Helping relationships – principles, theory and practice

Helping relationships – principles, theory and practice. In this article we explore the nature of helping relationships – particularly as practised within the social professions and informal education. We also examine some key questions that arise in the process of helping others. In particular, we focus on the person of the helper.

Contents: introduction · what do we mean by helping? · the helping person · the helping relationship · does helping involve seeing people in deficit? · are there different stages in the helping relationship? · is helping a skill? · conclusion · further reading · how to cite this piece

'Helping' is one of those taken-for-granted words. It is a familiar part of our vocabulary. Traditionally, for example, social workers, youth workers and support workers have been talked about as members of the 'helping professions'. The question, 'do you need some help?' is part of our daily business as informal educators and social pedagogues. Yet what we mean by 'helping' isn't that obvious – and the qualities we look for in 'helping relationships' need some thinking about. Here we try to clear away some of the confusion.

What do we mean by helping?

For many people within the social professions – social work, youth work and community work (Banks 2004: 1-3) – the notion of helping is tied up with counselling and guidance. The same is probably true of those working within informal education and social pedagogy more broadly. People having to deal with difficult situations and choices, worrying feelings and/or a sense of having missed opportunities may well feel they need someone to listen and to assist them to make sense of what is going on, and to move on. Sometimes it will be others who judge that it is in
the best interests of people that they receive such ‘help’. Gerard Egan, whose book *The Skilled Helper* (first published in 1975) did much to arouse the interest in ‘helping’ within the counselling arena, has argued that it involves two basic goals. Each of these is based in the needs of the person seeking help. The first relates to those they are helping to manage specific problems. It is to ‘help clients manage their problems in living more effectively and develop unused or underused opportunities more fully (1998: 7). The second helping goal looks to their general ability to manage problems and develop opportunities. It is to help ‘clients become better at helping themselves in their everyday lives’ (Egan 1998: 8).

As well as being linked to counselling and guidance, helping is often used to talk about specific moments of teaching e.g. ‘helping’ someone with their homework or filling in an income-support form. It is also associated with giving direct physical assistance – for example, helping someone to wash or to go to the toilet – or practical aid such as giving clothing or money. Many of the people whose work Smith and Smith explored in *The Art of Helping Others* (2008) – youth workers, housing support workers; priests, nuns and lay workers within churches and religious groups; and learning mentors – engaged in all these areas and placed an emphasis upon developing and sustaining relationships

The helping we explore here is characterized and driven by conversation; explores and enlarges experience; and takes place in a wide variety of settings (many not of the helper’s making). However, describing the role exclusively in terms of counselling or teaching or educating narrows things down too much for us. Making sense of what these people are actually doing and expressing entails drawing upon various traditions of thinking and acting. This form of helping involves listening and exploring issues and problems with people; and teaching and giving advice; and providing direct assistance; and being seen as people of integrity. (Smith and Smith 2008: 14)

The processes and approach to helping that is being discussed here overlaps a lot with what we know as informal education – but it also goes beyond it. Helpers are concerned with learning, relationship and working with people to act on their understandings. However, they also step over into the world of counselling. They do this by being experienced as a particular kind of person and drawing upon certain skills, not by taking on the persona of counsellor (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy 2002; Higson 2004). Counselling entails a more formalized relationship than what we are talking about as helping; and is based in a specific set of traditions of thinking and practice. Thus, the helping relationship in the context of therapy and counselling feels and looks different to the helping relationship in the context of pastoral care or housing support – but more of this later.

The helping person – caring, committed and wise

To reword Parker Palmer (2000: 11) good helping is rather more than technique; it comes from the identity and integrity of the helper’ (Parker Palmer was talking about teaching). This means that helpers both need to know themselves, and seek to live life as well as they can. They need to be authentic.

In a passage which provides one of the most succinct and direct rationales for a concern with attending to, and knowing, our selves Parker Palmer draws out the implications of his argument.

*Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together…. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life – and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject – not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth. (Parker Palmer 1998: 2)*
If we do not know who we are then we cannot know those we work with, nor the subjects we teach and explore.

As well as knowing themselves, Smith and Smith (2008) argue that helpers also need certain other qualities. When people search for someone to help them reflect upon and improve their lives, they tend to be drawn into relationship with those who are seen or experienced as caring, committed and wise. They are liable to look around for help from people whom they can approach easily and with confidence. They ask people they know who they would recommend and/or approach those they already know to offer helping relationships.

