

Listening Post Kristianstad, Sweden

January 15, 2014

Nine persons had signed up and all of these attended the Listening Post. The group consisted of 5 women and 6 men, representing professions such as psychologist, engineer, speech pathologist, occupational therapist, family therapist academic, manager in a community administration. One of the participants was retired. Petra Bovide and Magnus Larsson were convenors.

Part 1. Sharing of experiences

The session started out with an older man talking about the experience of being retired, and the feeling of suddenly not being so caught up in everything that is going on around you, instead being able to lift up your eyes and see things anew. This was followed by accounts of other experiences of what happens when roles are shifting, and we become less busy, as well as by comments about how immersed many of us we seem to be at work. Several of the participants shared the experience of people being very busy, trying to manage and fit all the demands of everyday life; working, exercising, taking care of and spending time with family.

One woman reflected on the theme of being busy, when she discussed how people nowadays seem to be fully occupied with themselves. She expressed a longing for the energy and possibility for more idealistic engagements, as in sports clubs and social organizations, in earlier times. This reasoning was continued by another man who observed that there is in fact a lot of organized participation today as well, but it tends to be in relation to one's children or home, as in housing cooperatives. Another man noted that the form of engagement today has changed, and is more in the form of voluntary work, in diverse settings, and less in typically Swedish form of organizational work. A woman, engaged in a large not-for-profit fitness club, noted that when young people volunteered to work there, it was with the goal of improving their own resumé, and that they were in fact working to build their own career, although it seems like they were doing something for the collective rather than for themselves.

The conversation continued on this topic of things lost in society today. Ideological engagement was mentioned as missing, along with a curiosity about other people. Reflecting partly on the ongoing conversation, a man noted the critical tone, that he believed to be very Swedish. He took as an example how many are critical of the way refugees are received in Sweden, instead of being proud of the fact that Sweden actually accepts relatively many refugees. Considering how many exciting cultural encounters the cultural differences make possible, it might actually constitute a unique possibility for development. The older man commented that going from survival to living on, or from reception to integration, is a really difficult task, which takes time.

The discussion on lack of interest and curiosity in each other was then resumed, and various images were drawn of people being in the same place but not interacting, like being in the gym with headphones on or standing at the train platform interacting with and through their cell phones. People around oneself are seen only as a disturbance to one's own doings. A man commented that

we lack the meeting places of older times, like the church yard, where spontaneous meetings happened.

The topic then shifted to the question of time, as a woman shared her frustration of lack of time being used as an argument for not being interested in others. Another woman said that we have never had as much time as now, whereas the next speaker said that we have always had the same amount of time, and it added by several that we live longer today. Time was discussed as being unevenly distributed between people in employment and unemployed people, and as something you need to keep an eye on, to make sure it is not filled up with other people and trivial problems. The pauses in life have disappeared, filled with fiddling with the electronic devices.

The conversation turned to people who are considered having more time, like unemployed and young people. It was suggested that unemployed and project employed people constitute a new class, and there was talk about how much society could and should demand of them. One woman suggested that parents should throw young adults out of their homes, into the world, instead of taking care of them as they play computer games or are laying on the couch.

A man shared a story of how a recent Lucia procession in a school caused a media storm, as the kids were not allowed to dress up as "ginger bread men" (Swedish: pepparkaksgubbar), causing parental outrage and media portraying it as a question of racism (as brown "ginger bread men" were associated with people with dark skin). The talk touched upon the need for, but current lack of respect for, boundaries and authority. A man reflected on the way a facade of correctness and unity was produced, while the reality was much darker.

The conversation turned into a discussion about the Swedish Democrat party (known for being critical towards immigration and as well as having a racist rhetoric). A woman reflected on the fact that about 10 % of the Swedes sympathize with the Swedish Democrats, but she did not know a single person who claimed that they did, as if their supporters are hiding, maybe out of political correctness. Questions were raised as to what makes this party grow, how there is a naïvety in society that makes a fertile ground for hostility towards immigrants, and that the Swedish Democrats function as a reaction against the older, more established, parties, and their sometimes somewhat sugarcoated fantasies of how integration can work. One man thought that there was a lack of a more critical discussion about these issues.

Part 2. Themes

Loneliness – community

Time – what do we want with time? Do we want to be engaged (or disengaged)?

To be part of a and a resource for society

The wholly inclusion

Lack of conversations

Fear of loneliness

Being busy, lack of interest for others

Performance

Exclusion

Naivety

Part 3. Hypotheses

Exclusion

Analysis

The members identified that exclusion was a theme that dominated much of the discussion. Various groups were identified as being potentially or actually excluded from. Part of the theme of exclusion relates to a illusionary facade of society and of ourselves, as a harmonious place where there is room for everybody. In part, it is an illusion of a good but now lost welfare society, that is threatened by the loss of idealism, and energy for engagement in the community, together with a strong occupation with ourselves.

The feeling of exclusion seems to be in relation to "the other", whether this is immigrants, unemployed or young people. However, the feeling seems to emanate from ourselves, but projected on others as we try to defend ourselves from the threat of being excluded by putting up a facade as being buzy, for instance by fiddling with mobile devices on the train etc. This facade and the busyness we immerse ourselves in, in turn disconnect us from each other, resulting in solitude and exclusion. We turn to productivity and efficiency as substitutes for community, but this can in turn diminish the spaces we have for spending time with each other, exposing our vulnerability, thus creating a community.

