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DIALOGUE AS A STRATEGY FOR ENLIGHTENING - HELP OR OPPRESSION?

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENLIGHTENING AND HELP – POWER AND POSITION

In the following I am going to discuss some dilemmas in The National Program for Parental Guidance, established in Norway in 1995. I want to bring attention to perspectives at macro- as well as meso-level, including concepts as: The increasing number of helpers, scientific knowledge as a threatened authority, knowledge development and meetings between different kinds of knowledge, and dialogue as the new concept of building knowledge in the private sphere.

Introduction – a macro perspective

The number of professional helpers is increasing on all areas of life. As a society we are using more and more resources on research and development in order to meet the societal and human challenges we are facing. In this situation many groups want their share of the support and are exposing their wishes and demands, while other groups are exposing their knowledge and technique in meeting these needs for help. This is an understanding of *problems seeking solutions*.

This understanding is reasonable, but it might also be very concealing. From another point of view we can get a quite new picture: The development of society is characterized by dividing up and specialization, which are leading to an explosion of knowledge within different areas. This particularisation is typical of our society, along with a huge confidence in research and development of knowledge. New knowledge about individuals is constantly developed. This knowledge makes the helpers able to describe and define the situation of each individual, especially when it comes to consideration of normality (Foucault 1973). This means that the increasing knowledge primarily concerns knowledge about what is not normal, and how helpers can contribute to a treatment in order to achieve a modification or an abolition of deviation. Closely related to this kind of knowledge many methods and techniques have been developed, connected to observation, guiding, therapy and other forms of treatment. This knowledge, these methods and techniques, become important to introduce to new areas, especially for those possessing this new insight.

This alternative understanding opens a new focus: A great deal of this knowledge, methods and techniques adopted through a highly specialized division of society, imply that many groups are establishing themselves in important positions towards other groups – where these other groups can be differentiated, separated and defined through this individual orientated knowledge. This is creating a situation in terms of position and power, versus help and dependency.

Helpers possessing this knowledge and techniques are in a central position concerning this development. People with needs are defined from the point of existing and available knowledge and techniques based on research. And at the same time there are an increasing

number of groups who, partly through this process, are considered to be in need of help. In other words: *Solution seeks problem.*

The development of monopolies of knowledge, like these, creates a basis for dominance, socially, economically and culturally. In this perspective the welfare state appears as a system for transformation of power and position, which does not seem to harmonize with the legitimating basis we usually call enlightenment and help.

Turning some new stones?

We all understand the world in different ways, and because of that we, among other things, communicate different images of reality to each other. It holds good for this text too.

Power is represented in texts, a matter of particular interest in a reading society, and can open up or close for ways of acting. Some individuals and groups represent great power of penetration for the way they understand the world, understandings that are seldom questioned. This is a kind of dominance often integrated in everyday life, it is hidden and for that reason not paid much attention. This is of great present interest when power is used for the purpose of playing on everybody's concurred values, i.e. the idea of the importance of offering knowledge and help to destitute groups, when making a point of this as both naturally and necessarily. Such ideas will not be refused by the majority in a social democratic welfare state. But, as illustrated by the introduction, the different interests behind such processes are often hard to identify, and it is also difficult to define what perspective should be the one to count. Do we have a society where problems seek solutions, or is it better described as a society where solutions seek problems? Both these macro-perspectives can be understood as reasonable. And maybe this is not a question of either – or, but a both – and. In any case, the challenge is to turn over the rocks, and look for what new perspectives can then be constructed. After this, it is possible to ask some new and more precise questions that can help us to see what is not so obvious.

