Everyday based social work among people with psychiatric disabilities – a service-user perspective on the relationship between the support worker and the disabled in the context of supported housing.

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In the past decades there has been a change concerning the living conditions for people with psychiatric disabilities. Total institutions are no longer dominating the scene and persons with psychiatric problems are to a great extent living in the community with different types of community-based support, for example supported housing, to manage their daily life. One kind of supported housing is independent living with community-based social support, enacted by support workers. The purpose of this support is to strengthen the ability of the individual to manage the practical and social tasks of everyday life (Stockholms stad 2003). Supported housing can be defined as an “everyday act” of social support where the social interaction between the support worker and the disabled person is the mean through which the support is communicated (a support that can be described as “the doing”, “the talking” and “the being with”) (Andersson 2009). Thus – the relationship and how it is perceived by the disabled person, is crucial for the support that is created. The aim of this paper is to analyze and describe the relationship between the disabled person and the support worker and further to understand the impact of the relationship on the perceived social support.

Research concerning the relationship between professionals and persons with psychiatric disabilities has covered different aspects but has a common message: the relationship emerges as an important factor in the processes of recovery (Borg and Kristiansen 2004, McCabe and Priebe 2004, Topor et al 2006, Denhov & Topor 2011) and in mediating support (Gough & Bensäter 2001, Andersson 2009). The interpersonal mechanisms though, associated with how supportive professional relationships can be defined and understood, are still a matter for further research (Kirsh and Tate 2006, Denhov & Topor 2011).

Methods

Through participating observational studies, interviews and time geographic diaries, material have been gathered of seventeen men and women living in a suburban area in Stockholm. To get in contact with potential participants, a unit of community-based social support, consisting of seven support workers, was engaged. Effort was made to get a variation of gender, age, social situation, daily activity, frequency of support and type of psychiatric problems. The final population consisted of eight women and nine men between 29 and 61 years old, characterized with the requested differences.
How to identify supportive relationships: relationship category and the social climate.

In order to identify supportive relationships, two main factors have proved to be of vital importance: relationship category - the fact that the relationship involves a professional person – and quality, defined as the social climate in the relationship. Relationship category and relationship quality creates a frame of interpretation within which supportive messages are understood (see Metts et al 1994).

Results

Relationship category

The material shows how relationship category has a crucial influence on the interpretation of actions taking place within the supported housing situation. The same act can be experienced and interpreted differently, depending on relationship category. Going to the store on your own can be a disaster or even an undoable act for a person with psychiatric disabilities, but possible to manage with company. If that company is your mother or a support worker inflicts on how the situation is interpreted. To go shopping with your mother will most likely be experienced within the given roles of inequality of the original relationship (the child’s need of the mother for survival), where as the company of a support worker offers a different context of interpretation.

At the same time, however, it is the acts occurring between the two parties that influences how the respondent values the relationship, ie its quality. There is a dialectic condition between the frame of interpretation and the social interaction that can be described as the acts define the relationship at the same time as the frame of interpretation determines how the acts are interpreted.

Relationship quality and the social climate

The quality aspect that proves important is the social climate in the relationship. The social climate in supported housing relationships varies depending on constellations and occasions – but – a basic quality dimension that has emerged from the material is a genuine interest in the individuality of the individual (occasionally developed to the sense of liking). Another quality dimension refers to care and concern; activities and conversations, all forms of interaction, take place in a social climate mediating: “I care about you”. A third and additional aspect, most likely to be described as an attitude towards the personal sphere, concerns respect of the integrity. The social climate, permeated by these three dimensions, has shown to be present in all various kinds of situations that characterize supported housing.
The interest in the individuality of the individual, care and concern and respect of integrity, are expressed by what is said as well as by what is done in the support situation, sometimes manifested by the small gestures; by the tone in the voice when talking and the touch in the act when doing.

To conclude, it can be stated that a social climate, expressing interest in the individuality of the individual, care and concern and respect of the integrity, is the “founding patty” that molds the acts of the doing and the talking to supportive acts.

Three types of relationships

Three types of relationships emerge from the material, roughly divided in supportive relationships and unsatisfying relationships.

The supportive relationship

The supportive relationship is not to be consider as a “one-of-a kind” relationship. It rather embraces a range of relationships from being friendship like to being more of a functional type of relationship.

The “as-if-friends”- relationship

When the respondents answer the question “do you have any friends”, some of them state they don´t have any, others name a number of persons in their informal social network and some mentions a formal social contact, like a support worker.

When certain respondents describe their support worker there are similarities to the description of what constitutes a friend (for example someone who is interested, nice, kind, accepting, thoughtful, being able to talk to and confide in, have fun with etc), but – there is a difference. This difference is often expressed with an “as-if”; the support worker is “as if” she or he was a friend and there by expressing a distinction between friend as relationship category and friendship as an act.

Research has brought attention to this “as-if-friend”-expression in studies of recovery from severe mental illness (Topor et al 2006). Topor et al state that professionals that have been significant for the recovery process often are referred to as “as-if-friends” (ibid s 34).

A feature of the “as-if-friend” relationship in this study is that the person is important; loosing the support worker would mean a loss of the person.
It can be stated that those who develop “as-if-friend” relationships, only have had few changes of support workers and thus long term relationships. But – long term relationships does not always generate “as-if-friends” relationships. There are also other kinds of relationships among persons who experience long term relationships with their support worker.

The functional relationship
The other type of a supportive relationship can be characterized as more functional than friendship like; it can be regarded more as the function of a relationship than a relationship in itself. Even though the interaction between the two parties may have a friendly tone, the support worker is defined differently, compared to the description of the support worker as a friend. A functional relationship can imply that things will get done; the dishes will get done and there will be groceries in the fridge. It can also imply that there is somebody to talk to and to rely upon. A functional relationship is found as well in long term as in shorter acquaintances.

The point of departure here is the purpose of the support. The specific relationship itself is not so important (which does not mean that the relationship is unimportant) – as long as there is a supportive social climate. 

There is no distinction between the “as-if-friend” and the functional relationship, in the sense that one is more supportive than the other. They are both considered as supportive. Behind the “as-if-friend” relationship and the functional relationship there are no concealed appraisal in which to prefer. But – there are also relationships that cannot be described in any other way than that they are not satisfying, often non supportive and even counter supportive. This can to a large extent be ascribed the social climate in the relationship.

The unsatisfying relationship
When the respondents have been critical or disappointed regarding community-based social support, they have experienced a lack of respect and a lack of interest in their individuality. This lack of respect and interest has been manifested in being mastered and being objectified. 

The experience of being mastered, and further more in one’s own home, is connected to the objectifying of one’s individuality. By being mastered, the individual is addressed to as a category, as belonging to the “mentally ill” and by that means not knowing what is best for him or her. Objectifying a person can also be an act of invisibility of the individuality.
If the support worker shows non interest or deprecation, is neglecting or mastering, this has an effect on the social climate in the relationship. It might get clean and it might get “walked”, but the act is not experienced as supportive – it is rather experienced as counter supportive. A “frosty” social climate does not just make the support situation an unpleasant experience, it may also cause anxiety and worries and rather intensify the psychiatric problems than relieve them. Incidents of this kind did not occur very often during the observations and were seldom mentioned in the interviews, but it did occur and the fact that it did, along with the respondents reactions and reflections on these incidents, throws light on the crucial importance of the social climate in the relationship. It is essential in order to be able to regard supported housing as an act of social support. To conclude:
The relationship has a crucial impact on the social support in supported housing.

Literature


