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The psychology of volunteering

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What matters is not what you say, but what they hear
What matters is not what you do, but what they see
What matters is not what you mean, but what they get.

Volunteering (from Latin voluntarius) refers to conscious, willing acceptance of a job that one is not paid for. Volunteers do not get money for their work, but it does not mean they work for free. Their gratification is feeling good, needed, serving their altruistic needs, boosting their self-esteem. If one expects or demands thanks for the work done, at the same time behaving in a pitying or patronizing way, it contradicts the idea of volunteering. Conscious volunteering thus implies substantial self-awareness, acknowledging one’s positive sides as well as limitations.

The interpretation of interpersonal relationships presented here, relying on the conceptions of F. Schulz von Thun (2001) and E. Berne (1961, 2012), will give a volunteer a chance to look into himself and his contribution to interpersonal relations.

Our behaviour always expresses something, is a statement, encoded message. The more understandable the code, the more effective communication. The sender will not say, “That is not what I meant, I wanted to say
something else”. We have to remember that silence is also a statement, a kind of message. Being silent with people who do not want any words is one of the most difficult forms of participating in another person’s time and space.

The questions that every volunteer should ask himself before taking the decision to work are as follows:

WHOM? Whom do I see?
Who am I?
What do people experience when they contact me?
What is my understanding of man?
How does my experience contribute to my understanding of man?
Do I treat the people I encounter as partners, or do I treat them casually?

WHAT FOR?
What precisely is the aim of a conversation, meeting?
Who is to benefit from my help? In what way?

WHAT?
What is the object of my actions?
What precisely does my action refer to?

HOW?
What methods do I choose and why?
How do I apply them?

WHO?
Who applies?
Who is the person that takes action (ME)?
How do I treat my interlocutor?
What feelings do I have for the person who needs help?
Can I control these feelings in myself and others?
What aim do I want to gain through the contact with the recipient?

An utterance in verbal or non-verbal communication reflects interpersonal relations. For a volunteer – particularly a young person – this may be
an unknown ground. A beginner should therefore face his own self, analyze his attitudes and behaviour, trying to understand motives of his actions.

Every utterance in interpersonal communication may be dealt with on four planes (F. Schulz von Thun):

**FACTUAL INFORMATION**

**Sender – SELF-REVELATION – APPEAL – Receiver**

**RELATIONSHIP**

1. Factual information – do I communicate in a clear and comprehensible way?

2. The treatment of the interlocutor, the recipient of my actions – the quality of the encounter (mutual relation). The quality manifests itself in acceptance or lack of it (not always conscious), expressed as rejection, patronizing, pity. We must also stress the importance of the interlocutor’s system of values, and of the manner in which he is addressed.

3. Self-revelation. An utterance reveals the person who produces it. It manifests self-knowledge, acceptance, the ability to express emotions. We deliver a portion of our personality. Thus, authenticity of an encounter, not putting on a mask, is important.

4. Appeal. Every utterance that we produce has an influence on our interlocutor. We always expect the recipient to accept our expectations concerning him. There is a risk of manipulation involved in this aspect of communication.

All the planes of verbal and non-verbal communication discussed above are equally important. It is inappropriate to focus on selected aspects only. It is vital to ensure that all four aspects play an important role. When educating volunteers, a particular emphasis should be placed on the quality of an encounter and self-revelation. These are the most often neglected areas,
although they help to reduce the stress level and prevent burnout, giving satisfaction and self-actualization.

The ability to open up to a person who needs help is a desired trait. However, there is a risk involved here. An inexperienced volunteer may adopt the attitude of "I give you my heart, time, I'm all for you". Eventually, it may turn out that the volunteer himself needs specialist therapeutic help.

A volunteer must be sensitive to the quality of being together. This aspect must be viewed in a systemic way, as a dialogue. In therapeutic contact - and in my opinion every meeting of two people can be called so - a volunteer meets a person or a group of people who need help. They meet in certain context, which they themselves create. The quality of being together is different when we meet a single person, or a group of people. The relations will be yet different if we meet a couple, or a family.

The context of an encounter is an important factor in establishing appropriate relations. Volunteers work e.g. in hospitals, where special conduct is required, determined by the standards of medical treatment; or at schools, where statutes and laws regulate communication. Thus, every encounter has its institutional, spacial, chronological and material limitations.