In this text I intend to contribute so that some of our accustomed notions about knowledge and help can be challenged by alternative understandings. My starting point will be a historical summary of some governmental help and enlightening projects. I will paint with a broad brushstroke, and briefly present some theoretical perspectives, together with the lines of traditions these projects have been a part of. In the last part, the National Program for Parental Guidance will be introduced as an example of new lines of development. I choose, already at this point, to draw attention to one of the main conclusions: *the will to do the good does not always guarantee good will happen.*

Enlightenment for the populace

Knowledge has been highly valued and understood as the foundation of development and progress. In Norway, the spirit of enlightenment has been dominant throughout the last 200-250 years. Enlightenment for the populace has been the vital idea. The Church, The School and later The Public Health Service, have had central positions in this regard. Knowledge has been understood as something valuable for everyone, something that everybody should benefit from and take part in. The people have been the object for upbringing, and the up-bringers' version has been that this enlightening process has represented the battle against ignorance and suffering. The idea of enlightenment has for this reason been directed towards development and preservation of the community. The question of whether the knowledge that has been made the object for enlightenment and help has been requested by, or is even relevant for, groups or individuals exposed to it, has for a greater part been ignored.

When, at the end of the 19th century, the farmers in Norway were protesting against sending their children to school several days a week, this was primarily because of the way this was effecting their everyday life. The children represented an important workforce, they had a function in the household, while the utility of reading and writing was not obvious to everybody at that time. In hindsight, this message can be established as relevant. But at that time, this was a matter of two kinds of knowledge belonging to different worlds, in collision with each other: Knowledge about how to act wisely in the present, versus shaping the individual in the new society to come (Edvardsen 1996).

This can also be said of the battle, where the populace protested against the attempts of the health service at introducing hand washing as an important practice in the preventive health care. But the populace had no easy access to either water or soap, and the persistent badgering of the health service about hand washing did not fit in to the practical everyday life of the people. But the enlighteners stood their ground, not least because the obstinate resistance to enlightenment generally became proof of the need for enlightenment (Edvardsen 1996). Hand washing after a while became an important and natural criterion of cleanliness in most homes, in the same way that reading gradually spread in most of the population. The authorities made a decision and made their knowledge hold good for the common cause.

From enlightening directed towards the body of the individual, the focus moved to the healing of the body of society. From the turn of the twentieth century and up to 1986 (in our very close history), an enormous project of rescuing children was carried out in Norway. At least 1500 children of Romani people were put into orphanages and foster care, due to the situation and pernicious lifestyle of the parents. In some ways, a similar idea was the reason for rescuing another minority. The "Norwegification" of the Sami (Norwegian minority) in the fifties in Norway was a "project of emancipation", for saving the Sami from their own language and culture.

There are a lot of examples to be found where projects of help and enlightenment both have failed and, after a while, have been seen as harmful, maybe ill-natured infringements. Only to a low degree have questions been asked as to what extent the knowledge, applied to enlightening and help, has been of the interest, or requested, of all groups and individuals.

Nevertheless, the conviction is still alive that some measure of conformity and joint ways of living life should be established. A prominent example is the many Christian groups and their view of homosexuals and lesbians. In Norway, as well as in other countries, therapy, consultation and advice have been carried out in the purpose of "curing" these people from their "differentness". These days also the increasing use of the psychological ADHD diagnose on fidgety schoolchildren, and subsequent use of Ritalin (an amphetamine), is an urgent problem in need of discussion.

In eagerness to secure normality and order as a criterion for community, there has been a movement from ejection towards persistent attempts at incorporation. The need for conformity and order, and a fear of chaos and lack of clarity, with a look-out for every deviation, has made, and is still making, a lasting impression.

"Order is to keep something together as a unit by excluding differences" says the sociologist Zygmund Baumann. And when this need for order is combined with a strong need for helping other people, and also with authority, an important and pressing question is raised: Whose knowledge is valid, and how are we to act when it comes to the knowledge of the authorities?

Science as authority – in transformation

In our society, knowledge that is based on science, i.e. organized and rational knowledge, for a long time has been focused on as the first and best knowledge. And its status still remains high. But, parallel with this, it has for the recent years been looked upon with a certain amount of scepticism when it comes to how complete this knowledge is, what is hiding behind the next corner? What about the food we believe is healthy today, but tomorrow is identified as harmful? What about the fresh air in the mountains we consider to be healthy today, but in a while, perhaps will be revealed as having a pernicious influence on our health? And in the context of parental roles, what about the way we bring up our children: will there be a better theory to trust and depend upon in the next decennium?

