

FRANS SPIESSCHAERT



Methodology Experience Expert in Poverty and Social Exclusion

Foundations, Training and Operation

METHODOLOGY
EXPERIENCE EXPERT
IN POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION
FOUNDATIONS, TRAINING AND OPERATION

Commissioned by De Link vzw.

*Dedicated to
all the students, process coaches, teachers, co-ordinators and staff
members of De Link,
all the trained experience experts, their colleagues and supervisors,
and all to whom the methodology described in this book owes its vi-
tality, thanks to their courage, perseverance and willingness to reflect
on their experiences and insights with an open mind and to share these
with others.*

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samen investeren in welvaart en welzijn
s'investir dans le bien-être et la prospérité
gemeinsam in Wohlstand und Gemeinwohl investieren

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FRANS SPIESSCHAERT

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Experience Expert
in Poverty and Social Exclusion**

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Preface

While this book was being finalised, Belgium was in the process of an important exercise with all the parties involved in order to obtain a systematic overview of the results and challenges with regard to the war on poverty, ten years after the General Report on Poverty (GRP).

Today, this GRP is still rightly considered to be a milestone. It recognises the poor as the communication partners par excellence in a policy seeking more refined and in-depth knowledge of the poverty problem in order to formulate effective policy objectives and to create a society based on increased solidarity. The poor were able to fulfil their role of communication partner in such a prominent way, because they had already organised themselves in associations to fight together against the social injustice of poverty.

Meanwhile, the methodology of organisations where the poor have their say has become generally accepted as an indispensable cornerstone in the fight against poverty.

During the previous decade another methodology with regard to the fight against poverty was born, i.e. *the methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion*. This book is the first publication to offer the reader the opportunity to become systematically and thoroughly acquainted with this promising methodology, which, as the Flemish decree concerning the war on poverty indicates, is already acknowledged as the second cornerstone in the fight against poverty. The complementary character of both methodologies is also recognised in the field of practice. This has, for example, been translated concretely into a structural co-operation agreement between VZW De Link, fulfilling a co-ordinating role with regard to the experience expert methodology, and the Flemish Network of Organisations where Poor People Take the Floor, co-ordinating the organisations which are in constant dialogue with the poor.

I myself have been privileged to closely witness the development of the methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion from the very beginning. I still vividly remember a number of key moments.

The first goes back as far as January 1988. At a parents' meeting

of VZW De Touter, the first daycentre for special youth care in Flanders, parents shared their deep inner grief hidden behind the visible and recognisable face of poverty. This grief and feelings of deep pain, shame, guilt and humiliation force people to remain in the vicious circle of poverty.

Although I had been intensely involved in supporting these families for a long time and from a viewpoint based on solidarity, it was only then that I caught a first glimpse of *the wounded inner side of poverty*. At the same time, I suddenly became aware of my own blindness with regard to the in-depth meaning of poverty.

This awareness led to the foundation of VZW De Cirkel only three months later, together with Celine Luyten who was *born in an excluded cradle*. Later, she also became the very first experience expert in poverty and social exclusion. Through the methodology of action research and together with the poor, De Cirkel tried to find the roots of poverty and the elements that explain why people who have not been poverty-stricken themselves cannot fundamentally understand the poor.

The research visualised the five huge gaps separating the world of the underprivileged from that of the privileged. It also revealed the *missing link* which is responsible for numerous communication problems. We learnt that the poor are the only ones who are able to reveal the foundations of the social exclusion mechanisms and who can offer us the opportunity to turn this inhumane reality into a more humane society for everyone.

The intensive co-operation in the search for the essence of poverty also revealed the prominent role of so-called *bridging figures* who are able to interpret and clarify the perspective of those who are poverty-stricken. Thus, the poor are enabled to share their knowledge of poverty from within, in a profound way with people who have never been poverty-stricken themselves. It is a prerequisite that these bridging figures have gone through an in-depth coping process and that they have acquired specific knowledge, skills and attitudes. In other words: systematic training is required in order to master all aspects of the function.

In March 1999, VZW De Link was founded, a non-profit organisation with the explicit intention of setting up *training* as well as *employment* of experience experts in poverty and social exclusion. This would offer our society a prospect of a fight against poverty in which this innovative methodology can be systematically adopted.

The *ideology* behind the methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion starts from the observation that there are structural exclusion mechanisms in society that cause poverty. At the same time, the ideology acknowledges one's fundamental right to stand up for himself and fend for his own liberation. The fact that also poor people are thought to be capable of this, results from the basis of this methodology: a fundamental belief in the strength of the poor.

According to the experience expert methodology *the war on poverty* is therefore primarily a matter of the excluded themselves. Only they are in a position to decide which changes must occur within themselves and their situation. Therefore, only they can rightly claim full control of their situation. This basic view also recognises the fact that it is everybody's responsibility to create the necessary conditions in order to enable the poor to pursue their own dreams. It is therefore our duty, including those who were fortunate to have been born in a privileged context, to discover our own blind spots that subconsciously direct our insights and actions and prevent one from having an open mind towards others.

The *values* supporting the experience expert methodology also constitute the most essential values for *a fundamental war on poverty*, i.e.:

- the postulate of the strength of those involved;
- acknowledging the need of a question-oriented, inward and integral approach to the problem.

Furthermore, the methodology is supported by a number of *values* which can also be very meaningful to *a society which is geared towards truly living together*, such as:

- acknowledging the fundamental need for respectful and equal interpersonal relationships, enabling each individual to be regarded as a complete person and to be recognised in his/her responsibilities;
- the importance of a direct and non-concealing style of communication and, if necessary, of a confronting approach, because these forms of communication can strongly emphasise the equality of all parties involved as well as the acknowledgement of their responsibilities at the level of metacommunication;
- continuing to respect the autonomy of the people involved as well as their shared responsibilities, even in problematic situations;
- the strength of solidarity;
- the importance of having experience as a source of knowledge and competence development;
- the value of a committed, instinctive and reflecting approach to the problems that present themselves.

Many people have made a substantial contribution to the development of this methodology. I wish to express my *deepest appreciation*, particularly to:

- the first experience expert in Flanders!
- all the experience experts in training and their environment for their daily commitment in order to create a more just society in the future;
- all the trained experience experts, who managed to finish this emotionally burdening training and to their families, who supported them through all this;
- the extensive team of VZW De Link for its seeking and dynamic attitude and its perseverance to maintain an open communication and a critical attitude towards themselves and each other, even in difficult circumstances;
- the author of this book, who in his search for knowledge continued to stimulate us in order to clarify, deepen and refine our insights and who inexhaustibly continued presenting us new, updated and corrected draft versions of this book for review;
- the members of the organisation's Board of Directors, who did not hesitate to support this innovative ideology and who wanted to assume the responsibility for a long-term and uncertain search for the structural recognition and establishment of this methodology;
- the institutions for Adult Education, who had the courage to continue co-operating and organising the experience expert training, even if the logic of adult education is sometimes at odds with the demands of this training, and even if the training requires a lot of time from their staff due to the fact that it is situated at the core of the fight against poverty;
- the work placement and employment locations, which adopted an unbiased and open attitude to this new and therefore unknown methodology, who initiated an open dialogue with regard to their task within the fight against poverty and who were not afraid to question themselves and their own views with regard to the co-operation between the experience expert and the other co-workers, as well as the organisation's way of operating in all its aspects;
- the research institutes, especially HIVA¹, who have emphasised, propagated and scientifically supported the importance of the methodology;

¹Note of the Translator: Higher Institute for Labour Studies, Catholic University of Leuven.

- the policy makers and their administrations in Belgium and especially in Flanders, who fulfilled a leading role from within their specific responsibilities with regard to this methodology;
- all those who mentally, financially or intrinsically supported the development of this methodology;
- and last but not least *Cera*. The social component of this corporation was willing to finance a project concerning the research and development of the methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion. As a result, they have made an indispensable contribution to the propagation of this ideology. This book is one of its concrete results.

I would like to conclude with the words of *Bram Vermeulen*, who at a workshop of De Link on 22 March, 2001 joined us free of charge to perform a new interpretation of his song *De steen*. In the meantime, this song has become the theme song of all the students, trained experience experts, staff members of De Link and most likely of all those who helped and still help to implement this ideology in one way or another.

DE STEEN (*The stone*)

I have moved a stone in a river on earth.
 The water flows differently than before.
 The flow of a river cannot be stopped.
 The water will always find another way round.
 Maybe one day, filled with snow and rain,
 The river will take my pebble with her.
 And let it rest smoothly and eroded,
 In the lee of the sea.

I have moved a stone in a river on earth.
 Now I know I will never be forgotten,
 I gave a token of my existence.
 Because by moving this one stone,
 The stream will never flow the same again.

I have moved a stone in a river on earth.
 Now I know I will never be forgotten,
 I gave a token of my existence.
 Because by moving this one stone,
 The stream will never flow the same again.

Bram Vermeulen (1988)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This book provides an introduction to the methodology experience expert¹. in poverty and social exclusion. This methodology originated as a response to a persistent social problem, i.e. the fact that despite all efforts the poverty problem has hardly if at all reduced in scope. This methodology could be developed thanks to a favourable social climate.

In the introduction to this book we will focus on the broader context and history of this methodology, which is situated at the core of the fight against poverty. This will enable the reader to view the methodology in its broader social framework.

¹Each time the term experience expert is used in this text, it specifically refers to a “trained experience expert in poverty and social exclusion”, “a person who has experienced poverty, who has coped with and extended this experience and who, through training, has acquired attitudes, skills and methods to apply this extended poverty experience professionally in one or several areas of the fight against poverty” (Decree of 21 March, 2003 concerning the war on poverty (Belgian Law Gazette 11.VI.2003), article 2.5°). In other words, it is a person who has received the opportunity through training to start or continue his coping process, to extend his experiences with the experiences of others and to develop attitudes, skills and methods which are important in the field of practice.

However, the official designation of the training, as it is recognised by the department of education, differs from the term used in the poverty decree. The latter refers to “experience expert in poverty”, while within the department of education the training is known as training for “experience expert in poverty and social exclusion”.

Social Need

Need for Experience Experts

The concept of the methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion originated as a response to the *missing link* between on the one hand the policy makers or the aid providers of all services with which the poor are confronted, and the poor themselves on the other hand. This missing link is partly responsible for the fact that poverty persists.

The key element consists of the fundamental difference in position between a poor person, who is forced to live in constant poverty, and the organisations and participants in policy making who are not familiar with this reality. The latter are not familiar with the harsh reality of life in poverty in all its aspects, and particularly with the sense of shame and humiliation due to the fact that the poor constantly need to ask for help. They find themselves in the social position to force their own solutions upon the poor in order to solve their problems. As a result, *the poor lose control* of their own life and social decision-making, despite numerous interventions and policy measures.

This kind of observation indicates a need to involve people in all areas of society who can base themselves on their own poverty experiences, who understand the logic behind the survival strategies they have developed, and who are able to communicate this logic to others.

The use of experience experts in poverty and social exclusion was therefore developed as a methodology to help bridge the gap between the poor on the one hand and social services or public authorities on the other. *Experience experts* prove to be an indispensable link in all sectors with which the poor are confronted and which in fact cover all areas of life: education, legal system, health care, employment, welfare, child care, culture, housing and social services. The contribution of experience experts towards policy-making re: these areas of life is also indispensable at all government levels. Their function is complementary to that of the *qualified experts*² who they co-operate with.

Need for Training

The history of the concept of experience expert in poverty and social exclusion goes back to De Cirkel Vzw, which was established on 28 April

²In this book we use this term to refer to the professionals who are not experience experts. In the field of practice, experience experts co-operate with colleagues of very diverse professions and disciplines. It is not easy to find a suitable concept that covers all of them. In this book we opted for the term 'qualified expert'. Possible alternative concepts are: methodically qualified expert or technical expert in poverty and social exclusion.

1988 as a research centre, a relief organisation and an association in which the poor take the floor. The organisation's thorough research into the in-depth meaning of poverty produced important new knowledge. Partly due to these new insights a historical turning-point was reached with regard to our views of the poor. The individual guilt model was abandoned and structural exclusion mechanisms were revealed. And the positive strengths of people in poverty were recognised as an important starting point in the fight against poverty.

De Cirkel introduced a new emancipated methodology in the war on poverty. Already in 1989, this organisation advocated the involvement of experience experts in order to create a more humane and efficient fight against poverty. It stated that, in order to achieve this, the poor must have their say in the discourse on poverty and must be involved in assisting the underprivileged and in the fight against poverty. De Cirkel implemented this principle in a consistent way and they involved experience experts in the organisation's operation. People who had lived in poverty all their lives were trained as experience experts through a personal in-depth search and an analysis of their own life history. This required a long and intense coping process of their own experiences with poverty.

Through their contacts with De Cirkel and thanks to the pioneering work of this small-scale organisation, services and public authorities themselves were able to discover the value of the concept of experience expert in poverty and social exclusion. All kinds of organisations started using the expertise of De Cirkel, and as a result they were no longer able to deal with the increasing demand. The social need for a larger potential of experience experts in poverty was self-evident. Therefore, the idea originated to establish regular training for experience experts.

The first attempts to meet the growing demand for experience experts by means of training were ad hoc initiatives. One example was the Driearmenkruispunt project. This was a project set up by De Cirkel in co-operation with the PCSW in Antwerp to train a number of experience experts.

This experience indicated that establishing such training was too extensive an assignment for a small organisation like De Cirkel. Organising and offering training could never become the organisation's main task, since it had stipulated the realisation of several other objectives in the framework of the fight against poverty.

It became clear that the methodology of working with experience experts could cover a wide range of applications. But it also became clear that a large-scale propagation of the methodology would only be feasible if permanent training for experience experts were to be established.

Need for a coherent approach

From that point, the search started for a better formula to establish training for experience experts that could meet the widespread demand for experience experts in very diverse sectors.

To this end, Vzw De Link was founded on 26 March, 1999. The training for experience experts, their employment and the concept as well as the area of application of this specific methodology constitute the main tasks of this organisation.

Area of application: Experience experts can offer an additional value at various levels. They can perform various tasks and fulfil diverse functions. Through the implementation of all these tasks and functions they can contribute to giving the perspective of the poor its full value. They bridge the gap between the world of the poor, which is also their own world, and the world of other social actors.

Trained experience experts in poverty and social exclusion are people who have personally experienced poverty, who have coped with this experience and extended it to a broader experience in poverty and who have acquired attitudes, skills and methods through training in order to apply the extended poverty experience professionally in all areas of the fight against poverty.

Training: The bridging function and the processes facilitating it must be supported by means of training: people in poverty must acquire the necessary insights, attitudes and skills to be able to work as an experience expert in the functions required. The training must also spend sufficient time on the necessary coping process of the students' own poverty experiences through the analysis of their own life story. Thus, the students receive the opportunity to mirror³ and test their own history and solutions to other experiences in poverty and a broader social framework. This enables them to turn individual experiences and solutions into general analyses and solutions.

³The concept of 'mirroring' originates from communication studies. It refers to the use of body language in communication. A person who mirrors, adopts the attitudes and behaviours of the other in order to show the latter that he understands him and that they are on the same wavelength. Mirroring can also be used to show the other how his behaviour comes across to someone else. This is the meaning of the concept we use in this context. This technique is frequently used in giving training to experience experts. It does not only make others understand how something comes across, but it also helps to look for the reason why it is experienced that way and whether this corresponds to the original intention.

Employment: It is only natural that the training pays active attention to employment, since it originated from the need for trained experience experts in the field of practice. In other words, the focus on employment must safeguard that the opportunities with regard to the fight against poverty created by offering society trained experience experts are truly seized.

Social Basis

A training and employment programme for experience experts in poverty and social exclusion can only succeed if it has a sufficiently solid social basis.

An important factor has undoubtedly been the fact that the poverty problem could count on increasing attention from policy makers and a policy which no longer questioned the fact that poverty is a matter of exclusion and a violation of human rights.

Another factor which contributed to a sufficiently solid social basis is the fact that the field of practice showed the first signs of a new view on poverty linked to a different approach in the fight against it.

