1. Title

The relevance of emotional bonding as part of the social worker’s relationship with sex workers (SWs) incl. those using drugs as clients of prevention outreach service

2. Names of participants

Research team: Tzvetina Arsova Netzelmann, psychologist, SPI Forschung gGmbH, Berlin, researcher initiator and Rayna Dimitrova, co-researcher, Health and Social Development Foundation (HESED), Sofia, team leader of the SW service provider team

Research participants: social workers from the outreach team of HESED: Polina Slavtcheva, Mihail Mihaylov, Verzhiniya Ilieva, Aleksandar Malinski, Petar Tsvetanov, Daniela Popova

3. Timeline

February – October 2014

4. Place/Setting of implementation

The place is Sofia, Bulgaria, the setting is related to the outreach service approach of the team, covering both indoor (clubs, table dance and striptease bars) and outdoor (streets, railway station area, parking places, highway) sex work scenes.

5. Context (departure points, place, organisation)

The participatory research project idea grew out of a currently implemented EU-project (EU Justice Programme), coordinated by the SPI Forschung, where I work as a scientific associate. Called WEDworks: “Women, ethnic minorities, drug-help services: What makes a difference?” it combines qualitative, partly participatory research with prevention interventions for an
improved gender-responsive focus of the drug-help services and a better interlink with health/social support services. The main beneficiaries of the project, implemented for two years in five CEE countries are women and SWs using drugs, as well as youth from ethnic minority communities. The project’s co-actors are helping professionals from drug and HIV prevention services i.e., social workers, psychologists, medical doctors, nurses, service users and community representatives. Two research ideas were developed by my colleague Joyce Dreezens-Fuhrke and me, which implementation was possible not least due to the financing of WEDworks.

I chose to implement the participatory research project together with the Bulgarian project partner HESED, active in prevention outreach services for female SWs and Roma communities in Sofia and the surrounding region. A long-term partnership relation binds me with the team together. As a native Bulgarian and co-founder of the organisation I took a pleasure by the chance to develop jointly the project with my former colleagues.

WEDworks offered all country partners participatory quality development measure accompanying their prevention interventions with series of intervision sessions. Originally five team meetings were planned, which gave the departure point for the participatory research project. The idea was to use the intervisions as a reflection format and to identify and explore together a theme of relevance and vested interest for the outreach workers searching for answers to the research questions formulated jointly beforehand.

The method of intervision1 (intercollegial learning) provided and held safe space in the professional context for:

- case presentations and discussions,
- individual and group reflection on practitioner’s code of conduct, outreach prevention work and the emotional-relationship work,
- outline of key elements/quality criteria of gender-sensitive client-centred work with SWs in the context of sexual health and drug-help services

6. Research questions

The initially drafted by me research question was: What are the most important components and factors enhancing a good emotional relationship/bonding with the client and how can this help the shaping of gender-responsive client-centred services for SWs?

Having set up the research project framework, after several skype discussions with the leader of the outreach team of HESED, we took a decision on the roles in the project. The lead researcher’s role taken by me, was indeed not a subject of a participatory decision-taking, considering that the whole research undertaking was initiated by my interest. The point to consider was how to plan a balanced team, avoiding vertical relations among

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1 Intervision Guidelines United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)
researchers and participants in the research team. Given the particularity of the research idea, the HESED’s team had to get into a double role simultaneously: co-researchers and participants in the self-experience and exploration process of the research, which was a complex and delicate matter. In order to avoid the risk of constantly enmeshing these two (who researches and who is “being researched”?), which would have doubtlessly overchallenged the whole research task; we decided to split clearly, following the formal roles’ principle. The outreach team leader stepped in the co-researcher role together with me, and the team members acted as the participants in the research process. Having agreed on this we headed towards the first participatory taken decision: fine-tune and focus the research question.

The draft question being rather a hypothesis was given a validation check by both co-researcher and participants at the first intervision team session (see 9.1.). Upon needs assessment brainstorming, eliciting and ranking of topics the real team’s theme and research questions were defined:

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How do we define and keep the boundaries of our team? What do we allow and what not? What is our relation with our clients: are we ‘friends’ with them? How can we draw the line between a client-friendly service and getting friends?
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7. Research aims and objectives

The research aim embedded in the intercollegial learning approach was to allow for reflection on challenges, barriers and limits of the social workers’ professional behavior shedding light to various ‘blind spots’ as well. The objectives were to help strengthening a gender-aware professional code of conduct through awareness, attentiveness and sharing of common meaning, insights and knew knowledge.

