

This paper was presented at the “Many Faces of Abuse” conference hosted by Standards Plus in Auckland, New Zealand on August 10-12, 2005.

Adopting A Personalist Response Within Impersonal Service Structures

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Introduction

Abuse and harmdoing against vulnerable and socially devalued people carried out by human service workers in service settings is an individual as well as a systemic problem. We know, for example, that some of the roots of abuse are found inside the ‘abuser,’ while others have their origins in service and social systems. This paper will primarily focus on more systemic problems of abuse.

To abuse is to treat another person with whom one is in relationship in a harmful, injurious or offensive way. (We do not typically speak of violence committed against a stranger as abuse; we usually reserve the word ‘abuse’ for a situation in which a person in a position of trust violates someone whom they have some responsibility for.) In human services, this includes both paid and volunteer service relationships. My purpose is not to exhaustively analyze human service abuse, but to set a context for describing a positive response to such systemic service harmdoing. (*On the attached resource list, see Flynn & Lemay; McKnight; Sobsey; and Wolfensberger (1998) for more complete coverage of service harmdoing*). While many conditions can lead to abuse in services, I will briefly describe only three. These three conditions are particularly relevant to the theme of this conference on human service abuse, and to the positive response which I propose.

Conditions which can lead to systemic human service abuse

A **first** condition for service abuse is when a human service program or system becomes increasingly formalized and bureaucratized. A common dynamic is for organizations to become larger, more complex and more stratified over time. Signs of this process within an agency or program can include an overabundance of policies, committees, regulations, organizational layers, and so on.

One likely result of this formalization in human services is that a bureaucratic mindset takes over the ‘time and mind’ of its employees. Support for accessing typical social resources such as family, friends, schools, jobs, neighborhoods, and communities gets driven out of sight. Use of common approaches such as effective teaching, bridge-building among different concerned parties, offering positive role models, and holding high expectations for the growth and development of individuals gets driven out of mind. Instead what becomes paramount is bureaucratic considerations: doing paperwork; avoiding liability; following agency procedures; determining who is in control and who makes decisions; and so on. (*See Kendrick for more on human service bureaucracy*). Such a reversal of priorities often contributes to the condition described next; indeed, these three conditions do often overlap.

A **second** condition for systemic abuse occurs when a human service program or system takes precedence *over* the people served, *over* the service workers, or both. The program becomes more important than people. We might picture a large bureaucratic organization as mentioned above, although smaller, non-bureaucratic services and systems can also take precedence over people. What I am describing can be thought of

as the ‘de-personalization’ of the system or organization.

The program or system can take precedence over the needs, interests, abilities, relationships, and well-being of the people served. For example, an agency’s money needs can outweigh what is in the best interest of the service recipients. The service system or program can also take precedence over the abilities, ideas, strengths and relationships of the service workers. For example, service workers are often told to not get too emotionally close to the people served, as this is ‘against agency policy.’ Overall, a de-personalized program or system can become a wedge driven between people: (a) between the people served and service workers; (b) between co-workers; (c) between the people served and typical citizens; and so on. (*See McKnight for more on this issue*).

A **third** condition (which can also grow out of the first) contributing to systemic human service abuse is likely to develop when direction and guidance are imposed on service workers from above. Human service leaders, managers, administrators and directors are expected to, and should, set a vision and direction for programs and systems. Yet it is problematic when that direction is imposed without room for personal responsibility or accountability on the part of those carrying it out. This is true whether that imposed vision is itself good or bad. Such a dynamic is often exemplified by a top-down, one-way communication style.

In this problematic precondition of service abuse which I am describing, program priorities and responsibilities get set by service managers or system administrators who are far removed physically or socially from the devalued person and his or her situation. This imposition can occur through several layers of staff in a large hierarchical

organization for example, or when government directives and policies filter down to smaller, even less hierarchically-structured organizations.

Systemic patterns of service abuse

These three developments (and others) can open the door to service abuse in many ways, but I will focus only on three. As well, they have many implications and nuances that I will simplify for clarity and brevity.

First, these developments can take away from a sense of relationship, interpersonal identification and personal involvement between the people served and service workers. Concerned service workers can find themselves physically, emotionally or socially separated from the people served. This separation often develops to the point where service workers feel that they have nothing in common with the people served, not even a shared humanity. A sense of responsibility for one another is therefore damaged or lost. Service workers may find themselves thinking “I know this is wrong, but it’s out of my hands ... it’s not my job ... what can I do?”

When relationship, identification, and personal responsibility are lacking, this can lead to apathy, neglect, or outright abuse on the part of some service workers. When a service worker becomes just a slot on an organizational chart “working on” a depersonalized service recipient, or when they do not see service clients as fellow human beings, then it becomes easier to treat service recipients abusively.

