

Planning With Open Eyes and Open Hearts

An Alternative to Excessive Positivism

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The notion of “excessive positivism” amuses and somewhat distracts me with its denotative suggestion that person-centered planners are over-concerned with scientific verification and logical proof. But beyond the punning, I wonder about the fit between the real difficulties that Holburn and Cea describe and the idea they have chosen to organize their critique. I think it blurs the important messages they have for person-centered planners by leading toward a debate about optimism versus realism (or pessimism, as it may seem to the positive thinkers who tend to be over-represented among committed person-centered planners).

I have experienced with sadness and anger much of what Holburn and Cea describe: modest changes inflated to the status of major events; apparent belief that adopting some new words will do when deep changes are necessary; and quickly sweeping failure under a rug of self-congratulation on how well the planning meeting went. However, I frame the issue differently than they do. They see the root of the trouble as self-deception induced by a lopsided focus on the positive. I see these temptations to self-deception as an invitation to look more deeply at how people who want to make a positive difference understand contingencies and cope with failure and disillusionment. To me they raise questions about the extent of people’s commitment, the acuity of their reading of their environment, and their capacity for learning. On this view, excessive positivism on the part of administrators generates far more mischief than optimistic person-centered planners do, and those who choose to commit to person-centered planning need to go forward with their eyes open to their environment and their hearts open to one another. What follows describes some implications of this alternative perspective.

Open eyes: Reading the environment

It may be that there is too much person-centered planning going on, or at least more than many organizations can capably support. People who want to have failures that lead to learning have to open their eyes and assess the capacities in their environment.

Are competent facilitators available? It takes substantial investment in learning and ongoing support to become competent as a facilitator, time to invite people into the process properly, and time to keep the process moving through the weeks and months it takes to build strong working relationships and learn how to make progress toward a desirable future (See Holburn & Vitze, 2002 for an inspiring account of a five year process of guiding the development of effective supports for a person whose needs for assistance challenged available services.)

Administrators who demand that overcommitted staff shepherd caseloads of 50 or more through hour-long episodes of filling out a state imposed “PCP Form” (even the acronym elides and cheapens the effort), including fitting “your dream” into a little box, and expect that people’s lives will be better for it might well meet Holburn and Crea’s criteria for excessive positivism, if they are not simply mindless or cynical. Managers who want a less demanding way to improve the level of person-centered practice have reasonable alternatives to doing a poor job of supporting the creation of good person-centered plans. For example, there are development programs to teach the skills of person-centered thinking throughout an organization (Sanderson, 2007) and to mobilize direct support workers to practice in person-centered ways (O’Brien & Mount, 2006).

Anyone who wants to facilitate person-centered planning meetings with integrity needs to ask, with eyes open to gaps between what it takes to fill the role and what is currently available,

“Have I got the time, knowledge, skill and support necessary to competently facilitate good plans.” When agency supports are weak, people who want to be more competent facilitators can choose to seek knowledge, support, and time on their own. People have joined other interested staff for mutual learning support, wrangled the means to attend training, and found ways to make time to do at least some plans well. This leads to a second question, “Am I going to take the initiative to make up for what’s missing from my employer?” If the answer to these two competency questions is no, the chances rise that even planning meetings themselves will be weak and fail to produce commitments that will guide and sustain action toward a desirable future.

Can available services actively support change? Person-centered planning is an exercise in revealing and aligning interdependency. It’s outcomes are contingent on people and organizations having the willingness and ability to do what it takes to move toward a desirable future. Realizing a positive future is more difficult when it requires coordinated effort among a number of people; when those people have to learn new things; when some of the necessary resources, including the time of some key people in the effort, come from the service system and so are subject to many bureaucratic constraints; and when the service system has to change in order to make necessary resources available in flexible forms.