8. Methods

A set of interactive methods was implemented during the intervision sessions:

8.1. Brainstorming and small-group work

Partly conducted in same-sex groups in order to elicit gender-specific foci and differences. The male and female research participants compared their perspectives on emotional bonding and partnership in the client work. The intention was to probe for certain uneasiness with the topic, given that emotional rapport is stereotypically held as mother’s role and women-specific attribute.
8.2. The Six-Thinking-Hats (after Eduard de Bono, 1986)²

This is a simple and effective participatory group/team work method for parallel thinking, brainstorming and role-play helping teams to be more productive, focused and mindfully involved. It breaks down the thinking and reflection process into six components. Each team member can and ideally should experience all six areas of thinking swapping the different hats:

- Information (white hat)
- Feelings (red hat)
- Weaknesses (black hat)
- Strengths (yellow hat)
- Creativity (green hat)
- Managing the thinking process (blue hat)

8.3. The Walt-Disney Method (after Benno von Aerssen) ³

Named originally after the film producer Walt Disney this is a creativity role-play method, opening space for imagination, idea creation and new insights to known topics through a new point of view. It enables each team member to slip consecutively in three different roles and to ponder on the issue in charge from the ‘the eyes’ of the role. The three roles are: The Dreamer (idea generator, creator, visionary), The Realist (doer, action performer) and The Critic (manager, auditor, quality controller, and skeptic).

All methods were applied by the two researchers, whereas I was present in person only at two sessions. In the other two sessions I discussed and prepared together with the co-researcher via skype and she conducted the intervision sessions herself.

All original data was collected in Bulgarian, recorded digitally (audio-files, scanned work sheets) and sent by email in the cases I was not present on the spot.

9. Course of implementation

9.1. Preparation

The preparation comprised of drafting and re-finishing the initial research question in result of the fruitful discussions within the other training course participants at KHSB and the non-directive guidance of the tutor. It was followed by the definition of team and roles and kicking-off the research project.

9.2. Defining of the research theme and questions: Intervision session 1

Having defined the research question (see above), we spent intensive time on mapping the key research areas in a dialogical mode. Some examples:

- How do I actually feel about our clients? What are my attitudes: ‘do I like to work with them’, how do I perceive them, what are my prejudices?
- How to cope with the clients interaction: ‘I give- they do not take’, how to consider the resources of the client and to dose/measure the care for her/him?
- Which resources and the freedom to act (agency) do my client posses? How to learn identifying them, not overseeing them? How to create and enhance awareness and self-reliance of the client on her own resources?
- How to cope with my own professional burn-out?
- How to end up relation with clients, how to say goodbye?

³ http://www.ideenfindung.de/Walt-Disney-Methode-Kreativit%C3%A4tstechnik-Brainstorming-Ideenfindung.html?#top
9.3. Theme exploration with six-thinking-hats individually, Intervision session 2

The theme of this session touched upon some emotionally laden aspects of the client-centred work: how much do I allow myself as a professional to get into feelings and how much emotional investment can I contain keeping my neutrality healthy?

“I reflected on the theme of friendship through the perspective of two emotional poles and the continuum of feelings in between: Hate – when do we feel that we hate our clients? In some moments the group is being hated by us, I think…. Because we cannot cope with the destructive life circumstances of our clients, we transform this into hate towards them. ... Love - in some moments, most often in the beginning of our work we attribute a special value to our clients, we transfer our idealized idea of the work to the people on the street..... In between is the Positive accepting attitude towards our clients. However when we show such attitude it can be often misunderstood as an invitation to get into informal friendship relationship” (M., a male social worker)

“My feelings are of ambiguity. With a female client the intensive emotional relation and being a friend with her is burdening me due to the growing claim on attention from myself and my time, the social talks.. With a male client I feel emotionally unease, when I am polite and friendly and they misinterpret this as open and inviting attitudes and they mix up roles, they start flirting and try to get off with me... My gut feeling is to try to meet the needs of the particular person in the particular situation without giving too much up of my borders.” (P., a female social worker)

Simultaneously the group dynamic brought strong negative emotions to the surface, suggesting fear from betraying the team trust, anxiety about being exposed to awkward and unpleasant truths, having to reveal weaknesses.

“Me personally, I decided not to participate in this, principally, I can’t feel myself as a student and to write down on something I do not know the question, do not feel at ease, this is a lack of trust (D., a female nurse, research participant).

Opening a space to explore the realm of feelings related to the clients turned out to be a challenging threshold for some research participants at this early stage. It could endanger the team’s safety and obstruct the research task, if the required level of research distance is not available and the differentiation between professional team role (our team weaknesses) and the individual vulnerabilities (my own weaknesses) is not watched over.

9.4. Validation of team norms, Intervision session 3

Having assessed these first findings we discussed extensively what did the warning message, voiced by one participant mean. Was that a resistance to engage with the research process, or was it a reaction on allegedly misunderstood research question? As I did not participate in sessions 2 and 3, we decided that the co-researcher would take-a-step-back re-opening the discussion on the sense of intervis, or ‘ the whole thing’ and the potential benefits of
exploring further the intended common research topic. At this session the six-thinking-hats-method was offered again, this time as a group role play, all ‘putting the same hat on’ reflecting on weaknesses and strengths of the emotional relations with the clients. Thus the risk was minimized to confront individual team members with strong self-revealing feelings, at same time ensuring the safety of the team’s mental space to get in close contact with and to withstand negative feelings. The results refuted to certain extent the expectation that the team would not be able to stand the load of the research task.

