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To cite this article: Björn Andersson (2013) Finding ways to the hard to reach—considerations on the content and concept of outreach work, European Journal of Social Work, 16:2, 171-186, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2011.618118

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2011.618118

Published online: 10 Nov 2011.
Finding ways to the hard to reach—considerations on the content and concept of outreach work

Att finna vägar till dem som är svåra att nå—reflektioner kring uppsökande arbete som begrepp och utförande

Björn Andersson

In this article central elements and characteristics of outreach work are discussed. The empirical basis is documentation from five research circles conducted in Sweden, where outreach workers participated and put their work experiences into words. The findings from the circles are weighed against accounts from detached youth workers and it is argued that there are common methodological key components in outreach work that can be identified throughout the different contexts where the method is applied. The three main tasks of outreach work are contact making, initiating social change processes and providing social support to keep the process going. The efforts are performed in quite different surroundings, typically, however, in settings that the outreach worker does not organize or control. This has effects on how relations are built with target groups. Since outreach workers often meet people in vulnerable positions, engagement and respect are stressed as important professional qualities. Linking people to other resources is common and outreach workers need an extensive network of contacts to other organizations. The processes and situations that outreach workers engage in often have an open and unpredictable character. Managing contingency is therefore a central aspect of the work. Finally, a definition of outreach work is suggested.

Keywords: Outreach Work; Detached Youth Work; Social Work Methods

Nyckelord: Uppsökande Arbete; Fältarbete Med Unga; Metoder i Socialt Arbete

The obscure position of ‘outreach’

From a methodological point of view, there is something uninvestigated in the concept of outreach work. In spite of the extrovert activity it signifies, the concept itself seems to dwell in the shades. In the basic teaching books on social work methods used in several Swedish social work university programs, ‘outreach’ is not discussed or mentioned (Payne, 2005; Meeuwisse et al., 2006). From a historical perspective this is peculiar, because outreach was there from the beginning. Social work did not start off with building social service offices, but with people working and making contact in the field—as in the Salvation Army (Svenson, 2003), as ‘friendly visitors’ or as in the so-called ‘Elberfeld System’ (Swedner, 1993). On the surface, outreach work may seem easy to understand and define. The concept has an almost performative character. The contact making is central; it is about ‘reaching out’ to people. However, there are few general definitions of outreach work and the problem of making distinctions from related forms of social work is often commented on (see EMCDDA, 1999, p. 14; Crimmens et al., 2004, p. 14).

The lack of methodological discussion has been pointed out before. Morse et al. (1996) refer to a ‘conceptual void’, which they see as one factor behind ineffectiveness in the field (p. 262), while Kirkpatrick (2000) notes that ‘remarkably little has been written regarding theoretical models of outreach’ (p. 39).

One reason for this situation is that outreach work often is treated as highly dependent on context. The outreach approach is used in relation to a number of areas in social work: homelessness, drug abuse, mental disorders, youth problems,
and street prostitution. Considerations of method and accounts of work experiences are usually kept within the respective field and related to specific target groups. This results in a tendency to emphasize differences in the work (see Rowe et al., 2002 for an exception to this).

Another explanation for the hidden character of outreach work is that it is often seen as a part of something bigger such as ‘detached’, ‘street-based’, or ‘preventive’ work. In relation to these overriding concepts, outreach is given a subordinate importance and is not considered in its own terms.

However, a cross-contextual consideration of outreach work would help us to understand not just how it is affected by circumstances, but also what the method brings into the situation.

The aim of this article is to contribute to a generalized conception of outreach work by discussing some central elements of outreach methodology. This will cover the main tasks of outreach work, some important preconditions for—and consequences of—the work procedure, the professional learning process, and the relation to organizational power. Finally, a general definition of outreach social work will be suggested.

