

OBSERVATION: A TRAINING TOOL

Introduction

Anyone who works with disabled people on a social farm is personally involved on a daily basis because theirs is a supporting role, whatever the aim of the farm: educational, therapeutic, or designed to help people to get into employment. A daily relationship experienced by a practitioner may give rise to many questions in which aspects regarding relating and communicating intermingle with those regarding the work itself. For example, “Why does he refuse to do anything?”, “why does she react in such an aggressive/apathetic, etc. way?”, “Have I understood the core problem?”, “why does he get even the simplest tasks wrong?”, “Why does she make me so angry, frustrated, etc.?”, “how can I get him to stick at the task for longer?”, “am I helping her too much or too little?”.

These and other similar questions demonstrate that:

- Interpersonal involvement is part of the professional role;
- The practitioner is aware that there isn't just one answer which applies to everyone;
- Work improvements and difficulties cannot be separated from the quality of interpersonal relations;
- The practitioner is aware that disabled people are particularly sensitive to the non-verbal aspects of actions and interactions, in other words, to the way something is done.

Attempts to respond to these questions require a collective ability to make accurate observations on both interactive action and work action. And so, we believe that one of the fundamental areas of training within the DIANA project is in observation. That's why we are offering some initial ideas for reflection on the subject, so that at the next meeting we can discuss things from a common starting point.

OBSERVATION AS AN EXPLORATIVE PROCESS

The human being is constantly observing, whether consciously and deliberately or unconsciously and spontaneously. This happens right from birth: you need only consider the way babies of just a few months old observe. Why do we constantly observe? To try to understand things we don't know when faced with a new situation, to find connections between different facts and events. Or better,

observation serves to understand things we do not know or to doubt things we think we know. And so, whatever the object of observation may be and whatever the methods and tools used may be, **observation is always an explorative action**. Exploration is the observer's explicit or implicit search for an answer to a question. That is to say, observational exploration responds to the characteristics, needs and aims of the observer, not of the observed.

Continuing research in various fields since the Seventies, disputed the concept of objective observation, meaning the idea of a neutral observer, independent from the object described, and the observational description as a pure account of what the object is, independent from the observer. Thus, the consolidated myths about the neutrality and objectivity of observational descriptions were dispelled.

It's worth mentioning that the description of the observed object is also a self-description of the observer because the aims, language, questions and methodologies belong to the observer and not to the object of observation. As von Foerster ironically notes, "obscurity is not an inherent characteristic, but a subject/object connection since, if we show a picture to Mr. X and he defines it as obscene, this tells us a lot about Mr. X but very little about the picture" (von Foerster 1982, p. 120). In the same way, calling a person aggressive is not an observational description but an interpretation, and a very banal interpretation at that, because it takes for granted the observer's definition of aggressiveness and doesn't state which actions and behaviour have led him to consider the observed person aggressive.

The strong interdependence between the observer and the object of observation becomes macroscopic when the object of investigation is a human being. A physical object (for example, a stone) can be described, but cannot give descriptions; while in the case of human beings, as well as being observed, they can also be the observer. In other words, the observer and observed belong to the same world: they share physical and mental structures and functions, and ways of experiencing and feeling. And so they find themselves simultaneously to be both the subject and object of description and interpretation. Both use the same basic mechanism to describe and interpret reality: formulating a theory, attributing meaning.

This can become a problem when the object of observation is a disabled person. In fact, there is a tendency not to ascribe them the same ability to make observations and interpretations, or not to give them importance. Furthermore, the authority of the clinical descriptions of various disabilities tends to shape the description of the real person, becoming the only possible description. The risk is that every aspect of the disabled person's behaviour will be interpreted within the rigid framework of their diagnosis which, by its very nature, highlights deficiencies, things that are

missing: differences rather than similarities. In other words, the risk is that the disabled person will be identified with their disability.

But, even though disabled, the person is a human being who communicates, observes, formulates ideas, and acts according to their own evolutionary history (which is absolutely original as it is for every one of us), and who has a personal emotional, educational and therapeutic history. Such is the diversity that there are no two people with exactly the same diagnosis or degree of severity. Everyone interprets their own disability differently: “Two people with the same illness can have different degrees of functioning, and two people with the same degree of functioning don’t necessarily share the same health conditions” (I.C.F., p. 15).

For example, there is no such thing as a ‘Down person’ but rather lots of people who share the same condition of Down’s Syndrome, all of whom have their own individual characteristics and personal history which make them unique. The concept of a Down’s person type is an abstraction which can only be defined by eliminating individual characteristics and retaining only common ones. But even these are, in turn, descriptions made by the observer, who has selected them as being pertinent and defined them in his own language. To put it metaphorically, they are a map, not the terrain itself. *The observational description is a map, not the terrain.* The word “cat” doesn’t scratch, just as the description of a person who is mentally retarded is not the mentally retarded person. And to notice in the terrain only the elements described on the map, or worse, to mistake the map for the terrain, is a mistake that is all too easily made.