Compassion

In *Zen and the Art of Helping* David Brandon argued that ‘The real kernel of all our help, that which renders it effective, is compassion’ (1990: 6). He continues:

> Compassion is being in tune with oneself, the other person(s) and the whole world. It is goodness at its most intuitive and unreflecting. It is a harmony which opens itself and permits the flowing out of love toward others without any reward. It avoids using people as tools. It sees them as complete and without a need to be changed. (Brandon 1990: 60)

Ideas like these are difficult to handle within the way many people talk about professionalism – but there is considerable evidence that people are better able to explore questions and issues when they are in the presence of a helper who accepts and respects them, listens and cares. David Brandon put caring and concern to alleviate suffering at the core of helping.

Caring

When considering caring and caring relationships it is helpful first to distinguish, as Nel Noddings does, between ‘caring about’ and ‘caring for’.

*Caring-for* someone, according to Noddings, involves sympathy – feeling with. It also entails being open to what the other person is saying and might be experiencing and reflecting upon it. However, there is also something else here. When caring for another we have to be concerned with the interests of the that person. Carers have to respond to the cared-for in ways that are, hopefully, helpful. For this to be called ‘caring’ a further step is needed. There must also be some realization on the part of the cared-for that an act of caring has occurred. Caring involves connection and relationship between the carer and the cared-for, and a degree of reciprocity. Both gain from the relationship in different ways and both give (see Smith 2004).

*Caring-about* is more abstract. When we talk about caring-about it usually involves something more indirect than the giving immediate help to someone. For example, we may care-about the suffering of those in poor countries. In this we are concerned about their plight. This may lead to us wanting to do something about it – but the result is rarely care-for. More usually, we might give money to a development charity, or perhaps join a campaigning group or activity that seeks to relieve ‘third world’ debt.

Nel Noddings argues that we learn first what it means to be cared-for – particularly in families and close relationships. ‘Then, gradually, we learn both to care for and, by extension, to care about others’ (Noddings 2002: 22). This caring-about, Noddings suggests, is almost certainly the foundation for our sense of justice.

Wisdom

Smith and Smith (2008: 57-69) have argued that helpers need to cultivate wisdom – both in themselves and those they help. It is quality which especially attracts people to them for help. However, while they possess expertise:
… often it is not just the knowledge they pass on or the advice they give that makes them special. Rather it is how they are with us, and we with them. We can feel valued and animated and, in turn, value them. Out of this meeting comes insight. (Smith and Smith 2008: 57)

The thing about wisdom is that it is usually associated by others to particular people rather than claimed by them. It generally means that the person so labelled is seen as having a deep understanding, a regard for truth, and an ability to come to sound judgements. For helpers, Smith and Smith suggest, this involves them appreciating what sort of things might make for happiness and for people to flourish; and being knowledgeable especially about themselves and relationships, around ‘what makes people tick’, and the systems of which we are a part.

The helping relationship

Relationship is a human being’s feeling or sense of emotional bonding with another. It leaps into being like an electric current, or it emerges and develops cautiously when emotion is aroused by and invested in someone or something and that someone or something “connects back” responsively. We feel “related” when we feel at one with another (person or object) in some heartfelt way. (Perlman 1979: 23)

When considering the nature of a helping relationship one of the key reference points, perhaps the key reference point, is the work of Carl Rogers. He suggested that a helping relationships could be defined as one in which:

… one of the participants intends that there should come about in one or both parties, more appreciation of, more expression of, more functional use of the latent inner resources of the individual. (Rogers 1967: 40)

We can see that this definition can apply to a counselling-client, parent-child and educator-learner relationship. In other words, Carl Rogers understood that counselling relationships, for example, were just special instances of interpersonal relationships in general (op. cit.: 39). Furthermore, he concluded that ‘the degree to which I can create relationships which facilitate the growth of others as separate persons is a measure of the growth I have achieved in myself’ (op. cit.: 56)

Rogers goes on to suggest that people will be prepared to explore things once they believe that their feelings and experiences are ‘both respected and progressively understood’ (Thorne 1992: 26). We can see this belief at work in his best known contribution – the ‘core conditions’ for facilitative helping – congruence (realness), acceptance and empathy.
Exhibit 1: Carl Rogers on the interpersonal relationship in the facilitation of learning

What are these qualities, these attitudes, that facilitate learning?

**Realness in the facilitator of learning.** Perhaps the most basic of these essential attitudes is realness or genuineness. When the facilitator is a real person, being what she is, entering into a relationship with the learner without presenting a front or a façade, she is much more likely to be effective. This means that the feelings that she is experiencing are available to her, available to her awareness, that she is able to live these feelings, be them, and able to communicate if appropriate. It means coming into a direct personal encounter with the learner, meeting her on a person-to-person basis. It means that she is being herself, not denying herself.

