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Talking, Listening and Emancipation: A Heideggerian Take on the Peer-Relation in Self-Help

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Abstract

This paper adds a phenomenological account to the discussion on what constitutes the favourable prospects of the peer-relation in the context of self-help. By drawing on Heidegger's lectures on St Paul's First Thessalonians, and engaging in dialogue with a fictive case, we show that more attention needs to be given to how meaning is enacted, rather than simply adopted, in the peer-relation; that is, away from experiential content towards the process of how experiential knowledge is shared communicatively. This, we argue, may clarify the underpinnings of the peer-relation and its emancipatory potential. Our findings propose a reconsideration of the role played by communicative activities in self-help. And, whereas storytelling has often been propounded as a way to facilitate agency among self-helpers, also the act of listening should receive more attention. By considering listening as an expression of agency, attention is reversed from self-narration on behalf of the person expected to be helped from it, to participation in another person's

story. The enaction approach to the peer-relation elaborated on in this paper invites the reader to rethink the value of talking and listening in helping relationships.

Keywords: Peer-relation, Phenomenology, Agency, Self-help, Social work

Introduction

This paper adds a phenomenological account to the discussion on what constitutes the favorable prospects of the peer-to-peer relationship, or peer-relation for short, in the context of self-help. One of the questions that seems to drive self-help research is in what ways the peer-relation may contribute to distinguishing self-help from the standard account of professional help, for example, within social work practice. Carol Munn-Giddings & Thomasina Borkman (2017) recently suggested that the peer-relation is characterized by *reciprocity*. Based on the observation that the members in self-help groups, for example Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), mutually engage in talking about their own and listening to others' lived experiences of a shared problem (i.e. alcohol addiction), the authors argue that peers here take turns being both each other's helpers and helpees¹. Thus, the peer-relation is different from the client-professional relationship, which instead signifies a one-way flow of provision from professional to client. Yet, understanding the peer-relation in terms of turn-taking of roles arguably makes for a zero-sum game with no radical break from the underlying provider/receiver-dynamic at the foundation of the standard account of professional help. If the act of helping others is to be regarded differently in the context of self-help, the act itself has to be considered for its potential of facilitating agency on the behalf of peers (cf. Riessman & Carroll, 1995; as cited in

¹ It can be argued that peer-support and self-help are two different things. However, when considering self-help in terms of the activities carried out in a self-help group, the peer-relation appears as a common feature. Self-help groups can be said to utilize peer-support in and through their supportive activities.

Munn-Giddings & Borkman, 2017), while in turn be accounted for as facilitated by and through dependency on other peers. Elsewhere, Borkman (1999, p. 143) alludes to something similar as ‘the apparent paradox of “self-help”, which is the experiential learning of an individual, in combination with “mutual help”, which is the social learning in very special circumstances with peers’. What merely appears to be a paradox can arguably be overcome by Borkman’s own model of *experiential-social learning*. What saves the peer from being simply a proxy of collective experience (i.e. receiver of help) is that individuals have to vet knowledge at the group level for personal relevance, thus upholding the possibility for individual autonomy. Yet, in viewing learning as primarily a question of reception of experiential content, Borkman reintroduces passivity at the foundation of the peer-relation. Given that Borkman appears to be an authority on self-help research, the field is left with a seminal account of the peer-relation that still does not present us with any clear break from the concept of professional help.

A possible way forward could be to reconsider the knowledge sharing process within the peer-relation itself. When focusing only on the experiential content being shared, any communicative activities, such as talking and listening, are excluded from serious consideration in their potential for facilitating agency among peers. By engaging in a phenomenological dialogue with a fictive case, we aim to show that more attention needs to be given to how meaning is enacted, rather than simply adopted, in the peer-relation. Specifically, we wish to draw on phenomenological philosopher Martin Heidegger’s (2004) 1920–1921 lectures on St Paul’s *First Thessalonians* in the New Testament. What Paul’s letters addressed to the congregation in Thessalonica indicate, according to Heidegger, is that Christian life is characterized by living in uncertainty as to when Christ will return. Paul conveys this, not by spelling it out explicitly, but by

expressing his *own* uncertainty as a Christian, thus co-enacting the Christian religious experience with the Thessalonians. We will regard co-enactment (or simply enactment) as a promising lead when it comes to clarifying the peer-relation concept.

The link between Paul, phenomenology, and peer-relation might appear peculiar to the reader. At this point, we wish to stress that our interest in Paul (as is Heidegger's) is anything but an interest in religious dogma. For these reasons, the aforementioned link needs to be addressed right away, before presenting and elaborating on the fictive case, and lastly, contrast our findings with Borkman's learning model.

St. Paul – an authority or peer?

