Nygren 1992; Nygren and Soydan 1997)

In brief, the reason for the focus on this relationship—as was touched upon initially—is the view that without the social worker–client relationship, it is not possible to give adequate help; the relationship is a necessary prerequisite. Payne (1991) argues that relationships become important in social work because the relationship between client and worker is the vehicle of the continuity of the social work process, because a broad involvement in clients' lives is needed which cannot be achieved in distinct episodes or limited interactions, and because of the effectiveness of relationship as a medium for achieving change in people's lives' (pp. 26–28)

The advocacy of the idea of a close and mutual relationship between social worker and client as the core of social work practice might surprise in light of the discussion on burnout in the human services. In a flood of articles and research reports, it is claimed that close relationships lead to burnout, stress and lack of compassion (e.g. Leiter 1992; Maslach 1978, 1993). However, the phenomenon, burnout, and its causes, have been seriously questioned by a number of researchers on theoretical (Asplund 1987; Morén 1994), as well as on empirical grounds (Söderfeldt 1997). Based on those arguments and empirical findings, I claim that eventual correlation between close relationships and burnout (whatever it is?) is spurious. Burnout (in most cases fatigue) depends on high workload (too many superficial contacts) rather than the negative effect of close relationships *per se*. Moreover, the fact that social workers and other people are sometimes subjected to fatigue does not diminish the importance of relationships in social work.

Obviously, the relationship between social worker and client implies more than just being a base for change. By way of example, the relationship can also constitute a base for support (Bernler *et al.* 1993); existential confirmation (Rogers 1951, 1961) or for the creation of meaning via the narrative structuring

taking place in the conversation (Sarbin 1986; White and Epston 1990). However, I argue that when clients' self-chosen change is the focus, increased clarity on the subject is offered by Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological existential philosophy, which essentially is about human relations.

In this article, two social work theories are presented that focus on the relationship between social workers and clients. They function as examples in order to analyse what Sartre's theory can add to the relationship discourse. However, before they are introduced, I touch upon some critical remarks that have been made against Sartre's theory.

Critique of Sartre's thinking from different perspectives

It might appear foolhardy using Sartre's existential phenomenology for a theoretical scrutiny—a theory that has been much criticized for a long time. In the 1980s, post-modern ideas, though variously defined, made progress and challenged the so-called grand narratives (among them Freud's, Marx's and Sartre's theories), i.e. theories claiming to be true and generalizable to different contexts.

Post-modern ideas involve the assumption that there are no absolute truths, only more local accounts of reality, thus facts are contextually determined. Moreover, truth is replaced by trustworthiness, and validity is a question of pragmatism. Increasingly language (signs) constitutes the world, so that any distinction between the appearance and the real is lost (Bauman 1987; Baudrillard 1983; Lyotard 1984; Rorty 1980, 1989). The pros and cons of post-modern ideas have also been actively discussed in relation to social work, even if not explicitly with regard to Sartre's ideas (Howe 1994; Pardeck *et al.* 1994; Parton 1994; Taylor-Gooby 1994; Taylor and White 2000).

However, post-modern ideas have quite recently been heavily attacked from several philosophical directions (Bhaskar 1989, 1991; Gellner 1992a, b; Habermas, 1985, 1990; Outhwaite, 1987, 1994). Most convincing, as I see it, from a critical realistic perspective (Bhaskar 1989, 1991), showing that with

(radical) post-modern assumptions, reality is nothing other than the researcher's construction in a particular historical and cultural position. Reality and truth become relative, both ontologically and epistemologically. Critical realism distrusts these ideas, based on a more realistic ontology, but acknowledges relativism on the epistemological level, i.e. sees knowledge as socially constructed. In other words: there are truths but these are not definitive (reality might change), and our observations are dependent on theory, but not determined by it.

Some writers argue that critical realism is a relevant meta-theoretical base for social work research (Kazi 1998, 2000; Kazi *et al.* 2002; Nygren and Soydan 1997). As I understand it, Sartre's phenomenology is consistent with a critical realistic ontology (cf. Sartre 1937, 1989). This means that it theoretically tries to explain what is going on within a relationship, assuming there is a reality irrespective of the observer. Events and aspects of relationships are not merely constructions of the researcher, presenting one of an infinite number of ways of seeing things. The possibility of combining Sartrean ideas with critical realism has already been paid attention to by Dauermark *et al.* (1997, 2002).