**Point of departure and material**

My starting point for this discussion is a two-sided engagement in the field of outreach work. On the one hand, I have for several years been in contact with outreach youth workers in Sweden, working with the development of a better theoretical and methodological understanding of their occupational role. This cooperation has resulted in a couple of texts about detached youth work (Andersson, 2005, 2006). During the last two years I have organized occasional seminars with detached youth workers in the Gothenburg area, concerning methodological matters. Among other things, we have done a documentation project, trying to map how detached youth workers divide their time between different work tasks. The study showed some interesting patterns, but is yet not published. I will, therefore, make only sparse referral to it in this text.

For the last two years I have been involved in a project aiming at investigating and verbalizing methodological experiences of doing outreach work among adults and young adults. A national network of outreach workers, established in 2005, took the initiative for the project. The formation of this network was due to an increase in the number of outreach workers during the 1990s, especially in the larger cities in Sweden. Essential for this enlargement was a growing public awareness and discussion about the situation for homeless people.

The project was implemented during 2007–2009 and organized in ‘research circles’. A research circle is a method to express, gather, and deepen knowledge in relation to a certain subject. It is pedagogically built on active participation and works both with the experiences that participators bring into the group and with new material, produced during the process of the circle. As one part of the circles in question here,
participants made short interviews with members of the target group. It should be underlined that throughout, the conclusions from the circles are based on how the outreach workers themselves understand their work.

In all, five different circles, involving a total of 38 participants, were conducted in five different city areas in Sweden: Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö, Umeå, and Södertörn. A specially trained leader, in most cases recruited from regional Research and Development units, led the respective circle and was responsible for documenting the process in a report. My own role has been twofold. In the first phase of the project I was the leader of the circle in Gothenburg. Later, I was responsible for writing a report to the National Board of Health and Welfare in Sweden, based on all five documentations with references to international literature concerning outreach (Andersson, 2010). Relevant articles were collected from GUNDA, LIBRIS, PubMed, ERIC, and Social Services Abstracts.

The participants of the five circles were, with one exception, employed within the public sector. They had different target groups: homeless people, mentally ill, drug abusers, street sex workers, and young adults. All did outreach work, but the role of this varied according to their job instructions. To some of the participants, outreach work was the main occupation; to others it was one task among many.

A contradictory relation to methods

One paradox of outreach work is its contradictory relationship to methods. On the one hand, outreach work is a highly reflexive activity with a working day often filled with discussions on methodological issues (see Henningsen, 2010 for a similar observation). Outreach workers are repeatedly asking for a more solid professional basis to build their work upon. The project with research circles was a response to that kind of demand, and in my contact with detached youth workers the request for more knowledge of methods has been ever-present.

At the same time, outreach workers are seemingly reluctant to apply structured methods in their work, and rather tend to give prominence to flexible interventions and personal engagement. This was obvious in the research circles, where the self-understanding of the outreach workers was formulated as an opposite to a stereotypical construction of the average social worker. This social worker was seen as a bureaucratic and office-dependent person, governed by rules, regulations, and inflexible working methods. As a contrast the outreach workers saw themselves as persons who were prepared to think and act ‘outside the box.’ They described their target population as consisting of individuals and groups who needed special attention and extraordinary solutions.

This position is also reflected in the literature. In an overview presented at a symposium on homelessness, Erickson and Page (1998) stress that ‘engagement is the key in outreach’ and that ‘the process of outreach and engagement is an art, best described as a dance’ (p. 1). In the same vein, Rowe et al. (2002) write that ‘one of the most important lessons learned from outreach is that it requires more than a method’
and that the complex nature of the task forces outreach workers ‘to become artists of sorts’ (p. 264). A guideline, provided by outreach workers from several European countries, states that ‘outreach work is primarily an attitude and only after that a method’ (Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 17). Finally, Henningsen (2010) has identified precisely the same line of thought among detached youth workers in Norway. His impression is that ‘youth workers tend to place a strong emphasis on informality and moral commitment as the defining elements of their occupational role’ and he terms this a ‘romantic ethic’ (p. 2).