Poverty on the Agenda of Policymakers

Poverty as a Violation of Human Rights

In December 1948 the right to a humane existence for each citizen was incorporated in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Organisations of the poor used this declaration of human rights to demonstrate that the daily living conditions of the poor must undoubtedly be considered as a great injustice. To keep this awareness alive, the tradition grew to come together and bear witness to the fight against this injustice on the occasion of the international human rights day, celebrated 17 October. For many years these gatherings have been taking place in Paris, where on 17 October, 1987 a commemorative stone was inaugurated in honour of the victims of extreme poverty on the Trocadero Plaza. Every year several Flemish cities as well pay tribute to the poverty victims on this day. Examples are Saint Peter's Square in Ghent and the Esplanade in front of the European Parliament in Brussels, where replicas of the commemorative stone have been placed.

The theme of poverty and the fight against it gradually required a permanent and prominent place in the political and social debate.

Already in 1976, the law concerning the Belgian PCSWs recognised that each person has the right to social assistance in order to be able to lead a life in human dignity. However, it took as long as 1994 to incorporate the fundamental right that each human being has to live 'a

decent life' into the Belgian constitution. The latter also stated what the concept of 'a decent life' entails: it refers to one's right to health protection, one's right to proper housing, one's right to cultural and social development, etc.

As a result, Belgium became one of the leading countries to develop a concrete approach to poverty, based on regarding poverty as a problem of systematic structural exclusion. In other words, Belgium chose to approach poverty based on a *human rights model*.

The Belgian government also explicitly chose to involve the poor in the fight against poverty. For the first time in world history a government asked the poor to become an *active partner* in tackling the structural causes of poverty. In implementing a government policy statement made by the Dehaene II administration⁴, referring to a contract with all citizens to create a more solidary society, the Belgian Minister for Social Integration commissioned the King Baudouin Foundation in 1992 to draw up a General Report on Poverty in close co-operation with the representative organisation ATD Quart Monde and the Belgian Union of Cities and Towns. We quote:

"The government acknowledges the necessity to create a more solidary society. This can only be attained if the experiences and expectations of the most impoverished are known. Therefore, they themselves should participate as directly as possible in this democratic dialogue."

This report would:

"...become a tool to deal with the structural causes of poverty and social insecurity by mobilizing those who are poverty-stricken themselves as well as the social actors."

The General Report on Poverty [KBS 1994] that followed was the result of two years of intense mobilisation and dialogue, a process of the poor and organisations, of social workers and policy makers from all over Belgium. This method of dialogue became the basis of all further policy actions as well.

Poverty as Systematic Structural Exclusion

At the same time, an important worldwide evolution occurred which was reflected on the recommendations of the World Summit in Copenhagen in March 1995: all government leaders officially acknowledged that poverty is a *structural* and thus a *socially created phenomenon* and

⁴Belgian Federal Government (1992), *Coalition Agreement of 9 March, 1992*, Brussels.

not a matter of individual guilt. This statement constituted a historical turning-point in the way on poverty and those who are poverty-stricken are viewed.

Another important insight resulting from this summit: if poverty is a problem of exclusion, the fight against poverty should focus on inclusion, on the reintegration and involvement of people living in poverty and on involving them in the fight against it.

At the *World Summit on Poverty and Social Cohesion* of 2000 in Geneva, the so-called Copenhagen +5 World Summit, a research report [UNDP 2000] was presented concerning the evolution of the poverty situation in the world, five years after the Copenhagen Summit. This report indicated that poverty in the world was still getting worse, except where the poor were actively involved in the fight against poverty.

As a result, the participation of those who live in poverty remained a major point on the policy agenda of the fight against poverty. Similar insights also existed at the level of the Flemish Government, which explicitly declared its intention to involve the poor themselves in the fight against poverty.

First Initiatives in the Field of Practice

The activities of the previously mentioned organisation De Cirkel have undoubtedly contributed greatly to the development of a sufficiently broad social basis for the methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion. During a period of about ten years, the organisation studied the foundations of poverty and the dynamics supporting it. The fact that this research was not conducted for the poor, but together with them was an important innovation. Apart from this, De Cirkel explicitly chose to involve people who were poverty-stricken as colleagues, in other words as paid professional employees, in the fight against poverty. The fact that the initiative to conduct this research was taken by an organisation which committed itself on a daily basis to providing concrete assistance to the poor, undoubtedly increased the faith in the applicability of the obtained results.

The in-depth search for the roots of poverty, and this together with people who were poverty-stricken themselves, did not only lead to a better understanding of poverty, but it also produced, as mentioned above, the very first experience experts in poverty in Flanders.

By systematically involving the poor as experience experts in its operation and acknowledging them as full employees, De Cirkel set an example for those at the level of the field of practice. Hence, the field of practice was able to observe the value and attainability of co-operating with experience experts. Soon however, various services and organisations recognised the value of working with a tandem consisting of a

qualified expert and an experience expert and started involving employees from De Cirkel for a wide range of practical purposes in order to take advantage of the added value of involving an experience expert in their own services.

The first experience experts thus proved their value in the field of practice. The example of involving people who live in poverty as experience experts was even followed by other institutions.

In 1993, Kind en Gezin⁵ was the first large, authoritative public service in Flanders to integrate the methodology of experience experts in their guidance of families. Its Board of Directors officially confirmed this choice of policy, indicating that the entire organisation was convinced that together with experience experts a more qualitative assistance could be provided. In expectation of an official method of training for experience experts, Kind en Gezin organised its own internal introductory training for experience experts who had just joined the organisation.

This was undoubtedly an important step in convincing the field of practice of the ideology with regard to experience expertise, and of the fact that it is necessary to support its quality by means of training.

These few facts demonstrate that, based on the perspective of the poor, the field of practice was ready to question its own functioning, paving the way for a more in-depth qualitative approach.

Recognised Methodology

All these activities in the field of practice and at the policy level, and their specific emphases, indicate that the development of training for experience experts in poverty and social exclusion meets a clearly felt need. This observation will later be explicitly confirmed when the Flemish Government pays special attention to experience experts in poverty in its decree concerning the war on poverty⁶. On 21 March, 2003 the decree was unanimously approved by the Flemish Parliament except for one vote.

The decree defines an “*experience expert in poverty*” as a “*person who has experienced poverty, who has coped with this experience and extended it, and who has adopted attitudes, skills and methods through training in order to apply the extended poverty experience professionally in one or more areas of the fight against poverty.*”

In a separate section on “*experience experts in poverty*” the decree states that “*in all areas with which the poor are confronted, initiatives*

⁵Note of the Translator: ‘Child and Family’ is a Flemish government agency responsible for the well-being of young children.

⁶Ministry of the Flemish Community (2003), *Decree March 21, 2003 concerning the war on poverty*. Brussels, Belgian Law Gazette 11/06/03.

must be taken to employ experience experts in poverty". Further on, the decree states that "the Flemish government is authorised to recognise and allocate grants to organisations for co-ordinating and preparing the training for experience experts in poverty. [...] The co-ordination consists in creating the required conditions for organising and sensitising the training, for safe-guarding its quality and for the employment of experience experts."

Due to this decree the function of *trained experience expert in poverty and social exclusion* is officially recognised and it is expected that experience experts can be employed in all sectors with which the poor are confronted. Apart from this, the decree provides the possibility to finance the co-ordination tasks of authorities such as De Link.

On 10 October, 2003 the implementing decisions⁷ with regard to this decree were voted on. These implementing decisions confirmed the ambition to employ experience experts in all sectors with which the poor are confronted. Article 23 of these implementing decisions states that each Flemish Minister must take initiatives with regard to the employment of experience experts within his area of policy making.

Ideology Taking Shape

A look at its previous history shows us that the development of the ideology with regard to the fight against poverty occurred in different steps, starting from the insight that the poor have an important part to play to the translation into the methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion.

Each of these steps has led to concrete pilot initiatives in the framework of the fight against poverty in Flanders. The last step, recognising the need for regular and permanent training for professional experience experts in poverty and social exclusion, completes this process, which is outlined below.

- First, the poor were mainly regarded as a partner in dialogue: providing assistance to people who are poverty-stricken was not a question of giving directives anymore, but of a dialogue with the poor, while the relationship with regards to social assistance still defines the partnership. In this respect, the special youth care centres De Touter and De Tandem can be regarded as pilot initiatives.

⁷Flemish government (2003), *Decision of the Flemish government concerning the implementation of the decree of 21 March, 2003 concerning the war on poverty*. Brussels, Belgian Law Gazette 24/11/03.

- In a second phase, it was discovered that the poor could also be involved as a partner in offering social assistance and research: a poor person is professionally employed and works in tandem with the qualified expert within an experimental framework. In this respect, De Cirkel fulfilled the role of a pilot initiative.
- As a professional partner, a poor person is found to add his own specific expertise, i.e. experience expertise. This expertise is based on knowledge and skills which can be improved, developed and refined through ad hoc training. The Driearmenkruispunt Project and the training project organised by Kind en Gezin can be regarded as pilot initiatives with regard to this third step.
- In numerous social areas the involvement of experience experts can offer an added value in the war on poverty. Such a strong social need for experience experts requires permanent and structurally embedded training. In this respect, we can situate the training project co-ordinated by De Link.

The above outline of the evolution in the views on a partnership with people who are poverty-stricken is based on the perspective of the methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion. It is evident that this partnership is not only a characteristic of this methodology, but it also constitutes, for instance, an important principle of the dialogue method, as applied in the organisations where the poor take the floor.

Chapter 2

Approach to Poverty

2.1 Introduction

Experience experts apply their own poverty experience in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The experience expert's own experience constitutes his basic tool. If a person wants to perform the function of experience expert, he must personally have experienced exclusion based on poverty.

Apart from this, the person must have experienced poverty in his early childhood. People who live in poverty from a very early age are deeply affected by it. These inner wounds seem to manifest themselves as a very persistent and permanent factor of the poverty problem. Experience experts must therefore have acquired their knowledge of extreme poverty from within through their own life history.

In this chapter, we will investigate the characteristics of this form of poverty and its consequences.

2.2 Poverty: a Complex Subject

When people talk about poverty it is striking how often they do not talk about poverty itself, but explicitly connect it with something else:

Poverty and *social exclusion*

poverty and *placing in care*

generation poverty

the *most* impoverished

It seems as though people want to be absolutely sure that there is not a chance left to regard poverty exclusively as a problem of insufficient income, of not being able to make ends meet. Poverty is not just a financial

problem. Poverty is what is called a multi-aspect problem. This means that it consists of a combination of different elements. Poverty is deeply rooted in the personality of a poor person, in society and in the interaction between a poor person and society. In other words, poverty also has an important inner side, even if it is mainly a structural problem, a problem of social exclusion. Apart from this, people who are poverty-stricken tend to develop behavioural patterns and survival strategies in their daily lives which in turn contribute to the persistence of the dynamics of their marginalisation and exclusion.

The authoritative Research Group on Poverty, Social Exclusion and the City (OASeS), which is also responsible for the realisation of the yearbook on Poverty and Social Exclusion, has attempted to express this multi-aspect nature of poverty in its definition of poverty. As a result, poverty is defined in the following manner [Vranken et al. 1999, p. 30]:

“Poverty entails a special form of social exclusion, namely a tangle of exclusions which are interrelated. These exclusions concern different areas of one’s social and individual life and can take specific shapes in each of these areas. The incapacity of the poor to bridge this complex fault line all by themselves simply underlines the fundamental nature of exclusion caused by poverty.”

“As a result, poverty contains all characteristics of social exclusion: limited means (inequality) and fault lines (social exclusion). Hence, poverty has an additional network-like or multi-aspect nature. Poverty is linked to limited participation in all kinds of social means such as income, employment, education, housing, health, legal aid, collective services and culture. These areas are interrelated.”

In other words, poverty is a complex subject and it is much more than a purely financial problem.

And although it is generally accepted that the poverty issue has a very penetrating nature, our knowledge of the problem is probably still very insufficient. Well-intended efforts made by social services or well-meant policy measures still seem to encounter resistance quite often and they do not achieve the desired results.

That is why De Link continues to establish a permanent and intense dialogue on the essence of poverty with the people involved. This dialogue was even structurally incorporated in the organisation through the employment of several experience experts. Together they try to gain insight into the deep roots of poverty. These roots are formed by a combination of structural, inter-relational, socio-psychological and in-

trapersonal components. This interaction results in a wide gap between the poor and the remaining members of society.

2.3 A Big Gap

There is a big gap between people living in poverty and the remainder of society. Because the poor are its main victims, this gap is clearly visible from their perspective. They are incapable of bridging it by themselves, since it is maintained by a dynamic of exclusion within society. This implies that the position of the poor within society is determined by society and not by the poor themselves. This gap is characteristic for the situation of people living in poverty and its existence explicitly labels their personality.

Further on, we will focus on the various aspects of this gap, since together they constitute the roots of poverty. It will become clear that these roots extend very far and as a result it cannot be emphasised enough how firmly poverty is indeed rooted. It is self-evident that not all the aspects dealt with in this book are part of each poverty problem. And not all elements mentioned are equally visible or present.

2.3.1 Structural Gap and Participation Gap

2.3.1.1 Structural Gap

The structural gap refers to the fact that those who live in poverty are deprived of all basic rights, even when the latter have been transformed into concrete rules with a practical implementation. Regulations are often based on and designed for the average family system and as a result the poor often fall by the wayside.

The Right to Education: Those who live in poverty often have an unsuccessful school career behind them and it is often wrongly situated in special education.

The Right to Housing: Those who live in poverty must often content themselves with inferior housing. Poor people often live in unhealthy houses which are too small, too expensive and owned by private owners or rack-renters. They frequently move from slum to slum, fleeing the bailiffs.

The Right to a Family: Those who live in poverty must conclude that the right to a family is not at all self-evident. The numerous difficulties with which poor families are confronted put enormous pressure on family relationships. Children in poor families are

more often placed in care. For a family evicted from their home it is often impossible to find shelter as a family unit.

The Right to Health: Those who live in poverty are more frequently struggling with severe health problems such as cancer, lung and heart conditions, back problems, etc. People living in extreme poverty die approximately seven to eight years earlier than the average individual.

The Right to Social Assistance: Those who live in poverty are often forced to appeal to numerous social workers without feeling as though they are truly being helped. The poor often live with a permanent fear of having their family torn apart by some social service or other.

The Right to Legal Aid: Those who live in poverty are more frequently the victim of criminal offences. Only in very rare cases are they able to obtain redress and compensation for the damages suffered. At the same time, they more frequently come into contact with judicial authorities and are more easily and more severely convicted than the average citizen. The children of people living in poverty more easily end up in juvenile court.

The Right to Culture: Those who live in poverty are sentenced to a culture of silence. Exclusion, shame and powerlessness force poor people to lead a hidden life on the fringe of society. As a result, the fundamental rights to self-fulfilment and participation in, contribution to as well as development of a cultural life and society are inaccessible. Moreover, the consequences of living in poverty are often wrongly interpreted as the expression of their very own cultural identity.

The Right to Employment: Those who live in poverty hold a very weak position on the job market. Because they are unqualified and due to their appearance poor people are often not employed for jobs they are suited for. If they are able to find a job, it often concerns temporary or irregular employment. Because they do not have a choice, some of them work under the table and hence lose their right to social protection in case of illness or unemployment.

The Right to Social Security: Those who live in poverty often live on minimum benefits or they depend on another replacement benefit for a long period of time. Part of this already limited income is often not available for their own basic needs and those of their family. For example, in case of a settlement through collective debt mediation, when part of their income is reserved for the instalment of previously acquired debts.

Hence, people who live in poverty remain deprived of all basic rights. As a result, poverty is a fundamental injustice. That is why poverty is above all a structural problem. It is indeed inadmissible that individuals remain deprived of fundamental rights which should apply to each individual and which have been established by means of instruments with more binding power, such as for example the constitution and human rights treaties.

Because the government has become more aware of this fact, a number of efforts have been made to gather specific knowledge on these structural components of poverty on a more permanent basis. Examples are the indicators developed with regard to the policy on the Social Impulse Fund, the indicators of deprivation by means of which Kind en Gezin strives to provide more tailored assistance, the atlas of deprivation by means of which poverty issues are pinpointed at a neighbourhood and community level, etc.