These interdependencies raise the risk of failure, and variations in organizational competence matter considerably to how far a person who relies on services can move toward a desirable future. Someone with substantial impairments and a desire for an office job has a good chance of getting the opportunity in an agency organized to customize employment supports; so planning is likely to pay off. The same person faces long odds in an agency that only knows how to provide

the level of assistance required in a day habilitation center; longer odds if that agency's administrators have no interest in developing customized employment services; and still longer odds if the system that pays that agency encourages congregate services. Under those daunting conditions, a person who wants an office job and her allies either have to learn to become organizational change agents or find a way to move forward without much support from available services. This is why it does not make sense to require person-centered planning of agencies disinterested in the hard work necessary to organize in a person-centered way. (To appreciate the organizational work involved, see Fratangelo & Strully, 2002; for a case study of a person and his allies contributing to system change while escaping a nursing home against the odds, see O'Brien, Browning, & Lyle O'Brien, 1998).

When some people realize the interdependencies and organizational learning requirements created by competent person-centered planning in typical service agencies, they come to a point of disillusionment and choice. Service systems encourage the illusion that individual plans work like a doctor's prescription: an expert determines what's needed, orders it, others fill the prescription, and do what's indicated to achieve a desired state under a monitoring gaze. In some instances, the expert mantle has passed from a single professional, to a team, and sometimes to the person or guardian as expert on desired life circumstances, but the enduring problem lies not in writing the prescription but in filling it.

It is disillusioning to learn that only plans that maintain current patterns, and are thus largely unnecessary, stand a reasonable chance of describing the actual future. It is doubly disillusioning if people have succumbed to magical thinking and believe if only we perfect the process of planning and monitoring, reality will shift accordingly. Disillusionment about the power of plans

to deliver change creates a choice point. “Does it improve the odds for a better future enough to make it worthwhile planning, even though moving toward that future will probably not be as easy or as fast as we’d like and we will probably have to work very hard together to move forward.” If disillusionment hits after planning reveals a future that makes sense but does not immediately attract support from those who control important resources, the question arises in a different form, “Is the better future we have imagined still worth working toward even if some key resources are now missing and we might have to figure out ways to move forward without them?”

Open eyes are aided by the lenses of particular disciplines. Holburn and Crea’s seem to approach person-centered planning as if they were gathering evidence on the efficacy of a clinical intervention, testing it by correlating standard procedures with reliably measured individual outcomes and contrasting the results with different interventions or no intervention. This lens produces useful knowledge and, to the degree that it demonstrates positive effects, builds interest in person-centered planning. My perspective is shaped by a different community of practice, among practitioners of normalization based service development who adapted some of the tools of socio-technical systems consultation to create several of the now common approaches to person-centered planning (Lyle O’Brien & O’Brien, 2002). In these disciplines, evaluation and learning happen through the reflective study of particular situations in which people design and pursue courses of action to develop collective capacity to thrive in a specific and dynamic environment. The contingencies (“multiple molar dependent variables”) that Holburn needs to find ways to move into the background form the matter that we students of organizing seek to understand so that we can play a constructive role in the living drama they shape (see Miller,

1993 for a collection of the sort of organizational analyses that strongly influenced the development of person-centered planning). I think this difference in perspective leads me to see failures in strategic thinking and reflective practice where Holburn and Crea see exaggerated positivity.

Open hearts: Learning from false starts, failures, and fallibilities

Competent person-centered planning makes connections among people that generate images of a future worth working for and a desire to move together toward that future. It is possible to fall at this hurdle. People may be demoralized or bound to a narrow view of what is possible or trapped in chronic conflict with one another and even the most capably facilitated person-centered planning can only sometimes melt the hardness of life under these conditions. But, surprisingly often, people liberate the energy to imagine and seek better. Now people are players not spectators and they face the real possibility of feeling failure.

If they trust each other enough to move beyond the most common way to avoid failure –setting a small well defined goal within easy reach– they increase the risk of hurt that they hold together.

Consider the story Holburn & Crea sketch of Dan: swept away from those who had worked carefully for 18 months to imagine and begin preparing individualized supports with him and dumped into a group living situation by a system controlled by its mechanics of timelines and filling beds. The notion of excessive positivism provides one way to interpret this experience, but I don't think it nearly sufficient, for three reasons.