Sartre's theory has also been criticized from within the discourse of social work theory. Payne (1997) argues that problems with existential ideas, such as Sartre's, in social work are the lack of clarity and the difficulty of forming clear targets and agreed explanations of behaviour. In addition, existential starting-points may be criticized for their vagueness and lack of rigour, and for the lack of any evidence of the effectiveness of the techniques proposed. The theory does not tell us what we should do to intervene effectively in the client's situation within the relationship. Moreover, social work based on existential ideas presumes voluntary, fairly self-motivated clients.

The latter critique concerns the difficulties involved in implementing existential ideas in social work practice. Accordingly, I believe it would present difficulties trying to use Sartre's theory as a social work theory—it was not constructed for that purpose. Nevertheless, as I try to show here, it can be used for a discussion of existing social work theories

and potentially it can be integrated with future social work theories. Thus I agree with Payne (1997) when he says that existential ideas fit well with the central principles and value base of social work. There are already a few interesting attempts to integrate Sartrean thoughts into social work theory (Börjesson 1974, 1977; Thompson 1992). Nevertheless, I do not believe that these authors have used the full potential of Sartre's theory.

Two theories of social work

My theoretical standpoint is represented by a synthesis of two theories of social work. The first derives from Nygren (1992) and Nygren and Soydan (1997) and suggests that social work is an activity that is carried out at the interface between the individual and society. In situations where the relationship between the individual and society is what Nygren (1992) calls distorted, one can talk about social exposure. The focus is society's limiting structures rather than individual failing.

He considers that social work aims at change through intervention, i.e. the social worker intervenes—with her/his presence—in the socially exposed person's distorted life situation. The social worker's intervention is (whenever possible) made together with a co-subject; i.e. the intervention is not only aimed at and towards the client as an object.

Nygren's concepts and assumptions are at an early stage, and hence need further development. Above all, this is true when Nygren (1992) postulates that the relationship between social worker and client constitutes the 'core' in social work. This assertion has to be discussed in more detail.

Morén's (1994) way of defining social work is the second contribution to my synthesis. In a critique of what he—in theory as well as social work practice—regards as a turn to psychotherapeutic treatment or bureaucratic handling of material resources, Morén has constructed a theory of human assistance for social work. He claims that to regard social work in terms of human assistance can open up the predominant frame of thought, and make the 'blind spot' of social work visible; the usually un-seen or not under-

stood assistance aspect. According to Morén, social work practice is not homogenous:

Sometimes the practitioners provide limited services, such as financial assistance and focused counselling. Measures are limited in time and no demands are made on the client to change his or her way of life. Social work in this respect can be characterized as the adjustment of or compensation for difficult living conditions in relation to prevailing societal conditions, and in respect of that aspect of the task, successful achievements do not ultimately depend on a deeply personal relationship with the client.

Sometimes the picture changes. The social workers encounter people dwelling in very disordered and destructive conditions; a chaotic outer reality goes hand in hand with a likewise chaotic inner reality. Problems often have developed over a long period of time (often decades), and the social worker cannot contribute to an alteration for the better by means of simple measures or decisions. Instead the task is to participate in a long-term process of transforming or remoulding the individual's self-image, conception of the world, and eventually his or her way of approaching the world.

To participate in such a transformation or remoulding of another person's way of life requires that the social worker and the client develop a personal relationship that is durable, reliable, trusting—and based on the principles of nearness, reciprocity and non-moralising. Hence, with regard to this aspect of the work task, the personal relationship between the social worker and the client appears to be a basic condition for being able to contribute to a process of human change. (Morén 1994, pp. 158–189)

Morén designates the first aspect as adjustment/compensation and the second as transformation/remoulding. He points out that, in practice, social work is carried out in the borderland between the two positions; i.e. the aspects are inter-twined and contemporary. However, he postulates that transformation is the central aspect of social work. A fundamental condition is the development of a close and personal relationship between social worker and client. The relationship is a base for understanding

if the client is socially exposed. The relationship is also necessary for giving the client hope of the possibility to influence his or her life situation. Such a relationship will be characterized by a mutual challenge of self-images and views of the world. Morén writes that one will discover oneself when encountering the other person. The process is connected with pain, anxiety and resistance to (possibly) giving up oneself and becoming another.

The social worker's primary task is not to diagnose and treat, but to understand and assist in making exposed life-situations visible to the client. Morén writes that making the situation visible is the very assistance, and that when the socially exposed person's life situation is made visible, when new possibilities to interpret have shown possible change, the assistance is finished.