Still, poverty is often reduced to its most visible characteristics: people who have had little or no education, who live on benefits, who have poor housing, who often have debts and who are in touch with several relief organisations. For people who are not familiar with the poverty problem, these most striking characteristics of poverty make it even more difficult to understand that the poverty issue is not caused by the poor, but that poverty is a problem of social exclusion and therefore a fundamental social injustice.

This *structural gap* is the most commonly known aspect of the poverty problem and the structural exclusion is also often confirmed *institutionally*. Examples are the already mentioned placing in care of children or their referral to special education, admission to psychiatric care, etc.

2.3.1.2 Participation Gap

The participation gap is a result of the structural gap, of the exclusion of people in all areas of life and at every level. Social exclusion prevents people from fully participating in society.

Essentially, this gap is about the fact that people are deprived of controlling their own lives and their social decision-making. It deals with the fact that people who are not poor keep on regarding the problems of the poor from their own dominant culture and redefine them from their own perspective. Hence, solutions are created based on these views and due to this dynamic even the evaluation is taken out of the hands of the poor. As a result, in their own lives the poor are deprived of the opportunity to be able and to be allowed to take responsibility. This puts the poor in a dependent position and at the bottom of each social relationship. They are deprived of their autonomy by an outside world

responding by means of numerous interventions, to which the poor must adhere over and over.

However, a loss of control can never lead to fundamental solutions. Social problems can never be solved *on behalf of* the people involved, but only *through their own actions*. The poor can therefore only overcome their oppressed position if they themselves are able to acquire the necessary knowledge, insights and skills allowing them to participate fully in society. This is only possible by means of methodologies based on the analysis and processing of their own life history. All this can only arise from a poor person's inner strength. However, this does not imply that the social worker cannot support him in this process and that it cannot occur in solidarity with the poor. It does however imply that the social worker cannot do this *on behalf of* the poor.

2.3.1.3 Ineffective Resources

Both social rights and social institutions prove to be less effective resources to aid the poor.

Social rights, which should in fact prevent or eliminate the development of social exclusion, prove to be insufficiently effective. The means to realise these rights are mostly geared towards the middle class and they are often not adjusted to the specific circumstances of those who are poverty-stricken. As a result, poor people are much less able to take advantage of a number of social provisions, such as scholarships, child allowance, housing benefits, fiscal benefits, etc.

Structural exclusion and the unequal relations of power resulting from it, together with a lack of knowledge and skills (see below) are responsible for the fact that people who are poverty-stricken do not easily succeed in appealing effectively to the social institutions which they can fall back on.

An example: based on their concern to safeguard their children's opportunities, some poverty-stricken families try to maintain close contact with their children's school. But teachers often find that these parents appeal to them much too often and for trivial matters. Because these people are poor and often confronted with all kinds of prejudices, and due to the less conventional manner in which they express their involvement, the school tends to take them less seriously. Rather than being regarded as committed parents who wish to be closely involved in their children's education, they are regarded as a nuisance to be avoided. There is little chance that the school will make the efforts needed to keep them equally involved in the follow-up of their children's academic progress.

Naturally, not everyone living in poverty has the same relationship with their children's school. They can also tend to avoid the school due

to their own bad school experiences in their childhood, out of fear for negative reactions, out of shame or for other reasons. By means of the previous example we only wish to illustrate that, even if they do make a lot of effort to become involved, they do not always succeed - or should we say they receive few opportunities - to become adequately involved, and consequently their efforts often do not lead to the desired results.

Unequal power relations can constitute the basis of the fact that those who are poverty-stricken are not able to effectively appeal to the resources which are available to them. The following example illustrates this. A student following training for experience expert received a minimum benefit from the PCSW. Since the social worker did not only want to offer financial assistance but also guidance based on the idea that good training constitutes the best guarantee against poverty, he requested the student to show him every school report. When the student was no longer willing to do this, the social worker withheld his benefit in order to put pressure on him. As a result, the student was no longer able to attend the training, since he did not have the money to pay for his public transport. He only had to pay it in advance, since he was entitled to a reimbursement of his transport expenses. In order to pay for his transport and keep on attending the training, he borrowed the money from De Link. As a result, he had yet another debt to be paid off through yet another instalment plan.

2.3.1.4 Limited Social Network

Poverty also implies that resources cannot be used, even if they seem to be available. One of the most effective resources which can be addressed is one's social network. But also in this respect, the poor are often at a disadvantage.

The network of relationships which the poor can address is limited compared to that of the middle class. This is yet another element contributing to the persistence of the poverty issue.

Poor people often have a very limited number of contacts. This results from the fact that their own family and close relatives take the most central place in their network of relationships. Although the emotional importance of these relationships is crucial, they are often not that intense in practice. Often, the actual contact with a number of members within this close relationship network is even non-existent. This is linked to the fact that break-ups frequently make it impossible to maintain these relationships.

Also the relationship network outside the direct family circle is limited, not only in terms of the scope of the relationship network, but also and mainly in terms of its quality. The relationships are often brief, casual and superficial and lacking any trust.

Apart from this, there is not much variation in these relationships, since they mostly consist of people who are poverty-stricken themselves.

However, even in this context we must not forget that the structural exclusion with which the poor are confronted daily and which also expresses itself in limitations re: finances and housing, also restricts their capabilities to develop, maintain and address a broader social network.

Due to problems with affordability and accessibility, some people are forced to choose less appropriate channels to solve difficulties they are facing. For example, someone who wants to do something about the psychological consequences of his life in poverty may have difficulties finding a mental health facility specialised in these kinds of problems and situated nearby. This person cannot seek help with a private therapist since he does not have the financial means. Similar thresholds are met when people who live in poverty seek opportunities to solve one of their children's learning difficulties. In these cases, it is probably not very effective to fall back on the relationship network of their immediate environment, but it might be the only way to do something about the problem instead of doing nothing at all.

2.3.2 Emotional Gap

Exclusion has two major consequences with regard to one's emotional life. On the one hand it stimulates an enormous need to belong. On the other hand it causes pain and leaves people in poverty with wounded internal feelings.

2.3.2.1 Need to Belong

People want to give a meaning to life, and in doing this, their loved ones play an important role. For example, it is commonly known that teenagers start attaching increasing importance to receiving appreciation from their friends and peers. The judgement of their peers becomes increasingly important to them. Being able to belong becomes almost a matter of life and death and they are sometimes even prepared to enter into conflict with their parents over this.

Each person has the fundamental desire to belong. By means of our social structures we exclude poor people. Belonging is not an option to them. The exclusion does not only deny their desire to belong, it even reinforces it. In an attempt to meet this desire to belong, the poor try to adopt middle-class behaviour. It is as if they subconsciously think: "If I act like the middle class, I will no longer be excluded." In other words, the poor gear their behaviour towards what they observe in people who are not poor. Or towards what they think they observe, since people who are poverty-stricken have a limited knowledge of society. We will

return to this aspect further on.

As a result of the exclusion, this need to belong can become so powerful that a poor person feels as though he is left with no other choice but to adopt the behavioural patterns of the middle class. In other words, those who are poverty-stricken experience the pressure from society to conform as such a powerful element that they no longer have any freedom of choice. In their perspective, their behaviour is forced upon them by the outside world.

The network of people who are poverty-stricken is mostly limited to their own intimate circle. As a result, their knowledge of the middle-class world is superficial and they are hardly aware of the hidden characteristics of the dominant society. In other words, the poor only adopt the externally visible aspects of society and mainly the most striking elements. It is therefore understandable that, in order to belong, the poor feel obliged to buy the latest mobile phone, an expensive wedding dress or a smart, luxurious car, despite their poverty and their insufficient financial means. Indeed, according to this very perspective they must own these attributes in order to be accepted by society.

The feeling that they do not have a choice, which is the cause of this behaviour, cannot simply be reduced to a poor person's subjective perception of things. Also in the perspective of society on poverty, the poor do not have any freedom of choice: they are forced to first seize every opportunity and accept the help they are offered. This is a priority, at least from the perspective of society.

Social Condemnation At the same time, society harshly condemns the attempts made by the poor to belong and interprets them as proof of the fact that the poor themselves are to blame for their misery and for the fact that they do not succeed in conquering their poverty. This is proof of the extent to which the huge difference in perspective further complicates the poverty problem. Moreover, the mechanism of the assignment of guilt resulting from this will reinforce the exclusion even more.

The need to belong therefore plays an important role in the poverty issue. This is the case for the poor themselves, but even more so when it comes to their children. They are willing to do anything in order to enable their children to belong. This need surfaces even more in celebrating birthdays and special holidays, such as Christmas. On such occasions, people do not want their children to be left out. When their children ask "were we really this bad that Santa gave us only one present?" parents immediately tend to make a top priority of giving their children an abundance of Christmas presents, even if they themselves and the entire family will have to sacrifice a lot for this. Due to the fact that they want their children to belong and because they are

often poorly housed and find it difficult to organise things, it is understandable that some families decide to organise their children's birthday parties at a fast-food restaurant. Naturally, this requires huge financial efforts, which are not seen by the outside world, while the latter judges them for spending their money on this type of expenses.

A society judges, establishes standards and interprets from the point of view of the dominant culture. This is so self-evident that people are not even aware of the fact that they do this. As a result, there is often no space to question this self-evidence. People do not seek the reason behind deviant behaviour, such as giving a birthday party at a restaurant, but simply condemn it.

This dynamic of condemnation is also present in the interventions of social services. The following statement made by a social worker in a home counselling situation illustrates this: "I can no longer tolerate this mess. You can make sure it's cleaned up by next time!" By means of this statement the social worker sets the norm and condemns the poor, he does not ask why they do not tidy up but considers it self-evident that they know how to tidy up and are able to do so. To a poor person this is yet another confirmation of his exclusion.

But even if the social worker in this example had formulated his recommendation in a friendly and encouraging manner instead of a threatening and condemning manner, it is not at all certain that it would have had more of an effect. Since it would imply that a poor person is able to 'receive' the recommendation. If he has a lot of troubles on his mind, he might not even be able to really comprehend what the social worker is trying to convey. In that case, all that is said goes in one ear and out the other.

Therefore, the poor need the time and space to take things in. This can be achieved by respecting their priorities: "Which problem do you want to deal with first?" is a simple question, but it can be very effective since it enables the poor to solve the problems which concern them most.

The Pressure of Conformity Trying to adapt to the norms of society originates from the desire of the poor to stop feeling excluded. But the need to conform does not only come from the poor themselves. There is also great pressure from society to behave in a conformist manner.

Society gives poor people less space to be different. Non-conformism is sometimes tolerated or even positively appreciated, but when non-conformist behaviour comes from a person who is poverty-stricken, it is always condemned.

A non-conformist with an untrimmed beard is probably regarded as trendy, but if a poor person has an untrimmed beard it is regarded as a sign of the fact that he is not doing well and that he is sinking away

in his misery. Another example: a proud person is considered to be beautiful, but someone with a proud attitude in spite of his poverty is probably regarded as arrogant and pretentious.

The previous examples illustrate the enormous pressure which society puts on the poor to conform, but at the same time they indicate that the same type of behaviour is judged differently depending on the person. All this has to do with self-evidences which are not being questioned.

2.3.2.2 Wounded Inner Side

Apart from the need to belong, the emotional gap with regard to the poverty issue consists in the fact that people in poverty feel terribly hurt inside.

The exclusion gnaws at their personality like cancer. Both their emotions and skills are affected by this. It gives the poor the feeling that they do not have the right to be somebody.

Someone who is forced to live in poverty is burdened with enormous pressure, constant anxiety and stress. The many problems he is constantly confronted with keep on nurturing and intensifying these emotions. The impoverished person feels like a failure because he thinks that he is to blame for all his problems. He does not realise that other people are also confronted with problems and that the limited availability of resources, such as a social network, is partly the cause of the fact that similar problems are much more difficult for him to deal with.

Feelings of guilt are often explicitly present in people who are poverty-stricken. To a great extent these feelings are forced upon them. In its ignorance about poverty, society makes poor people feel as though they are to blame for their situation. Unconsciously, we keep on giving underprivileged children the message that they themselves are the cause of their own failure, and as a result these feelings of guilt accumulate. Later, in their adult lives, they will internalise each new assignment of guilt, reinforcing their feelings of guilt even more.

Poverty is also related to a feeling of *absence*. Legitimate hope and desires remain unattainable dreams. Inside they are filled with deep pain and an unfulfilled basic desire. In most cases, this desire results from the fact that - often in their early childhood - the ties with their natural environment were cut off.

The *wounded inner side* is an important factor in the perpetuation of poverty. It causes poor people to drag their past along, dominated by so much pain that it prevents them from functioning properly. They lead a life based on a very powerful inferiority complex. They are confused, feel disowned, not accepted and they live in shame, with feelings of guilt and humiliation. From their early childhood on, the feeling that

they are nobody is nurtured through numerous contacts at school, in the community, with social services, etc. Very young children can already feel really stupid and behave accordingly at school. They tend to think that they are not capable of doing anything and that they constantly need help from the teacher.. This behavioural pattern is likely to intensify and can surface in their relationships with, among others, social workers.

Similar processes and dynamics contribute considerably to the persistent intergenerational character of the poverty issue. As a result, they leave deep scars. This so-called psychological dimension of poverty is often not observed or recognised by social services and authorities [Corveleyn 2000]. However, it is gradually accepted that living in poverty constitutes a source of immense stress affecting people's capabilities and causing deep psychological suffering and possibly even a break-down. It also contributes to the fact that people are no longer able to benefit from the assistance, support and guidance offered to them. And because this enormous stress is often already present at birth, it severely affects children's opportunities to learn and develop.

In the following paragraphs we will focus on a number of aspects of this wounded inner side.

Shame The feelings of shame, guilt and humiliation together with a sense of inferiority burdening the poor are some of the many aspects of the wounded inner side.

People who are poverty-stricken hardly ever experience a seeking and open attitude of other people. Most of the time, they feel stared at and experience a condescending attitude. This attitude confirms the poor person's feeling of being abnormal and feeds his shame; together these processes cause a serious block and have an extremely paralysing effect.

Shame prevents a person from remaining open to positive interactions. For example, it is difficult for them to receive a compliment such as: "Your hair looks nice!" They easily tend to think that people do not give a compliment just like that, that there must be something behind it, more specifically with a negative ring to it.

Shame prevents you from expressing yourself, from following your intuition. For fear of being stared or pointed at, a poor person will restrain himself and try not to manifest a certain type of behaviour or even avoid wearing nice clothes. He will try not to be noticed, since he has often experienced that being noticed has a negative connotation.

Shame makes it impossible to experiment and as a result undermines the opportunities to learn. While for a normal teenager it is very common to experiment with his clothing and his appearance to find out how people react to it, a teenager who lives in poverty has no such space. Being stared at and the feelings of shame make it impossible to experi-

ment and thus put a heavy burden on the opportunities to fully develop their identity.

Chaos A poor person leads a life in chaos because he is not able to get a grip on his life. On the one hand, he is frequently confronted with crises from external angles and in this respect he does not succeed in managing his situation. On the other hand he has no control of the interventions made by social services in order to solve his crises. As a result, everything coming from the outside world is regarded and experienced as a threat. Again, this feeds his distrust.

Another aspect of the chaos in which poor people live is linked to the fact that it is difficult for them to correctly assess situations they are confronted with.

If you live in poverty many issues you are confronted with are acute in nature. As a result, poor people often develop a behavioural pattern to immediately deal with every issue they are confronted with, even if a number of issues are less urgent. Having to react immediately each time a new problem occurs causes enormous stress. To protect themselves from this stress, they may sometimes adopt the opposite behaviour by not dealing with anything anymore. But naturally, some matters require immediate action in order to avoid a cascade of problems.

In other words, poverty makes it difficult to react to issues with the appropriate intensity and to set the right priorities. The fact that the poor have gone through so much and live with too much pain makes it difficult for them to react in an appropriate way. This is reinforced by the fact that they, as was mentioned earlier, receive hardly any opportunities to maintain control of their lives, since the numerous interventions from outside affect their autonomy.

The chaos expresses itself very concretely, for example in the fact that people are often unable to tell their story in a structured manner. Also the facts from their past form a mass of unstructured information of which they cannot get an overview. Apart from this, feelings of guilt make it virtually impossible for the poor to look at their past.