Self-revelation and confrontation with what I know about myself and what others know about me also helps to build appropriate relations. Non-verbal aspect of every utterance must be consistent with its verbal content. In this context it is important to distinguish between coherent and incoherent utterances. A coherent utterance is characterized by harmony and clarity. An incoherent one results in confusion, misunderstanding and lack of agreement. It may stem from insufficient self-knowledge, a multitude of messages transmitted simultaneously, inadequate language, not adjusted to the recipient, inappropriate linguistic or emotional connotation.

The discussion above pertains to the sender of a message. But how is a message decoded by the recipient?
Again, let me refer to Schulz’s conception. His approach is entirely sufficient as a practical solution to our considerations. Depending on what the recipient wants or is prepared to hear, we talk about “listening with four ears”. Every plane of an utterance mentioned above is received by a different ear, the one that is most developed. The threats posed by one-sidedness of reception may be connected with the relationship as a whole, or one of its aspects.

1. The matter ear – set on receiving information only from the factual plane. In this case we may not notice that relations between people in interpersonal communication are not compatible, interlocutors do not receive messages, for example emotional ones.

2. The relationship ear – set on receiving information pertaining to mutual relation. In the recipient’s view it may indicate positive relations, thus making him feel good. It may, however, convey a negative message; in this case every piece of factual information is interpreted negatively in its emotional aspect. There is yet another manner of perceiving relations, when every message, even a neutral one, is decoded as harmful to the receiver.

3. The self-revelation ear – it is not the hypersensitive relationship ear, but one that is open to what the sender wants to say about himself. This type of listening is very helpful when building appropriate relations between the sender and the receiver, or between a volunteer and a receiver of help. It facilitates the understanding of what is behind the emotions displayed by the sender. The danger connected with self-revelation ear is interpreting every utterance as attacking the receiver, jeopardizing his self-esteem or system of values. Often the message is arbitrarily distorted, triggering a sense of inferiority, or letting your self-image depend on the context of an utterance. If this happens to a volunteer, he undoubtedly needs to work with a supervisor.

4. The appeal ear – set on hearing, seeing, reacting promptly, in other words, recognizing and fulfilling the wishes expressed by the sender.
Lack of compatibility or cooperation between the sender and the receiver, resulting from insufficient knowledge about the message that is sent and received, and about ME and YOU in interpersonal relations, may lead to concealed misunderstandings or omitting crucial elements in any therapeutic meeting, including volunteers’ work.

With regard to the I-YOU relation, it is a good idea to consider the suggestions that Eric Berne puts forward in his conception of transactional analysis. He defines **Ego-state** as a coherent system of thoughts, feelings and corresponding behaviour. Ego states are ways and manifestations of a person’s existence in relation to other people and itself. The author distinguishes 3 Ego-states: Child, Parent, Adult. Each of them expresses different characteristics of ways of functioning.

**Child Ego/Self** state consists of experiences originating from childhood. It includes needs, wants, emotions, intuitive thinking, creativity. This state is a source of feelings, emotions and energy.

**Parent Ego/Self** state gathers opinions, norms, rules and values. It includes opinions concerning work, men and women, students, pupils, our subordinates and superiors. The whole content of **Parent Ego/Self** state is taken from our parents, teachers, authorities without modification, as it is treated as true and irrefutable.

**Adult Ego/Self** state contains everything that has been worked out in the process of personality forming, namely the procedures and strategies allowing for the mature contact with the self, with other people and the here and now reality. According to Berne, the mature ego uses this state to solve problems, take decisions, gather information, express emotions in a mature and responsible way.

Functional analysis of Parent, Adult, Child Ego states (PAC Ego states) indicates ways of using the resources that we possess.

**Parent Ego** states has two varieties: **Nurturing Parent** and **Normative (Controlling) Parent**. We learn these roles from our parents, who teach us how to be caring, but also how to instill rules, norms of behaviour, values,
how to bring up and support in difficult situations. Nurturing Parent cares about others, gives advice, permission, motivates.