**Prizing, acceptance, trust.** There is another attitude that stands out in those who are successful in facilitating learning… I think of it as prizing the learner, prizing her feelings, her opinions, her person. It is a caring for the learner, but a non-possessive caring. It is an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, having worth in her own right. It is a basic trust – a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy… What we are describing is a prizing of the learner as an imperfect human being with many feelings, many potentialities. The facilitator’s prizing or acceptance of the learner is an operational expression of her essential confidence and trust in the capacity of the human organism.

**Empathic understanding.** A further element that establishes a climate for self-initiated experiential learning is emphatic understanding. When the teacher has the ability to understand the student’s reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then again the likelihood of significant learning is increased…. [Students feel deeply appreciative] when they are simply understood – not evaluated, not judged, simply understood from their own point of view, not the teacher’s. (Rogers 1967 304-311)

Carl Rogers’ exploration of the helping relationship, and his formulation of the core conditions has stimulated a lot of debate and some disagreement. For example, there are questions around empathy; whether we ever stand in someone else’s shoes (this is why Nel Noddings talks about ‘sympathy’). This said the spirit and direction of what Rogers says, and the framework that these conditions offer, provides us with a good starting point and orientation to exploring and fostering helping relationships.

**Does helping involve seeing people in deficit?**

Some people are put off the notions of ‘helping’ and ‘helping relationships’ by a feeling that it inevitably creates inequality – and a strong possibility of approaching people as being in deficit. David Brandon (1990) was very alive to this possibility in his exploration of helping relationships. Indeed, he looked at some of the different ways in which helpers can hinder the development and flourishing of those they seek to help. One common means is through focusing too strongly on institutional and bureaucratic ways of defining the situations and experiences of people. In order to access resources people often have to either define themselves, or be defined as, in deficit or needy. A current UK example of this is how young people are deemed to be NEET (not in employment, education or training) so that the agency can get additional funding for the work and meet targets. The labelling and data-sharing involved can quickly work against the interests of the young people involved, invade their right to privacy, and inhibit the creation of the sorts of space and relationships they need to flourish. Unfortunately too, the simply act of naming ourselves ‘professional’ can feed into an unthinking assumption that we know best. ‘Sometimes “helping” is simply a thin veneer over the top of robust hindering’ Brandon argued (1982: 6).

These concerns led him to be careful when talking of compassion, to distinguish between such caring and pity. The latter, he believed inevitably embodied a tendency to superiority, to looking down on the other. ‘Real compassion is often uncomfortable and disturbing’, he wrote. ‘It enlightens rather than lubricates. It has few intentions and works in an unflaunting way and unselfconscious way’ (1990: 58).

A similar set of concerns has emerged with respect to aid relationships and assistance to communities and areas seen as being in need of economic and social development and has led to the surfacing of ‘helping theory’. The question arises ‘How can ‘helpers’ assist those who are undertaking autonomous activities [doers] without
overriding or undercutting their autonomy?’. David Ellerman (2001) has argued for five principles:

- Help must start from the present situation of the doers.
- Helpers must see the situation through the eyes of the doers.
- Help cannot be imposed on the doers, as that directly violates their autonomy.
- Nor can doers receive help as a benevolent gift, as that creates dependency.
- Doers must be in the driver’s seat.

All this does not minimize the expertise and knowledge of helpers – it simply places them as partners in an endeavour and puts a premium on conversation, relationship and developing shared understandings.

**Are there different stages to the helping relationship?**

Many of the books that explore helping and/or counselling skills use stage theory. This is possible when looking at counselling or more formal relationships as they generally involve some sort of specific contract or agreement to work together. This will usually include something about the number, time, duration and frequency of sessions. It is, thus, pretty easy to think about the sorts of steps or stages the helping relationship might involve. For example Gerard Egan (2002) structures his influential model around three stages:

**Stage I:** *What’s going on?* Helping clients to clarify the key issues calling for change.

**Stage II:** *What solutions make sense for me?* Helping clients determine outcomes.

**Stage III:** *What do I have to do to get what I need or want?* Helping clients develop strategies for accomplishing goals.

He has altered these stages over the years since the first edition of his book appeared back in 1975. Then his stages were: building the helping relationship and exploration; developing new understandings and offering different perspectives; and action – helping the client to develop and use strategies. The changes are interesting in that they reflect criticism made of the model, research into the helping process, and years of conducting training programmes.