The problem with this tendency among outreach workers is that it renders professional and methodological development more difficult. The process of transforming singular work experiences into a body of collective professional understanding is hindered when this practical knowledge is fragmented into specific cases and situations. When central job competences are discussed in terms of ‘engagement,’ there is a risk of too much stress on personal, rather than professional, work qualifications.

All social work involves elements of the social worker as a person. Being professional does not mean omitting the personal, but rather practising it in a reflexive and systematic way. Different problems and settings attached to the work position cause specific limitations and possibilities for how professional performance and personal engagement can be intertwined. For outreach work methodology, this relationship seems important to investigate.

The main tasks of outreach work

What, then, is the central content of outreach work? When the participants of the research circles described their experiences, they often used phrases such as ‘making contact,’ ‘identifying needs,’ ‘motivate to change,’ ‘linking to services,’ and ‘relational work.’ In spite of differences according to target groups and work instructions, there was a concordance in how they described and understood the outreach effort.

I think it is possible to summarize the discussion by saying that there are three main tasks that engage outreach workers (compare Morse et al., 1996 who mention five different tasks). The first of these is the contact making, which of course is the basis for justification of the method as such. The fundamental idea of outreach work is to start a process of social interaction between people in need, on the one hand, and some kind of support-oriented organizational body on the other. This is reflected in the definition provided by the Collins Dictionary of Social Work, which sees outreach as ‘any attempt to take a service to people who need it and who would otherwise probably not use the service’ (Pierson & Thomas, 2002, p. 324). An often-used phrase is that the target group is ‘hard to reach’ (e.g., EMCDDA, 1999, p. 34; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 21) and is not possible to get in touch with by other means.

The contact making is undertaken in a variety of settings: in public, at certain meeting places or in people’s homes. The implication of this is that outreach workers have to acquire competence in at least two different areas. One has to do with
sociability; outreach workers must have skills to initiate and maintain communication also under conditions that do not stimulate reciprocity and relational actions. The other is about spatial orientation; they must know about local meeting places, group movements, and how to bring about desired encounters.

The second main task of outreach work is initiating social change processes for the target group. Making contact is never an end in itself; it is always the first step in a process aiming at the improvement of life conditions and social situations for people in need. Basically, outreach workers have two ways to go: either they connect people to accessible help resources and support systems, or they may organize and carry through the effort themselves.

According to the evidence from the five research circles, there is a difference in the initiating process depending on how outreach work is integrated and connected to other tasks that the workers have to perform. As mentioned earlier, to some of the participants outreach work was a main task; to others it was something they did only on certain occasions. In a number of teams, engagement in treatment work with individuals or groups was expected. However, due to the complexity of problems among the target groups, connecting to and cooperating with other services was very common in all teams. This process was habitually referred to as ‘linkage.’

Important in this context is to come to an agreement with the people contacted on what personal or structural conditions constitute a ‘problem’ and should be changed. Outreach workers also need extensive networks and good knowledge about possible change agents to make the initiating process work.

Finally, the third main task that outreach workers have to deal with is to establish and maintain social support. For one thing, this has to do with the effort to facilitate social change processes. Target groups are provided with accessible information, often printed, on what to do and where to go. Outreach workers also spend a lot of time on motivational work. They talk to people about possible ways to change their situation. Sometimes this part of the work has a very practical character. The participants in the research circles recounted several occasions where they had managed to solve difficult situations by concrete interventions such as transporting people and things or taking care of belongings. This was done in a very inventive mood, at times in the borderlands of what professional rules and regulations would allow.