A negative aspect of this state manifests itself in the actions of the so called Rescuer, who does not possess the appropriate knowledge, skills or competence, and his way of acting may bring more harm than good.

Feeling pressurized to help others, we may subconsciously feel used. In this case a volunteer may feel resentment towards the person he is helping. Another aspect of the Rescuer is helping when no help has been asked for. Often the Rescuer thinks he knows better what kind of help a person needs. He cannot administer help in reasonable doses, giving more than is needed. Moreover, he can reinforce the demand for help or deepen the state of inborn helplessness, inability to act.

Behaviours associated with Normative Parent pertain to building a system of values, setting limits, obligations and restrictions. A negative aspect of this state manifests itself in the Persecutor, who is not set on helping, but criticizing or punishing.

The Adult Ego state does the analytical and synthetic thinking, acts in the here and now, is objective and may have the function of negotiator or mediator between the Parent Ego state and Child Ego state.

The Child Ego state is manifested as a Spontaneous Child and Adaptive Child. The Child state needs instant gratification, its emotions are revealed with no internal control. The Spontaneous Child Ego state is in everyone of us, despite growing up and socializing (all the nurturing, internalizing actions). It depends on us if it is used. Definitely, it is advisable to take advantage of it in interpersonal relations such as: play, intimate relationships, expressing admiration. Being focused on serving one’s needs and no reaction to danger reflects a negative aspect of the Spontaneous Child Ego state.

The Adaptive Child Ego state. When confronted with a variety of life situations, we learn to compromise and use creativity, which helps to adapt to the existing situation. Inadequate and automatic adaptation occurs in a negatively Adaptive Child – rebellious or submissive.
The Creative Child Ego state (Little Professor) is manifested in intuitive, creative, curious reactions, questions, explorations. The Creative child Ego state positively cooperates with the Adult Ego state in a way that is adequate to a situation, but more intuitive than logical. In the Creative Child Ego state magical thinking, as opposed to factual thinking, has an inappropriately large role. In this case a person slips into passivity, idleness, or initiating psychological games.

Relying on his conception of the Ego states, Berne put forward an innovative approach to interpersonal communication. He referred to it using the word “transactions”. According to Berne, a transaction is an exchange between two people, between their Ego states. Interpersonal relation is a sequence of transactions occurring one after another. Considering the six Ego states in their positive and negative aspects, we can talk about a multitude of possible transactions. Such an approach helps to understand the complicated exchange of messages that occurs between people.

Thus, we can assume that a human being characterized by a mature personality and the ability to communicate chooses the Ego state that is the most adequate one here and now. The effectiveness of communication depends not only on the content of an utterance, but also on the manner in which it is conveyed.

Berne mentions reciprocal transactions – symmetrical and complementary. As long as transactions are reciprocal, communication may continue indefinitely.

Symmetrical (reciprocal) transaction. Stimulus and response originate from the same Ego state.
Complementary transaction. When stimulus and response in the PAC diagram are connected by parallel lines:

Symbiotic transaction – fixed, constant complementary reactions in reference to the same persons. Two people complement each other to two:
Crossed transaction – reaction directed towards a particular state, response comes from a different state:

If stimulus and response in the PAC diagram are crossed, communication ceases to exist.

Covert transaction – what we say is a part of a transaction, “between the lines”, so in fact we say much more – it is a meta-communication level.
Angular transaction – the message is apparently delivered from an Adult to an Adult, but in fact to a Parent or Child:

Duplex transactions – the message is apparently delivered and received by Adult, but actually takes place on a different level, e.g. Child (flirtation).

Building our strong Adult – useful in mature contacts – involves:
Recognizing our Child - its weaknesses, fears, ways of expressing emotions, acknowledging needs.
Recognizing and learning our Parent – his orders, criticism, fixed attitudes, and the main ways of displaying them.
Becoming sensitive to the Child in others, talking to it, giving strokes, taking care of it, appreciating its need of creative expression.
Giving Adult the time to process data and tell the difference between Parent and Child, and real facts.

Working out a system of values. We cannot take any decision without ethical underpinning.

Presenting his theory, Berne warns against the so called “drivers”, who “change the soul into barracks”. Most frequently, these are messages we receive from people who are important to us, e.g.: be perfect, act quickly, demand from yourself, please everybody, be strong, powerful.