Many other writers also use a three stage model. Put at its most simple (and probably most useful) the helping or working relationship is seen as having a beginning, middle and end (see, for example, Culley and Bond 2004). Alistair Ross (2003) provides a similar model: starting out, moving on and letting go.

However, stage models have less use for many informal educators and social pedagogues. The sort of relationship generally involved in informal and community education and in things like pastoral care does not generally involve an explicit contract and the time, duration and frequency of encounters (rather than meetings) is highly variable. Endings can be extremely abrupt, for example. This said, by focussing on beginnings, middles and endings such models do help us to think about what might be involved at different moments in relationships – and to develop appropriate responses. (Smith 2008: 26)

**Is helping a skill?**

Much of the literature around helping and helping relationships explores ‘helping skills’ (see, for example, Carkoff 2000; Egan 2002; Shulman 1979 and Young 1998). In this piece we have approached helping as an orientation and a process. Whether the help is useful or not, it has been suggested, relates to the relationship between helper and helped and the people they are. In this context skills are significant – but not the main focus. There is a danger of becoming too focused on skill. It is easy to slip into following the form of a particular skill without holding on to who we are, and what our role and relationship is with this person. An example of this is listening. If we concentrate too much on listening as a skill we can end up spending a lot of time trying to demonstrate that we are listening (through our posture, looks and head nodding) rather than actually listening. If we truly listen to what is being said (and being left unsaid) then this will be communicated to the other person through the sorts of
questions we ask, the statements we make and the relationship that develops (Smith 2007: 25).

This said, there are some obvious areas of skill that we can draw upon – and these relate to the process of fostering conversation and exploration. For example, we might look to what Sue Culley and Tim Bond (2004: 2-3) have described as ‘foundation skills’. They group these around three headings (all of which will be familiar in terms of what has gone before):

**Attending and listening.** In particular Culley and Bond (*ibid.*: 17-8) are interested in ‘active listening’ by which they mean ‘listening with purpose and responding in such a way that clients are aware they have both been heard and understood’.

**Reflective skills.** Here Culley and Bond are concerned with the other person’s frame of reference. Reflective skills for them ‘capture’ what the client is saying and plays it back to them – but in our words. The key skills are, for Culley and Bond (*ibid.*: 18), restating, paraphrasing, and summarizing.

**Probing skills.** It is often necessary to go deeper, to ask more directed or leading questions (leading in the sense that they move the conversation in a particular direction). Culley and Bond (*ibid.*: 18-9) look to the different forms that questions can take (and how they can help or inhibit exploration), and to the role that making statements can play. Making statements is seen as generally gentler, less intrusive and less controlling than asking questions – although that does depend on the statement! Probing tends to increase worker control over both process and content and as a result ‘should be used sparingly and with care, particularly in the early stages of counselling’ (*ibid.*: 18).

As Alistair Ross (2003: 46) has commented, counselling skills such as these are important and can be developed through reflection and training. However, ‘no matter how good a person’s skills, they must be matched by relational qualities’.

**Conclusion**

While the notions of ‘helping’ and helping relationships may lack some precision, they have the great merit of taking us outside some of the usual bureaucratic and professionalized ways of categorizing work in the social professions and informal education. Some of the issues that arise from their use alert us to significant problems and tensions in the work. Once we unhook ourselves from an over-concentration on skills and look to relationships, the person of the helper, and the nature of the systems people have to work within, then some interesting possibilities arise. As David Brandon recognized, helping is based in relationship and the integrity and authenticity of the helper.

> The foundation of genuine helping lies in being ordinary. Nothing special. We can only offer ourselves, neither more nor less, to others – we have in fact nothing else to give. Anything more is conceit; anything less is robbing those in distress. Helping demands wholeheartedness, but people find it hard to give of themselves to others. Why? In essence we are afraid to offer ourselves for fear we will prove insufficient, and if all that we have and are is not enough, what then? We are afraid to risk using simply our own warmth and caring, and as a result the thousands of therapy techniques which are becoming increasingly popular are intended to conceal rather than reveal. *(Brandon 1982: 8-9)*

**Further reading and references**


Smith, Heather and Mark K. Smith (2008) *The Art of Helping Others. Being around, being there, being wise.* London: Jessica Kingsley. When people search for someone to help them reflect upon and improve their lives, they tend to be drawn towards those who are compassionate, committed and wise. This book explores the helping processes and relationships involved and draws upon the experiences and practice wisdom of helpers such as youth workers, housing support workers, the clergy and those working in a religious setting, and education.

**References**


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