A second part of the social support has a temporary character, such as arranging a bed for the night or organizing instant backup in critical situations. Because outreach work is performed in environments and situations that can be rather turbulent, a need for immediate intervention does occur. The extension of this kind of support is, however, in some cases subject to ideological constraints. Some of the outreach teams in the research circles always offered coffee and cigarettes to people they encountered, and they also had access to temporary shelter. The idea here was to facilitate contact and to meet immediate needs. Others considered such activities as ‘harm-reduction’ and counterproductive in relation to change efforts. They, therefore, concentrated on what they saw as more long-term solutions.
Thirdly, social support is given to sustain social change efforts such as participating in treatment programs or group sessions. Outreach workers often follow up people they have been working with, partly because they continue to meet them in the streets.

In reality the work process is not as linear as the above-mentioned three main parts of outreach work may indicate. The different tasks merge into one another and may be difficult to separate in practice.

**Limitations of outreach**

This understanding of outreach work has two important implications concerning the limits of the effort. Firstly, outreach work does not include all social work that is done outside the office. Just locating social work activities in a neighborhood, or carrying them out in people’s homes, does not make them outreach. There has to be a purposeful attempt at getting in touch with members of a target group, and structured trials to connect them to social support systems. Secondly, treatment work or, put more generally, ‘people-changing’ effort (Hasenfeld, 1983) is not an integral part of outreach work. The improvement of people’s life conditions is a central goal for the outreach endeavor, and meeting outreach workers may have huge impact on people’s lives. However, from an analytical point of view the connection between outreach work and ‘people-changing’ should be understood on an initiating level; outreach concerns creating the prerequisites for a process of social change.

To delimit outreach work in this way is important for evaluation purposes. One often-discussed problem with outreach efforts is how the effects should be measured (Dickey, 2000). Is the contact making to be in focus, or is outcome dependent on verifiable changes in the life conditions of target groups? The argument made here is that the potential success of outreach should be measured according to the mentioned criteria: the capacity to create and maintain contacts, and the ability to link and support people in a continuing help process. Otherwise, the estimation of outreach would, to a large extent, be totally dependent on the achievements of other organizational bodies and units.

In youth work, there is a tradition of differentiating between outreach work and detached work, which reflects the division made here. In their study of street-based youth work in England and Wales, Crimmens et al. (2004) distinguish between ‘outreach’ and ‘detached’ and make different definitions. What they observe is that some teams focus on the outreach while others, the ‘detached,’ also engage in ‘...a broad-based, open-ended, social education...’ (p. 14).

As mentioned earlier, there was a parallel situation among the participants in the research circles. This means that, on the practice level, outreach work appears both as a main occupation and as a mere phase in the work process. For practitioners working on a detached basis, the distinction between outreach work and ‘people-changing’ may seem confusing, because these phases in the work process often merge into one another.
Smith (2005) has judged this discussion of the difference between ‘outreach’ and ‘detached’ as ‘pretty pointless.’ His argument is that the difference in reality is not necessarily so manifest because both these forms of youth work rely on connecting young people to ‘existing organizations and activities.’ In the terminology used here, they employ ‘linkage’ strategies.

From the vantage point of practice, I definitely agree with this position. However, the methodological problem is that ‘outreach,’ in relation to ‘detached,’ has a tendency to become unseen and, therefore, an analytical distinction is necessary to make it visible. This clarification also helps to bring attention to the importance of the linkage process—a subject I will return to a little later in the text.

**Conditions for the contact making**

Two factors have an important effect on the conditions for the outreach contact making. One has to do with the people considered ‘hard to reach’ that outreach workers are aiming at. Looking at the accounts from the circles, the people contacted were hard to reach in two quite different ways. One group consisted of people with little knowledge of, and scarce relations to, support systems. Among them were individuals who belonged to designated problem categories, but who had brief experience of life in the margin. Sometimes, ‘new groups’ also were mentioned. These could be, for example, users of previously unknown drugs or women on the street sex market coming from earlier nonrepresented countries. The other, and more numerous, group were people with quite opposite experiences of the social services. They had long and often complicated relations to authorities and their wish was to minimize that kind of contact. A feeling of being mistreated and overlooked was reported to be common.

