

The Trouble With Person-Centered Planning¹

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*My continuing passion is to part a curtain,
that invisible veil of indifference that falls
between us and that blinds us to each
other's presence, each other's wonder, each
other's human plight.*

— Eudora Welty²

Person-centered planning is often useful and sometimes powerful. When it is powerful, a changing sense of what is possible and worthy of effort generates new opportunities and innovative forms of support. Expectations shift in a deep way, direction grows more clear and compelling, and shared engagement in opening new paths grows stronger.

The trouble with person-centered planning lies in what makes it powerful. Skill in the practices that define an approach to planning matters, but does not assure real change. Strategy in its deployment matters, but does not assure real change.³ When it is powerful, person-centered planning hosts experiences that resonate with the passion that moved Miss Welty's writing. Gathering to affirm a person in their interdependence awakens those engaged to their mutual presence, wonder and plight. This collective awakening demands and guides action as people make time to facilitate expressions of higher purpose, recognize possibilities and coordinate commitments to move toward a better community future.

¹This is a reflection on a discussion of the meanings and distortions of the term "person-centered" at the 2013 TASH Conference in Chicago. Angela Amado facilitated the discussion and Pam Walker will provide a better record of the discussion and its conclusions, which is fortunate as this reflection is almost completely tangential to the conversation.

version 1.5 – 29 December 2013

² (1998) *One writer's beginnings, The William E Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization 1984*. Cambridge:Harvard University Press.

³ Skill and strategy do matter, though they are neither sufficient nor necessary for a planning process to generate power. My friends and I have described skilled practice in, for example, *The PATH & MAPS handbook: Person-centered ways to build community*. Toronto: Inclusion Press (www.inclusion.com). I discuss the contribution of person centered planning to strategies for change in Person-centered planning and the quest for systems change in M. Agrin, Ed. *Equity and full participation for individuals with severe disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes, pp. 57-74.

Person-centered planning is powerful when people freely choose to practice it as a vernacular art. It prizes common language and the artistic expressions of ordinary hands using simple materials. It is guided by simple but provocative questions whose answers are never final and only provisionally discovered by acting in the world beyond the planning session: What are this person's gifts? Where will those gifts make a positive difference? What will it take for those gifts to show up in those places? Who will commit to action? It depends completely on the willingness of those involved to part the veil of indifference and allow a felt sense of the person's identity and higher purpose to move their collective will.

It is possible for facilitators to act from an internal place that will gather good people together and host a process that can generate the power for real change. It is not possible to reduce this gift to a set of techniques that can be applied impersonally to produce predictable outcomes. Powerful person-centered planning and evidence based treatments come alive in different worlds that simultaneously occupy the same social territory, our territory.

The world of powerful person-centered planning is the product of lifeworld rationality.⁴ Lifeworld rationality arises from a network of relationships woven by natural ties and a lived belief in the principles of mutuality and care. Coordination happens as people try to understand each other's viewpoints and situation and act together on their understanding. Relationships that express care create changes in conditions that threaten the possibilities of mutuality, contribution and care.

The world of evidence based treatment is a product of system rationality. System rationality assumes a world of unrelated individual actors seeking technical means to efficiently meet their objectives. Shared values and understanding are rendered unnecessary by the coordinating media of markets and the rules and standard procedures of bureaucratic structures. Laws establish and enforce rights and rules. Questions about the good life are answered by experts who draw on a body of facts. Efficiency improves through objective measurement and monitoring. System rationality establishes and depends on a veil of indifference: each consumer can choose whatever

⁴ This discussion is my horribly compressed and oversimplified version of a critical distinction developed by Jurgen Habermas (1985). *The theory of communicative action, v 2: Lifeworld and system*. Boston: Beacon.

is affordable, each client is seen and treated uniformly and correctly according to established criteria and procedure.