Reference to Paul can be found in early self-help literature. Episcopal pastor Sam Shoemaker's (2009) commentary on *First Thessalonians* is regarded to be a source of inspiration for the AA movement and its twelve-step recovery method (Dick B., 1998). Shoemaker proclaims as to the primacy of equally sharing experiences over dogmatic servility that: 'The difference between true sharing and formal confession lies primarily in the open willingness of the person who is trying to help, to share himself.' (Shoemaker, 2009, p. 41, as cited in Dick B., 1998, p. 236), and he implies Paul as a role model for this kind of social communication. However, regardless of the great emphasis on the pious effort to equalize the relationship between himself and the congregation, Paul is considered by Shoemaker's (and possibly the general AA tradition) a *charismatic authority*, that is, someone of unique significance who has been called upon by the Lord to help the lost. Accordingly, Paul has been treated in classical sociological theory, perhaps most famously by Max Weber (see 1978), as a most striking example of the charismatic type. In his capacity as 'a chosen one', God has bestowed upon Paul a rock-solid

self-security, the power to effectively admonish those who are astray, and an unmistakable piety. As such, Shoemaker sees in Paul a role model for those who are lost to worldly temptations and finds that his letter's may show the way to get back on track in life.

In the winter semester of 1920–21, Heidegger presents in his lectures on the phenomenology of religious life a reading of *First Thessalonians* that presents Paul in a way that is at odds with Shoemaker's view (and general pastoral exegesis, for that matter). According to Heidegger, Paul is insecure, scared, and full of doubt. An obvious reason for writing to the congregation in Thessalonica might have been to answer a question from them as to when Christ will return and save them all – because they need him and think of him as an authority. Yet, by no means does Paul answer them in a reassuring way. His answer is indirect – indeed – downright vague: '5 Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.' (New International Version Bible, 2011, 1 Thess 5.1–2).

Instead of providing them with an objective answer, Paul refers them to themselves and to the life of uncertainty that they live. This way of answering, Heidegger thinks, disturbs the original question as to *when* (Christ will return), by answering in a modus of *how*. Had Paul answered in objective terms with a guess as to when, he would have instated himself in the superior position that the congregation expects of him; instead, it appears he would rather *be with them*. By answering them in this peculiar way that reveals his own uncertainty, he dismantles authority projected onto him, so that he and the congregation may be in the same boat and experience the anguish of waiting together.

Given Heidegger's account, one could approach Paul's relationship with the Thessalonians as one of power, and perhaps even of persistent or concealed power. While

not rejecting any possible merits of this approach, it is not one we wish to take here. We believe that there is something interesting going on here with Heidegger's account of Paul that would be missed if one attempted to disclose it as a case of power.

At the outset, being peers suggests that one shares a sense of equality and/or community together. This is somewhat analogous to Paul's attempt at being *with* rather than merely doing something *for* the Thessalonians. The idea entertained here is that Paul has personal stake in writing his letters to them; that he does it not only for their sake but for his own as well. He addresses a 'we', that is, the congregation of which he sees himself being part of and whose future he is invested in. This is what underlies Paul's *co-enactment* of the Christian religious experience. Thus, and for sake of clarity, we may term this particular kind of 'we' an *enactive* we as opposed to an *objective* we; the latter signifying that a consensus or an agreement – say, a prophecy of exactly when Christ is to return – instead were to characterize it. Paul's uncertainty only serves to stress this point: the enactive we of the congregation, in accordance with Paul's view (via Heidegger), is not *something* arrived at determinately through knowing this or that (or when), but instead actualized performatively and together with others, that is, through the activity of the Christian faith.

The enactive we and emancipatory support

Paul's enactive we can be compared with certain sentiments transpiring in self-help and peer-support research. Consider, for instance, Mead, Hilton and Curtis' (2001, p. 135) definition of peer-support, which includes both objective and enactive-oriented components:

Peer-support is a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility and mutual agreement of what is helpful ... It is about understanding another's situation empathically through the shared experience of emotional and psychological pain. When people identify with others who they feel are 'like' them, they feel a connection. This connection, or affiliation, is a deep, holistic understanding based on mutual experience where people are able to 'be' with each other without the constraints of traditional (expert/patient) relationships. Further, as trust in the relationship builds, both people are able to respectfully challenge each other when they find themselves in conflict. This allows members to [among other things] move beyond previously held self-concepts built on disability and diagnosis.

The first part of the quote suggests a more objective-oriented approach to understanding the we that arguably presupposes any possible supportive functions deriving from the peer-relation, emphasizing 'mutual agreement of what is helpful' and also *feeling like others*, that is, sharing a sense of similarity with others. The latter part of the quote, however, opens up for a different notion of support, as well as a different sense of we. Aside from practical and emotional support, peer-support is here also believed to facilitate a form of emancipatory support. The authors suggest that there is freedom to be enjoyed with other peers by simply being together. What does this mean? The last sentence implies that what is meant here is not only freedom from *traditional relationships*, but also freedom from 'previously held self-concepts'. Emancipatory support entails, then, not merely that one gets to exchange one identity for another. What we believe to be suggested here is that peer-support may provide participants with the opportunity to redefine themselves open-endedly and in the negative sense – as someone *other* than a disabled person or with this or that diagnosis. Similar to Paul's uncertainty, the

activity of identity work achieved with peers is here portrayed as valuable in and by itself, as opposed to a myopic focus solely on *what* identity is to be attained.