This latter group already had a position as clients of the Social Services, but they were moving in and out of the system, so the relationship was malfunctioning. In this context, outreach work becomes a sort of restoration activity, where the workers try to vitalize the position as client and find ways back to the system for the individual.

This division in the target group, concerning existing connection to the social services, probably occurs in all outreach work, although the balance differs. It is no doubt more common to meet people with a client history when working with adults. The investigations made of outreach youth work in Gothenburg suggest, however, that also youth workers spend substantial time working with young people who have had long, and often troublesome, contact with welfare organizations.

The second factor influencing the contact making has to do with environmental conditions. The work is undertaken in a variety of settings. One fundamental aspect of this activity is that it is usually carried out in surroundings and situations that are not controlled or organized by the outreach workers themselves. Certainly, most outreach workers have access to some kind of premises, such as an office or, as with mobile units, a vehicle. These are important assets for meetings, talks, and
withdrawal. But still, the largest part of the work, especially the contact making, is done in settings and environments where the outreach workers are visitors.

Consequences for the relationship

These conditions for contact making have an overall effect on how the relationship between outreach workers and their target groups is constructed (Fisk et al., 1999), with two important consequences. One is that outreach workers do not build their relations to people in settings where professional power is mediated through spatial structures. In a social work office, the relationship between social worker and client is formed under the influence of spatialized practices and material design (Billquist, 1999). Outreach workers cannot embed their professional performance in this kind of supporting structure. They sometimes ‘lend’ authority by appearing in schools and youth clubs, but they do not belong there by profession.

The second consequence is that this puts more emphasis on the skills of the outreach workers to motivate their presence and give meaning to the support they can assist with. Because outreach workers often meet people under circumstances where their marginal position is so apparent, outreach has a certain unmasking character. This may mean that people are met in situations when they need help the most and when they have strong incentives to make change in their lives, but it may also mean that people are contacted when they least want any relation to professional help, and when they feel that they must display aspects of their lives that they would want to hide to others. This can cause feelings of intrusion, aggression, and resistance to any contact attempt from outreach workers. There is a situation of two-sided vulnerability here. The target group is exposed to the professional eye and practice of the outreach worker, and the outreach worker is at risk of reactive aggression and violent behavior.

Henningsen and Gotaas (2008) report how the youth workers in their study used the phrase ‘to come into position’ (p. 85). This was about finding a working angle for contact making and relation building. Outreach workers often pursue a wait-and-see policy. They make themselves visible and let people they meet take the first step. Things must not be said or done immediately. One part of outreach methodology is about waiting, facilitating opportunities, and then acting when the possibility is there.

Another part of this strategy is to put an emphasis on being accessible and easy to approach. In this context informality plays an important role. Outreach workers play down the exercise of authority and make use of a more personal approach (Sahlin & Löfstrand, 1992). They try to create an easygoing atmosphere; they have more physical contact and make more jokes than other social workers (Ng & McQuistion, 2004). The closeness to people’s everyday lives also contributes to the informal character of the work. In a very momentary sense, outreach workers ‘share’ experiences from the street with the people they meet there. To outreach workers these encounters may function as a source of feelings of solidarity in relation to people living in the margin.
Engagement and respect

One problem with this informal and personalized way of shaping a professional role is that it confuses power relations. The formal mission does give outreach workers a kind of accreditation to represent ‘society’ in relation to members of the target group. The extension of this may differ depending on the status of the principal organization, but, by their professional position, outreach workers can activate networks and resources that the target group does not have access to. The use of this power advantage and the distribution of resources may be obscured if the outreach worker just appears as a ‘nice person’ in front of members of the target group.