Through the concept of "risk society" Ulrich Beck (1992) has pointed out how industrial modernization has created a lot of risks, that are unlimited in time and space, and have sources and consequences that no one can be fully aware of or able to call somebody to account for. This is, to a certain extent leading to a stronger dependence on science and rationality, while the confidence in science at the same time is crumbling away. Accepting all these threats, on the one hand we should use all our resources to find out how we can avoid this danger. On the other hand, possibly quite different threats against life and health are going to be central in the future. It is not easy for the common woman and man to make up one's own mind about what, in short or long terms, will be a curse or a blessing at the end of the story. Maybe the best, after all, is to trust one's own experiences or those of close friends? In this way, scientific rationality is, in practice, challenged by social rationality.

When science is under pressure in this way, and no longer can be understood as the only trustworthy source of knowledge, we are faced with new challenges. The social rationality is built on the foundation of experiences in everyday life inside more limited networks (Beck 1992, Lyotard 1996, 1998). Fellowship through collective consciousness and collective identity can no longer be established as the foundation for building a nation and establishing *one* people. Development of joint values, built on the basis of common knowledge, is for that reason no longer a project to be solved through enlightenment of the people. In this way enlightenment through monologue seems to be an outdated project.

The spread and the development of the relationship between the scientific and the social rationality are not easy to judge or decide, whether we are talking about technological, humanistic or social questions. To what extent people choose to rely on the knowledge produced by research, or on the experiences of their family and network, will depend on various conditions. Some of those questions will be discussed in this paper. But as an introduction it is necessary to take a short look at what is the hallmark of knowledge outside the field of science.

Knowledge outside science

Using the concept of *knowledge* about things we learn when living our lives together and acting together with others, we do not just talk about scientifically based knowledge. Other forms of knowledge are widely spread, and this knowledge is perhaps of even more importance than scientific knowledge. This knowledge has many labels, for instance informal knowledge, practical knowledge, culturally based knowledge, traditionally based knowledge or *narrative knowledge** (*In this connection I choose the concept of Jean-Francois Lyotard, *narrative knowledge*). This knowledge has for a long time been in a situation of competition with scientific knowledge, when it comes to both dissemination, status and legitimacy.

Culture and tradition deliver narrative knowledge, based upon experiences. Stories from everyday-life deliver "a bunch" of specified knowledge. In this "bunch", collective values and

attitudes, constantly changing, is lying (Gudmundsdottir 1997). When such stories from everyday life are handed over from one person to another, both transmission and interpretation is taking place. The general knowledge is understood through the special. If the transmission is successful, and the listeners can identify themselves with the content, they will be convinced. This knowledge might again be used in a lot of situations, even if it is collected from a special context. The narrator tradition from the north of Norway serve as example of values and norms delivered through transmission of everyday stories. And most families have their own stories. And those who are searching into these stories enables themselves to pick up a lot of knowledge, passed over in a more explicit and elegant way than in any textbook.

This type of knowledge, delivered by the narrative, *also* represents a way of arranging knowledge. But the rules organising narrative knowledge are different from the rules organising scientific knowledge (Lyotard 1996). Both have long traditions within their own system, and they are definitely not the same. *That variation might, in itself, threaten the need of order.*

The Parental Guidance Program

The National Program for Parental Guidance is a cooperation between three Norwegian ministries; Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs. Public health nurses, pre-school- and schoolteachers are the main target groups, and they receive training in the guidance of, and collaboration with, parents. This guidance and collaboration takes place in public health centres, kindergartens and schools. The aim is to support and strengthen the parental role in families, to prevent psychosocial problems among children and youth, and also to prevent interaction problems within the family. The program is directed towards all classes, groups and types of families. This is a continuation of earlier programs for preventive childcare.

The program started in 1995, based on an idea of the society in change, and parents being confronted with huge challenges in their parental role. It is defined as

"resource-orientated", and "the parents' own need for co-operation and guiding" is the basic idea.