Mead, Hilton and Curtis (2001) are not alone in their view that peer-support amounts to more than reaching agreements or gaining a sense of kinship with others. Other researchers have suggested that self-help groups have the potential for providing members with *safe spaces*. These spaces seem to allow for emancipatory support similar to the one described above. Eronen (2020) studied a self-help group for mothers and found that the group not only accommodated learning experiences in the sense of, for example, taking part of practical wisdom from others on how to deal with life as a mother, but also a relaxed environment free from outside pressure, self-censorship, and for enjoying – as one study participant puts it: “the freedom to act ‘simply like oneself’” (Eronen, 2020, p. 580). Similar findings can be found elsewhere, in research on self-help groups (e.g. Boyce, Munn-Giddings and Secker, 2018, p. 59), as well as professionally organized peer-support work (e.g. Rosenberg and Argentzell, 2018, p. 56).²

In some studies, however, it is argued more along the lines of Mead, Hilton and Curtis (2001) above, that the peer-relation may also be emancipatory in the sense of challenging a shared social identity (i.e., objective we). Munn-Giddings and McVicar (2006) found that participants in a self-help group of carers (of family members with health issues) valued each other’s company in ways not related to care. Munn-Giddings and McVicar (2006, p. 31) conclude that “[t]he group provided a ... ‘space’ where [the members] could discuss caring in the context of their fuller lives and relationships. The

² It should be noted that some empirical evidence points to the prevalence of manipulation and social control within professionally lead peer-support and support groups (Neale, Tompkins and Strang, 2017; Wotton 1977), as well as within voluntary self-help groups (cf. Borkman 1999), perhaps suggesting the risk for unsafe *spaces* to develop as well? It is however well beyond the scope of this paper to investigate such themes more closely.

unique quality of the group was related to their peer relations, which enabled active members to transcend their role as “carer”. By being with other carers, the caring identity fell into the background as peers would relate to each other precisely by not being reduced to their carer identity. In a later publication, Borkman and Munn-Giddings (2017, p. 42) observed that a feature shared by two disparate self-help groups (one AA group and one consisting of carers) was that ‘attendees were able to listen freely to each other without judgment, criticism or being offered unsolicited advice’. The authors argue that the peers’ own familiarity or intimacy with the phenomenon of addiction or care enabled them to suspend it and be attentive to other group members as persons. Importantly, it is not only unwanted and stigmatizing identities that are hoped to be suspended in and by the peer-relation.

The above accounts indicate that an enactive we plays an important part in envisaging the peer-relation, and that it cannot be disclosed by relying entirely on we in the objective sense: what a group identity or consensus can do for its members. This transpires most clearly with Mead, Hilton and Curtis (2001, pp. 135–6) when they write that ‘[r]ecovering lies in *undoing* the cultural process of developing careers as “mental patients”. We *undo* this by practicing relationships in a different way [emphasis added]’. Yet, if the identity as mental patient (or addict, or carer, for that matter³) is what facilitates the connection between members, does not undoing that identity paradoxically put at stake that very connection as well? How the activity of ‘undoing’ – or ‘transcending’ (Munn-Giddings & McVicar, 2006), or ‘suspending’ (Borkman & Munn-Giddings, 2017) –

³ Surely, there may be considerable differences between individual self-help groups, and not only in terms of types. As Borkman (1999) elucidates, every self-help group (even in the case of individual AA groups joined together by their formalized twelve-step program) develops their own culture and knowledge practices that are never completely identical to any other. This paper draws on empirical research on self-help groups but studies the peer-relation as a formal structure that may or may not be found in particular self-help groups, or expressed differently within different groups, which all are issues for empirical inquiry.

identities is enacted together with others, as well as squared with an objective-oriented notion of we, has not been, to our knowledge, problematized or further explored by peer-support and self-help research.

The co-enactment of Paul and the case to be explored

‘Undoing’, ‘transcending’ and ‘suspending’ are indeed quite vaguely defined activities that do not say much about how individual emancipation is facilitated by or achieved through the peer-relation. What goes on in the peer-relation that may possibly contribute to the undoing, transcending, or suspending of identity? What is suggested in this section of the paper is a reorientation to the very communicative activities – that is, talking and listening – that supposedly uphold the peer-relation from the viewpoint of practice. If we can make sense of how these activities may be co-enacted with peers, the emancipatory potential of self-help in the self-help group may be elucidated.

Before presenting and commenting on Heidegger’s analysis of the Pauline letters in more detail, we wish to first introduce a fictive case.⁴ This is both for the sake of maintaining relevance to self-help research and also for minimizing the risk of drawing far-fetched analogies between philosophy and social science. The case, then, will work as a kind of ‘hook’ that keeps our analysis on track.

The case presented below is an excerpt from Mia Törnblom’s (2009, pp. 84-87) autobiography *Sådumt!* [How stupid!], which is a personal account of living with drug addiction. In the excerpt, Mia describes an encounter with the character Bosse, a former

⁴ Although based on an autobiographical account (see below), the case is to the extent of our analysis regarded as fictive such as to dispel any claims of facticity.

user employed within a treatment program. What makes Bosse different from the other professional social workers that Mia had met before, that is, Helena and Irene, is that Bosse seems to spark Mia's recovery from addiction by talking about himself and his experiences of alcohol addiction rather than actively trying to do something *for* Mia. This manner of self-relating on Bosse's behalf makes his interaction with Mia a sort of paradigmatic example of the peer-relation, in that Bosse succeeds in relating to Mia as a peer *despite* his professional role.

