

# A DIFFERENT WAY: SUPERVISION AT A DAY SHELTER FOR HOMELESS WOMEN IN SWEDEN

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PAPERS

Imagine coming to a totally new place in your own town. Everything is new to you. You get an immediate feeling of 'here and now'. All your senses are alert. You see a colourful room full of colourful people. Someone is asleep; someone else is painting a huge oil painting. Two ladies are watching television. Standing in a corner, a large attractive woman is lamenting the loss of her baby. She cries out loud: 'Why did they do that? Why did the bloody social workers take my baby away. It is not fair! I will sue you! How can anyone have the right to steal my baby! I'll take care of her. I'll take care of my baby!' Someone whispers to you: 'It happened eighteen years ago!' Eighteen years ago! There is an intense sound of someone coughing. In the 'smoking booth' someone tells a vivid story about today's police razzia on 'the street'.

In this place you will see things you have never seen before, hear things you have never heard, sense smells that are probably new to



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you. You might get a feeling of being in a theatre with multiple performances going on at the same time. If you listen carefully you will hear stories about your own society that are almost unbelievable. One burlesque story after another.

The place is colourful and the women are colourful! This is a place for survivors. This is a meeting point for outsiders, marginalized women. Women who have survived, in spite of it all, due to their spirit of never giving up, due to their everyday creativity in meeting and enduring yet another day of humiliations of all kinds. Welcome to the day shelter for homeless women! A shelter run by the City Mission of Stockholm!

Hanging on the notice board there is a protocol from the regular Monday House Meeting, an invitation and sign-up list to a popular rock concert, and a photo of the shelter's sponsored child, a four-year-old girl in India.

In the middle of this colourful chaos, there are people who work here. Calm, friendly, and ever present. Steady as rocks yet always moving from one woman to another. Serving someone coffee. Embracing a sad woman. Writing a note, probably an address or a phone number to someone. They seem calm but are they really?

Suddenly there is a violent turmoil at the entrance. What happened? Was someone hurt? People, who apparently are staff here, come running. No one shouts. Everyone but one psychotic lady stop their activities. The silence is almost frightening.

What will happen now? Will the staff ignore what happened? Pretend it did not happen? Will the staff become angry and repressive? Will the lady be thrown out of the shelter? For how long in that case? One week? Two weeks? A month? Or will the lady be comforted, given a cup of tea and be caressed on her back? What now will happen will depend upon the individual human value system of whoever happened to work that day — or of the general value system of the NGO — in this case the City Mission of Stockholm.

In the year 2000, the change of the millennium, we discovered restorative justice. It was like a revelation. Something we had always to some part practised, but it had been present like a 'tacit knowledge' — a knowledge you have and practise but which cannot be explained in words, as it is not put into words. To convert tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge demands becoming aware of the nature of the

knowledge and finding a way to express it in words. It is very similar to 'intuition' — but yet not intuition as it is based on praxis and knowledge. Restorative practices gave us a structure and a common value system. Basic values include expecting the best both from ourselves and from others.

In weekly supervision, we started to share experiences and stories and to put praxis into the framework of theory. We started with the basic questions: What did the staff do? Why did they do what they did? According to what? The commission by the City Mission? According to law? Following the Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations? Or were their actions conditioned by their earlier work experiences in, for example, psychiatric hospitals, according to their earlier work experience, or their personal belief system?

We had to start from the beginning. Working with restorative justice, in this shelter for homeless women, was pioneering work. We had to restart and think. We had to go back to basic questions:

'What is a human being?' 'Who is a human being?' 'What is the difference between I and Thou?' Or 'Am I an "I" and you an "It"?' 'What makes the difference in your and our value systems when working with homeless women?' 'Are we superior?' like when we define rules? Or 'Are they superior to us?' as when they place all sorts of expectations and demands on you.

We all agreed we had to define a value system, which was not only a value system for when we were working with people but also could be leading us in our daily life, living together with our families and in our interactions with our friends. A fellow human being or a Thing? Martin Buber (1878–1965) wrote about this in his famous book *Ich und Du* ('I and Thou'). Buber focuses on the interpersonal encounter as a meeting between two subjects, as opposed a meeting between I and It — which would be a meeting between a subject and an object.

Homeless people are most often people who were cut off, or who cut themselves off from an ongoing dialogue with the established society. They stereotype us and we stereotype them. (In fact even this article is a sort of stereotyping.) Working with homeless people is fun and challenging work, but there are always a lot of power struggles. The institutions will either be too rigid with all sorts of rules or too lenient with too much empathy and understanding. Both positions are positions of power.

When we started to work more democratically, more restoratively, we worked to gain as much symmetry in the relationship as possible: ‘no one inferior, no one superior’, i.e., this is the position between the human beings, an encounter between I and Thou, subject to subject. The roles, however, can be asymmetrical — the director of the institute might have to make decisions in her role as leader of the institute.

Dr. J.L. Moreno (1889–1974), founder of group psychotherapy, sociometry, and psychodrama, was also a great inspiration in my work as a supervisor in the shelter. He was contemporary with Martin Buber, and both of them collaborated in the newspaper ‘Daimon’. Dr. Moreno is the man behind the concept of ‘encounter’. Both the concepts of ‘dialogue’ in Buber’s thinking and ‘encounter’ in Moreno’s thinking mean something more than a meeting between two people. It really means two human beings who are not only willing to meet, but also to become changed by that meeting.

Dr. Moreno sees all human beings as co-creators of society. This puts a demand on us always to not only do our best, but also to have the discipline to see the Other as a competent human being.

Problems should be solved by their owners! ‘Solving someone else’s problem is theft!’ says Dr. Moreno.

Apart from using circles and restorative dialogues, we learned that humour and playfulness could break the ice and lead to creative solutions. We also learned to trust the willingness and capacity of everyone to solve their interpersonal conflicts — they only needed the structure that restorative dialogues offer: ‘What happened?’ ‘Who was affected?’ ‘Who else was affected?’ ‘How?’ ‘What do you need in order to feel OK again?’ ‘What do I need in order to feel OK again?’ ‘What do the other affected people need?’ Simple questions that can help to mend broken relationships. Doing circles is a quick road to democracy! Turn-taking and turn-giving. Listening to others and making decisions together.

We learned to explore shame, guilt, and pride, and what they do to us. The knowledge we had acquired from Dr. Tomkins and Dr. Nathanson gave a new meaning to our work with homeless women. Being a homeless woman is the ultimate position of shame. You live in the shadow of society. In the shelter run by the Stockholm City Mission, human dignity was restored, at least in moments. Over time, through such moments, like threading a pearl necklace, the women’s

self-esteem was rebuilt to include genuine and appropriate pride — a transition from living in shame in the shadows of society to increasingly functioning as a citizen.

Working with homeless people has enriched our lives and strengthened us in the trust of life and human survival. Parallel lives go on side by side. By sharing our stories we find that there is a core essence of values that we all share: the belief in life, the trust in human cooperation, the strong wish to survive, creative ways of coping with life.

For me as a supervisor, I am proud to be part of this pioneering project to work restoratively with homeless people in my country. I hope this short speech will inspire you, too!