The Importance of Fidelity in Human Services, Especially to Devalued People

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Introduction

There is one issue of great universal importance in human service, regardless whether it is paid or unpaid, whether it is residential, educational, or vocational, and largely regardless to whom it is given. That issue is fidelity of engagement. By fidelity, we mean a commitment to stand by, to stick with, not to leave, not to abandon, not to be supportive only "from far away," a steadfastness even in the face of temptation, a sense of continuing obligation, not to easily send away or be sent away. Other words that are related to the meaning of fidelity include allegiance, loyalty, faithfulness, and devotion.

The Normativeness of Infidelity by Service Workers to Service Recipients

Fidelity is a virtue, a precious quality to possess, and a precious gift if one is the recipient of it. But it assumes a very special role in one's relationship to people who are devalued by society, because a dominant reality in their lives is the experience of social and relationship discontinuity. Such people are apt to have had in their lives many parent figures, physicians, therapists, social workers, psychologists, supervisors, attendants–and most of these, and often all of them, spend only a short time in the life sphere of a given individual. A devalued person's life can thus be compared to a stage where "actors" such as the above enter for their "performance," their "act," "routine," or "dance"–and then move on. This kind of dancing in and out of a wounded person's life does not offer the continuity in interpersonal relationships that most people take for granted in theirs, and that human beings need.

In contrast, most valued people do have a number of continuing, long-term relationships, some of which may even go back to birth, such as those with parents, siblings, other relatives, neighbors, and friends. One may even have ties to people who have been involved with one's family before one was even born.

It is important to acknowledge here that it is not just the **number** of relationships one has that is important, but that even more critical is the number of deep, **stable, continuing** relationships that one has: relationships which tie one back to time and one's origins–one's "roots," so to speak. **Many devalued people do not have one single enduring relationship commitment made**

to them in their entire lives, and especially not by any valued person. How devastating that typically is! Such abandonment may well be the source of any number of other problems of a person, such as insecurity and behavioral disorders.

Insofar as such discontinuity is one of the biggest problems of devalued people, and contributes to so many other problems, one of the single biggest long-term responses needed is faithful long-term relationships, which may have elements of what one could call service.

But fidelity is one of many things that receives very little support and respect these days. Whether it is fidelity to a person or a thing, to one's spouse, children, parents, pets, community, church–it is apt to be denigrated. For example, people who remain faithful to someone or something, particularly when doing so is inconvenient or outright difficult, are put down as backward, masochists, cowards afraid to be liberated into an "actualized life," etc. People who call others to fidelity are said to be old-fashioned, unrealistic, repressive, "imposing their values," standing in the way of the fulfillment and self-actualization of others. So fidelity is thrown over for whatever is seen to contribute to one's short-term self-maximization.

And no wonder fidelity has become unfashionable: it is, after all, very difficult to live out. If it were easy, why would marrying couples have to **vow** it, and to vow it no matter what obstacles might arise? After all, we do not have to promise to do things that are easy and that we like to do, such as to eat when we are hungry, to sleep when we are tired, to play our favorite sport. What we have

to make promises about are those things that either are, or might be, hard for us to do or even to want to do.

Because fidelity in all sorts of things is becoming less and less common these days, we should therefore expect that it will also become increasingly rare in human service endeavors–indeed, even **more** rare in human services than elsewhere, because the people who receive human services are so often societally devalued, so they are by definition people that others do not want to be with or to have around. If it were otherwise, they would be much less devalued, or not at all.

Indeed, the facts show precisely that: discontinuity of human service workers in their work and relationships with devalued people is extraordinarily high. In some fields, locales and agencies, 70% annual turnovers have been normative. There are even agencies that have more than 100% turnover per year. One relatively independent blind woman in her early 30s told us that she had counted over 300 service workers in her life up until then, none of whom had maintained relationship contact with her, and her situation is not at all unusual. The numbers for more impaired people might even be much higher. Parents of handicapped people often bemoan the fact that not only is it hard to get support workers to enable them to keep their impaired child at home, but that these workers come and go, with the result that the child does not develop trust and begins to exhibit disturbed behaviors or becomes more disturbed than before. The parents become frustrated at having to tell their story over and over and over again to yet another new face–who will probably soon leave anyway,

and so on. We have seen this situation lampooned by a cartoon that says, "I'm your new social worker, I just stopped in to say goodbye."

Even human service workers who voluntarily engage themselves with people in great suffering, or in services to greatly suffering people, quite commonly do not stay very long these days. For instance, in a supposedly highly ideologized and committed AIDS treatment team at the Montefiore Medical Center in New York (featured in *Newsweek*, 21 July 1986), only one member of this team of 20 remained after a mere two years.