As economic life grows increasingly complex and society becomes more diverse, more and more of the lifeworld is colonized by the system.⁵ In the domain of services to people with disabilities, the past generation has seen this takeover gather momentum. In the early period of deinstitutionalization, the social space encouraged passionate and personal engagement in creating options intended to liberate people. Today much more space is occupied by complex bureaucratic rules intended to manage risks and market mechanisms intended to manage costs. Professional objectivity, social distance and consumer choice are prescribed to ration resources and enforce individual rights. In this sector of system world, person-centered planning functions as a tool to specify consumer choice and improve the fit between the client and the evidence based, cost effective services offered. The veil of indifference must remain in place. Person-centered planning can be useful as a tool in this colonized space but it cannot be powerful unless an awakening parts the curtain.

When the veil parts those involved awaken to a person's presence, wonder and plight. System world can't bear the claims of a person's unique gifts and ordinary concerns, only relationship can do that. Person centered planning escapes the system's impersonal boundaries and sets loose an eruption of ordinary desires into the trying to be cool world of settled professional judgements about what is realistic, legitimate and possible. Those who administer system rational services and see a person in this way can no longer be treat them impersonally without experiencing a sense of somehow doing wrong.

Those who part the veil and affirm a person's dignity, capacity and legitimate desires for a good life are unsatisfied with the compromises that have created system controlled group living arrangements, day programs, community experience programs, and almost-but-not-quite real jobs. Their affirmation pains them if they ignore people's

⁵Those of us who have taken John McKnight's geometry lesson, distinguishing the circles of association from the triangles of bureaucracy, can gain an even better understanding of our plight by noticing how much association life has been colonized by system rationality. System rationality can't help but try to turn the mutual support and action that arises when people identify with one another's purposes into its instrument for achieving its outcomes. More and more associations have an irresistible urge to make strategic plans and quantify goal attainment.

desires for roles in which they can make meaningful contributions or for privacy to develop and live in intimate relationships. In most organizations this creates an embarrassing mess that must be mopped up as quickly and unobtrusively as possible. Appeal to high scores on surveys of consumer satisfaction or reference to inadequate funding often absorb the messiness and restore the veil of indifference.

Some organizations have protected the space to innovate in partnership with people whose life purposes, interests and desires become more clear and more demanding of action (though many of these organizations report that this is getting much harder to do as the system advances its inspectors and auditors deeper and deeper into everyday life). In these places the expression of unnoticed capacities and desires energizes the search for new opportunities and the development of new forms of support. Deep policy change based on an understanding of social justice that focuses public resources on entitlement to necessary self-directed supports for contributing citizenship would open a much greater space for creative action (though promising early efforts to test some of the elements of this policy have been quickly swamped by system rational controls and structures).⁶

The trouble with person-centered planning is its potential to reveal the typical contradiction between most current service structures and the publicly stated goals that system rationality says it seeks: self-direction, inclusion, individualization, work first, upholding rights. The confections that sell the notion that the system already delivers on these goals melt when the wonder of a person's ordinary desire for a real home or a real job meets the reality that slots in group homes and community experience programs exhaust the available options. It is uncomfortable to live with this contradiction but no quick way out, apart from denial. Nostalgia for lifeworld is no answer. Giving in to the colonizing forces of market and bureaucracy is no better. Not even as great a mind as Habermas' has found a way to overcome the general case of this trouble: how do we develop ways to live together decently with one another, and with the planet, in the most completely systematized society in the history of humankind.⁷

⁶ See, for example, Simon Duffy (2011) *A fair society and the limits of personalisation*. The Centre for Welfare Reform. <http://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/uploads/attachment/261/a-fair-society-and-the-limits-of-personalisation.pdf>

⁷ I'm indebted to Rich Feldman, who is responsible for this insight though not for the way I have tailored it to my lifeworld-system story.

Our plight is that person-centered planning as an instrument of system rationality cannot in itself overcome the colonizing forces of system rationality. The wonder is that even in a world dominated by system rationality people can choose to resist its limits and transcend those limits by supporting one another to act outside its boundaries in a shared search for the conditions of a good life. The further wonder is that we have the capacity to host occasions to become present to each other in ways that generate power by parting the veils of indifference that separate us. The point is not to deplore the intrusiveness of system rationality but to be conscious of how powerful, precious and fragile direct encounters with the interdependency of our highest purposes can be and to protect and extend the spaces in which these encounters arise.