This dilemma is not unknown among outreach workers, and one response is to stress the need to consider the ethical dimension that is encountered in relation to people. Questions of ethics were common in the discussion during the research circles, and the participants extensively used the word ‘respect’ to describe what they were aiming at. One reason for this was that the contact making was done without people having asked for it. It was also about personal values and taking a position for people they were working toward. The assumption here was that if outreach workers take sides with the target group and support their interests, this would help the workers to avoid taking advantage of the power imbalance.

How well outreach workers manage to balance between their formal assignment and their informal involvement in people’s everyday affairs is an empirical question to be investigated in each case. There is research evidence pointing in different directions. Rosengren (2003) followed homeless women in Stockholm and her conclusion is that they were quite satisfied with their relation to the outreach services. The women did not consider the contact controversial because it did not involve planning or decisions concerning accommodation and economy. The focus of the relationship was rather on social support.

A study by Kryda and Compton (2009) comes to a quite different result. The authors undertook interviews with 24 long-term homeless people who lived on the streets of Manhattan, New York. These homeless people had made very little use of existing facilities and they said this was due to a ‘mistrust of outreach workers and lack of confidence in available services’ (p. 146). They criticized outreach workers for not showing a genuine interest in them as individuals, but rather treating them as stereotypes. Their experience was that nothing substantial came out of given promises and that the main interest of outreach workers was their own wages (pp. 146–147). Kryda and Compton conclude that the study shows the importance of an empathetic and individualized approach by outreach workers. They also point out at the problem of funding. It should not be organized on a per-contact basis, because this will encourage outreach workers to go for quick fixes (pp. 148–149).

The linkage

This brings us back to the crucial connection between the outreach phase and the further engagement in individual or group work; how is this ‘linkage’ actually
achieved? Morse et al. (1996) have criticized what they label the ‘screen-and-refer approach’ that is characterized by a brief contact making and an immediate referral to a support system. Instead they emphasize the importance of taking time to build relations, to involve members of the target group, and to make thorough assessments.

This model of outreach work was much discussed and highly approved by the participators in the research circles. To the outreach workers it was important that they could rely on the competence of the professionals and the services that they linked to. They engaged in networking with social services, health agencies, and volunteer organizations to create relations that would facilitate linkage processes with the target group. Sometimes the support did not work anyway and this was connected to a feeling of ‘cheating’ people into assistance that they had not benefited from. In these cases the outreach workers expressed a strong sense of responsibility. They saw it as their task to keep the spirit up and to represent a position of ‘never giving up.’

Another consequence of malfunctioning services was that the outreach teams had to address expressions of distrust from members of the target group, directed toward help agencies and efforts in general. The account from the research circles is in this respect parallel to what Jost et al. (2010, p. 14) report from a street outreach program in New York. People that outreach workers meet in the streets often have bad experience from earlier contact with the social services. They are, therefore, reluctant to engage in a new relationship and rather want to manage the situation on their own. The outreach workers described that they always try to acknowledge people’s experiences and show respect for the choices they make. However, when there are urgent needs to be met they also suggest solutions. Trust in relation to the outreach worker was at that point experienced to be an important factor to make people change their minds.

When linkage is obtained to an activity that outreach workers themselves are organizing, the situation is different. In regard to detached youth work, I have elsewhere (Andersson, 2005) used the Freirean concept of ‘generative themes’ to describe how outreach contacts are mediated into further transformative action. One part of detached youth work professionalization is to develop a certain sensibility for the inherent transformational possibilities in situations and talks during the encounter with young people in outreach sessions. The sad experience of the latest boyfriend may turn into a girl’s group, and the critique of leisure time activities being too steered by adults can lead to a local youth festival. In this way the further social educational activities are built on needs and interests articulated by the young people themselves, and the role of the youth worker becomes transparent.