Hypothesis

Changes in society threaten the romanticized image of a society for everybody, creating an increasing fear for exclusion. Members of society respond to this threat by putting up a facade of being busy and occupied, constantly turning to our mobile devices, and by projecting the feeling of exclusion to less busy groups of society, such as immigrants and unemployed. This reaction in turn creates a distance between us and creates an even stronger fear of exclusion. Further, our projection of exclusion onto others hinders a more creative interaction, and loss of potential for development of both individuals and society.

Community

Analysis

Paradoxically, community did not emerge as a solution to exclusion, but instead as another theme that was problematic. Participants identified problems of community as other people constituting a disturbance to ones own doings and ongoing projects, whether they be work or training or family. Openness to others and to a deeper engagement and interaction threaten one's own sense of direction and the projects one values. Working on one's own resumé also means that the present relationships are interesting only in an instrumental way, to putting something on my resumé, rather

than as something that is interesting in itself. Other people tend to be seen as resources rather than as full human beings. Further, the people around oneself are generally less important in the long run, than the relationships that I can hope for in the future. The resumé is oriented towards the future, aiming at facilitating future roles and relationships, more valuable than the present. The local relationships cannot be trusted either, since to many people move around and shift jobs and careers. Being dependent on the people around you exposes you to the risk of making you the loser, the one that was left behind. Further, community tends to be seen as a threat to productivity and efficiency.

Hypothesis

In a situation with increasing mobility and emphasis on individuality, production and efficiency, members of society tend to experience deeper relationships with others, that is, being part of a community, as risky, since relationships cannot be trusted, and energy spent on community does not go towards working on the individual projects. In response to this experienced threat of community, members of society tend to turn away from engagement, to disengage from relationships with other people, and turn even more to various individual projects. As a consequence, engaging in collective enterprises or deeper relationships becomes even more problematic.

Time

Analysis

The participants were also concerned with the theme of time. It is similar to the other themes, since the question of distance between people cuts across all three of them, but there was a feeling of there being something distinct about time, although it was difficult to point more precisely of what. The question of time was related to an idealization of time in past times, as if everything was going more slowly, being more relaxed in the "good old days". The current experience of the pressures of time was related to an experience of everything moving and changing faster today, and of being engaged in multiple projects, such as work, training, ambitious parenting and so on. The experience of time being more pressured also seem related to feeling of emptiness and loneliness, where being constantly occupied functions as a defence. Being busy is a way of proving the world that you are someone who is competent and of value to your surroundings. The idea of a longer life also contains an idea of not having to choose, but to be able to do it all, since there is ample time for everything. The disappointment of not having time to be successful in all areas of life is threatening. Social media offers the opportunity to create and present an image of success in every sphere of life, and a pressure to conform to this. The lack of choice, however, could also imply a lack of commitment, and thus lack of closer and more meaningful connections to others. Choosing to engage would in another words mean losing the possibility to do different, potentially more productive things for one's future status and identity. The resumé functions as a formalization of group membership that is stable and does not vanish with the relationships themselves. The resumé also makes time measurable and produces a need to account for how one has spent the time available. A focus on how to manage time properly and how to be successful in every aspect of life threatens, however, to lead to engagement in trivialities, wasting time on updating profiles on Facebook and answering huge amounts of unimportant mails. Trivialities and by extension other people thus eats one's time and threatens one's control in life.

Hypothesis

Due to the increasingly rapid pace of change and the exposure of many areas of life offered by social and other media, a myth about the need to be productive and successful in every area of life is fostered. Members of society experience this as a pressure of time, and by feelings of emptiness and loneliness. Not being as successful as the myth prescribes you should be threatens to imply that you are nobody. Choice and focus becomes dangerous, as it risks meaning choosing the wrong path and to only be successful in one area, not all. As a defence, members of society tend to treat time as a scarce resource, and as something that is to be guarded and wisely invested, to create as much return on investment as possible. As a consequence, other people are perceived as threats to one's own self control and control over one's own time, increasing the emotional distance between people.

Summary hypothesis

Deep going changes in society, including increasing speed of change and extensive reliance on the Internet and IT devices, changes culture on a deep level. These changes threatens to undermine the experience of continuity and connection among members of society, leading to increased feelings of exclusion. The individual member of society is increasingly left to his or her own to manage these emotions, evoking further feelings of emptiness, loneliness and meaninglessness. These emotions are therefore projected onto groups considered to be outside of society, such as immigrants, young people and unemployed, that are experienced as different from "us". These marginal groups and their alien culture (youth as well as various forms of immigrant culture) are unconsciously blamed for our feeling of exclusion, emptiness and meaninglessness. The guilt for this projection onto already exposed groups is further difficult to face. The blaming and the anger is in turn projected onto groups that are explicitly hostile to immigrants, such as the political party the Swedish Democrats. The fact that they are largely invisible to many of us, in the sense that we seldom encounter people overtly supporting them, is helpful in making our own guilt invisible to us.

These defences sustain and exacerbate the already experienced emptiness and lack of meaning, as we lose contact with our own feelings and with many of our fellow members of society. We are also frightened of losing contact with our conscience, since it might punish us without forewarning. We silence our emotions by engaging in the individual life-project. This individual project brings us illusory meaning and by keeping us occupied by external stimuli, we avoid being in contact with our inner emptiness and the potential threat of our own conscience. In the individual life-project, relationships become instrumental and time becomes a stressor, since the individual life-project, in contrast to society, ceases to exist when the individual dies.