Second, as a result of the developments described above, socially devalued people often become so physically and socially isolated as to be ‘hidden in plain sight’ within human service systems. They are not known in any meaningful way by those in their

community. Many devalued people are served in publically-funded programs and yet rarely see, or are seen by, typical citizens in typical places or in typical social situations. This negative reality is consistently described in evaluations and surveys of human service programs for many different groups of devalued people. (*See Flynn and Lemay; specifically Flynn and Aubry's article*).

Socially devalued people are commonly made and kept disconnected from other people with typical social status by their very own services. Almost all significant aspects of their lives get transacted within the confines of human service programs, agencies and systems. Such isolation is a reliable predictor of abuse. Harmful and abusive practices get carried out without anyone or very few seeing the negative consequences or the whole picture. This isolation and invisibility is a true vulnerability for people with low social status. This social invisibility can also result from the cover-up and deception which is inextricably linked with violence, abuse and harmdoing. (*See Gilligan for more on the link between violence and deception*).

Third, the developments described above can cause service workers to become overwhelmed and frustrated. They may feel constrained by rules and regulations, and as if they are not able to accomplish anything positive or to see any positive fruit of their efforts. Such frustration can get taken out on essentially powerless service recipients by even good service workers, often unintentionally or unconsciously. It does not often get taken out in any real way on those in leadership or management positions, since they have power and status which devalued people clearly do not have. Such (unconscious) acting out of frustration can become abusive when directed at service recipients. Human beings are always tempted to vent our anger and

frustration on the weak or on other scapegoats.

This critique of programs and systems is not meant to suggest that individual people are perfect, or that individuals would never cause or carry out abuse unless or until they were working in human service organizations. Yet individual service workers are persons who can at least grow, think, change, take responsibility, and make moral decisions. Organizations cannot do these things.

Personalism

A classic human service dilemma is for human service workers to find themselves wanting to do good, but working in a program or system that has some or all of the characteristics described above. This is an extremely difficult position to be in, and quite often causes service workers to feel great anxiety and anguish. In this situation, a person may engage in either more or less valid and adaptive responses. One of the first responses of many people, including service workers, is to look outside of oneself for the answer: “it’s someone else’s fault ... someone else must change ... this other person should do something ... if only a new law were passed, or a better policy written ... ” Another common response is for a service worker to themselves feel oppressed by the organization, while essentially ignoring the plight of service recipients.

One potentially more adaptive response than those mentioned above lies in the ideas behind personalism. (Note that there are a number of other potentially valid responses to abuse and harmdoing, some of which are also consistent with personalism. *See Kendrick; McKnight; and Wolfensberger for examples of other responses.*) Personalism is a philosophy put forth by writers and thinkers such as

Emmanuel Mounier, Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day. As described by Wolf Wolfensberger, personalism is built on three pillars or foundations, which I will review. These pillars are simple to explain, but complex and profound in their implications. It is all too easy to dismiss these ideas as mere platitudes, or to underestimate their power and depth.

The **first** pillar of personalism is the honoring of the inherent dignity of each and every person. In human services, for example, this includes the dignity of socially devalued people, their family and friends. It also includes the dignity of service workers. Dignity refers to the inherent nobility and worth of a person. Personalism calls us to strive to uphold the dignity of each person; regardless of age, ability, social status, past history, bad decisions, income, culture, and so on.

Adherence to this first pillar can provide an anchor for service workers *in* impersonal structures, or *toward* impersonal service structures. It elevates the person above a thing, such as a program, law, policy or system. Even when an agency does not recognize this dignity, an individual (service worker) can. Recognizing dignity personalizes rather than depersonalizes. This recognition helps build a wall and a safeguard against abuse and harmdoing. A difficult question is, how can I honor the dignity of others, no matter how well-disguised or hidden? Do I see the dignity of someone who cannot speak, who is not intelligent, who is addicted to drugs, who is apathetic towards others, who has hurt a child, or who has abused someone? How do I practice ongoing consciousness of the dignity of others?

The **second** pillar of personalism is the assumption of personal moral responsibility. It speaks to our obligation to do what is right, and to try to live morally. Implicit in this

pillar are the assumptions that: right and wrong exist; we can discern even if imperfectly what is right and what is wrong; and that we should strive to do the right and to avoid the wrong as much as possible. Personalism teaches that we are responsible for what we do. We are not responsible for other's (bad) decisions or acts; they are. We are not compelled to carry out someone else's bad decisions if it goes against what we believe is right and true. Indeed, in that case, an assumption of personal moral responsibility would compel us *not* to carry out that bad decision. We are not cogs or robots, but persons who are free to decide.