“I feel fear of personal failure; I try to keep staying in the “golden middle” – the space between too close relations, which gain the trust and the professionally moderated relations” (P., female social worker)

“I respect the clients and expect from them the same..I show understanding for the way of life they have chosen, but I do not allow too much closeness and trying to get “buddy-buddy” games”. ..I feel antipathy towards persons who try to make advances to me” (D., nurse)

“I feel weariness and boredom, sometimes sympathy, sometimes I am shattered” (M. male social worker)

An important knowledge was that the team had learned to allow expression of negative emotions and to handle them with seriousness, respect, and attentiveness towards the vulnerabilities. Having achieved this common result the research team could focus again on the research question.

9.5. Creating a common team vision, Intervision session 4

The particular look at the research question taken at this session had to answer the question how can we take care of improving our partnership-relationship vs. friendship with our clients? Using the Walt-Disney role play the research participants swapped in all three roles and collected ideas and visions.
The Dreamers dreamt of: “delegating rights, empowerment, legalization of sex work, improvement of the capacity and emotional wellbeing of the clients... (and last but not least) marking clearly the team’s boundaries” (group role results)

The Realists cheered up at successes reached so far: “.. (established) .. reliable contacts, trust, openness and sharing, stability in the relations, sustainability of the service, respect and adequate personal attitude” (group role results)

The Critics scrutinized not yet exhausted sources of perfection, undercurrents and stumble stones: “.. the clients do not have available resources, we have different values, attitudes and concepts of partnership relation.. having accepted the capacity limits of some clients, we stop investing in them.. prejudices... the clients want us to do their job” (group role results)
10. Results and applicability (state of progress, outlook)

Although an end point was put the research project is to be considered a work-in-progress. All results given back to the participants will serve as departure points of new ‘travelogues’. The intermediary results achieved are embedded in the local context and are a shared ownership of participants and co-researcher. The consultation and validation of the results has not taken place. Therefore the findings hereafter reflect only my own analysis and interpretation endeavour and have to be handled as a draft.

A major result is related to a core element of the participatory research. The project promoted civic society’s commitment to support a change process and strengthened the agency of research team and participants, focusing not only on weaknesses but acknowledging successes at same time. Learning together for better acting was enabled.

Next result is seen in the enhanced critical reflexivity of all research co-actors, another core element of PHG. The active stance on self-exploration of professional code of conduct brought insights about the social workers’ role in the client work. It is (also) about power in the client-relations, even of helping professionals. The sooner we open to that challenge the better we participate, negotiate and contract the partnership relationships with the clients.

It is not yet possible to anticipate what the project’s impact will be. The results are enriching but not unequivocal. They triggered essential questions about the personal meanings in the client-related work for each participant. At same time the superficial layers of self-confidence and matter-of-factness (‘we know how to do the right things’) were displaced. Doubts and anxieties came to light (‘What are we doing here? What is the point of the exercise, are these silly games? What is the purpose of the intervision?’). The trust within the team has been shaken.

The impact of these can be powerful, enhancing the team’s resource to develop further its critical reflexivity. But it can as well entail various risks in the daily work after the research has ended, as the feeling of ambivalence dominated.

11. New evidence (knowledge gained in the frame of the project)

The form of knowledge produced is highly practical and local, as it mirrors the momentous reality of the participants in a certain ‘here and now’ context.

The conclusions are not yet drawn. Similarly unclear is still who will benefit from the results and conclusions. The issues raised during the process suggest that a more relevant question would be: Do the participants like to have such results as yielded by the process? The

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4 After the piece of Sasha Waltz & Guests: Travelogue I, www.sashawaltz.de
6 Ibid.
discomfort and discontent with an intentionally selected research question is new evidence and likewise a feedback to the approach of PHSR.

What does it mean to confront unpleasant insights in the research process, which were originally not conceived as the subject of the research, but became more than a side-effect?

An ethical dimension embodied here refers to the right or better the power of the researcher to guide further the participants in an unintended direction? Is it the responsibility of the researcher to keep such impulses under guard, or can the course of research process be blamed for following own laws?

12. Contribution to the participatory research

A particular contribution to the participatory research is seen in the scale and format of the project, featuring a handful of research participants and working out a kind of introspective research question and tasks. The study of the mental space of a team moves on the edge between research and intervention. It is hardly possible to re- pose objectivity of the relation between researchers and researched, as the space to be researched is the inner emotional space of both subject and object of the research.

A dilemma exemplified here is assumingly of generalisable quality. What happens when the research question overstrains us, did we overdo, and did we go too far? Can we really participate if we cannot withstand the urgency with which the research questions transform into uncomfortable self-awareness and knowledge? How can we transform the discomfort into useful knowledge?

More questions than answers. The travelogues must go on....

13. Contact

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14. References

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Intervision Guidelines. UNODC Project Office for the Baltic States 2010


15. List of abbreviations

SW – sex workers

PHG – participatory health research

PHSG – participatory health and social research