The program has developed objectives from which I quote:

"The responsibility for children and youth is, first and foremost, the parents'. The public responsibility is to create the conditions in order to make it possible for parents to practice their parental role as well as possible. The program for parental guiding shall contribute in creating good meeting places where parents can exchange experiences and discuss questions in raising children. Offers of parental guiding (and father groups) have a preventive objective and is to contribute in supporting and strengthening the parental role in families with children". (Q5/97:4)

Comprehensive material, such as videos, books and note-books for professionals and parents have been developed, containing contributions from different professionals of high competence in the field of child research. The content is mainly based on eight themes for good interaction based on scientific knowledge, and these themes are central in the program. It is also a precondition in the program that the task of the professionals is to contribute with their own professional knowledge in the guidance role. Acceptance of the offer is, for the parents, intended to be voluntary.

Apparently, there is a will to do good, but the dilemmas are many. And the first dilemma I will draw attention to, is based on a macro perspective.

The Program of Parental Guidance as a legitimate idea: A first dilemma

The Norwegian psychologist Magne Raundalen* (*he is a member of the professional board for The National Program of Parental Guidance, and he is also the author of one of the books used in this program), who has several central roles in the program, writes in an article in the Norwegian newspaper Dagbladet about the Program of Parental Guidance;

"It is going to be a huge challenge to make use of all the knowledge gathered and systematised through modern child psychologist research in the recent years. And to do that in a way that will strengthen parental competence, self-confidence and the choice of direction (Raundalen, Dagbladet 30.1096).

This formulation is interesting as a starting point for reflections about what kind of motive underlies The National Program for Parental Guidance: problems seeking solutions, or solutions seeks problems? A close reading of this quotation can give us an understanding of some of the basic kind of premises in this program.

At first I will point at the existence of a connection between "*modern child psychologist research*" and "*strengthen parental competence, self-confidence and choice of direction*". This relation indicates the existence of a clear coherence between the parents obtaining possession of a specific kind of knowledge about children and the qualifications necessary for being competent parents. However, it is not obvious for everybody that such a coherence exists. It is not an inevitable understanding that the new knowledge of child psychologist research takes a special precedence *per se*. The representations in the text is in other words strengthening the understanding of new scientific knowledge being given a special position.

It is also, in the text, indirectly taken for granted that those who have the knowledge of modern child psychology research, (this means teachers, pre-school teachers and health-nurses) also have a *particular readiness* for counselling the parents in their parental role, including preventing problems of interplay in the family.

But, in spite of this, new scientific knowledge and professional helpers are seen as resources that should consequently be used.

The quotation above strengthens the understanding of the National Parental Guidance program as an alteration program on the society level, grounding its reason for existence on premises that are only to a low degree understood as inevitable, both leading in the direction of *solutions seeking problems*.

In the same way these two specific premises, more or less hidden, are lying in this program, there will also be a lot of other premises lying as a basis for the problem definition that makes parental guidance an answer. And the legitimacy of the program will depend on whether these premises can be accepted.

How can we understand development of knowledge? A second dilemma

The epistemological assumption of spreading and intake of new knowledge inside traditional enlightening has been based on an assumption that knowledge, information and news can be transferred from one individual to an other, or from one group to an other, through transmission or export (Edvardsen 1996). This is based on an idea that "somebody knows something that others should be knowing ". In the National Program of Parental Guidance

the eight themes for good interaction have got such a central position, and are in that way representing a type of curriculum in the meeting between the professionals and the parents.

The German sociologist Niclas Luhmann pointed out several weaknesses in this kind of understanding of communication. Here I want to focus on one of these: *Such an understanding, in a too high degree, overemphasizes the identity between what is transmitted and what is received.* Or, more correctly, Luhmann claims that such an identity does not in fact exist (Rasmussen 1999).

Luhmann distances himself from the idea of communication transferring news, information or knowledge from a dispatcher to a receiver. The reason for this repudiation is in Luhmann's understanding that psychical systems* can neither give away nor deliver messages. *The systems are producing their thoughts and notions themselves.* (*Psychical systems in Luhmann's theory signify a system having consciousness as a basis (Götke 1997). In this connection we can understand the single individual, both professionals and parents, as a psychical system.)

This perspective is, in a high degree, breaking with what has been the practice in a great deal of enlightenment projects, being based on the strategies of the professional helpers (Edvardsen 1996).