This connection is, however, not always present. In the earlier cited study of outreach youth work in Gothenburg, different models were identified. In several cases there was a loose coupling between the outreach work and different kinds of individual and group activities that the youth workers carried out. The outreach effort resulted in some contacts and a general knowledge of local conditions for young people, but the relevance for other parts of the work was limited. In a way the
outreach work and the ‘people-changing’ activities worked as parallel strategies. This raises important methodological questions about the significance of outreach in relation to the work process in its entirety.

**Relation to the social services**

The teams participating in the research circles were all but one employed by the local municipalities and organized within the social services. Their relation to the organization was, however, ambiguous. On the one hand, the connection was characterized by dependence. The outreach teams were of course reliant on their parent organization for resources and work regulations. They also took part in meetings and tried to create relations to other sections of the social services, because they often needed functioning means of communication and a good reputation to make the linkage work. Some teams reported that they were occasionally asked by other social workers to go and visit clients or look for certain people in the streets, to see if these were all right. This was not always a meaningful task for the outreach workers, but they performed it as part of a ‘give and take-strategy’ and also to serve a ‘useful’ purpose in relation to the organization as a whole.

On the other hand, the outreach workers tried to maintain a self-governed position vis-à-vis the organization. Important to accomplishing this was to construct their own work role as ‘different’ from other social workers. As mentioned earlier, they understood their performance as more flexible and more oriented toward inventive solutions than the average social worker. They also saw themselves as the last stand of public assistance, which often had to cover up for things that others left behind. In this context, professional knowledge was described as something obtained through their own experience and from older workmates. The job was learned while doing it and by taking good advice from more experienced colleagues in the field. Henningsen and Gotaas (2008) describe the same learning processes among Norwegian outreach youth workers (see also Mikkonen et al. 2007).

The practical result of this ambiguity toward organizational affiliation was a combination of ordered and self-selected work tasks. The outreach workers used the expression ‘commissioned outreach’ to designate duties they felt obliged to do. But there was also room for a more ‘committed’ outreach. This was about taking on a responsibility for fulfilling needs that were poorly met by the support system. Because these efforts often exceeded the limits of the work instructions, they were interpreted in terms of personal engagement and an obligation to be sensitive to the needs of the target group. Naturally, not all work tasks were either ‘commissioned’ or ‘committed.’ A lot of time was spent on efforts organized in between these extremes.

In this context organizational control became crucial. Several of the outreach teams expressed how important it was to them that their managers based leadership on trust rather than detailed regulation.
Managing contingency and open-ended conditions

The overall impression from the research circles is that outreach work is very much about managing contingency. One part of this has to do with uncertainty, which is related to the fact that outreach work is done in settings that the workers themselves cannot control. This adds unpredictability to the situation; it is difficult to foresee what can happen. From cases mentioned in the research circles, one can conclude that this uncertainty is not only connected with public spaces. Participants reported, for example, on how visits to people’s homes had developed in quite unexpected directions.

A second part of the contingency is related to the often open-ended character of situations and processes that outreach workers engage in. For example, a lot of the linkage work is conceived of as an attempt and not a final solution. Many of the people they have been working with comeback to the milieux that the outreach workers visit, and the effort has to restart. This is something that the outreach workers feel they have small possibilities to influence, and it results in a feeling of partial distrust toward the possibilities of the organized support system to meet the needs of the target group.

Thirdly, contingency has a relational aspect. The outreach workers describe ‘never to give up’ as a central part of their work ethic, and underline the importance of always being open for a new trial. In relation to people they meet, they want to emphasize the uniqueness in each individual and every situation, to make people feel ‘seen.’

This brings us back to the earlier discussion of the ‘romantic ethic’ and the idea about outreach workers being ‘artists.’ At least three aspects seem to contribute to the particular blend of personality and profession in outreach work. One is the overall unplanned and open-ended character of the work process; the second is the way the contact-making results in a relatively informal relationship to the target group; and the third is the ambivalent connection to the parent organization. This is a setting that both enables and enforces creative solutions and extraordinary involvement. When perceived problems do not get solved in the presupposed way, efforts have to be organized in the borderlands of organizational recognition. Such engagement will easily be understood as guided by personal choice rather than professional rationale. Artistry and engagement can in this context be interpreted as responses to a work situation marked by contingency and high pressure on continuous optimism and making things happen. The crucial point here is that engagement and talent for improvisation should not primarily be seen as personal virtues that outreach workers bring with them to their job. Rather they are qualities produced by work conditions, and are thereby also central parts of outreach work methodology.