Basic Desire Many of those who are poverty-stricken, and particularly those who have been placed in care, struggle – not necessarily, but frequently – with an unfulfilled basic desire. This desire is anchored in problems with attachment, in other words in a lack of parental love and affection, and this leaves very deep scars. This broken sense of attachment nearly always occurred in their early childhood and it forms an important component of their wounded inner side. It cut them off from their roots, and thus deprived them of being a person. This can for example be caused by a placement in care.

In some cases, their family formed an intimate entity but it was completely isolated. In this case, the dynamic of exclusion is not situated within the family itself, but in its direct environment. As a result, the entire family is excluded, which is particularly harmful if the family is left on its own without any support. This external rejection can put such great pressure on the family system that it becomes impossible for the parents to offer their children a safe context which is required to enable them to feel attachment.

A severe break in attachment may also have occurred during the childhood of the parents but not in the current family context. In this case, the origin of the attachment problem is situated in the previous generation. The parents were willing to love their child but due to the broken attachment in their own childhood they did not really know how to love and show affection. As a result, the child is unable to build a close relationship with his parents. In this case, the parents often try to give their children a lot of material things, in an attempt to show them that they are good parents. This shows that a break in attachment can affect the next generation and cause a great sense of insecurity for the second generation.

A break in attachment in one of the above-mentioned forms leads to experiencing exclusion that reaches far deeper than for example a simple exclusion experience of exclusion at school.

A study conducted by the OASeS research group with regard to the networks of the underprivileged [Steenssens et al. 1996] also revealed the importance of similar experiences of exclusion and confirmed that they constitute an important factor within the entire poverty issue. This study indicated that the relational network within the core family of the underprivileged often displays cracks leading to a later family break-up. In many cases, a family break-up is as it were a reflection of the family break-up which occurred in the childhood of the parents. Therefore, the attachment issue linked to poverty constitutes an intergenerational problem.

People who struggle with an unfulfilled basic desire due to a break in attachment often try to fulfil this desire through their relationships, for example in the relationship with their partner. Hence, the desire to be someone persists even in their adult life. This has a very paralyzing effect since their basic desire remains unfulfilled and there is nothing they can do about it.

Listening to music is a common way to deal with this desire and the emotions linked to it, because it is socially acceptable to express your emotions through music. In other words, they can listen to music that reflects their own life story. And in doing so, their deepest feelings of desire and distress can surface. Then the pain becomes real and tears can run freely.

Most of the time, people are not aware of this unfulfilled basic desire playing an active role in their emotional lives. Becoming aware of this and understanding that it is impossible to fulfil this basic desire at an adult age, since this is only possible in their childhood, can have a liberating effect. It can help people take some distance from this desire and accept their right to feel angry at their parents, care-givers, institutions, etc.

However, when the process of removing the blame from their parents is initiated too quickly, the need to be a person is not always fulfilled. But by means of such a process the poor can gain more insight into why things went wrong, even if this insight can block his feelings of anger with regard to the injustice he had to suffer. In that case, the desire will keep on having a paralyzing effect and make any type of change and development virtually impossible.

Loss When a person is raised in poverty, chances are that he has been confronted with the loss of a loved one. Causes of such an experience of loss might be: a family break-up, a past of placement in care, episodes of hospitalisation, etc. They have experienced that they can lose what is dear to them and they continue to feel the fear of having to deal with another loss. This is expressed in difficulties with regard to initiating and maintaining relationships. Often, a poor person also struggles with the processes of attraction and rejection.

Dreams Also people who are poverty-stricken develop projects, expectations with regard to the future, but they are hardly ever fulfilled and as a result these projects take shape as idealised dreams. The urge to have these dreams is based on the feeling of abandonment. Also the wish to give their children a better future plays a powerful role.

The fact that these expectations with regard to the future take shape as idealised dreams is reinforced by the phenomenon that the poor often do not have a realistic insight into what can be expected in the future. But the fact that their expectations only reach the stage of an unfulfilled dream can also be linked to various other factors.

For example, poor people can have difficulties maintaining a certain perspective, namely a goal to be reached, because the steps that must be taken in order to attain that goal are so frustrating or take up so much time that the dream has already been shattered before it could take shape.

A reduced tolerance of frustration, for example resulting from insecure attachment or an unfulfilled basic desire, can make it very difficult to maintain a certain perspective. But the shattering of a dream also constitutes yet another failure leading to frustration. This explains why

the person involved may sometimes seem to overreact to a similar experience of failure.

The fear to fail again or to be disillusioned with oneself and with everything else can become so dominating that it becomes virtually impossible to realise any type of project. The fear of getting started has a paralysing effect. Even before it has taken shape, the project is transformed into an unfulfilled dream.

Distrust If you live in poverty many of the things you are confronted with have a negative connotation. The external world shows you its worst face by means of all kinds of negative responses, such as disapproval, condemnation, rejection. As a result, people in poverty develop a negative attitude towards the outside world. They regard it with distrust and try to avoid it as much as possible. They mainly keep to themselves and focus on their own direct environment, their relatives and especially their own family unit.

As a result, sending their children off to school becomes very difficult since they try to keep the one thing that is dear to them as close as possible! And they try to protect the ones they love from the outside world, where people do not treat them with good intentions! And certainly they protect them from school, where they had their own share of negative experiences!

This attitude of distrust is constantly nourished by the fact that they feel stared at and even targeted without knowing why. Some respond to this by withdrawing from society, while others tend to adopt an aggressive attitude towards it.

The dynamic of poor people developing a distrustful attitude can be compared to the way in which a person with a hearing disability may develop an attitude of distrust. The latter can get the impression that the outside world targets him, talks behind his back, even laughs at him without knowing why and without the ability to check whether his impression corresponds to reality. While the latter's impression is often incorrect, the impression that poor people get is often the harsh reality. Poor people are often truly targeted. For example, when they apply for financial assistance at the PCSW, they may indirectly set an uncontrollable process in motion, which may even result in their children being placed in care.

No wonder that poor people have a profound distrust which is very hard to overcome.

2.3.3 Knowledge Gap

2.3.3.1 Limited Knowledge of Society

It is striking how poor people often have little knowledge of society, its institutions and its services. Although it can seem as though the underprivileged know their way round the world of social assistance, they often do not know how society functions. For example, when they want to visit their child placed in care, it may be anything but self-evident to use public transport.

People who live in poverty often do not know how to comply with the regulations concerning child allowance, health insurance, unemployment insurance, scholarships and other provisions with regard to social security and welfare.

For example: for someone who is evicted it is often difficult to find a new permanent home. After a while, the local authorities may decide to remove his name from the municipal register. Without an official residence, various rights to social security, such as child allowance and health insurance, are put at risk. The homeless person might find a noble friend who is willing to offer him temporary accommodation. But such type of generosity may be severely punished, since the friend puts himself at risk of losing a substantial amount of his unemployment benefit or minimum benefit and may even be charged a higher rent for social housing. When the homeless person tries to protect his right to social security and welfare and decides to contact the authorised services by phone, he will find that it takes several attempts to reach these services and when he has finally reached them he will often be asked to hold the line. All this while someone who lives in poverty often has limited mobile phone credit. A poor person is therefore often forced to disconnect before he has had the chance to speak to the right person.

If he had more knowledge of society, the homeless person in the previous example would have been able to prevent this cascade of problems from happening. He would have known that he can fill in a form at the local registrar's office in order to register his temporary accommodation with a friend as an official address of reference.

The knowledge gap with which the poor are confronted is quite extensive. In fact, many people who are poverty-stricken hardly know anything about the social environment of the average citizen, even things which are self-evident to us. The persistence of the knowledge gap lies in the fact that both parties, the underprivileged and the privileged, do not know that the other is unaware of this gap. Middle-class people are not aware of the fact that the underprivileged do not have that knowledge and, as a result, the former do not provide information or do not show them how it should be done. But the gap with regard to the necessary acquisition of knowledge is also maintained by the underprivileged,

who are hardly or not at all aware of the fact that they lack knowledge and as a result they cannot ask any questions. In other words, this situation is confirmed by both parties and this makes it difficult for the underprivileged to extend their knowledge of society.

Partly due to their lack of knowledge of society the poor are condemned and excluded, as illustrated by the previous example. Hence, a lack of knowledge reinforces exclusion. And precisely because society responds by means of excluding the poor, it becomes even more difficult for the latter to acquire knowledge with regard to society. The poor are left without any clarification and in order to avoid the pain of exclusion they withdraw even more from society.

It is striking how many people in poverty keep their shutters rolled down.

Most of the time they do have contacts with social workers who intervene due to a certain aspect of the problem of poverty, but even they often fail to mirror society. And if they try to do so, their intervention is often experienced as a condemnation and thus even social services are unable to provide the poor with a better knowledge of society. Moreover, the social worker is often unaware of the fact that his client lacks essential knowledge of society. And even if he were aware of it, it would be very difficult to pinpoint these knowledge gaps.

An example: because a poor person has never learnt to recognise a common disease, he might take his feverish child straight to hospital for a common flu. Society does not notice that he acts out of a genuine concern for his child. A concern which is expressed in an unconventional manner due to his lack of knowledge and skills. He is even punished financially, because society condemns him for the way in which he expresses his concern, namely as an improper use of the emergency services. Apart from this, his behaviour also often arouses suspicion and distrust. People will be more alert to possible child abuse and this may result in preventative interventions. To the poor person, who was willing to do anything for his child's health, the financial punishment, the negative judgement by our society and the spiral of interventions which may result from this, feel like a slap in the face. It's impossible for him to understand.

2.3.3.2 Limited Opportunities to Acquire Knowledge

A great deal of our knowledge of society, its institutions and services is acquired in an informal manner. In this respect, the social network surrounding us constitutes a primary source of information.

We have already mentioned that the limited social network of people who are poverty-stricken has an enormous impact in this respect. The lack of knowledge is partly perpetuated by the fact that people who

live in poverty are mainly oriented towards their relationship with their core family or people in their intimate environment. As a result, their only references are people who are poverty-stricken themselves and who have equally limited knowledge of society. And although the poor do consult other people in an attempt to solve their problems, they are still confronted with the lack of knowledge, since the people they consult, such as family and other people who are poverty-stricken, do not dispose of this knowledge themselves.

An example: people who are poverty-stricken often want their children to have a better life than they had in their childhood. If, despite this deep desire, they encounter difficulties in raising their children, they may tend to take this very personally. And they may ask themselves: “What am I doing wrong? What should I change?” In their search for an answer they consult people they trust. Chances are that these people are poverty-stricken themselves. And although they might recognise their problem, because they experience it in the same way, they may not be the right persons to mirror society, to seek a possible answer or view the problem from a different angle.

Hence, the nature of the relationship network which poor people can make an appeal to, is partly responsible for the fact that they receive less opportunities to acquire a better knowledge of society.

2.3.4 Skills Gap

Living in poverty is also characterised by a lack of skills which are necessary to survive within society in a way that is accepted by the dominant culture. The lack of skills due to poverty is expressed in many areas. In paragraph 2.3.1.3 on page 30, we have already described how a lack of social skills can lead to ineffective interactions with the social network. The lack of skills mainly manifests itself in practical matters such as housekeeping, family administration, financial management, etc. These are all kinds of daily skills which are mainly acquired within the context of the *existential relationship* with the parents. This is also the case for emotional and pedagogical skills which become evident through communication, relationships, rearing children, etc.

There are two main issues which cause the lack of skills encountered in people who are poverty-stricken.

2.3.4.1 No Basic Attachment

A fundamental cause of the lack of skills may be the lack of attachment which we already mentioned before. In order to be able to learn, a child needs a fundamental bond of attachment with its parents. In a similar existential relationship children acquire skills from the desire to be a

person. They are able to learn these skills by carrying out tasks they receive from their parents and due to the fact that these assignments are repeated within the family relationship. The implementation of these assignments does not occur from the wish to acquire certain skills, but from the desire to be loved by their parents [Onderwaater 1986]. This is the driving force behind the acquisition of all kinds of skills necessary to behave in an acceptable manner and socially assert oneself later in life.

For example, children respond to their parents' request to tidy up their toys, because they want to be loved and recognised by them and because they want their parents to be proud of them. By means of repetition, this behaviour is practiced and it slowly turns into a skill. Hence, children learn to assume responsibility and acquire skills in an existential relational context in which a bond of attachment has taken shape.

Most families have this kind of fundamental relationship based on mutual trust. But in some cases, despite the presence of a family context, this attachment offering security has not taken shape, resulting in a lack of skills. Even if these skills are observed at home, children are not able to integrate them when they are linked to a negative atmosphere. The acquisition of skills indeed only occurs in a *positive atmosphere*. A negative atmosphere causes a sense of powerlessness, a lack of self-confidence and of limited self-esteem, creating a context in which it is impossible to learn.

A context of poverty contains various elements which may contribute to a negative atmosphere. For example, the parents may be struggling with so many problems that they are unable to pay sufficient attention to their children. In these circumstances, parents may find it tiring to be constantly bombarded by their children with all kinds of questions. And as a result, they will simply ask their children to 'leave me alone'.

This dynamic is often reinforced by the fact that parents who have been poverty-stricken all their lives often do not know how to respond to certain questions asked by their children.

Parents may also be so terrified of losing their children that they are afraid to require certain things from them, and as a result their children do not learn to take responsibility. Such a context makes it impossible for children to acquire skills. Often, these children tend to adopt a very demanding attitude.

In fact, in all kinds of ways poverty can have a negative impact on the parent-child relationship, creating a context which does not benefit the acquisition of skills.

Children who are poverty-stricken can also develop such a strong sense of absence and a constant feeling of lacking that this negative feeling prevents them from acquiring the necessary skills.

2.3.4.2 Lack of Role Models

In families who are poverty-stricken, the acquisition of skills can go wrong, despite the fact that the child-parent relationship is one of love, appreciation, recognition and loyalty. Sometimes, the parents themselves have never acquired these skills and as a result the children *do not have a role model* within their family. Hence, the children are unable to acquire the necessary skills which has all kinds of consequences for the next generation.

In other words, the lack of skills can also result from the fact that the parents themselves grew up in a family lacking a number of basic skills. For example, parents who have a childhood history of placement in care often have no idea how to organise their everyday family life.

2.3.4.3 Placing in Care: No Attachment and No Role Model

As we have already illustrated, skills are acquired from birth, through the emotional child-parent relationship based on mutual trust.

When a child is placed in care, a context is created in which learning processes are no longer supported by this emotional relationship. Children who are placed in care lack this relationship and as a result the attachment process offering a sense of security is certainly not self-evident.¹ It is found that these children are unable to fully absorb what they are taught. And thus, they are unable to develop what is taught into a skill.

A lack of skills can originate from a past of *placement in care* or in some cases even a long-term hospitalisation. Children who are reared outside their family environment have difficulties expressing their loyalty towards their parents and receiving their parents' recognition. If a child placed in care is asked to tidy up his toys, responding to the request will not enable him to obtain his parents' love and affection. And the carer's appreciation can never fulfill the child's desire to be loved by his parents. An assignment in a context of placement in care therefore has a completely different meaning than the same assignment in a family setting, because the latter is situated in a context of an existential child-parent relationship. As a result, the child placed in care may respond to the request, but he will not acquire the desired skills in the long term.

Children placed in care very often do not have a role model to help them acquire basic skills, often with regard to housekeeping or education. And without a role model, these skills cannot be acquired.

¹See in this context for example [Ghesquière 1993]. The theory and methodology of this contextual therapy can provide a frame of reference [Boszormenyi-Nagi and Krasner 1986].

See also [De Cirkel 1996, p. 40 ff.].

Many people who are poverty-stricken have a history of frequent and long-term placements in care. This is one of the fundamental reasons why they lack a whole range of skills which are very hard to acquire later in life.

2.3.4.4 A Persistent Gap

Indeed, people who are poverty-stricken often develop inappropriate behavioural patterns because they lack opportunities to learn due to a problem of attachment, the absence of a role model or due to a combination of both.

The lack of skills can manifest itself on a practical level, such as housekeeping and family administration, as well as on an emotional level, in their communication, relationships and in raising their children.

A common and straightforward example of this skills gap is: doing one's best to clean the house, but simply forgetting to tidy up.

In practice, the lack of skills persists, even when the poor become aware of the problem and learn that there are more appropriate alternatives. It remains very difficult to turn this newly acquired knowledge into proper behaviour. The acquisition of skills later in life is hindered by various elements.