The case: Mia and Bosse

I do not remember that much about what was said when Bosse from rehab came and informed me about *Kvarnlyckan* [treatment facility]. Just a day had gone by since my meeting with ... Irene [my parole-officer] and ... Helena [from social services], and I suppose I thought that the information would be of the formal kind: we do *this* and *that* during the days, our treatment facilities are located *here* and *this* is the most convenient bus route – end of story. But it was the total opposite. I was moved and dazed during those two hours when Bosse sat on a chair across from me in the meeting room. He made me both laugh and cry without me knowing how. I cry when I am out of dope while listening to [golden oldies on the radio] in the evening – and that is that; not because of what an old guy in his late fifties makes me feel and think – end of story again.

Bosse told me about himself and how his life had been. He was once a proper park bench drunk who had sobered up pretty late in life. He did not really say anything about what he thought about my situation or what he thought that I [p. 84] should do, and this was precisely what was different from the meetings I had had with the social

services. He only talked about himself, to the effect that I could not keep myself from chiming in and recognizing myself in his stories, and I did constantly.

From within, words and sentences just poured out of me, haphazardly, sometimes more coherently, about how it had been, and still is.

‘I have been using every day for over ten years ... I understood early on that drugs are dangerous; I would never try it. Never! In Skärholmen where I grew up there were a lot of junkies, and I clearly saw the humiliation involved ... But my anxiety over my weight got more and more severe, and it ate away at my resistance to drugs. I was recommended amphetamine-based weight-loss pills, and I chose to think that pills prescribed to you by a doctor do not count as dope – doctors prescribe you medicine! Not dope!

It was during my time on Gran Canaria that I started using cocaine, on top of my daily amphetamine use. One spoonful every day to keep my weight in check – that was what I kept telling myself ... Started working with Marie on ...[a] manicure school again when I got back home ... cranky and messy and created quite a mess, though it was not my intention. It just ended up that way. [Someone told me about Oslo; I went] and over there it was even crazier ... Parties, guys, amphetamine ... I liked [p. 85] Oslo a lot actually ... Save for that psychotic anabolic-doorman I got together with. Fucking awful ... messy again ... house-warrant ... and then some ... so I took my stuff and returned to Stockholm.

My new boyfriend [Calle] loved to freebase, first, you know, like crack. But it became such a hassle and expensive as you need about ten grams of cocaine a day ... Thousands of [Swedish] crowns! Still he meant safety to me, you know? The nicest, I

mean nicest guy I have ever met. No games. But he went all silent when he freebased. You could hear him crawl around looking for stones, or hiding behind the curtains and keep looking on what was happening outside... So inwards... And I thought I saved Calle from his base smoking... Hash... Pills... Heroin... Heroin it is. Crazy huh? At least it did not make you withdrawn. So I also took heroin but mostly for him. How stupid!

Adventures with Calle in Europe ... Zürich ... Lanzarote ... Drugs ... Hassle ... Court ... Spanish prison ... Home to Sweden again ... And here at home everything has kept getting worse very quickly ... Hunting for cash ... Drugs ... Humiliation ... Violence ... Fear ... Lies.' All this I confessed to Bosse, an old alcoholic who I had never met before. I told him things that I did not even remember happening. When my meeting with Bosse was [p. 86] over, I went back to my cell and I was so indescribably tired that I fell asleep and slept for twelve hours straight. Unwakeable!⁵

Framing Bosse's approach

What is going on here between Mia and Bosse? In short, Mia co-enacts the lived experience of addiction with Bosse by sharing her own story with the reader, following Bosse's act of story-telling. A sense of 'we' is accomplished by Mia, not merely in the *objective* sense as if agreement or consensus would suffice to disclose their relation, but in the *enactive* sense. The content of Mia's story does not simply correspond to the content of Bosse's story. This is revealed by the integrity of her story as well as how she maintains a distance between herself and Bosse by repeatedly emphasizing their differences in gender, age, and drug use. Still, their actions are intimately linked, in Mia's view. So what

⁵ Authors' translation.

is it that Bosse does that encourages or inspires Mia to share her life-story with him? Bosse seems strikingly indifferent towards Mia. Of course, if asked, Helena, Irene, and Bosse would say without much hesitation that the purpose of their encounters with Mia was to help or support her in her fight against addiction, but Bosse seems not intentionally focused on Mia, and a help-agenda is not the focal point of his approach to her. He simply starts telling her about himself. Bosse addresses neither addiction nor Mia directly, but rather indirectly.