As opposed to “drivers”, “tranquilizers” instruct us: be yourself, take your time, work peacefully, live in harmony with yourself, respect yourself and your limits.

Interpersonal relations are endangered by transactional games, psychological games – several, mostly covert, messages exchanged between people, that lead to gaining psychological benefits.

A game is a defence mechanism used by people with unsatisfied need for support and appreciation, who cannot obtain it in a normal, sincere, open way. Every game contains a trap, in which the partner is to be caught. The game is a snare, which seemingly satisfies somebody’s need, but in fact has a different purpose. It is a snare, which targets the victim’s weak point, but as soon as the victim reacts, the situation changes (according to S. Karpman’s Dramatic Triangle – Rescuer, Victim, Oppressor), and the real purpose is revealed, with an unexpected ending appearing like a jack from the box. It is an ending the victim never expects.

From the psychological point of view, the less developed the Adult, the more frequently he will resort to a game, which will be his way of coping with reality and personal difficulties.

Summing up our discussion of transactions and psychological games, we cannot be blind to the positive aspect of games. The psychological tension is reduced, as the substitute needs are satisfied – these are the internal psychological benefits. The external psychological benefit is being protected from excessive closeness and involvement in relations with others. Safe
distance and other people's company, as well as satisfying the stimulation need, are socially internal and external benefits.

A volunteer's personal characteristics:

The desired traits of a volunteer's personality presented below are my, probably idealistic, proposal. Every person doing a job that involves helping others should possess these characteristics. Thus, what should a volunteer be like?

1. A volunteer should have a mature personality:
   - it means having well developed image of himself
   - an ability to understand himself, being self-aware, conscious of his own emotions
   - being able to satisfy psychological needs without permanent inner conflicts
   - having a sense of emotional security, in other words having an emotional stability in fear-inducing situations
   - having an objective insight into himself, knowledge about his positive sides and limitations
   - to estimate situations in a proper way
   - to act with a dose of optimism, authenticity and empathy
   - to have his own philosophy of life and fully formed outlook on life.

2. A volunteer should be authentically interested in other people, he ought to have positive attitudes towards other people, he should create the atmosphere of security and mutual trust.

3. A volunteer must learn to see other people as trustworthy, valuable, capable of solving their own problems and coping with their lives.

4. A volunteer ought to have a sense of responsibility for himself and the people whom he helps.

5. It is absolutely necessary to avoid judging people and their conduct. On the contrary, a volunteer should concentrate on behaviour itself rather than motives.

The ethics of volunteer's work implies no impinging on the limits of intimacy and dignity of the needy, as well as confidentiality of each meeting.
**Tips for volunteers** [Kubacka-Jasiecka, 2010]

- Do not play any roles in the presence of the clients.
- Be spontaneous – trust yourself and be self-confident.
- Do not assume defensive attitudes (do not apply self-defense mechanisms).
  
  Behave in a coherent and consistent way (thoughts, words, feelings, behaviour).
  
  Be able to share yourself with others (be open, allow others to get to know you, show feelings and emotions).
  
  And how to avoid getting involved in a psychological game? (according to Eric Berne?)

**Do not join the game**

- Be more self-aware thanks to reflection and understanding of different situations, particularly in the state of mental discomfort.
  
  Develop and use your emotional intelligence.
  
  Be assertive.
  
  Be aware of using defense mechanisms.
  
  Learn to identify motives that trigger psychological games.
  
  Do not allow yourself to be driven into a game, in other words do not satisfy the partner’s pathological needs.
  
  Do not let yourself be underestimated and disrespected.
  
  Get out of the game by confronting the person who initiated it.
  
  Develop your adult and use it.
  
  Do not take responsibility for solving other people’s problems.
  
  When there is no other alternative, consciously respond to a game by playing a game.

The discussion above has focused only on a small fraction of the complicated issue of volunteering. I have not referred to the external conditions of volunteer work. I focused on certain, in my opinion crucial, aspects of communication and personal characteristics, that definitely depend on the person who offers help. There is also the important problem of training,
continuous support and supervision of volunteers by people who have therapeutic expertise, abilities and competence [Gilbert, Evans, 2004].