Nygren (1992) writes, inspired by Jürgen Habermas, that social work has an emancipating and innovative interest in knowledge. I claim that this presumes that social work implies a rationality which Morén argues is based on 'un-knowing' (Blom 1999). At the risk of over-simplification, this can be described as being open to the unknown, by deliberately putting your pre-understandings aside.

These are normative standpoints against the view that social work only can be pursued with mere means-end rationality, based on a knowing about the other person. Morén's way of looking at social work delivers a fruitful contribution to this discourse, but some of his assumptions can be further developed with the help of Sartre's theory. Above all, this is true for the concept of transformation. A deeper discussion of this concept is attempted in the article. However, before doing that, I present some of Sartre's phenomenological existential philosophy.

Themes in Sartre's thinking, important for social work

Sartre analyses the foundations that characterize human existence. In short, he means that man's existence is freedom: transcendence, negativity and relation to himself. However, Sartre points out a contradiction in this existence: it is a fundamental free-

dom, but also a striving after being-in-itself; to give oneself the same features as an object (by identifying with a defined social role, striving after a social position etc.) According to Sartre, the striving after being-in-itself is a way of escaping the anxiety we experience before our own freedom (Sartre 1943, 1986; Stevenson and Haberman 1998)

In something that looks like an incantation, Sartre says that man¹ is not what he is, and is what he is not. It is a fundamental feature in man's existence that we live through something that does not exist: the imaginary. Man can 'throw himself out', make continual drafts of his future; we live in anticipation and longing after something. These phenomena are characterized by negativity; i.e. they are not given but marked by absence. This means that man's conditions are not determined, he is his own legislator. Thus, man is capable of transcending (going beyond, transgressing) what is given by negating the circumstances through what is possible. Man is a relationship to himself and has a distance to facticity (the given, the permanent). Man has a possibility to choose other goals and, as such, deny what is factual. Sartre summarizes this by saying that man's being is transcendence (Sartre 1946, 1977; 1943, 1986)

Nothingness

Through man's existence, Nothingness (an absence, a lack) enters the world. Nothingness is the part of my existence that is not the life I actually have been living. I am something more than my own life story, I am what I have not realized, I am my possibilities. Nothingness is thus an existential category that constantly opens new and, by ourselves, unforeseen ways to enter upon. Nothingness implies that man's being is not determined. The absence of being forces man to choose his own acts and create himself (Sartre 1946, 1977; 1943, 1986; Stevenson and Haberman 1998)

Consciousness

Consciousness is a nothingness. It is not independent of its content. On the contrary, consciousness is its own content, and if the content is removed only emptiness remains. Consequently, it is meaningless

to talk about consciousness in itself (Sartre, 1943, 1986)

Freedom

Man can not exist without being free; man's being is freedom. Sartre denies the existence of God, which implies that we are forced into freedom. There is nothing, a priori, that can support man's choice. Not in religion, tradition, cultural norms or in man's biology are there normative foundations to fall back on (Sartre 1943, 1986; Stevenson and Haberman 1998)

Being

Sartre uses two existential forms of being: being-in-itself and being-for-itself. He draws a sharp line between these forms. The first form, being-in-itself, is the world without consciousness. It is the way of being of a thing. To be-in-itself (*en soi*) means that it is what it is, it cannot relate to something else or miss the not-being. In contrast, being-for-itself is the self-conscious man's existential form; the world that is created by his consciousness. Man is characterized by, not only being what he is. He can pose new goals, and say no to the old and given. He can always choose to transcend himself. Man is relating to himself and not only in-itself, but for-itself (*pour soi*) (Sartre 1943, 1986)

In Sartre's Magnum Opus *Being and Nothingness*, a third form of being is described, namely being-for-others. This form will be described more thoroughly shortly.