Bosse's indirect approach may appear to be a clear departure from what is expected of him as a professional. But could not Bosse's indirect approach still amount to being part of his professional conduct? One could entertain the thought that Bosse's approach is not so much indirect in the sense of being unintended, as it is possibly a 'concealed' intent. For instance, could not what Bosse is doing be disclosed as self-disclosure; used as a technique to establish trust in his relationship to Mia, or done simply to instruct her in what he wants her to do next, that is, talk about *herself*? However, and importantly, this would not consider seriously enough Mia's distinction between Bosse, on the one hand, and Helena and Irene on the other. What makes Bosse special, in Mia's eyes, is precisely that his actions were not experienced as simply instrumental to achieving a professional goal, that is, carried out with the purpose of doing something *for* Mia.

This point allows for clarifying how we intend to use the case. We are here only interested in Bosse's indirect approach as a *possibility* relevant for conceptualizing the peer-relation – not as an empirical fact. Thus, the case is to be regarded as an imaginative example instead of evidence put forth in support of any claims that would concern what Mia and Bosse *really* are up to, for example, whether Bosse is manipulating Mia or not.

Staying with Mia's first-person perspective, we will instead pursue the following question: how can it be that Bosse's indirect approach triggers something constructive in Mia, boosts her self-confidence, and increases her self-transparency? It seems nonsensical, to the extent that one is led to believe that it is coincidental; it seems as if Mia's self-exploration is not necessarily prompted by the encounter with Bosse. However, we shall try to make sense of this and argue that Bosse's approach could indeed be integral to Mia's transformation. Our hope is to shed light on Mia's dependency on Bosse as peer, without approaching this dependency objectively. In other words, there is more to the case than simply stating that Mia's account conveys an agreement with Bosse's experience, or that she (re)constructs an 'addict identity' with him. Instead, we will consider how Mia and Bosse's interactions can be viewed as a case of co-enactment initiated by Bosse's way of communicating with her.

The phenomenological how of Bosse and Paul

In order to phenomenologically indicate what is communicated by Bosse to Mia (or perhaps rather how he communicates to her) we now proceed with a more careful presentation of Heidegger's phenomenological investigation of the Pauline letters. What we will try to render probable is that Heidegger's radical interpretation of *First Thessalonians* lends itself to our attempt at understanding more profoundly what happens in Mia's encounter with Bosse, as it will be elucidated in analogy with what Heidegger sees in Paul's communication to the Thessalonians.

Given the cautionary comment above about the risk of conflating parts of Heidegger's philosophical project with self-help research, it seems appropriate to inquire into what motivated Heidegger to explore the phenomenology of the Christian religious

experience. From the outset of his adolescence and early career in philosophy, Heidegger was introduced to philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey and his book *Introduction to the Human Sciences*. In this book, Dilthey presents Christianity as having something of grave importance to offer philosophy. Whereas philosophers in general (including phenomenologists) have sought to explain ‘the self’ with reference to universal objectivities (such as, for instance, the transcendental ego), Christianity, especially in its ancient, pre-institutionalized forms, constantly refers to the singular historical ‘I’, that is, *factic life experience*. As such, Heidegger thinks, the ancient Christian experience may serve as a paradigm for philosophical (read: phenomenological) experience. In short, this explains Heidegger’s fascination with Christianity and why one should be careful to not overinterpret the project in *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* to be a missionary one.

One of the things with Paul that fascinates Heidegger is the peculiar way in which Paul answers the Thessalonians. The point we wish to make about Mia’s encounter with Bosse is fundamentally informed by Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretation of Paul’s way of communicating to the congregation in Thessalonica. Paul tackles the congregation’s question (which is likely to have prompted the letter in the first place (cf. Hyldahl 2008, pp. 38–41) to him regarding the time of Christ’s return in the fifth chapter of the letter.

5 Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵ You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not

belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (New International Version Bible, 2011, 1 Thess 5–11).

Heidegger (2004, pp. 70, 72–4) begins by pointing out that Paul divides the Gentiles and Christians into two groups: ‘while people are saying’ and ‘but you’. Heidegger argues that Paul answers the congregation in an ‘indirect way’, that is, by referring to two different forms of enactment: the Christian and the non-Christian. ‘For those who get drunk at night’, that is, the Gentiles, the day of the Lord (cf. the second coming) ‘comes like a thief in the night’. The congregation, on the other hand, does not get drunk at night and is (‘dead as well as alive’ (cf. 1 Thess 4.13–18) destined for the grace of God when the time comes (cf. 1 Thess 5.4–11). We are here not dealing with a comparison in merely objective terms, that is, between who are and who are not Christian. It is rather about juxtaposing objective and the non-objective forms of living. To be in the day, Heidegger reads, is to be converted to God, it is to *become* something else (which again is no-thing in particular) than what they were. It is this other-nothing that characterizes Paul’s and the congregation’s shared way of being (Heidegger, 2004, pp. 65–7). The Christian way of life, which is hereby described by Heidegger as playing out in a world with no fixed identities, no substance, no fundamental categories, or as Paul states it: no ‘peace and

safety’, is according to Heidegger (2004, p. 57), analogous to the postmetaphysical phenomenological life-world that he aims to characterize.