In order to be efficient, or even instrumental in achieving a new form of consciousness, observation by those who are committed to working in the care sector has some general rules which cannot be standardized into predefined procedures:

- 1) avoid hurry: in other words, keep the desire to understand everything immediately under control;
- 2) be simultaneously short-sighted and long-sighted: in other words, see the detail, each single episode as well as the general context, and maintain a connection between the two;
- 3) avoid the temptation of slotting the observational data into a consolidated theoretical-explanatory framework immediately, in other words, of transforming the unknown into the known straightaway;
- 4) activate all your expertise and knowledge in the meantime.

The aim of observation in a training project for care of the disabled is to understand the characteristics of that specific individual, how he interprets his own illness, in order to more effectively plan, implement, verify and modify the aid action.

THE OBJECT OF OBSERVATION

The human being is fundamentally a being who communicates and relates. That's why he pays particular attention to the communicative and behavioural aspects of actions, even when he fears or runs away from them, as in the case of autism. In fact, above and before resolving problems, he is constantly involved in assigning and sharing meanings, mainly relational meanings.

Most of our actions and behaviour occur during interaction with others, or at least in the presence of others, in a kind of ongoing dialogue which is mainly non-verbal. If you want to understand the meaning of the words of one speaker, you also have to consider those of the other and the context in which the conversation takes place. Therefore, in order to understand the behaviour or difficulties of a disabled person on a social farm, one must observe the interactions during which these aspects manifest themselves. Thus, **the object of observation cannot be a single individual but rather the interactions between practitioner/disabled and disabled/disabled.**

This may seem a banal affirmation but all too often we tend to forget that we always observe people in an interactive context. And interaction presents characteristics which aren't simply the combination of the partners' behaviour, but are properties belonging to the interaction itself. "An interaction must involve both partners and its nature depends on both " (Hinde, 1979, p. 33). It is, therefore, correct to "assume that the nature of every interaction is a product of both partners, even if it seems to be controlled by just one of them" (op. cit, p. 34). Thus, the actions and responses of the disabled person, however serious they may be, cannot be attributed exclusively to their pathology, but also depend on the approach and response of the care worker.

In fact, a selective perception pattern exists by which certain characteristics are more important than others. "A responds selectively to certain aspects of what B is or does, and what A selects depends in part on A's previous experiences with B or with others similar to B." (op. cit., p. 43). For example, if a person is used to continually asking to be helped, to saying they can't do anything, this also depends on the usual responses they receive. In other words, the person is dependant partly because others allow or encourage his dependence.

To say that the object of observation is the interaction is still too generic since 'interaction' is itself a summarizing term. Since an interaction is made of actions, then a more precise object of the observational description are the both partners' actions always seen from an interactive point of view.

Normally, we say that an action consists in doing something concrete while, in reality, it can also consist in "not doing something", "abstaining from doing something". For example, "to allow" can

constitute doing something, but also choosing “not to act” which by so doing “allows” the other to act. “The letter we don’t write, the apology we don’t make... can all be sufficient and effective messages, since ‘nothing’ can have a meaning within a context” (Bateson 1979, pp. 68-69). It’s no coincidence that people in love get very irritated if their partner doesn’t respond to their call or text message. So “not doing” can also be an action, sometimes of more importance than a concrete one. Here we come to the problem of how to describe actions, that is to say, the distinction between description and interpretation. We are often able to give a precise overall reading of personal characteristics or of an interaction, but we identify them in terms of very general qualities of the participants or the interaction. That is to say, we automatically give interpretations. But it’s very rare for us to be able to precisely describe the elements that have made us infer correctly. For example, in Italian when we give someone a present, we use the verb “offer” rather than “give”. “To offer” is much more than “to give”, even if both verbs involve the transferring of an objects from one person to another. What kind of behaviour or way of acting makes us call that “giving” an act of “offering”? When does the action of “putting the plate on the table” stop being that and become “slamming the plate on the table”? The difference in meaning implies the attribution of different aims and intentions, giving different responses and therefore defining the interaction differently. To describe the action as “running away” or “escaping” is not the same, since these are two different levels of description.

The examples cited demonstrate the fact that we are very conscious of and sensitive to not just what a person does but how they do it. We consider the way an action is done as a clue which can help us gauge the person’s emotional state or intentions towards us. Approaching a person slowly or quickly, looking them in the eye or avoiding direct eye contact, using fluid movements or rigid ones, keeping actions continuous or punctuating them with tiny pauses, using a relaxed or a raised tone of voice: these are all ways of conveying very different relational meanings. In fact, the way in which we carry out an action often gives us an idea of the aim (consciously or not) of the approach and the emotional state of the person acting. It is often the variations in these ways which help us identify a body movement as one thing or another.

And disabled people, like children, are far more aware of and sensitive than us about how others act. Just as their ways of acting can give a watchful care worker signals about whether or not to intervene. For example, it can be important to notice if, when using direct eye contact and a face to face, close-up position with a disabled person, they do not respond, move away or react aggressively. This can provide information about how to approach and present yourself to the person: information which specifically regards ways of acting.



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These brief notes are just a few indications on the subject we propose as a training tool. We believe that they can easily be shared by those who are faced daily with difficulties in their relationships with service users: to decide which initiatives to take or answers to give, to understand why a disabled person does well with one activity but not with another, with one a practitioner but not with another.

References

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