First of all, a person needs mental and emotional space to be able to learn. The learning process of the poor is often hindered by the wounds from their past which have not yet healed. Because their wounded inner side impedes the learning process, this can be regarded as one of the causes of the gaps in knowledge and skills.

But there is a second obstacle. The translation of newly acquired knowledge into behaviour, or, in other words, the acquisition of new behavioural patterns, proves to be a complex task in practice, even with the necessary insight and motivation. On the one hand, it is not easy to break through acquired behavioural patterns. On the other hand, the acquisition of new behaviour requires the completion of several learning steps. A first step consists of gaining insight into the acquired knowledge. This insight must then be translated into practice. In a third step, this implementation must be translated into a habit, the integration level where acquired skills really become useful.

Moreover, people often do not receive sufficient space to acquire basic skills later in life. Adults are expected to master the required basic skills and the ability to implement them. Even if society were to have sufficient knowledge and understanding of why the poor do not possess these basic skills, it is uncertain whether it would offer these adults the necessary time to experiment and catch up.

The lack of skills is one of the more complex matters with which even trained experience experts are still confronted. Although they

make enormous progress in various areas, they frequently encounter difficulties due to their lack of skills.

2.3.5 Inner strength Is Not Observed: Strength Gap

The above observations do not at all imply that *complete powerlessness* characterises each person who is poverty-stricken. Although the poor are confronted with a lot of suffering, they do possess inner strength and courage, great motivation and strong resilience. But their strength and motivation to end the injustice of poverty often remains invisible. The poor do put a lot of effort into improving their situation. But it is not easy for the external world, not even for social services and social workers who are confronted with poverty and its issues on a daily basis, to recognise this strength and these efforts. And one cannot be acknowledged for something that is not seen.

On the contrary, people who are poverty-stricken are often approached from a very negative perspective. This explains why it is so hard for them to reverse the dynamics of exclusion despite their inner strength. Society is not only blind to their motivation and resilience, but also to the skills they did develop in poverty, since these are hardly known and appreciated in our society.

2.3.5.1 Causes of the Blindness

One of the causes of the fact that society does not notice poor people's inner strength, is because the poor act from their own perspective which differs considerably from the middle-class perspective. Many people who are poverty-stricken only have one fundamental project in their lives: creating opportunities for themselves, but especially for their children. Middle-class people, on the contrary, often have several projects: work, partner, children, friends, hobbies, etc.

The strengths of people who are poverty-stricken also remain unobserved, because these strengths are less customary in the dominant culture or because they express them in an unconventional manner.

They also remain unnoticed because society still finds it difficult to recognise that some of its members are condemned to a life in poverty, despite the many efforts to prevent this from happening.

Another reason why their inner strength goes unnoticed, is the fact that poverty absorbs a great deal of this strength in their daily material and emotional struggle to survive, a struggle which is often fought behind closed doors and on the fringe of society.

It is striking to what extent their strengths can manifest themselves when they are able to overcome their wounded inner side.

2.3.5.2 Elements of Strength

Prospects for their children The strength of those who are poverty-stricken is translated concretely into their efforts to provide a better future for themselves, but primarily for their children. This is a very powerful driving force, geared towards a better world, which is very characterising for people who have known poverty all their lives. They hope that their children will have a better life than they have had. This aspiration is often linked to a very *strong motivation* and they are prepared to make great efforts, even if they do not succeed at all in offering their children a better future.

The outside world also struggles with this difficult issue in its own way. It often does not notice these efforts or does not know what they mean. Sometimes, these efforts are indeed less effective, due to the obstacles with which the poor are confronted on a daily basis, let alone the obstacles from their past which they carry with them.

Solidarity While the privileged are characterised by individualism, the underprivileged often exhibit a strong sense of solidarity and a fighting spirit. Even if they are overwhelmed with problems, they still want to help others who are having difficulties. Some do this from an intense need to mean something to other people, others recognise the injustice caused by poverty.

People who are poverty-stricken express this solidarity through concrete behaviour and through helping others who are having difficulties, even when they do not have anything themselves. It is as though poor people have a stronger sense of practical needs, and, driven by their motivation, they develop a stronger fighting spirit to try and do something about these practical needs. And even if they are very poorly housed, they find it self-evident to take in their brother or sister or even a whole family who was evicted.

People who are poverty-stricken often find it self-evident to invite someone over who would otherwise be alone at Christmas or New Year. They are more inclined to take care of children in their neighbourhood, to take someone with them on holiday for a relaxing experience, or to take care of someone else's child because that person is having problems at that moment.

This solidarity is often one of the reasons why students start training to become experience expert. Nearly all candidates indicate that they hope to learn from the training how they can help others even better. Another important motive to start the training is the strife to eliminate poverty. A similar attitude of solidarity can also be found in those who work for the organisations where the poor take the floor.

The current social structures are often opposed to this concrete soli-

darity among the poor. And the latter are frequently punished for this, because society is often not sufficiently aware of these mechanisms of solidarity. When a person receives an unemployment benefit and takes someone in, he can lose his status of head of household, resulting in a sudden and considerable decrease in the family income. When that same person is caught helping a friend out with some chores, he is immediately regarded as a moonlighter, which can result in losing his benefits all together for a certain period.

Resilience People who are poverty-stricken often have remarkable resilience. Despite all the setbacks and misery they have to deal with, they always find the courage to start all over again or to keep on going.

“When I was a child the bailiffs came and took everything, even our toys. They forced me to take my toy organ, that I was so fond of, outside myself. This experience made sure that as a mother I never got a bailiff at my door, despite all the misery my family has been through. I saved money for food or clothing rather than not paying a bill. I thought it was the right thing to do. But when I look at pictures of that time, I wonder how I was able to live with that.”

This resilience also helps the poor to face the problems that occur when they offer a practical solution to someone in need.

“If you live in a small house and you invite an evicted family to stay for a while, you know it won’t be easy. You know that the house will be a mess and that this will bother you from time to time. You know that when so many people are living so close together there will inevitably be a lot of tension. But in a similar emergency situation you set your priorities straight. And these inconveniences only come second. This enables you to put up with the discomfort and tension for months, without letting things build up to the point where they explode.”

Poor people can be very creative in facing these so-called secondary problems or in finding ways to keep things liveable. In the above illustration this could be: taking their own family out to stay with a relative during the weekend to be out of the house.

Maybe poor people have less difficulties dealing with this kind of situation, because their experiences have taught them how to deal with unforeseen circumstances and keep their heads above water in a less structured or even chaotic context. They experience this capability as an attitude: being open and being able to respond to the unforeseen.

In the dominant society this attitude and the skills linked to it have largely disappeared and they have been replaced by clear arrangements, structure, organisation, planning, timing and efficiency. But if one gear in the machine of structure falls out of step, the entire system breaks down. There is no more room for the unforeseen, the unstructured, the unplanned. “You don’t really live!”, is what a poor person is inclined to think about the middle-class patterns of living.

Humour For people living in poverty the emotional aspect is very important, much more important than for most members of the middle class. People who are poverty-stricken are radars of emotions. They have broad artistic abilities and a great sense of humour.

Humour is their driving force. It helps them to cope with difficult circumstances. It is therefore not surprising that many of them have not lost their sense of humour along the way. They also tend to develop a vocabulary rich in imagery and they are linguistically creative.

In the context of poverty, humour might seem paradoxical and even very cynical. But people who are poverty-stricken also laugh a lot and can draw a lot of strength from their sense of humour. This also goes for celebrating. It helps them to forget their misery for a moment and to find the strength to go on.

Direct language People who are poor tend to call a spade a spade. They don’t tend to cover up what they are trying to say. Most of the time, they use direct language which has the advantage of clarity. It can open the door to enable one to discuss certain issues.

The direct language of the poor is influenced by their emotions. This emotional link can have a very positive impact. But due to this link, people sometimes regard their language as impulsive and overcharged with emotion. If the content of what is said also relates to the situation in which certain emotions occurred, their exaggerated way of expressing themselves is often influenced by emotions from their past. Another element is the fact that due to their social position and their poverty, these people often have not been taken seriously or listened to in the past.

This very direct language of the poor is the complete opposite of the euphemistic and indirect language used in some circles. Even some social services have a culture of obscuring solidarity. Both for the experience experts employed in these services and their colleagues it can be quite difficult to deal with these diverse cultures in an appropriate manner.

Good at confronting People who are poverty-stricken often develop a strong intuition to recognise emotions in other people. By combining

this intuition with their direct language, they are often very good at putting things into words, at interpreting things and thus confronting others with themselves.

Once people in poverty have received the opportunity to experience what equality entails with regard to interpersonal relationships, they will confront the privileged when they feel patronized by them. This is linked to the fact that they have always been placed at the bottom side of the social relationship. They know, better than anyone else, how a patronizing attitude can obstruct a respectful and equal relationship and how a genuine confrontation can create opportunities to grow.

Never really had a true home
Never really had a warm environment
Been dreaming all my life of that
One warm cuddle
Someone who would love me!
Who would finally see the things
I could do and was good at
Who would give me some kind of confirmation
One embrace would have been enough
Now all that is unknown to me!
Have endured all humiliation
But deep inside of me some things
Live on.
I have tried to let go of the abuse
But they keep haunting my psyche
They leave me powerless
They trouble my mind
In everything I do

*A student's testimony
in the news letter of De Link,
Year 1, n° 3 (July/August 2002).*

Chapter 3

Missing Link

3.1 Introduction

The fact that people in poverty create their own mental and social world may be attributed to the exclusion processes driving them to the margin of society. Due to this exclusion, the gap between people in poverty and the rest of society is widening. This was discussed in the previous chapter.

This exclusion also causes a big gap between the perspectives of the underprivileged and those of the privileged.

On the one hand, this results in the fact that social workers and policy actors, even if they are experts, remain ignorant of the daily reality of poverty and particularly of its internal roots.

On the other hand, the poor are hardly or not at all familiar with the perspective of society and with the world of the social worker.

This is what we refer to as the missing link. It takes shape in a combination of various factors and it is one of the most pressing issues in the fight against poverty.

3.2 Historical Background

The insight into the existence of a missing link originated thanks to the members of the former parents' working group of the special youth care centre De Touter in Antwerp, Belgium. They wondered why they themselves and many others were not able to overcome their poverty, despite all their efforts.

They concluded that the existence of inner wounds was largely responsible for this. But they also indicated that they had hardly if ever experienced any help from anyone. And this despite the fact that many

social workers had visited their families and that they could not blame them for being ill-willed. On the contrary, they sometimes even put in a lot of effort and a great deal of solidarity. But still, the interventions of these social workers were not able to help them. They were more likely to create new wounds and perpetuate their situation.

An action survey conducted in 1989 by De Cirkel [De Cirkel 1996], built on this and was aimed at obtaining a better understanding of these remarkable conclusions and these first insights into the existence of a missing link.

This taught us that most of the time the above-mentioned phenomena are not observed by social workers and policy makers. It also helped develop the awareness that the missing link is the result of a very large gap between the world experienced by the poor and the world experienced by the middle class. It was concluded that the missing link is essentially connected with *the lack of fundamental communication*. Due to this lack, people in poverty lose control of their own situation, since the social worker takes control by forcing interventions upon them. The research taught us that in all stages of social assistance, from the definition of a problem to the social assistance process and even the evaluation, there are elements which contribute to the widening of the communication gap. Social workers do not perceive these elements and this very blindness keeps the gap wide open.

3.3 Combination of Factors

3.3.1 The Inner Side of Poverty

We have already mentioned that people who are poverty-stricken suffer the pain of their inner wounds caused by poverty. The burden of poverty weighs heavily on them and they carry it with them all the time.

In this respect, it is remarkable that so much effort and energy of various services and well-intended social workers are only sporadically experienced by the poor as true help. But even far more remarkable and far less known is the fact that the interventions by social workers, despite all good intentions, often result in more wounds which only perpetuate their situation. Even if someone, who is actively involved in the fight against poverty, is able to see and rationally comprehend that these inner wounds play a prominent role in the poverty issue, it is still virtually impossible to fully grasp the huge impact of these wounds on the perpetuation of poverty.

The inner side of poverty can only be fully grasped from within.

It constitutes an important component of the missing link, since it contributes to the fact that the efforts made are thwarted and hindered by fundamental problems in communication. This is not surprising,

since there is a large gap between the world experienced by the poor and the world experienced by the social worker.

3.3.2 Lack of Communication

Even if there is no ill-will involved in either of the parties, the lack of communication causes the poor to experience the help offered to them as imposed on them. The lack of communication also results in the fact that already from the stage in which the problem is defined, the poor person loses control of his situation and is not able to regain this control throughout the entire process, not even in the evaluation stage.

For example, social workers often see themselves as the crisis managers of underprivileged families [Driessens 2003]. Most of these families only tend to ask for help when they need it very urgently, often when the problem has already taken on vast proportions. First, the social worker tries to solve the problem, then he tries to ensure that the same problem will not occur in the future. But by that time, the family no longer appeals to the social services. So, while the acute problem might be solved, the social worker is not able to help them deal with a number of other matters in order to prevent further problems. If a social worker mentions this to the poor, the latter will not return to him. "Because I was too confronting," the social worker concludes. "Because he does not understand me and forces his viewpoint on me," says the poor person. Indeed the social worker's viewpoint and solutions are perceived as strange and imposed. And the fact that so many things must change is experienced by the poor as a clear signal that he is not doing things right and consequently that he is to blame for his own miserable situation.

3.3.3 Burden of Problems

Typical in this respect is the tangle of problems the poor are confronted with. This tangle, a huge intertwined mass of all kinds of subproblems, causes each new problem to be weighed down by all the other problems already burdening them. And despite all the efforts made by the poor, a huge burden of problems remains, which hardly allows the poor to breathe.

The way in which problems manifest themselves with people who are poverty-stricken qualitatively differs from how a middle-class citizen tends to experience his own problems. This is because the latter has learnt to develop strategies to isolate problems as much as possible, to put them as it were in some kind of quarantine, so that they can no longer dominate his inner life. This method of problem isolation can also make it easier to deal with the problem and even to solve it in a more appropriate manner.

3.3.4 Different Viewpoints

Social workers and policy actors view the poor and their problems from their own perspective. And this perspective is inevitably influenced by their own background, their own origin, their own experiences, their own opinions, values and norms. And because this perspective often strongly differs from that of the poor, it is not surprising that also the perception of the social worker and policy maker strongly differs from that of the poor. But most of the time the poor person is not in a powerful enough position to let his perspective prevail.

3.3.4.1 An Analysis

Interventions geared towards people in poverty are often very solution-oriented. Based on the idea that solutions must be found as soon as possible in order to avoid further escalation of the problem, the poor lose all control of their own situation. As a result, they are also deprived of opportunities to learn from their own experiences. And chances are that they cannot really relate to the solutions offered. Moreover, the poor often lack a great deal of knowledge of society with its rules and customs due to their personal history and their inner wounds. All this leads to the fact that people in poverty fail in many areas and must constantly admit their failure to social workers.

The ideal of expertise among social workers, whose training has taught them that expertise and failure do not go together, makes them blind to their own part in the failure of the poor and it does not allow them to open up and approach the poor in a more vulnerable way. This infallibility of the privileged – at least from the poor people's point of view – is in sharp contrast with their own constant failure of which they are deeply ashamed. They feel personally responsible for their failure. This shame and guilt related to their failure is added to the shame and guilt they already carry with them. People in poverty are constantly confronted with their failure, shame and guilt, due to the permanent control exercised by the social services, even if they do not intend to control them but simply want to closely monitor the process of assistance.

Social workers do not know what it feels like when you constantly need to ask for help. They have never experienced the feeling of constant failure and shame. They do not know what it is like to be checked every minute. Social workers observe, act, judge and condemn from their own life history, from their own view on a well-functioning family, from their own self-evidences. They do not know the logic behind the complex survival strategies of people who are constantly fighting against their own poverty.

Hence, for social workers it is often difficult to relate to the world

of the poor. Most social workers are middle-class citizens. From their middle-class position it is extremely difficult to fully grasp what it is like to be poor and excluded. Social workers can try to relate to the poor but they will never experience true poverty or exclusion themselves. Fortunately.