The Devastating Impacts of Service Worker Infidelity

Without service fidelity then, people end up in the "relationship circus" described above, with "performers" constantly replacing each other. We can identify a number of devastating impacts this normatively has on the wounded people who are the "audience" of this circus.

Lack of Knowledge About Service Recipients

A very obvious outcome of high contact discontinuity is that no one on the scene knows a person very well, and people's case dossiers become the closest thing to a knowledge and memory of who and what they are. This case record may be several inches thick, and may tell a story to those who have the mental eyes to see of endless rejection, abandonment, and broken relationships. In fact, it might not be at all unusual to find a mountain of paperwork on a person on which few names ever appear more than once, testifying to how many service workers have cycled in and out of some role of responsibility in the person's life. If no one has been around very long, then no one has ever gotten to know

the person; or, if there were perhaps people who did know the person well, they are no longer on the scene.

Recipients Are Lonely

Not surprisingly, when no one knows a person well, the person is apt to be lonely, even when he/she is around a lot of people. This is the plight of so many service clients, even in services for hundreds or even thousands of clients, where they may have no friends, either within or outside the service.

Repetitious Use of Tests in Order to Gain Knowledge About People

One burden that personnel discontinuity inflicts on clients is that new contacts subject clients to either the same tests and evaluations that they already underwent before, or to new ones that would not be needed if personnel knew the clients better. This phenomenon is particularly notorious in the high personnel discontinuity of the hospital scene, with its endless stream of physicians, nurses, therapists and technicians that a patient has never seen before, and may never see again. Some patients give up on names and refer to Doctor Fourteen, Nurse Eleven, etc.

If this endless repetition of procedures only involves filling out forms, responding to interview questions, and taking psychological tests, it may be merely an annoying burden, but when it involves medical tests, it can become outright dangerous, both because of whatever risks the tests carry, the damage they do intrinsically (as with an X-ray), or the high error rate in such tests that can lead to wrong treatment.

Disruption of Program Regimens

In this kind of context of discontinuity and poor knowledge of the person, programs or social structures become disrupted, disjointed, even contradictory, since one can hardly expect that a new person stepping in will know, believe, or do the same as the previous person, or take up precisely where the other person left off. And we know that inconsistency in some regimens can actually be worse than no regimen at all, and that often, it is better **not** to institute a regimen if one cannot carry it through consistently.

Disorientation of Service Recipients

Quite naturally, one result of all this is that the person at issue becomes confused and disoriented because of the discontinuity in workers and programs, the endless repetitions of procedures, the loneliness, etc. Such disorientation can become quite literal where impaired people are involved. How this could happen is that a mentally vulnerable person may begin to ask him/herself: "Is this the same person who was here yesterday? Am I getting confused or forgetful, because it seems that I have never seen this person before? Isn't this person contradicting something some other staff person told me earlier? Haven't I just had this test, or is this the one I was supposed to get and I only imagined that I took it before?" Etc.

This sort of thing was illustrated by what happened to the grandmother of friend of ours. She lived in a nursing home, and every time our friend went to visit her, she was in a different room on a different floor, each floor staffed by different workers. She once told him, "I'd like to show you my room, but I can't

remember where it is." Indeed, the staff said she was "confused"; their solution to her confusion and that of the other residents was to paint each floor a different color, so that people would know where they were by the color.

Insecurity of Service Recipients

People who have experienced repeated discontinuities in relationships–especially important relationships–will get very insecure and mistrustful, particularly since new people usually signal, either implicitly or explicitly, that they are genuine, interested in the persons, committed to them, perhaps even that they love them, that they are there for the sake of the person's long-term growth, etc. And then they are suddenly gone, to be replaced by **another** shift that emits similar signals that **also** turn out to be untrue.

We have to be very clear that as far as the phenomenology of clients is concerned–especially those who are emotionally vulnerable or lack the mentality or sophistication to understand "the system"–the messages of genuineness that service workers routinely emit upon their arrival are simply fraudulent, virtually a form of psychopathy.

Insecurity and distrust are both a very poor basis for any subsequent regimen. It is well-known that positive relationships are among the most powerful disposers of learners toward what their teachers or models convey. Also, insecurity is a major drain on mental resources and energy that then are not available for learning or other adaptive behaviors. Yet the constant coming and going of people in the lives of wounded persons disposes quite

systematically toward such **in**security and **dis**trust, rather than towards the needed opposites.

It is important to understand that even if personnel turnover did not induce in clients a sense that they had been betrayed (even though it can be fully expected to do just that), such turnover can still be a cause or precipitator of maladaptive client behavior, particularly in those instances where a client had become attached to a staff member, and the staff member's departure then constitutes a discontinuity in a relationship that is important to the client. Of course, a staff member could maintain involvement even after leaving a particular position, but in the vast majority of instances, contact does, in fact, cease, or becomes at best very infrequent and superficial.