This pillar does not imply that we always work alone, but that we seek out other moral actors and allies. We invite, support and challenge others (no matter where they stand on an organizational or government chart) to take responsibility for their own acts, remembering perhaps when others have done this for us. We also invite devalued people, including those receiving human services, to take personal moral responsibility. This pillar too raises difficult questions. How do we take on personal moral responsibility in the face of pressures not to do so? How do we invite others to assume personal moral responsibility, some of whom will not want to even think about it?

The **third** pillar of personalism is the principle of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity calls for taking action at the lowest level of formality which is effective. If something can be done well or even better on a smaller, less formal, less structured, or more local level, it will be better done that way. It will be better for all involved, and better (or potentially more effective of positive change) in the long run. This principle implies, for example, doing things on a personal, friend, family, school, neighborhood, or church level before going up the ladder to more formal, often agency-based, social structures and

organizations.

In human services, subsidiarity calls for those closest in relationship to the devalued person to be involved in helping. Those with the closest perspective on an issue (i.e., the person themselves, their family, their friends, their neighbors or co-workers, often their long-time service workers, etc.) should ideally be part of addressing it. Thinking more about people than systems and about small, informal efforts can help keep the door closed on individual and systemic abusive practices.

Focusing on local, informal efforts requires ongoing struggle and consciousness-raising. Our tendency is to jump straight to the organizational approach. We go immediately to an agency or to the government for help. Personalism invites us to resist this tendency, as well as the tendencies for our organizations to get bigger, to add layers, or to build up formal bureaucratic structures which often grow out of individual control. Big is not intrinsically bad, yet it does create a unique set of predictable and often intractable problems. An important question is, how do we resist those temptations to get bigger so we can “help more people” without acknowledging the problems in getting bigger? Another fundamental question is, how do we ‘stand by’ or ‘walk with’ people as the programs and systems around them and around us get bigger and more formalized?

Conclusion

Taking a personalist stance can bring us a cost, even a heavy one. For example, we may be ridiculed or treated as an outcast in a human service organization. We may become (even more) isolated within an agency, or be reassigned, disciplined or fired. Sometimes,

we may begin to doubt ourselves and our stance. Despite our best efforts, bad things can still happen.

Yet embracing personalism can also bear good fruit for us and others. To struggle to do what is right is often ennobling. We may also find (more) joy in our service to others. Our relationships with devalued people and with colleagues may deepen and become more genuine. We may grow in maturity, wisdom and understanding. We may meet like-minded people. As well, good things might happen for vulnerable and devalued people, including long-lasting positive changes. The important struggle though remains to do what is right primarily because it is right, not because of the (potential) outcomes.

Personalism is a simple yet powerful philosophy. Honoring the dignity of others, taking on personal moral responsibility, and embracing subsidiarity can help us to not engage in systemic abusive practices, or at least to minimize the effects of those oppressive dynamics which cause harm to service recipients. Personalism calls us to do what is right. It can motivate us not only to resist systemic patterns of human service abuse, but also to seek more relevant and coherent alternatives. It invites us to keep our focus on the person and on our relationships with others. It can guide individual as well as communal action.

Trying to live out the three pillars of personalism can cut through many of the distractions and temptations that concerned people, including service workers, face. It will require a lot of hard, ongoing, personal effort. It will be difficult to accomplish alone, without like-minded allies. And finally, personalism raises a challenging dilemma for those who work in services, namely: how much good can one truly accomplish within formal, organized, largely impersonal service structures?

As Peter Maurin taught, personalism can be a powerful tool for positive change, but it is like a box of dynamite with a lid on it. We need to take the lid off if we are going to use its power for good.

Resources

Robert Flynn and Raymond Lemay, editors. *A Quarter-Century Of Normalization And Social Role Valorization: Evolution And Impact*. (1999)

James Gilligan. *Violence: Reflections On A National Epidemic*. (1996)

Michael Kendrick. *Some Examples Of Broad Strategies To Shield Consumers And Families From Invasive Bureaucracy*. (July 2002 article)

Peter Maurin. *Easy Essays*. (1961, reprinted 2003)

John McKnight. *The Careless Society*. (1995)

Emmanuel Mounier. *Personalism*. (1952)

Dick Sobsey. *Violence and abuse in the lives of people with disabilities: the end of silent acceptance?* (1994)

Wolf Wolfensberger. *A brief introduction to Social Role Valorization, 3rd ed.* (1998)

Wolf Wolfensberger. “*The philosophy of personalism, and implications to human services and advocacy for the lowly*” workshop.

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