They can however strive to understand the world and patterns controlling the lives of the poor. But the only way to do this is to find reference points in their own experiences, which will always differ greatly. And as a result, social workers will never really know what it is like to be poor and the insight they did acquire through their own experiences will always remain abstract to a certain extent, since they are not familiar with poor people's patterns of living or the processes in their social world.

This unfamiliarity with the social and mental world of the poor leads - more often than we think - to misunderstandings between the social worker and the poor, even more so because a poor person is hardly or not at all able to relate to the world of the social worker. In other words, there is mutual incomprehension and lack of knowledge of each other.

This mutual incomprehension can lead to fundamental consequences. The social worker starts from a number of self-evidences and does not realise that a poor person is not familiar with them. While the latter lacks information because he does not have any previous knowledge. One party is unaware of the fact that the other does not know and vice versa, resulting in a fundamental misunderstanding of each other. And this is not easy to avoid: those who are unaware of the fact that they do not know are not able to ask for any clarification. And those who are unaware of the fact that the other does not know and who are not familiar with the world of the poor have difficulties finding the appropriate intervention to break through the chain of misunderstandings.

But this is where the relationship is out of balance, as was said earlier. The social worker is put in a position where *he* formulates the problems of the poor and where *he* offers him solutions. And due to this dynamic, the social worker is likely to put his client in a negative perspective.

3.3.4.2 A Few Examples

A few examples can illustrate that these misunderstandings can occur in different ways and that efforts, good intentions and a professional approach cannot avoid them.

In view of drafting a social assistance plan, the caseworker sits together with the family and together they list the most acute problems. While the social worker observes a manifest hygiene problem, the family does not experience any problems in that area. But later on, the fam-

ily does however indicate that there might be a hygiene problem after all. The caseworker, pleased with the progress made, suggests to put cleaning on the agenda of his next visit. "Because cleaning your house regularly is very important in order to maintain good hygiene", he adds. But this is met with a great deal of opposition from the mother. The social worker is surprised, since the mother was the one who had pointed out the problem in the first place. She says that he does not have to teach her how to clean, because she learnt it from her mother. And that it is impossible for her to clean the house on a regular basis due to their limited family budget, since her mother taught her that cleaning means: dumping all household goods and getting new ones.

A father has to appear before the juvenile court and he is urged not to use violence in raising his children anymore. The father strongly denies that he has ever used violence. But he has no difficulties admitting that he frequently slaps his children. He even regards this as evidence of the fact that he is genuinely concerned with his children's upbringing. To him, violence is something completely different. It makes him think of his own father who often beat him with his belt. That is why he resolved to never use violence on his own children. And from his point of view, he never did, because when he slaps them, he uses his bare hand.

A mother and father who live in poverty are glad that they have found such a good school for their daughter. She never complains about anything. This is nothing like their own school career, where they were constantly humiliated and discriminated. Even when they are not able to pay a school bill in time, they never receive a complaint. With good reason, they thought, because eventually they always pay. A few days before the start of the summer holidays, their daughter's teacher asks her to bring some money to school in order to pay the last bill. "Make sure you don't forget," the teacher adds in a friendly tone, "or you deserve a slap on your bottom." When the girl mentions this to her parents, her father runs to the school in a fury and attacks the teacher. Because the latter did not have the right to touch his daughter. His own school experiences prevent him from analysing the event and from asking the teacher to clarify the matter and explain the deeper meaning of his words.

A social worker remarks to his experience expert tandem partner that the latter's car is often a mess. The experience expert is surprised by this, since he cleans the interior of his car every week. So is the social worker, who does not clean his own car that often. And in the conversation that follows they come to the conclusion that the messy impression was caused by the fact that there are all kinds of things lying round in the car. So the car is cleaned but not tidied up. A few months later they go to a seminar together. The experience expert picks up the social worker at home and asks whether he notices anything unusual.

But the social worker, very willing, can't come up with anything remarkable. The car is not a mess anymore. But the social worker does not notice. To him a clean car is an obvious fact. And due to the fact that he tends to focus on what goes wrong, he misses the opportunity to positively confirm the efforts made by the experience expert.

3.4 Various Forms

In the previous chapter we illustrated the existence of a gap between the poor and the rest of society. We also indicated that there is a similar gap with regard to knowledge and skills. However, it is often believed that the latter can be quite easily bridged, so that the missing link may be limited in this respect. This is not true, as illustrated by the following example.

A young man had just graduated and was urged by his caseworker to start looking for a job. The young man was motivated and told his caseworker that a friend had promised to give him the address of a company that would certainly take him on. Three visits later, the young man was still without a job and was still waiting for the promised address. He had not taken any further initiatives to find a job.

The social worker regarded this as ill-will. In order to urge the young man a bit more, he asked him to join him and go to his office. There they could make some phone calls in order to find a job. It soon became clear that the young man did not know how to start looking for a job. For example, he did not know that the local paper may be an interesting tool in his search, since it contains a lot of job adds from local companies. The social worker could never have imagined that this was the actual problem. From a middle-class frame of reference it is nearly inconceivable that this function of the local paper could be unknown to anyone.

But in the meantime, the social worker had already developed a negative image of the young man. He had already wondered several times whether the young man had faked his desire to find a job in order to conceal the fact that he did not want to work at all but only wanted to take advantage of an unemployment benefit as long as possible.

Generally, each of the various components of the poverty gap can lead to the development of a missing link. Due to the complex and multi-aspect nature of the poverty gap, this missing link can manifest itself in numerous ways. And each time, people are not sufficiently aware of the mutual incomprehension between the poor on the one hand and the privileged on the other. This incomprehension is the main characteristic of the missing link and it can only be overcome by involving experience experts as a permanent strategy in the fight against poverty.

3.5 Elements of the Missing Link

Gradually, social workers and policy makers are becoming aware of the existence of a missing link in the fight against poverty. As a result, it can be expected that in the future there will be more room to develop methodologies and strategies which take this missing link into account.

Below is an overview of the elements which, according to the action survey conducted by De Cirkel, cause difficulties with regard to effective communication and mutual comprehension in the fight against poverty:

- The social worker approaches families in poverty from his own values and experiences. He may do this unconsciously or he may even try to avoid doing this at all, but he will not succeed. This biased view can even constitute a breeding ground for the perpetuation of manifest prejudices, such as the idea that poor people are dirty and lazy and do not want to work, etc.
- His viewpoint is also influenced by the mission statement of his organisation, as well as his own specific task in the framework of his social assignment.
- An objective view is also hindered by the social taboo re: misery and poverty. As a result, it is hardly possible that he will be able to gain insight into people's misery and poverty. The taboo and ignorance are preserved by the fear for the unknown and the fear to be confronted with poverty, which is fed in our upbringing. Social services have even built a professional attitude based on this fear: an attitude of professional distance.
- People who work for social services often do this based on a great passion and a strong inner need to help others. This only increases the chance that the poor person's own solution strategies are brushed aside.
- Training for social workers mainly focus on problem-solving and on the fact that social services emphasise offering solutions to people in need.
- The relationship between social worker and underprivileged is not one of equal power. The provider of help has more power than the seeker for help, and thus the former is more likely to force his perspective upon the latter.
- We impose help upon the poor, but we do not understand what it is like to be obliged to take this forced help. The help which is offered to the poor is often linked to obligations, while we are free to accept or turn down the help we receive.

- The core of social services still mainly consists in focussing on the problem areas. Hardly any serious effort is made to seek possibilities, opportunities and prospects in problem situations, despite the difficulties.
- People who live in poverty are constantly confronted with their failure, partly because the social worker keeps on forcing solutions upon them and keeps on showering them with good advice. This failure causes shame.
- When a caseworker visits his client he is often not the first person to interfere in his client's life. The feeling of being permanently watched, resulting from this, is completely unknown to social workers and other middle-class citizens.
- People who are poverty-stricken lack basic knowledge and skills. Social services and society are not really aware of this fact. People assume that every adult has received sufficient time and opportunities to acquire these basic tools for life. It is inconceivable to them that some adults have never been able to do this. According to them, someone who considers himself capable of creating a family should simply master this basic knowledge and skills. Due to this point of view, there is no willingness to offer these people opportunities to learn, once they are adults.
- The problems with which the poor are confronted are clustered problems and as a result they differ from most middle class problems. The poor are unable to isolate the different (sub)problems, because all their problems are closely interrelated. But this only increases the burden of problems. Apart from this, the poor are often excluded from knowledge and channels which could help them overcome their problems. This only makes the tangle of problems more complex.
- The poor are left alone with their inner wounds.

Communication problems are not at all unique in the fight against poverty. They occur everywhere where people communicate. But the incomprehension arising from this communication problem will only be stronger as the distance between the parties involved becomes larger. With regard to poverty this is a considerable gap.

All this has to do with the fact that our view on poverty, as we already indicated, is affected by the individual guilt model. Poverty is regarded as something for which the poor are to blame. And he is regarded to be fully responsible for the fact that he does not seem to succeed in fighting his poverty. This concept of guilt is based on the ideology that was born in the period of the Enlightenment.

3.6 A Missing Link

The action research conducted by De Cirkel did not only contribute greatly to the visualisation of the communication gap in the fight against poverty, it also taught us that the gap can only be bridged by a mutual search for and an analysis of each other's social world in a collective effort of the poor and the social worker. This search is only possible if the social worker realises that there are gaps in his own knowledge and if a poor person realises that he is offered the skills to see and analyse his own experiences and to relate to the world of the social worker.

It would be unreasonable to conclude that each poor person should just simply acquire those skills. Such a conclusion would only reinforce the logic of guilt. Moreover, the development of these capacities requires a lot of effort and does not occur automatically. As a result, the development of these skills is one of the core objectives in the training for experience experts.

A more reasonable approach consists in the employment of well-trained experience experts. They have been trained to bridge the gap between the poor and the social worker, and gaps situated in other areas of the fight against poverty, so that the obstacle of the missing link can be eliminated.

Chapter 5 of this book will deal with this innovative methodology. But first we will try to find the roots of the view on the fight against poverty, constituting the basis of this methodology.

Chapter 4

View on the Fight against Poverty

4.1 Introduction

History has taught us that a view on poverty is not static, but that there is an evolution in the way people think about poverty. It has also taught us that the view determines how a society deals with poverty and the fight against it. Throughout history, various changes have occurred in the way people think about this issue.

In the Middle Ages, poverty was regarded as a fate determined by God which had to be embraced in order to gain salvation.

Due to the French Revolution a whole new ideology was established and this led to the dominant view on poverty. According to the Enlightenment, man is an autonomous creature, who is able to create his own world and to determine his own fate. As a result, poverty was regarded as a fate which the poor themselves could change. And thus, the poor were to blame for their own poverty.

Only recently, poverty has come to be regarded as a problem of social exclusion which has victimised the poor and has made them powerless. This approach mainly focuses on the victim role of the poor and sees them as passive and powerless creatures.

But such a view does not really acknowledge the fact that the poor also actively fight against their exclusion. And it can no longer correlate with the recent insights of policy-making, which emphasise the necessity to stop focussing on the problematic aspects incorporated in the weaknesses of the poor themselves and in the threats from their environment. It is regarded equally necessary to pay attention to constructive possibilities which manifest themselves in their own qualities

and the opportunities offered by their environment. Also in the daily fight against poverty it proves to be of fundamental importance to not only see the *difficulties* but also the opportunities.

The belief in the poor as an indispensable partner in the fight against poverty, and the insight into the fact that they can make an irreplaceable contribution to it, constitutes one of those opportunities. In order to take full advantage of these opportunities the view on the fight against poverty must change. Such an innovative view is based on a number of important ethical-philosophical foundations, which we will discuss in the following paragraphs and which can be reduced to the abstract democratic principle that all parties must be enabled to have their say. But this is not the only motive to change the fight against poverty. There is also a very pressing practical reason: to eliminate the persistent missing link in the fight against poverty, which we have already discussed in the previous chapter. A logical result of this missing link is that a dialogue with the poor constitutes a necessary requirement in order to improve our knowledge on poverty and to render the fight against it more effective. The choice of a dialogue also expresses a true belief in the strength of the poor.

A view based on these foundations is closely linked with the ideology of empowerment. The engagement of experience experts in the fight against poverty is an important methodological translation of this view.

4.2 Active Partnership: a Necessity

Poverty is a form of social exclusion. And since poverty equals exclusion, participation constitutes a vital element in the approach to the poverty issue. Hence, it is not a coincidence that a lot of attention is paid to the permanent dialogue with the poor as an indispensable condition for an effective fight against poverty, while poverty is recognised as a structural social issue. In this respect, the General Report on Poverty [KBS 1994] constitutes a milestone, particularly with regard to Belgium. The poor are now recognised as an indispensable and active partner in dealing with the structural causes of poverty.

The importance of active partnership can be found in the concept of the fundamental human rights. Poverty organisations have always drawn attention to this, since autonomy and self-determination are inalienable rights of every individual. And the acknowledgement of these rights is necessary to create a partnership with people who are poverty-stricken. The failure to appreciate the poor as a partner in social assistance or in policy-making implicates that their competence with regard to self-determination and autonomy is not acknowledged and that they are denied the right to autonomy and self-determination.

Hence, a partnership with the poor in the framework of the fight against poverty is indispensable based on fundamental human rights. But democratic considerations are relevant here as well. By means of an extended active partnership, the policy on poverty receives a larger scope, which will also result in citizens having more faith in that policy.

In practice, an active partnership is only possible if people are able to believe that the poor have an enormous inner strength and that they possess specific knowledge on poverty which can make the fight against it and the policy on poverty more effective. We will discuss these elements in this chapter. They owe their importance to the fact that there is a missing link in our current fight against poverty and that knowledge from within is needed in order to eliminate poverty.

4.2.1 Equality Principle as a Basis

The basis of a democratically organised society is that all its citizens receive equal opportunities and equal rights. This ‘principle of equal opportunities and equal rights’ has even been incorporated in the constitution and in international human rights treaties: each person has the right to a humane existence, to education, employment, etc.

According to the principle of equal opportunities and equal rights, the fight against poverty constitutes a fight for equal rights. Because poverty is a question of injustice and social exclusion, it has to be fought.

The daily practice shows us that realising this equality principle is not self-evident. With regard to social exclusion, there are two main parties involved: the privileged on the one hand and the *underprivileged* (an appropriate word in the English language) on the other. The privileged can acquire welfare, well-being and power. For those who are on the other side, welfare and well-being are wonderful but unattainable ideals, and the power to claim these rights is also lacking.

Hence, realising more equality requires an active allocation of means for education, social security, the creation of appropriate employment, etc. Based on its democratic foundation, society should be convinced that it owes it to itself to ensure that the rights and opportunities which it guarantees are actually put into practice for each of its members.

4.2.2 Persistent Inclusion Strategy

When, despite this fundamental concept, exclusion or inequality of opportunities are manifest, as is the case for the poverty issue, society is not easily inclined to find out whether there are undemocratic mechanisms impeding the realisation of its fundamental democratic openness towards each of its citizens and communities. If the current social order has succeeded in realising the principle of equal rights and equal

opportunities for the majority of the population, one should think that it would also be able to realise this for the small group of people still living in poverty. For a society convinced of its own fundamental democratic foundation, the alleviation of poverty should only be a question of a small extra effort or of finding more appropriate methods to help those who are still living in poverty by adjusting them to the system and including them in it. The numerous inclusion projects, work experience projects and other similar initiatives implement this line of thought on a daily basis.

4.2.3 Dialogue and Empowerment as Alternative

With regard to poverty, this inclusion strategy has only very recently been combined with an open dialogue, of which the General Report on Poverty and the Poverty Decree are concrete illustrations. An open dialogue recognises the strength of the poor and acknowledges that they can help society find its undemocratic mechanisms and reverse them. In other words, entering into a dialogue is a clear act of empowerment.

As we will clarify in paragraph 4.3.3, according to De Link, the elimination of the undemocratic exclusion processes generating poverty does not only require a process of empowerment in those who are poverty-stricken, but also a similar process in other actors within our society.

Hence, the social emancipation of those who are poverty-stricken requires several liberating processes.