A deeper meaning of transformation

Returning to social work, Morén (1994) stresses the necessity of a personal, close and durable relationship as a fundamental condition for transforming social work. But why is this relationship so important? Morén says that within the relationship, the socially exposed person's situation is made visible. Here, new options for interpretation and acting are uncovered. Sartre's concepts can add depth here. According to him, other people are essentially the most important for our knowledge about ourselves (Sartre 1943,

1986) He assumes that man can be-for-itself, but he also argues that, at the same time you are-for-yourself, you can only see yourself through the other person who is looking at you (Sartre 1943, 1986)

Here Sartre is positing something essential—the form of being he calls being-for-others. In interaction with the Other, I become aware of my relationship to myself as well as the Other. Through the Other who sees me, I discover myself. It is even true, that I have to pass through the Other to become aware of myself. Sartre also says that my being-for-others makes me an object in the world. To be-for-others is like being an object, i.e. for-itself. However, through my existence as object for the Other, it becomes possible to acknowledge the Other as subject or transcendence (Sartre 1946, 1977; 1943, 1986). How is it possible that the relationship facilitates to be-for-itself, but turns me into a being-in-itself?

This demands a thorough explanation of Sartre. Thus, let us follow the process within the relationship with the Other, from the beginning. Imagine a situation where two persons, Ego and Alter, are in the same room. Alter initially looks out of a window, at the same time he is being watched by Ego. To Ego this means that Alter is perceived as something in the room. In Ego's consciousness Alter is a phenomenon, comparable with other perceived things in the room. After a while, Alter turns around and directs his eyes towards Ego. Apparently this makes the situation change. Sartre (1943, 1986) argues that the Other is an object, albeit of a special kind, until the Other directs his eyes towards me. Then I experience the Other as a subject.

Alter, who a moment ago was a phenomenon in Ego's consciousness, has, by turning his eyes away from the window towards Ego, changed into a subject. However, not only Alter changes by this, Ego also changes. Before the eyes of the other, I turn into an object. Thanks to this I have access to what I am, to my facticity. The Other is indispensable if I shall be able to comprehend my own being in its totality. My self-relation is necessarily mediated through the Other, understood as the one who sees me (Sartre 1943, 1986).

Nygren (1992), as does Morén (1994), assumes

that an encounter between two subjects takes place within a good relationship. How does this assumption relate to Sartre's theses? According to Sartre, it is not really the Other we encounter, but his eyes or presence as a subject. Through the eyes, we experience the Other, we feel the other on our body (Sartre 1943, 1986).

To paraphrase: an encounter between two persons is not an encounter between subjects. It is an encounter between persons perceiving that Alter, as a subject, turns his eyes towards Ego who is an object. The eyes of the Other make me become an object, and vice versa. Thus, it is necessary to experience oneself as an object, in order to get access to one's facticity. This sounds like a veritable antithesis to Morén's discussion. Encountering people within a transforming relationship could hardly imply regarding the Other as an object, and being regarded as an object oneself, could it? This needs an explanation.

Sartre declares that the Other reveals for me how impossible it is to be an object except for another freedom. Consequently, the Other is for me first and foremost a being that I am an object before, i.e. the being whereby I gain objectivity (Sartre 1943, 1986).

It seems as if, when we are perceived as an object, we will realize that we cannot be an object, by experiencing the freedom of the Other. The Other is the myself from which nothing separates me (Sartre 1943, 1986). My similarity with the Other, his freedom and possibilities, can be understood when I feel the eyes of the Other on me.

Objectification can bring my own freedom to light. But what happens when I have discovered my freedom? Sartre postulates that when I discover the eyes of the Other, I will experience fear, shame or vanity. Irrespective of which of these feelings appears, it will make me strive to become an object again. In brief, the concrete experience of fear or shame leads to an unpleasant feeling of being a thing. A being-in-itself whose possibilities are transgressed by the Other. This makes my being-for-itself threatened. Vanity, however, does not cause unpleasant feelings; instead the vain person enjoys being the admired object of the Other. However, the vain person does have a paradoxical project, which implies that he strives to influence

the Other to continue his admiration. However, when the vain person does this, it is in his capacity as a subject. Thereby the vain person ceases to be the admired object (Sartre 1943, 1986).

Summing up, I believe it is possible to give a deeper meaning to the concept of transformation—using Sartre's theoretical language—in the following way: the basic condition between two consciousnesses is that both can regard each other, both can be objects for each other, but not simultaneously. To be an object does not mean to be a thing, when the thing only is one of several kinds of objects (Sartre 1943, 1986). When I discover that the Other regards me, I experience myself as an object, I experience my facticity. However, when I feel on my body, that the one who regards me is a subject and, in the same moment, understand that nothing separates me from him, I discover myself as a subject (freedom and possibility). When fear, shame or vanity appear, I make the Other into an object and my objectivity is replaced by subjectivity. In a 'normal' relationship this is a constantly on-going interplay.