In Luhmann's perspective, a situation of learning will imply that the parents, as well as professionals, are able to produce thoughts and ideas, and this necessarily has to be a personal product by the individual. Because the communication is not able to be exported, and each psychical system is not acting transparently to others, no form of intersubjectivity will be established. The participators, in other words, will not be able to share their thoughts with each other, or understand the world in the same way. On the other hand, the process will for each person be a possibility to develop *original thoughts and notions*, and only that. The process and the result will in no way be the same for any of the participators in the learning system. This is to underline the epistemological position of Luhmann: We are not able to learn from others, but we can be learning by participating in communication with others.

At the same time, a consequence from such an understanding is an acknowledgement of the difficulties in planning the result of the learning process. *The personal product is developed on the foundation of people's own experiences and understanding, and they are in a high degree not the same.* In questions connected to enlightenment, given an idea of "somebody knows something important for others to know", this can be a challenging perspective.

Is dialogue a more strategically correct concept? A third dilemma

In the parental role, narrative knowledge acts as a central source. Everyday life is characterized by experiences that are constructed, and for that reason, are basic for understanding the world (Bremback 1992). And this world reaches out in time and space, where experiences from one's own and other's childhood, and experiences from one's own and other's parental practices, are central. The scientific knowledge is also represented inside this mosaic.

The parents' knowledge, values and attitudes in the parental role can by this, not unexpectedly, be understood in the relation to the parents' own background, including gender and class differences. All together, these variations will give a different foundation for how to think about the world and the child, and therefore also different aims for bringing up

children (Bremback 1992). Ideals as obedience, independence and sense of responsibility are among the norms parents subscribe to in different degrees and ways.

The professional helpers are trained in and obliged* towards a different foundation. (*The connection between the education and knowledge of professionals is complicated, and research in this area indicates that basic education is just one factor in a more complex picture (Bergmark og Lundström 2000)). And such meetings between parents and professionals can in reality imply meetings between very different norms and values. Central questions related to this are: Whose knowledge is valid, and for whom? Is the knowledge of the professional important knowledge, and is it real? Or is the parent knowledge just as essential, even if it is different? However, the question of vital importance in this connection will be whether these different forms of knowledge might be combined for the benefit of the users, and in what way this is planned in this project.

In some of the documents of the parental guiding program it is underlined that "*parents are experts on their own children*". Apparently this means that there is a lot of knowledge of great value about children among parents, and that the respect for this knowledge is the new and central point when professionals are meeting parents. This is meant to secure the basis for mutual and equal dialogue.

But, and this is a crucial point, *nowhere* in the written materials related to the National Program for Parental Guidance are there any statements about parental knowledge being of interest for the professionals. In addition, it is not mentioned that this group has any utility in developing new and important understanding of children, childhood and family settings rooted in the parent knowledge from everyday life practice. The idea of contributions of new perspectives have one dimension: *from the helper to the user*.

Furthermore, it is striking that children's own knowledge about how it is to be a child here and now is not at all mentioned in the program. Such a child-perspective is definitely absent. This underlines the partial perspective in this idea about development of knowledge *through dialogue*.

This program gives the appearance of willingness to develop knowledge through dialogue in mutual and equal meetings between parents and professionals. Nevertheless, from my point of view, the program is quite close to the same characteristics we know from the traditional *monologue* within popular education.

In this way the program is hiding behind a superior idea of dialogue between professionals and parents, hard to take seriously. In spite of this, the idea of a program of parental guidance as a meeting between equal participants, is alive.

At the same time the question can be asked whether such an idea, if put into practice, would give the intended result.

Conditions for equal dialogue: A fourth dilemma

The fourth dilemma I am going to draw attention to is connected with the conditions for the dialogue. What are the preconditions for an equal dialogue when the participants have different bases of knowledge?

There are many participants in these discussions. I will shortly mention the dispute between the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas and the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard.

Habermas and Lyotard are both concerned with equality in dialogues, but on different premises. Where Habermas focuses on equality through ideal conditions like unconstrained participation, receptivity and honesty, Lyotard focuses elsewhere. He underlines that different types of knowledge have their different characteristics, and this includes formal scientific knowledge as well as informal narrative knowledge. These different types of knowledge are established on different bases, and based on different rules. Thereby a meeting between them occurs as a meeting between different rules. Even if these rules are not visible to the participants, they are still controlling the dialogue. Being unequal and invisible, the rules are difficult to establish as common rules. Lyotard asserts that preconditions for making common rules in order to make them function must include that the rules are surveyable for both participants in the dialogue, that both participants are able to make use of the rules and that it is possible for both participants to abolish the rules.