First, it offers limited and limiting guidance. Is the lesson that more experienced heads would have seen that Dan is at the mercy of a system with its own agenda and given up on the

possibilities of personalized supports from the start? Should the team have assumed group based services and planned for some ways that Dan could find a better fit with them? This would have made Dan's disappearance into the waves of services as usual less disappointing, but at the cost of delivering him directly to the circumstances that seemed hurtfully unacceptable after the team had worked with him. Interpreting this unfortunate turn as misplaced positivism masks a line of questioning that might make failure more instructive: what does this teach us about organizational politics; what might we have done to help Dan avoid or escape the organizational undertow that swept him away; and what will we remember next time we plan with someone? The misplaced positivism line also lets team members off a sharper hook: how do we overcome our own bruises at this defeat and figure out a way to get back on course with Dan; don't we owe it to each other and to Dan to figure out some way to keep moving? (I am not passing judgement on the team but thinking about the reader's possible conclusions from the way Holburn and Crea present and interpret this story. Absent information to the contrary, I assume that, in the event, Dan's team considered these tough question carefully.)

Second, it misses a fundamental question: how can person-centered planning build self-efficacy in all of those who plan together –in this situation especially the social worker who apparently initially assumed a cynical position whose dreary “this too shall pass” piled on extra weight for the rest of Dan's team to lift. Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) –the belief that one has the capacity to organize and carry out the actions necessary to produce a desired effect– is necessary if staff, family members, and people with developmental disabilities are to escape the pall cast by the social devaluation of people with disabilities and the bureaucratization of assistance. Person-centered planning can be understood as extended engagement in the practices that systematically

build self-efficacy: defining and pursuing mastery experiences, ambitious goals that really matter to a person and can only be realized by overcoming obstacles through sustained effort; learning from (and becoming) social models by seeing and hearing how others like them achieved ambitious goals; being accurately acknowledged for one's capacities and achievements; and learning to positively interpret physical and emotional reactions to difficulties. I imagine that Dan's team had plenty of experiences that built their collective sense of self-efficacy. To interpret defeat at the hands of the system as being excessively positive risks undermining self-efficacy by reducing the whole complex experience to a summary judgement of incompetence. A more powerful approach would be to ask more questions: what specific capacities have we discovered in Dan, in the other members of the team, in the team as a whole? How can each of us share and build on these capacities? How might our capacities further benefit Dan?

Third, it undervalues the importance of the team's effort. It's poor practice to try to convert failure into success by making up a story that obscures the the gap between desire and accomplishment. Dan apparently did not benefit from the realization of his team's plans, and I have no idea how he dealt with this or what has come next for him. But it seems excessively self-punishing to discount what team members brought to Dan and to each other as they stuck with one another and worked out how to grow small changes into more vivid and interesting ideas about how his life could be. Behaviorists have a professional preference for counting unambiguous things, but we humans can be encouraged and strengthened by the ways we relate to one another. It would not seem to me to distort the narrative of Dan's experience to note both failure and the ways that accompanying one another for eighteen months may have offered benefits.

To stand with people with developmental disabilities and support them in their aspirations for an ordinary life is too often a lesson in living with powerlessness, poverty, and isolation. The desire to imagine and move toward better is an unexpected gift that many people with developmental disabilities are willing to give when they sense the presence of people whose eyes, ears, and hearts are even a little bit open to them. To be an adult with a disability is often to know many times when good intentions and well meant plans didn't work out and supporters moved on to other matters in other places. There is no reason to intentionally add to this stock of disappointments. On the other hand, it is important to realize the limits that those of us who take the invitation to move with people toward their sense of a desirable shared future bring with us.

We can seldom write a check big enough to buy what's needed, even if that were desirable or possible. We can sometimes mobilize the necessary resources to underwrite the next step forward. Person centered planning can help motivate and guide those efforts at mobilization. We can seldom compel flexibility from service organizations, even armed with laws and policies that promise a person-centered approach. We can sometimes find enough room to take a next step in the right direction. Person-centered planning helps us discover a horizon of common purpose within which we can set ambitious goals and learn how working towards them moves us forward, back, or sideways. We can seldom demand access to the ordinary roles that many people with developmental disabilities want to play. We can sometimes find the ways to invite people to join in offering welcome and support. Person-centered planning can help us find the right invitation and give us the courage to offer it.

Courage, invitation, purpose, learning, resourcefulness: necessary and insufficient to guarantee success on the journey toward a future where there is greater justice and more inclusive relationships.

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