We are not, like Heidegger, making a case as to whether Paul’s Christian life experience is paradigmatic to the phenomenological factic life experience. Rather, we argue that Paul’s way of addressing the congregation, as spelled out phenomenologically by Heidegger, may illustrate how Bosse in and through his indirect, or perhaps even indifferent, approach provides Mia with *possibility*, rather than with *some-thing*, a ready-made identity always already there in the discourse. Bosse and Paul’s approaches are, admittedly, very different in a number of aspects. For instance, one may note that whereas Bosse hardly addresses Mia, Paul explicitly addresses the congregation. However, Paul and Bosse’s approaches share the feature of in-directedness, or non-indexicality, followed by a destruction and reorganizing of a preceding meaning complex. Paul does not answer the congregation in a manner that corresponds to the way in which the question as to when Christ will return is supposedly asked by the congregation. Rather, with this vagueness or indeterminacy Paul shifts the discourse away from objectivities, substances, and identities, and moves the question as to *when* into the realm of enactment, or *how*.

The entire question for Paul is not a cognitive question ... He does not say, “at this or that time the Lord will come again”; he also does not say, “I do not know when he will come again” – rather he says: “You know exactly...” This knowledge must be of one’s own, for Paul refers the Thessalonians back to themselves and to the knowledge that they have [already being converted Christians and having succumbed to Christian life experience (the authors)] ... This sort of answer determines that the question is decided in dependence upon their own life. (Heidegger 2004, p. 72)

Somewhat accordingly, Bosse does not call Mia out as something or someone in particular, an addict, a victim, an offender, etc. Rather he relates to her by talking about himself. Thus, Bosse disrupts the doxa of the standard social work situation by not presenting Mia with *any-thing*, for example, plans or programs, and by not merely listening to her in an attempt to help her. Instead, Bosse does not constitute Mia as someone repressing a heavy load of stigma; he treats her as a normal person capable of being talked to, herself capable of listening to him, of setting her own agendas and taking responsibility for her own life. In other words, the indirect approach leaves behind empty cracks and fissures in the situational meaning complex (especially with regard to those relating to Mia) that can be filled out by Mia, giving her a sense of self-mastery. She becomes an agent in her own identity work.

This is, however, not the same as saying that Bosse provides Mia with the opportunity to be *anything* or *whatever* she likes. We are not talking here of possibility in the substantive sense, for example, an ambition or a dream to be realized, but the possibility for Mia to *co-enact* the lived experience of addiction by precisely listening to and talking with him there and then. Looking towards activity instead of content allows for a different take on identity work in self-help. A discursive analysis of Mia's narrative (informed by, say, a Foucauldian- or Bourdieusian-styled argument) would perhaps be satisfied with stating that Mia simply reproduces the confessional tale of drug abuse (cf. Yeung, 2007), already implied by Bosse, or that Bosse simply determines Mia to be *an addict* by talking about himself. Such an approach to the case – emphasizing content – would, however, miss out on important relational aspects: Bosse's way of addressing Mia *through* addressing himself. Importantly, the addict identity does, by manner of Bosse's indirect approach, *remain an open question* for Mia. Addiction, through being *Bosse's*

addiction, is presented (aside from possibly being represented) to Mia as a context that is nondetermined by manner of *how it relates to her*, which Mia is invited to explore.

The fact that what ‘ties’ Bosse and Mia together is unclear, is here then not considered an obstacle or a problem for their relationship. Likewise, for Paul (via Heidegger), the inability of providing the Thessalonians with a when is not considered a shortcoming in Paul’s knowledge, or a flaw in his Christian doctrine. It is constitutive of his relation to the Thessalonians, and of factic life experience as such. Heidegger elucidates this by (among other things) emphasizing Paul’s distinction between Gentiles and Christians. Paul wants to remind the Thessalonians that they do not, like the Gentiles, cling to *this* world anymore. Rather they are engulfed within it. They live in such concrete closeness with it that no-thing appears and to the effect that the world does not anymore present itself as *this* world. The Gentiles, on the contrary, speak *something* (peace and safety, that is) about the world based on their abstract and reifying experience of it. They maintain an abstract distance to the world (indeed, they do cling to it) from where things and identities may be conceptualized. According to Heidegger (2004, pp. 65, 72), Paul communicates a knowledge of the Lord’s day which is not based on an objective experience of the world, and which is therefore exclusive to Christians who have all left this world.

Those who find rest and security in this world are those who cling to this world because it provides peace and security. ‘Peace and security’ characterizes the mode of this relation to those who speak this way. Sudden ruin overcomes them ... They are surprised by it [the second coming (the authors)], do not expect it. Or still better: They are precisely in the attitudinal expectation ... (Heidegger, 2004, p. 72)

It is in this way Paul ‘answers’ the congregation. The second coming is not an event that will happen once and for all in the future, and Paul does not answer the congregation with reference to a specific ‘when’; he does not even venture a guess. Keeping in mind Paul’s point that *the question is not a cognitive one*, it is now clear that, according to Paul, the time of the second coming cannot be comprehended by the type of knowledge within whose cognitive boundaries one recognizes an objective chronological time. Consequently, Paul, with the conceptual logic of his words, being limited by the aforementioned cognitive boundaries, cannot capture and describe this knowledge of the second coming (Heidegger, 2004, pp. 7–13, 67–74; Bruun, 2012, p. 418). Neither can he objectively communicate the content of this knowledge to the congregation. The words Paul writes as an answer for the congregation’s question have no objective reference but mirror the life the congregation members already live as religious Christians (Heidegger, 2004, p. 72).