4.2.4 Enrichment for Each Person as a Result

Other discriminated groups, such as women, have preceded the poor in the fight for equal rights and in a movement for emancipation. It is remarkable how after a while the awareness grows that the entire society will benefit from this dialogue, from recognising the equality of that part of the population and its full social development and participation in society. Then, the added value of a woman's touch in social life is recognised, the richness of a multicultural society is appreciated, etc.

It is intriguing to think that the fight against poverty will also create a better world, not only for those who are living in poverty but for all of society's members.

Although at first this might seem a strange thought, it may be worth reflecting on. If we are able to substantiate this thought, it may in time contribute to a plea which is strong enough to reinforce the fight against poverty and create substantial progress.

Using the human rights ideology to account for the fact that something must be done about the poverty issue sometimes seems a desperate attempt to find a weak spot in the strongholds of the privileged. Maybe

the privileged in our society have developed a certain sense of justice which makes them more sensitive to the human rights argument. This is similar to the times when poverty was still thought of as an act of fate, but some people could not help feeling sorry for a mother with her baby, begging in the streets. And although arousing people's pity used to work, it only worked for a small minority. Most people did not stop to give alms. In other words, this approach is not very successful. And also the fact that, for example, the Islam obliges each Muslim to spend a considerable amount of his income on charity, seems to confirm the assumption that one should not rely on people's empathy.

Maybe we should just assume that people do not really have a strong sense of justice. And maybe the driving force of this sense of justice diminishes as people start realising that the current efforts and investments do not suffice at all in order to eliminate poverty altogether. Financing the employment of experience experts in all relevant areas alone will require a considerable amount of extra means.

At first sight, this prospect of sacrificing power and wealth might not seem very appealing to the privileged. And it is very unlikely that they will be in favour of sacrificing their privileges and wealth.

Undoubtedly, this is a very simplified way of representing the issue. But this representation might contain an element of truth, and it does allow us to understand why so many solemn declarations and impressive action plans seem to deliver rather limited results in the field of practice.

Despite the fact that most people can fully subscribe to the abstract idea of a more just world, their willingness to make sacrifices for it seems to be rather limited, unless they can benefit from it themselves. This might explain why people look differently upon a beggar than a street musician. Although they both have the same goal to earn a living, the difference lies in the fact that the street musician makes life more pleasant, if only for a moment. When you give the street musician some money, you get something in return.

A similar process occurred with regard to the fight of women for equal rights. Men used to regard this as an infringement of their privileged position. Nowadays however, it is believed that the emancipation of women has been responsible for the acquisition of women's qualities in public life as men's traditional bastion. As a result, the quality of life of each person in society has increased. And although men were forced to give up their monopoly of power, they received a better quality of life in return. And due to this, men are less likely to regard women as competitors, but rather as an enrichment of our professional, political and public life. Hence, it is a privilege for men to work with women on their team.

When we apply this line of thought to the fight against poverty, it would mean the following: we must eliminate the exclusion of people in

poverty, because the entire society and the quality of life of all its citizens will benefit from it. If this is true, it could hold important consequences. If people were convinced that they themselves could benefit from it, a lot more people would undoubtedly be willing to make an extra effort in order to eliminate poverty. From the perspective of self-interest, the fight against poverty would be useful for everyone and not just because each person runs a certain theoretical risk of ending up in poverty.

In other words, the fight against poverty may also be a question of self-interest and not only of fundamental justice. Hence, everyone will benefit from the fight against poverty. Reducing poverty may help create a society manifesting increased solidarity and better social cohesion. The active welfare state will also benefit from it qualitatively and the sense of security will increase, since the poor are often blamed for creating a sense of insecurity.

These are only a few examples of the added value which the participation of the poor can offer to the entire community and to each individual in it. The more we succeed in reducing poverty, the more this added value will undoubtedly become apparent.

4.3 Irreplaceable Contribution

4.3.1 A Huge Potential

In chapter 2, we discussed how the inner strength of people who are poverty-stricken does not succeed in eliminating social exclusion, but paradoxically even contributes to it. This is linked to the fact that this inner strength often manifests itself in an unconventional manner, but mainly because we find it difficult to believe in that strength and to see it.

However, society needs the poor and their strength and courage as a partner in the fight against poverty, because apart from their inside knowledge of poverty, they can also offer us their strength, courage and perseverance, qualities which are more than welcome in the fight for a just world. In other words, we should become more aware of the values which people who live in poverty can offer us.

The methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion is based on a strong belief in the inner strength of the poor and on the conviction that people who live in poverty are an indispensable link in the fight against poverty. Although this view is not yet generally accepted, its social basis is expanding.

In her doctoral dissertation, Tine Van Regenmortel tried to incorporate this belief in the inner strength of the poor in the definition of poverty [Van Regenmortel 2002, p. 181]:

“Poverty is a network of social exclusion extending over several areas of the individual and collective existence. It separates the poor from the generally accepted social patterns. This gap can only be bridged if society is willing to address the psychological qualities of people living in poverty and of their environment. And if society offers them accessibility to its economic, social and cultural properties. Thus, every person receives equal opportunities to positive social interactions and valuable relationships with himself, others, society and with the future.”

Such a view on poverty is based on the fact that the poor have the potential inner strength to liberate themselves and take control of their own lives and social decision-making, provided that society and its leaders create the structural and psychological conditions to enable the inner strength of the poor to become a driving force.

The fact that more and more importance is attached to the inner strength of the poor and their contribution to the elimination of the structural exclusion caused by poverty, is clearly illustrated by the fact that in 2003 this aspect was incorporated into the definition of poverty in the Yearbook of Poverty [Vranken et al. 2003].

4.3.2 Unique Knowledge

This view is closely related to the ideas of the renowned Brazilian liberation pedagogue Paolo Freire (1921 – 1997), who based his literacy method on the inner strength of the poor and on the fact that only they can liberate themselves. And although they are not able to do this alone, nobody can do this for them. According to Freire, social awareness through an authentic dialogue, based on complete equality, is the only way towards emancipation. This means that the exclusion mechanisms in our society can only be exposed through a complete dialogue with the poor, since they are the ones experiencing those mechanisms.

“Joining the oppressed requires going to them and communicating with them.” [Freire 1972, p. 131].

This approach implicates that it is only thanks to the poor that society receives the opportunity to become acquainted with its fundamentally undemocratic mechanisms. And in doing this it becomes able to change them.

People who live in poverty can also offer us an invaluable source of knowledge on the poverty issue, due to their *inside knowledge of poverty*. This inside knowledge of poverty is essential for an effective approach to the poverty issue. Even for those who are closely involved in the fight

against poverty or in the daily provision of social assistance, numerous aspects of life in poverty remain concealed, inaccessible and unknown. Even to those who are highly motivated to be a true social worker who believes in solidarity, the inner dimension of poverty, and hence the social and mental world of the poor, remains largely unknown.

4.3.3 Prospect of Emancipation

For those who are forced to live in poverty, the fight against it keeps the prospect of emancipation alive. However, experience experts of De Link emphasise strongly that the emancipation of the poor is only possible if the dominant middle class itself can go through a *cultural emancipation*, so that the *dynamics of exclusion and oppression*, which are characteristic of our current society, can be replaced by *processes of solidarity*. This means that society will only be able to use the psychological qualities of the poor constructively and thus enable them to break free from the oppressive mechanisms which are still active in our society and the awareness linked to it. This applies even more to those who wish to play an active role in the fight against poverty.

Freire already referred to this aspect of a comprehensive view on the fight against poverty which is currently taking shape:

“The radical, committed to human liberation, [...] is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. He is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. He does not consider himself the proprietor of history or of men, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he does commit himself, within history, to fight at their side.” [Freire 1972, p. 18-19].

“A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, [...] than by thousand actions in their favour without that trust.

Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly. [...]

Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were.” [Freire 1972, p. 36-37].

Moreover, those who are engaged in the fight against poverty and policy makers will only be able to support the poor in their process of liberation from the paralyzing obstacles – caused by all kinds of social exclusion mechanisms, humiliation and forms of dependence – if they first *liberate themselves from their own paralyzing obstacles*. Throughout life, each person is confronted with pain and exclusion. As long as this pain and

exclusion are concealed, it is impossible to adopt an open and clear view of other people and their inner wounds. These personal wounds which remain hidden do not only obscure the insight into others and the actions towards others, but they also strongly influence them. Hence, the thought of solidarity in itself does not suffice, since one must liberate oneself in order to support the poor effectively in their own process of emancipation.

This view on the fight against poverty, similar to that of De Link, implies that a dialogue with the poor will not only help fight poverty more effectively, but will also enable society to recognise its own undemocratic mechanisms and reverse them.

Experience Experts

Who are they?

Someone who has the courage to speak and not to preach
Someone who seeks answers and does this intuitively
Someone who listens to you and who does not immediately
interrupt you
Someone who believes and tolerates you
Someone who has gone through a lot himself and is still there
for others

What do they do?

Listen to you, believe you and afterwards still talk to you
A lot of words leading to actions
Try to find a solution together with you
Without forcing you
They do not judge but they remain at your side
Until there is a solution for both to believe in

What do they believe in?

All people are people, that is their wish
Everyone has rights for which he is willing to fight
Equal opportunities, not just swimming with the tide
A world where everyone has their place
Even when you miss something, like a leg

I believe in a world where
Everyone is accepted for being themselves
I know that society is an old machine
That has been running for a long time
But a machine is only as strong as
Its weakest link
That is why we should try
To find that weak link
And make it stronger by creating opportunities
That allow us to grow
Give a weak person a chance
And before you know it he or she will be the strongest
Or is that what our society is so afraid of?!

*A student in the news-letter of De Link,
Year 1, N° 4 (November 2002).*

Chapter 5

Experience Expert

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have indicated the huge importance of involving the poor in the fight against poverty. As we have already mentioned, the Belgian authorities are also aware of this. As a result, the Flemish poverty decree was based on two participatory methodologies: organisations in which the poor take the floor and the methodology of experience expert in poverty and social exclusion.

Thanks to the methodologies of dialogue and self-organisation, for example in the organisations where the poor take the floor, the poor are able to meet fellow-sufferers, exchange ideas and experiences and organise themselves as a pressure group.

The methodology of involving trained experience experts in itself is particularly valuable:

- in valorising the strength and the contribution of a poor person as an individual in the many situations and contexts with which that poor person as an individual is confronted through all kinds of services and authorities;
- in interpreting the reality of poverty for all those who are faced with the poverty issue in their function of policy maker or social worker.

5.2 A Fundamental Need

If we summarize the insights of the previous chapters, the need to involve experience experts in the fight against poverty mainly arises from the following observations:

- The observation that there is a missing link in the fight against poverty.
- The observation that this missing link is not caused by any malice of social workers, services, social provisions or policy leaders.
- The observation that this missing link is not caused by any malice of the poor either.
- The observation that this missing link can be reduced to a fundamental mutual misunderstanding and ignorance of each other:
 - Policy makers and social workers are unable to relate to the harsh reality of the living conditions of the poor. Their own history makes it difficult for them to understand the social world of the poor, which is different from theirs. They can never intuitively relate to it. If they are able to relate to other people from their own middle class, like they are able to use their own mother tongue, they will only be able to relate to the world of the poor, like they are able to speak a foreign language. One is never able to master a foreign language as well as one's own mother tongue.
 - A poor person is unable to relate to and to gain insight into the norms and expectations present in our society.

5.3 The Methodology in a Nutshell

5.3.1 Bridging Figure

These conclusions indicate an important need for bridging figures to narrow the gap between the poor and those who are engaged in the fight against poverty. This constitutes the fundamental task for which the experience expert is trained. A trained experience expert is someone who:

- has personally experienced poverty from early childhood;
- has partially processed his own experiences;
- has tested and expanded his own experiences to those of others;
- has acquired a number of concepts, methods, skills and attitudes to professionally apply this extended experience with poverty to all areas dealing with poverty.

In other words, experience experts are the persons par excellence to detect the missing link and to provide the necessary information to bridge it. They are therefore an important and indispensable link in the provision of social assistance to the underprivileged and in the overall fight against poverty. Experience experts bridge the gap between their own world, the world of the poor and that of other actors in society.

By starting from their own poverty experience and indicating what it means to live in poverty, experience experts can interpret the world of the poor and the survival strategies they develop for those who fight poverty, resulting in better understanding and a deeper insight. The experience experts can also fulfil a supporting function to those who are poverty-stricken and they can be their interpreter of our society. In the context of social assistance, this supporting function can consist in offering maximum opportunities to those who seek help in order to enable them to gain an overview of and insight into the perspective of the social workers. When the experience expert acts as the interpreter of the poor in society, regardless in which manner, he always does this in order to make the poor stronger.

The bridging function of experience experts must enable us to reduce the number of wounds inflicted upon people who live in poverty as a result of ignorance and inefficient interventions or policy measures. This should increase the chance of a more efficient and humane fight against poverty. And the hope that the poor will no longer be forced to live in poverty may eventually become a feasible prospect.

5.3.2 Interpreter of the Reality of Poverty

The experience expert is not just unique in his role as a bridging figure. By including and constantly expressing the perspective of the poor he also makes a permanent *plea* in favour of a more fundamental approach in the fight against poverty, with regard to individual social assistance relationships as well as policy making re: services, organisations and authorities.

Being an interpreter, for example in a *social assistance context*, means that an experience expert in his specific function does not adopt the role or mental viewpoint of a qualified social worker. On the contrary, it is important that he receives the explicit authorisation to draw attention to the basic rights and perspectives of those who are poverty-stricken. An experience expert can provide particular knowledge re: poverty and he disposes of unique opportunities to elucidate and clarify the client's perspective. He should not be guided by considerations with regard to the organisation's limitations or regulations. He must however be willing to believe in the good intentions of the social service and of the social worker, and to seek possible solutions together with the latter

and his client.

In his function, the experience expert adopts his own position with regard to those who seek help. He ensures that the underprivileged is offered the opportunity to communicate his own perspective and, thanks to his extended knowledge of poverty, he is able to put this perspective into a broader framework.

As an interpreter of the reality of poverty, the experience expert's function in a team meeting will consist in expressing, interpreting and clarifying the client's perspective. In the relationship of assistance itself, he will help the client acquire sufficient space to communicate and clarify his own perspective. This should result in a more independent client with a more equal position. However, being an interpreter of the reality of poverty does not mean adopting the perspective of a poor person, since this will deprive him of his own perspective.

The experience expert's position must be explicit and clear to all people involved. It is his permanent task to guarantee, question and safeguard the fundamental rights of those who are poverty-stricken. Thus, he tries to ensure that the poor maintain a grip on the translation of their request for help and that they are able to steer the social assistance process, create solution strategies and adjust their course during the implementation.

The experience expert also has a specific position with regard to social services and other representatives of society. This specific position is also characterised by a critical view, based on the poverty phenomenon, on these services and representatives. If the experience expert does not receive this freedom, he is not able to fully realise the added value which his function has to offer. In that case, he will get caught in his mission as an experience expert on the one hand and the interests and limitations of the service or policy on the other. If the experience expert does receive this freedom, he can add a specific and extra aspect to the organisation he works for.

A fundamental and foremost starting point: the experience expert focuses on the rights of those who live in poverty. This fundamental basis implies that initially, the experience expert should not be distracted by other concerns, such as taking into account what is feasible, adopting a strategic position, safeguarding grants or maintaining co-operation agreements. The latter are all elements which partly determine the contours within which a concrete solution for a concrete problem can become feasible and these are mainly the tasks of the qualified expert, who must also take into account the limitations enforced by the legal framework or dictated by the organisation's objectives.

However, these clear differences in starting points of the experience expert on the one hand and of the qualified expert on the other, must never lead to polarisation. On the contrary, they must facilitate a mu-

tual dialogue and search, starting from clearly formulated perspectives.

The function of experience expert is at all times characterised by this basic position, regardless of its specific work form or the methodology applied in the fight against poverty. Whether in the framework of social assistance, socio-cultural training, community work or policy work, the experience expert must at all times adopt the role of interpreter of the underprivileged. In the framework of his assignment, the experience expert does not really receive the space, but he has the express duty to emphasise the right of the poor to a humane existence and to work together in a co-operative spirit to gradually implement this right.