Insecure Recipients "Test" New Relationships

One result of the insecurity induced in people whose lives are marked by constant comings and goings is that they may subject newcomers to all sorts of fruitless and unproductive tests of their sincerity and commitment. This can actually contribute to even more discontinuities, because the more wounded a person becomes by disappointed expectations, the more stringent become the tests, and the fewer the people who can pass them. For example, a child who has been through several placements in foster homes is very apt to test the next family to see whether this family at last will accept and keep him/her, and not send him/her away. So the child may do such things as get in trouble at school, be defiantly disobedient to the foster parents, steal money, perhaps hurt the family's natural children. Each of these incidents may be the child's symbolic

way of asking, "Will you really still love me if I do this?" But very few people are able to understand and to pass such tests, and so the child may suffer yet one more discontinuity–which is apt to lead the child to invent and impose ever more difficult tests the next time around, which is apt to lead to yet another discontinuity, and so on. It is thus that some people end up so deeply wounded and insecure as to be unreachable by worldly means.

Some of the above seven impacts are on program regimens, while others are on people's minds and hearts. Imagine especially the case where social discontinuity wounds and crazifies a person at the same time as it results in a poor pedagogic regimen. Imagine one or more of the above conditions impacting repeatedly over time on a person, perhaps a person who was vulnerable to begin with! Imagine even further that our service structures often put together, into one place and with each other, an entire group of people with similar experiences, and then inflicts yet more discontinuity on them!

On the individual level, one obvious result is apt to be that the person becomes stupid. Old people can be rendered demented, as we have already shown; children can be stunted in their mental growth; etc. Particularly when discontinuities are frequent in the life of a child, and particularly if they involve people in pedagogic roles (parent figures, day care workers, teachers, etc.), a child's growth can be severely stunted, in contrast to the way a good pedagogue who sticks around can make a child blossom. In support of this claim, we can cite the (US) National Child Care Staffing Study, published in 1989, which documented for the first time that high turnover rates of teachers and assistants in day care centers have a major adverse effect on child development. That pay

was **not** the decisive issue in making for discontinuity, as is often claimed, was shown by the fact that even in locales where pay was significantly higher than the average, turnover was only moderately lower (Shapiro, 1989). At the same time as about 2.1 million children in the US attend day care centers, 41% of the child care staff will be turning over–nearly triple the rate of 10 years earlier. Accordingly, in many centers, a young child will have several teachers in one year.

What is especially sad is that many people will fail to admit and address the problem without such scientific proof as this–and even with it, some people will still deny the facts.

Why the New-ness of Such Dramatically High Worker Infidelity is Not Recognized or Addressed

One is hard put to think of any time in human service history where personnel turnover was **normatively** so high, outside of episodes of war, pestilence, etc. But why service worker discontinuity has increased so dramatically is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, we are focusing on what it does, and what is needed. And one question that must be seriously raised is just how **any** service with such an ongoing high turnover rate can expect to benefit its clients, or even to keep from doing more harm than good. It seems that so far, this issue has hardly been addressed, and among the reasons for that failure of address, three stand out.

1. Many people are historically illiterate, or even suffer from a "time illiteracy" even in regard to things within their own lifetime that makes them *de facto*

amnesic to what happened just a few years ago. Such persons would be apt to deny that things were ever other than what they are now.

2. The turnover crisis has only recently become more fully apparent even to people willing to face the facts.

3. To admit what bad things high turnover does to service and clients would come close to having to admit to the ideological and programmatic bankruptcy of the formal service structures. There are not many people with the fortitude and freedom of spirit to do this–even if they are aware of the discontinuity problem.

The Need for Worker Fidelity in Human Services

Given the facts that infidelity to wounded people is apt to be the norm in contemporary society and its human services, and that it is so devastating to people, it seems to make sense that one of the ideals towards which helping and serving relationships should strive is fidelity to the person in need. This is especially important in certain types of voluntary commitments, such as communal support groups, and relationships that are, or function as, family for the needy person. In these types of relationships particularly, the fidelity given to the needy person should be similar to the type that one promises–explicitly or implicitly–to close friends, to fellow members of one's church congregation, and just a notch below that promised to one's spouse, children, parents, and other close relatives.

We might be helped to appreciate how exalted a niche fidelity should have if we see it as continuing a long, noble, but now largely forgotten, tradition of

human services, namely, that of the service vow. In medieval Europe, there were serving orders that were much like religious orders today, although they were comprised mostly of lay people. These orders dedicated themselves to service–often service of a particular type or to a certain type of person. For example, there were serving orders that took care of people with particular diseases, or of the dying; some taught poor boys, others poor girls; others tried to rescue prostitutes; and so on. The members of the orders took certain vows related to their service. For instance, one of the vows of one service order was the promise to meet, if it were possible to do so, any reasonable request of a guest–the people that we today would call "clients." A vow required of the members of another order was to go out into the worst parts of town and **actively** seek out to serve those who had been totally abandoned, and who might even be infected with deadly contagious pestilences. In fact, it is little known that the very term "professional" comes from the "professing" of vows or similar such promises. Sadly, the closest thing to a vow related to their work that professionals are apt to make today is a promise to follow a code of ethics. Yet this code may contain little that is of central relevance to meeting the needs of the people whom the professional will serve.