Defining outreach work

‘What has outreach to offer?’ was the question put by Rhodes (1993, p. 1317) almost 20 years ago. His own work was focused on HIV-risk groups, and his answer to the question was largely about community orientation and cooperation with ‘peer
educators’ (Rhodes, 1993, pp. 1318–1319). Rhodes’ work has been quite influential and is often referred to (e.g. see Rhodes, 1996; EMCDDA, 1999; Svenson, 2003; Mikkonen et al. 2007). One definition of outreach work that he and his colleagues have suggested is that outreach is: ‘A community-oriented activity undertaken in order to contact individuals or groups from particular target populations, who are not effectively contacted or reached by existing services or through traditional health education channels’ (Hartknoll et al., 1990 quoted in EMCDDA, 1999, p. 14). This definition includes several central characteristics of the method, but also sets out the community orientation as a general condition.

From the vantage point of another target group in outreach work, street sex workers, Kirkpatrick (2000) has criticized this position. Her conclusion is that social relations and contacts among sex workers are different from what is the case between injecting drug users. There is a tendency to processes of individualization among female sex workers, and their feeling of belonging to a collective is not strong. This makes individually oriented outreach work more in accordance with the needs of the group (Kirkpatrick, 2000, p. 44).

This illustrates the earlier mentioned problem of contextualization. It is difficult to construct a definition that does not include specific features connected to certain target groups. The risk is then to become too general in scope, as illustrated by the earlier quoted definition from Collins Dictionary of Social Work (Pierson and Thomas, 2002).

Now, the importance of definitions should not be exaggerated. However, there is a possibility that the methodological discussion could gain from a joint starting point. In the concluding report, based on all five circles, I have suggested the following one-sentence definition:

Outreach work is a contact-making and resource-mediating social activity, performed in surroundings and situations that the outreach worker does not control or organise, and targeted at individuals and groups who otherwise are hard to reach and who need easy accessible linkage to support (Andersson, 2010, p. 68).

This definition underlines some of the main elements in outreach work: the aim to contact people who are hard to reach; the provision of, and linkage to, low-threshold service; and the work being done in settings organized by others. These are attributes that connect outreach work across differences in target groups and work conditions, and could function as a starting point for methodological reflection.

Conclusion

Outreach work has a long history within the tradition of social work. This is poorly reflected in literature, however, and different actors have pointed out the methodological deficit as problematic. One complicating factor is that outreach work often is represented in relation to a certain field or target group. This has the
effect that differences between outreach approaches tend to be emphasized at the cost of a more generalized account.

The argument made here is that outreach work must be made visible and considered in its own terms. It should be recognized as a method that stands for certain solutions to problems occurring in social work everyday. Outreach work is about contact making, initiating change activities, and supporting people to keep the process going. It is aimed at creating relations to target groups whose needs are not met and generating workable connections to support systems. Typically, the work is done in settings that the worker does not organize or control. This makes for an emphasis on informal public appearance and respectfulness in outreach contact making and relation building. It also adds uncertainty to the situation and, overall, outreach workers have to deal with contingency and open-ended situations. This calls for creative and committed solutions, and contributes to the aura of engagement and artistry that encircles the method. However, it is vital to recognize outreach work as a professional activity where personal qualities are engaged in certain ways. The complexity of the effort underlines the need for critical discussion and methodological reflection.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Jean Spence at Community and Youth Work, Durham University, for insightful comments on an earlier version of this article.

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