Implications for social work practice

Nygren and Morén argue that social work practice should be emancipating, innovative and thereby imply rationality based on un-knowing (cf. Blom 1999). This normative standpoint finds support in Sartre's thinking.

Sartre argues that it is impossible to have knowledge about the Other as a subject. Not because the Other's consciousness is inscrutable, but because the other's consciousness, exactly like my own, is a nothingness. It is not possible to possess knowledge about the other as a subject as the concept of knowledge is tied to the concept of object. Our experience of the Other as a subject consists of being objects ourselves before the Other as subject (Sartre 1943, 1986).

In other words, a social worker cannot know anything about the client's subjective being beforehand—perhaps afterwards, but then as objective being. The social worker can only experience the client as a subject when the client regards the social worker as an object. This makes it impossible for the social

worker to have knowledge about the client's subjective experience of being socially exposed, a priori.

Sartre (1943, 1986) argues that real contact between two consciousnesses, as subjectivities, cannot arise: either the other is an object for me, or I am an object for the other—there is a struggle for 'control'. Thus, the relationship between two consciousnesses is, essentially, a fight. Hence, it is impossible to have a subject–subject relationship where the social worker as well as the client are subjects at the same time.

Sartre's arguments, however, imply that Morén's and Nygren's thesis about the encounter between two reciprocal subjects tends to become problematic. However, the relationship between people is an interplay between for-itself conditions and in-itself conditions, between subject and object conditions—and therefore a relatively harmonious state is possible (Sartre 1943, 1986).

It does not have to be problematic that both persons cannot be subjects simultaneously. If I understand it right, a mutual relationship, in Sartre's terms, consists of a continuous pendulation between the basic existential forms of being: *in-itself* and *for-itself*. Maybe it can be said that the 'fight' between consciousnesses makes it even in the long run.

According to this perspective, social workers cannot possess knowledge about socially exposed persons as subjects, in advance. This is an inescapable condition of human existence. Maybe it is not even necessary that social workers have this kind of knowledge. Transforming social work aims at making exposed situations and the possibilities to interpret and act visible to the client (Morén 1994). Since changes, according to Morén, should not be normative but possible, it is sufficient if the client discovers these possibilities. Consequently, the social worker is necessary within the relationship, but it is not necessary that she/he has or even obtains knowledge about the client as a subject. It is sufficient if the client discovers his/her exposed position and the new possibilities to interpret the situation and act.

It is possible to conclude that the client should use the social worker—in a positive sense. Morén argues that the relationship with the social worker is something that should be 'consumed'. This means

that the social worker's intervention in distorted life situations—the transforming aspect of social work—consists of offering a relationship and lending him/herself to the socially exposed individual. This is in sharp contrast to the notion that human change is possible to plan, control and manipulate.

Summing-up

Initially I put forward some questions about what makes people change, and how this can be described and conceptualized. I regard these as theoretical as well as empirical matters. The article has so far dealt with these questions theoretically, but it is legitimate to ask if Sartre's thinking has any bearing in empirical social work research.

In an ongoing empirical study (Morén and Blom 2001), we are trying to identify which causal mechanisms (Pawson and Tilley 1997) led to a change in former drug abusers' lives. Our study shows, quite clearly, that the client's relationships with the social workers were of decisive importance. This is the case, in spite of the fact that the clients did not come in contact with the social workers voluntarily, nor were they initially motivated to change their situations. On the contrary, in the beginning of the contact, there were salient elements of threat such as taking children into custody or other coercive measures, as means to generating change.

As mentioned earlier, clients' low level of motivation has been put forward as an argument against existential ideas in social work practice (Payne 1997). Our study reveals that a central feature of the relationship was the clients' discovery of their own freedom, their own possibilities via interaction with the social worker. Thus, clients' motivation was not a starting-point; rather it was, gradually, generated within the relations with the social workers.

Consequently, I consider Sartre's thinking helpful when trying to answer what is happening within the social worker–client relationship. He conceptualizes active ingredients of social work by showing that when people discover their own freedom there is a subsequent possibility to choose change.

Based on the theoretical scrutiny of his ideas carried out in this article, I argue that Sartre's theory

can contribute to social work as a field of knowledge as well as to social work practice. It can do this, not as a stand-alone theory, but as an integral part of other social work theories. There is a challenge in developing this further.

Notes

- 1 In the text man means human not male.

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