It seems that a promise or vow of fidelity to at least one needy person is consistent with this ancient, very noble tradition, to say nothing of the benefits it could bring to such a person in terms of a sense of security, self-image, and so on. Indeed, where fidelity is lacking, the work of all 300 or more service workers in a person's life (mentioned earlier) can be wasted and worthless, and end up in disaster–and on the other hand, with only one or two **enduring** service

relationships for a person, there may only be a need for perhaps three, not 300, other, professional workers to provide any assistance!

However, in order to stave off potential perversions of this idea, we hasten to point out that different people quite legitimately adopt different routes to commitment to a wounded person. Some are able to enter a commitment with the understanding from the beginning that what the wounded person needs is a long-term relationship, and to come prepared to offer that. Other people– perhaps the majority–are more likely to evolve such a commitment over time, as they begin to have contact with a person, and eventually become radically committed to that person. To present such persons from the very beginning with the challenge, or even the demand, that they make a long-term commitment to be a faithful friend, advocate, or supporter of this person, perhaps **for life**, may overwhelm them and scare them away. Thus, one must be understanding and sensitive to the way in which people's involvement can lead to commitment, and one must cultivate less intense relationships that have a reasonable likelihood of evolving into such deep commitments.

One difficulty here is that, on the one hand, it is important to give people a clear, accurate picture of what a commitment entails. In other words, people should know what they are getting into before they commit themselves, so that they can count the cost and be prepared for it. Of course, the person should also know about the joys of such service, but not at the cost of withholding knowledge of the "downs." Otherwise, one is apt to end up with something like what happens in so many contemporary marriages, where the partners enter into this most serious of relationships almost with levity, not understanding

even what a vow is, let alone what these particular demanding vows mean; or with a very idealized, unrealistically romantic notion of what married life will be like–and who then end up later in a suit of divorce, claiming (and often honestly so) that they had no idea what they were getting into and just were not prepared for it.

On the other hand, presenting a potential server with the full picture too early might be too much for the person to take, and frighten off a person who could evolve into a very effective and committed server.

And on the third hand, so to speak, is the reality that some involvements are of the type that, from the beginning, **do** carry the expectation of a long-term, faithful commitment, or else they do not qualify as that type of involvement. An example is, of course, marriage itself, as mentioned. Hopefully, one does not present marriage as something that may or may not last very long, depending on how the partners feel about it, but rather, as something where the expectation is that it **will** last for life, even though this expectation may not always be met. If such an expectation is not present, then the relationship should not even be considered a marriage. Certain communalities also fall into this category, i.e., they probably cannot work very well without the expectation of a long-term commitment. Examples are religious orders, and kibbutzim. While members' degree of engagement with the communality may indeed evolve from lesser to greater commitment, nonetheless, potential members should not be given the impression that "we don't necessarily expect you to stay" when one precisely **does** expect such persons to stay.

Of course, it must be understood that unforeseen things may happen (such as family crises or sudden death) that may make it difficult or impossible to live out some service or similar relationship with engaged continuity. But the commitment should be made in good faith with the understanding that, except for such unforeseen and uncontrollable events, one will make every effort to be and remain faithful.

Conclusion

We conclude with one person's (Kownacki, 1976) memoir about Dorothy Day, one of the founders of the Catholic Worker movement in New York City that began in the 1930s. This lay movement of the Catholic Church emphasized voluntary poverty, community, and personal service to the (very) poor. Among other things, Day lived with the homeless and poor, and served them meals.

> *I think that I am beginning to understand why–after 40 years–Dorothy Day speaks about 'fidelity' as the most important virtue. It's hard for me, after four years, to even imagine 40 years of listening to the same hard luck stories from the homeless; peeling vegetables and serving soup to the same alcoholics every day; writing the same monthly newspaper stories about seeing Christ in every person; being confronted with the same kinds of injustices year after year; facing the same community problems day in and out. What I used to admire about Dorothy Day was her love of the poor and her resistance to injustice. Now, when someone asks me why I think Dorothy Day's a saint, I reply, 'She's stuck with it. She is faithful'.*

References

Kownacki, M.L. (1976, November). Quote of the month. *Unity Kitchen Grapevine*, p. 4.

Shapiro, J. (1989, 23 October). Staff turnover may be day care's biggest problem. *U.S. News & World Report*, p. 33.