In conclusion, for both Bosse and Paul, the communicated lies with the communicative activity rather than its content. As such, whatever knowledge is shared is done so via the enactment of *sharing* itself. By avoiding – whether intentionally (as in the case of Paul according to Heidegger) or unintentionally (as in the case of Bosse, as far as the reader of Mia’s book is concerned) – any substantive determinations and, consequently, a discursive positioning towards the other that entails a preconceived self-identification for the other, a unique possibility for unconstrained agency arises for the other. This, Heidegger identified in Paul’s vague, yet exactly as such precise, answer to the Thessalonians, and this we have identified in Bosse’s indifferent, yet exactly as such de-stigmatizing, stance towards Mia.

Listening, talking, and meaning perspective

We now proceed with comparing our Heideggerian notion of enactment of the peer-relation, emphasizing activity in the process of sharing knowledge, with Borkman's model of experiential-social learning. What makes Borkman's(1999) account of the peer-relation especially interesting to consider in relation to ours is that it, too, stresses action. Borkman writes that in her study the overall 'focus ... is on the process of experiential learning, rather than its content: the learning process by which the primary experience is thought about and reflected upon, the meanings applied to it, and the individual's dawning awareness of what he knows and that he *knows that he knows*.' (Borkman, 1999, p. 35 [emphasis added]). The phrase 'knowing that one knows' suggests an attentiveness to lived experience. This is not completely unrelated to Heidegger's notion of factic life experience towards which Paul tries to turn the Thessalonians by stressing that they *already* live as Christians in their uncertainty of Christ's return. But as we have seen, according to Heidegger, the indirect, non-objective, and non-determinate way in which this insight is conveyed by Paul speaks to a very special form of awareness that cannot be disclosed propositionally. Let us first continue to compare our Heideggerian notion of enactment with Borkman's model, and then re-introduce the case of Mia and Bosse.

Although any direct parallels between Borkman and Heidegger should be drawn with caution, we find at least a shared interest in practical knowledge as something distinct from propositional knowledge. Borkman stresses this when discussing *knowledge-as-action* in self-help: 'Self-helpers describe knowing as involving bodily actions, not just intellectualized thought; action is highlighted and distinguished from

awareness, understanding, or feeling. The intellectual “head” knowledge is distinguished from the “gut level” knowledge associated with action, and it is knowledge-as-action that is important.’ (Borkman, 1999, p. 36). Yet, looking more closely at how Borkman argues that knowledge-as-action is learnt by the individual through the individual adopting the so-called meaning perspective of the group, we find a possible point of divergence between Borkman’s account of experiential learning and our own thesis of co-enactment.

One of the benefits to be gained from the experiential-social learning process is, according to Borkman, something that she calls a liberating meaning perspective. With it, the person can redefine him- or herself, alleviating self-hate, victimhood, and feelings of inadequacy. This relates (if not equates) to what we argued was the case when we said that Bosse dismantles one meaning complex and replaces it with a new and less predetermined one. Borkman regards meaning perspective as culturally specific to each self-help (or what Borkman wants to call self-help/mutual aid) group since it is the result of collaborative efforts between members through the use of personal narratives relating to a common issue or problem.

The role of narratives or stories is central to learning a liberating meaning perspective and to transforming one’s identity from a stigmatized ‘spoiled’ identity with a hopeless future life story to a normal and flawed human being with a hopeful life story ...

A newcomer needs to learn the meaning perspective of the [group] and how a storyteller’s personal story fits within it. Listening to the stories of seasoned members allows one to gain a sense of the general meaning perspective of the collective through the voice of the particular individual ...

[W]hile novices learn these and other aspects of the subculture of the group, they begin telling their story or parts of their story within the shared meaning perspective. This personal storytelling is an important way to begin reinterpreting one's past actions and history—one's identity. Within the context of the stories available to and expressed by the collective, one finds a different meaning to account for one's past actions. [In the case of a self-help group for stutterers,] reverting to your old stuttering self three months after completing a certain speech therapy is evidence not of your incompetence and inadequacy but the failure of the therapy. (Borkman, 1999, pp. 150–1)

What makes the meaning perspective liberating, according to Borkman, is found within the contents of the meaning perspective: the meanings in terms of insights or convictions to be uncovered in the culture of the group and taken up by the individual in relation to self. In contrast to my previous negative self-appraisal, for example, how I may have blamed myself for failing therapy, I now have an alternative way of viewing things; I open myself up to the possibility that it may in fact be the therapy that is at fault, and not me. In acquiring such meanings, I emancipate myself from a stigmatized identity, or so it is claimed.