In other words, all parties must have the same rights. It is not enough that one part understands the rules and is the master of the situation. Then the other part will subsequently find himself in a situation where we no longer can talk about an equal dialogue.

Lyotard argues that in social reality there will exist a monster of games of languages that are overlapping and heterogeneous. In this project, based on dialogue in a few meetings, I assume it will be extremely difficult to establish common meta-rules for these games of languages as a basis for development of parental knowledge. Of course, in some connections communication will incidentally be successful because people happen to meet other people with relatively equal basic knowledge. Parents meeting professionals with some of the same background and basic knowledge as themselves, may experience successful communication. For other groups this will probably not happen. These parties have no possibility of reaching each other, and there is a great danger that some of them will experience this as confusing as well as violating. And here a good result does not depend on good intentions.

Conclusion

In the light of the different perspectives and dilemmas I have called attention to in this paper, I will, as a first conclusion, claim that The National Program of Parental guidance is build on a problematic idea about intersubjectivity and universalism, an authoritative idea about the possibilities of export of knowledge and a naive trust in the equality of the dialogue between professionals and parents. At the same time I will claim that the overarching perspectives for this program are, to a large degree, resting on an understanding where "solutions seeks problems". At the same time, it is hard to reject to the full extent the societal reason for a perspective of "problems seeks solutions".

By this, I will uphold that the program is close to give legitimacy to traditional authoritarian use of power by dressing it up with concepts as dialogue and "parental expert knowledge".

However, in extension of such a conclusion it is important to underline a certain point: that all theories descend from certain connections. Lyotard, Habermas and Luhmann all have different views on central facts, leading them in different directions in the development of their understandings. The theoretical contrasts this entails, brought up in this paper, can be challenging. But also these authorities, on a level with all others, have developed knowledge that must be understood as partial. Knowledge is in other words tied to the connections that it is a result of, and is influenced by the ideals and frames of understanding of the individuals. This underlines the importance of bringing the theoretical reflections within, but establishing new knowledge about what is functioning or not, can in social science not be regarded as "great truths" valid in all places and at every time.

However, such an approach to the field of practice presuppose that knowledge can not only be understood as revealing objective reality or truth, but as constructions where certain individuals have limited overview of different connections. And because of this, it is neither desirable nor useful that "those who know something they think others should know", are given a too strong position to begin with.

But still there are other conclusions to be drawn. Based on Luhmann's theory of epistemology, The National Program of Parental Guidance appears as a quite uncertain project with regard to the question of whether any parents really change their view on the upbringing process. In Luhmann's perspective, it is not certain that the program's only concern is to enlighten the individuals. The Government is, true the formulation of this program, securing severe interest inside the field enlightenment and preventive childcare to be formulated.

So, in this important area, the program can as well be said to act as a self-description and a self-construction that can secure the self-identity and construction of meaning inside the Norwegian society. By this means, the social contacts are regulated in a way that enables the society to deal with itself.

With such a conclusion, it can also be said about this program that it fills a function that is important enough, but not similar to the one we imagine in everyday life.

But if we choose to take into consideration the consequences of The National Program of Parental Guidance, in the way it is formulated from the ministries and later interpreted in this paper, we are confronting huge challenges. It is not an easy task to secure for individuals with different knowledge their fair position within a pluralistic society.

There is a great danger in this program that the professionals are not really promoting knowledge – but rather conflicts and violations. This leads to great challenges, especially on the professional-political level, when it comes to developing and maintaining a critical view on one's own understanding and practice. From my point of view this is, above all, a matter of increasing one's consciousness about existing societal conditions and mechanisms. *This means focus on the structural level when it comes to knowledge, power, identity and community.*

If we fail to meet these structural challenges, even the most kindly intentions at the individual level will, as a whole, end up in dominance and use of power. This means that the will to do good does not always guarantee good will happen.

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