However, there is an additional aspect to consider here, and that is the act of perspective-taking itself. What is liberating, then, may not merely be the emerging conviction of myself as normal or non-blameworthy. This since, in order to acquire a new way to view myself, I have to *enact* the peer-relation through talking and listening to others. I have to explore and investigate, make sense of other's stories and my own experiences. Activity is not only signified by explicitly learning a meaning perspective, or by reinterpreting past actions, but through my very participation in the group; in how I and the other members are mutually involved in each other's processes. We find here an

expression of agency that in itself uncovers the emancipatory potential of the peer-relation. I am in fact *able* to learn and reinterpret my experiences and actions otherwise, and that may precisely be what was denied me when I was being preoccupied with my stigmatized self (cf. Eriksson, 2019).

The enaction of meaning is hence not interchangeable with any discrete conviction or insight in the meaning perspective. Mia's case illustrated this point. What allows for the comparison is that while Mia's case is not a case of organized self-help, such as a self-help group for stutterers, the enactment of the peer-relation through sharing personal stories is a common feature. And while Borkman refers to self-development and group processes, often ranging over many years, Mia still gets to experience a shift in how she views herself during her short meeting with Bosse. Yet, it is not the content of what Mia shares with Bosse that testifies to her shift in perspective. Mia's story – her experiences of drug use – are all the while vested in pain and suffering. We find with Mia no meaning signifying for her an emergence of a positive and robust self-image. Though this might happen further down the road, Mia's experiences do not, as of yet, profess any new-found insights about normalcy or self-acceptance. A parallel may be drawn here to Valverde's (2002) study on notions of selfhood in self-help literature. Contrary to what could be expected, Valverde found in the literature not only stories about a true inner self, emerging triumphantly through successful recovery from addiction. She also found stories that portrayed selfhood as fragmented, pluralistic and with "a variety of 'flows' and 'folds'" (Valverde, 2002, p. 11), thus challenging more essentialistic accounts by encompassing poststructuralist sentiments. Mia's story – with its numerous twists and turns – aligns much better with this latter view. Yet, Mia's expression of agency is not exhausted with a fragmented or chaotic sense of self. Looking once more to how Mia relates to Bosse, his

role cannot be disclosed as that of someone who inspires Mia to be self-critical (cf. Valverde, 2002, p. 9). Rather, it is the enactment of storytelling itself that is liberating for Mia. Aside from *what* she shares, Mia spontaneously and open-endedly explores her own experiences.

Turning again to the role of others, Mia's dependence on Bosse becomes inconceivable if explained in terms of sharing of information, that is, remarks or suggestions. Instead, Bosse *shows* Mia what she *can* do by talking about himself and without telling her what she should do or how she should think. The indirectness of Bosse's approach allows for a notion of support that is not provided by him in the form of good advice or wisdom. If this was the case, it is questionable whether it would really amount to facilitating emancipation or rather the experience of being encouraged or inspired. At the same time, the enactment of the communicative activity itself, for example, Bosse's indirect approach of talking about himself, still allows for maintaining that Mia's activity is dependent on his. Dependency on others is thus upheld in the peer-relation.

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to add to the existing bank of knowledge on why peer support in some instances presents social work with favorable prospects. This by considering how a Heideggerian notion of enactment may contribute to making sense of how individual agency is facilitated within the peer-relation. Our findings propose a reconsideration of the role played by communicative activities in self-help. And whereas storytelling has often been propounded as a way to facilitate agency, our findings further suggest that listening, and not just self-narration, should also receive more attention by

research. By considering listening as an expression of agency, attention is reversed from self-narration on behalf of the person expected to be helped from it, to participation in another person's story. Accordingly, instead of focusing on *what is being heard* (in which the narrative of the other becomes learning examples for the person listening), the act of listening itself discloses agency. Listening shows that the possibility of individual emancipation is already there in the interaction, rather than something following from it.

More remains to be said about the act/content-distinction in regard to the enactive aspects of the peer-relation and social learning in the self-help context. In opting for a Heideggerian approach, emphasizing praxis, some would perhaps think, in line with contemporary philosophical discussions (see Zerilli, 2015), that cognitive and intellectual aspects of the peer-relation here have been under-emphasized. However, we have responded here to overlooked nuances between an *enactive* and *objective* sense of 'we' (cf. Mead, Hilton & Curtis, 2001), along with the tendency to resort to objectification in making sense of communicative activities in self-help by research (cf. Borkman, 1999). Considering this, we hope to have made a novel and thorough enough contribution to the state-of-the-art in order to inspire further discussion on enactment as constitutive of the peer-relation.

Whereas the literature reviewed in this paper suggests that the aforementioned discussion is an academic one, we believe that our findings ought to be of value (as well as scrutinized) by a wider audience, including self-help group attendees and social work professionals. In pondering the case of Bosse as peer *despite* being professional, should professionals strive to be peers with their clients? Interestingly, such ambitions would seriously contradict the very non-intended indirectness that we identify in Bosse's approach. The enactment approach to the peer-relation is a shift in focus that expands the

peer-relation to be more than simply concerning who has experienced *what*. Thus, the reader is instead invited to ask: who is supposed to talk and who is supposed to listen in helping relationships, and to what end?

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