5.3.3 Qualitative Experience and Expert Implementation

In order to become an experience expert a personal experience of extreme poverty does not suffice. A person can only become an experience expert if he is able to professionally implement his own experiences of placement in care or one of the many other expressions of poverty. Due to his poverty experience, the trained experience expert can offer the following qualities:

- He has partly processed his poverty, although his experience of poverty remains, as well as the scars or the wounds suffered.
- He has gained insight into his own wounds, also those which he has not yet dealt with.
- He has also become stronger and is able to draw from his own experiences in order to help others.
- He is especially good at recognising the feelings of powerlessness in others.
- Through the analysis of his individual situation and through the opportunity to mirror his own situation, his own solutions and the analysis of them, to other experiences and in a larger framework, he is able to come to a general analysis and see a spectrum of possible solutions.

A professional implementation of one's own experiences is only possible after an intensive growth and learning process, in which the analysis of one's own history fulfils a prominent role.

This analysis and mirroring of the personal situation can occur through various learning routes. The experience experts of De Cirkel, for example, all went through an individual route of personal in-depth examination. The training for experience expert however is the most systematic and efficient method to achieve this.

5.3.4 Intensive Communication

The methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion is based on intensive communication between the experience expert and his colleagues. By sharing a lot of things about oneself, a favourable climate for intensive communication can be created.

Investing in intensive communication contributes to a better mutual understanding. This is a necessary condition to acquire deeper and better knowledge of poverty, which is indispensable with regard to the missing link.

Working together with an experience expert requires a considerable investment in the relationship of co-operation. Improving interaction and avoiding conflicts are essential. This implies that all parties in the relationship of co-operation must be convinced of the fact that each party's competence is indispensable and that nobody holds the truth. They should be able to support each other in their competences and they should not place the other in a position in which a clear evidence of that competence is expected and in which this evidence becomes a required condition for co-operation. Only contact and dialogue between both parties can activate the different competences and interpret and manage the situations of poverty.

Only when both parties respect each other's views, are they able to exchange meanings and to tune in to each other. Only then, a balance can be created where both parties acknowledge each other as an equal expert in the same poverty issue, but with a completely different expertise.

In the following paragraphs, we will focus on a number of conditions that must be fulfilled in order to obtain a successful relationship of co-operation based on intensive communication.

5.3.4.1 Open Attitude

The relationship of co-operation must be based on an open attitude, a curiosity for and an interest in the other. Both parties must be able to let go of their own position in order to connect with the other. In this respect, it can be very useful for both parties to examine their own rooted beliefs and avoid the use of stereotypes.

An open attitude towards each other starts from an open attitude towards oneself. This is particularly important for the experience expert, because it enables him to connect with his personal poverty experience. Also the qualified expert must acquire an open attitude towards himself within a relationship of co-operation with an experience expert. Based on this, the qualified expert and experience expert can both adopt an open attitude towards each other.

To a qualified expert, this openness towards himself is not self-evident, since in his training he has learnt to prevent his feelings from playing a part in his professional life. As a social worker, he has also learnt to maintain a certain distance with regard to his client. The experience expert perceives and experiences things very differently and sees this distance as a mask, as a lack of involvement. To him, a relationship means that you also give something from within yourself. That is why many people who start training as an experience expert consider the social worker as an ignorant person who does not understand them. This is a cultural gap which can create a lot of tension. In order to work together successfully in such a climate of tension both parties must be very competent.

The confrontation with the other person's point of view may be a drastic experience for all parties involved. In this confrontation, each party is also confronted with himself and is forced to take a closer look at himself, which can result in a different awareness of himself.

5.3.4.2 Safety and Trust

Emotional aspects play an important part in the experience expert's communication. This is not surprising, since society's unfamiliarity with the role of the wounded inner side constitutes an important component of the missing link. With regard to poverty, the experience expert is more easily able to provide better and more correct interpretations. In this respect, it is his task to try and bridge the gap between the world of the poor and the world of the qualified expert. In the framework of this task, he puts a lot of effort into providing the qualified expert with explanations and clarifications of the living conditions and emotions of people who are poverty-stricken. This frequently results in communication at a very deep level.

If the experience expert is able to offer his colleague more insight into the emotional basis of people's actions, he can create opportunities for his colleague to grow, not only because he is able to find recognisable elements in his own experiences, but also simply because he learns to understand his colleague better, which will lead to better communication at a deep level.

A consequence of this focus on the wounded inner side of poverty is that the qualified expert is also confronted with the pain from his own life history. He must also be willing to look at his inner wounds. But, just as the trained experience expert, he cannot let the pain take control of him.

The effect is that both the experience expert and the qualified expert are stimulated to work in a more intensive manner based on their feelings. This requires a lot of inner strength, since exposing your inner

self makes you very vulnerable. This is difficult to do in any relationship, let alone in a professional context where relations are mainly of a functional nature.

In order to make this possible, the relationship must offer safety and trust. In order to create such a *safe* and *reliable* environment, the parties must take a closer look at the mutual co-operation and communicate openly, look at each other's inner side, confront each other, grow towards each other, start exploring two worlds which differ from each other.

Safety has a beneficial effect. It enables the experience expert to do his thing based on his mission, namely conveying the perspective of poverty. It also enables him to be open in order to look together for ways to deal with a concrete issue related to poverty. Safety offers the experience expert the opportunity to test his perspective. It also offers some space to practise and express his intuition as accurately as possible. Safety also makes people strong enough to communicate their feelings, because they know they will be accepted by their colleagues.

Also *trust* has a beneficial effect. Because the inner side of poverty is unknown, the experience expert is often confronted with situations where he feels that he needs to convince the other that he must prove that his perspective of poverty from within is correct. In this respect, a relationship based on mutual trust between the experience expert and his colleagues is indispensable. Trust also provides the necessary space to improve elements in the relationship that do not function appropriately. Thanks to this space conflicts are less likely to occur.

Safety and trust enhance an intensive exchange between the experience expert and his colleagues in all areas which are linked to the inner side of the poverty gap. It can enable the experience expert's colleagues to meet him half way in bridging the gap which divides the poor from the rest of society.

To create and maintain this safety and trust, time is needed to invest in a qualitative relationship of co-operation. The experience expert also needs time to address his emotions and use them in the search together with his colleagues.

5.3.4.3 Equality

An equal relationship between the experience expert and his colleagues is required but that doesn't happen by itself. They need to work at it. Finding a balance in the relationship requires a lot of effort from all parties involved.

Although all parties involved are usually rationally convinced of mutual equality, in practice the experience expert and his qualified colleagues have a lot of difficulties putting this into practice. It is not at all surprising that the relationship will go through several unbalanced

stages before a balance can be found in the relationship.

At first, the relationship is often unbalanced, because the qualified expert, usually unconsciously, regards himself to be superior to the experience expert. Possible reasons may be: the difference in the degree of training or the qualified expert's many years of expertise. While in this first stage, the experience expert often feels inferior and subordinate. Possible reasons for this may be: the fact that the experience expert is new within the organisation or the fact that someone who lives in poverty is often used to taking an inferior position in his relationships. As a result, this is a very familiar pattern to the poor person, which he will easily fall back on in a difficult situation. Uncommunicative behaviour may be another poverty-related attitude and is often observed in an experience expert's first function. This uncommunicative attitude does not imply that he questions his own capabilities or considers himself insignificant. But because he has learnt all his life to be silent, it is not easy to suddenly start talking.

If they keep a conscious and open seeking attitude there is little chance of getting stuck in these unequal patterns. When the experience expert has had the time to become more familiar with his position and his function within the organisation, his self-respect, his belief in his own expertise and his self-confidence will grow. The qualified expert on his part, will gradually notice how good an experience expert can be at interpreting the practical reality of poverty.

At that moment, the balance may be tipped towards the other side. Supported by his growing self-awareness, the experience expert may adopt an arrogant and superior attitude and get the feeling that he is the one keeping everything going. It is important to emphasise that this too is not a conscious strategy, but rather an unconscious attitude. People who live in poverty are often confronted with the fact that others adopt a superior attitude towards them. As a result, the experience expert may unconsciously get the idea that adopting a superior attitude is part of being someone with a sense of self-respect. Paulo Freire was often confronted with a similar dynamic during his literacy project, where members of the oppressed class started adopting the role of the oppressor towards others. Freire attributed this to the fact that, in a context of oppression, the oppressing ways of interaction are often the only ones known, and as a result they are copied even by those who have personally suffered the terrible consequences.

When the experience expert develops a stronger self-awareness, the qualified expert will often question his own expertise and his own contribution. In other words, he will wonder whether he still has things to offer, since he has learnt that in the past he lacked a lot of knowledge with regard to poverty and was often in the wrong.

The qualified expert can also adopt an inferior attitude towards the

experience expert in an initial attempt to avoid playing the role of being superior to the experience expert. But from an inferior position it is not easy to question interventions taken by the other, while this questioning is vital to gain more insight and acquire more knowledge with regard to poverty and exclusion.

Some experience experts initially find it difficult to enter into an equal relationship with their qualified expert colleagues, because feelings of mistrust and anger towards them come to the surface. These feelings can originate from the past, if they often felt misunderstood as a client. There is no use in suppressing these emotions. Only by allowing them to exist, the experience expert can examine them, gain more insight into them and give them their own place, so that they no longer disturb the relationship of co-operation with his colleagues. The insight gained will also help the experience expert realise that he must move past this anger in order to function properly as an experience expert in social assistance or in another function with regard to the fight against poverty. However, this is not at all self-evident and it may take a long time.

An equal relationship may also be pressured by the high expectations with regard to the function of experience expert. An experience expert is new in the field of practice and must live up to these high expectations. He feels obliged to prove himself or his competence. And as a result, he will be afraid to act on his intuition, while this is one of his main strengths.

Also the qualified expert often has the impression that he must prove himself to the experience expert. This impression may partly originate from the feeling that his colleague is still in an inner struggle with his feelings of mistrust and anger resulting from his life in poverty.

The fact that experience experts are still often confronted with the consequences of their life in poverty is an extra factor which may create an unequal relationship. As a result, the experience expert's qualified colleague may adopt the role of social worker towards the experience expert. This will make it even more difficult to work together in a balanced relationship.

5.3.5 Function

Being an experience expert is a function, not a personal characteristic or personality trait.

The function of experience expert is not aimed at incorporating an outlined set of tasks into a service or organisation, nor is it aimed at simply asking more attention for the poor and their problems.

The function is based on a professional status and consists in working together on change-oriented and structural interventions in order to make the various services and authorities more accessible, efficient and

humane in the fight against poverty.

For this purpose, a trained experience expert can be employed in a wide range of areas in order to help bridge the missing link.

5.3.5.1 Core Aspects

Essentially, an experience expert is:

- an expert with regard to the social world and perspective of the poor;
- an interpreter of people's strengths;
- someone who clarifies the, sometimes small, missing links.

Such a function of experience expert requires a whole range of skills:

- An experience expert must be able to observe things from within himself. In order to do this, he must have processed his own experiences in order to use them as a basis from which he observes things.
- An experience expert must adopt the role of interpreter towards the qualified expert (social worker): providing clarifications and, if necessary, additions based on his own experiences.
- An experience expert must act towards the clients as he would act towards himself. In other words, he must view things through his own experiences and use this as a basis to clarify or mirror things.

This also means that an experience expert must always:

- look at himself;
- look at the qualified expert and the organisation;
- look at the poor.

This is without a doubt a very difficult task. And the implementation of it also requires a lot of effort from these people, who are often still dealing with their own problems due to their poverty.

5.3.5.2 Profile

Depending on the concrete setting in which the experience expert is employed and the concrete objectives of his function, his concrete tasks can differ greatly. Also the functions which are fulfilled through the implementation of the tasks can vary.

A study, conducted in order to draw up a profile for the profession of experience expert in poverty and social exclusion [Vandenbempt and Demeyer 2003], confirms that this profession cannot be dissociated from the context of the existence of a *missing link* in the fight against poverty and from a view on people in poverty as equal partners in this fight.

According to the profile, the characteristic property of experience experts is mainly the fact that they have a lived-through knowledge with regard to poverty and social exclusion and the fact that they have insight in and are familiar with the *specific perspective* of the poor and excluded, which is all too often ignored.

Probably, the most crucial element is the fact that the study with regard to this professional profile has led to the conclusion that the profession of experience expert in poverty and social exclusion does not differ from other professions based on the tasks and activities which are performed by experience experts,

“but mainly in the way in which or the starting point from which they shape and implement these tasks and activities. Their ‘lived-through knowledge’ of poverty and social exclusion, their insight in and familiarity with the perspective of the poor and excluded (cf. *supra*) constitute the core of this particular individuality. These are the foundations of the profession ‘experience expert in poverty and social exclusion’.” [Vandenbempt and Demeyer 2003, p. 16]

The professional profile also indicates that the experience expert is mainly a team player and therefore the profession of experience expert can only be exercised in a context of co-operation:

“If the specific characteristic of an experience expert is to be ‘made useful’ within an organisation, he must be engaged, present or able to collaborate in the daily operation and/or management of concrete activities within the organisation (whether or not in tandem). The interviews indicate that the specific nature of experience experts cannot be used as an isolated element or outside the main tasks and activities of the organisation.” [Vandenbempt and Demeyer 2003, p. 19]

According to the study on the professional profile, the set of tasks performed by experience experts can be divided into five categories:

1. individual support and guidance (ambulant or residential);
2. group work (ambulant or residential);
3. policy work (within organisations, umbrella style, on a local or higher level);
4. training, supervision and consultancy (towards the poor, social workers, policy actors or colleagues from other fields, such as education, housing, employment, etc.);
5. research.

In other words, these tasks are identical to the core activities of the various fields which are directly related to the fight against poverty and social exclusion. This strongly emphasises that experience experts can indeed offer an added value in each of these fields.

By means of the above-mentioned tasks, experience experts offer their own specific contribution. In other words, they fulfil their own function. Based on the professional profile, the core of the personal contribution of experience experts with regard to these activities can be summarized in five points:

1. interpreters – clarifying the social world;
2. bridging function – mediation;
3. support;
4. critical function – signal function;
5. approach to break down barriers.

5.4 Conceptual Clarity

The concept of experience expert, which in the framework of the fight against poverty was initially a new concept, has gained ground throughout the years, but at the same time it also received various interpretations. As a result, the risk of conceptual obscurity has increased.

Naturally, people can express their experiences with regard to poverty in various ways and contexts. And for the sake of convenience, sometimes each person doing this is considered an experience expert, regardless of how this is done or the context in which these experiences are expressed.

Due to this inaccurate use of the concept of experience expert, its social function can differ considerably. A clear insight is required into the different functions connected to expressing a poverty experience in order to maintain conceptual clarity with regard to the concept of experience expert.

Functions of expressing a poverty experience may be:

- Sharing personal experiences among the underprivileged and with the privileged in order to achieve personal goals. People share their personal poverty experiences with others in order to acquire some kind of overview of their inner chaos and to receive support from others.
- Sharing personal experiences with a clear external goal in mind, such as contributing to a better understanding of poverty, or increasing the awareness of the poverty reality among a more general public.
- Applying the personal poverty experience to improve legislation, policy measures of authorities and organisations and interventions of services and actors in the fight against poverty.
- By means of training using the own extended poverty experience professionally in various fields of the fight against poverty.

It is clear that the complexity of the missing link requires the function of experience expert to become a professional function. The experience expert's most important tool is his own extended experience, but the way in which this tool is used is based on profound professional training.

Initially, the idea that qualitative experience expertise requires training was questioned from diverse angles. At the same time, a study [Van Regenmortel et al. 2000] indicated that embryonic forms of working with experience experts had already taken shape in the field of practice, while it was not always clear whether the persons involved had completed specific training. However, various sectors with regard to social work, including a number of organisations where the poor take the floor and the department of welfare, soon acknowledged the importance of thorough training.

The first experience experts in training were concerned that the term experience expert was sometimes used much too easily, even when the persons involved had received no or little training. They feared that if such a person were to make a mistake, the negative consequences would be reflected upon all experience experts, also those who were properly trained.

In order to fight this conceptual confusion as much as possible, De Link uses the concept of *Trained Experience Expert* very consistently. (even using a specific acronym)

5.5 Organisation

5.5.1 Employment in All Fields and at All Levels

All kinds of organisations in various fields are engaged in the fight against poverty: government administrations, social services, trade unions, youth movements, educational establishments, poverty organisations, community work organisations, PCSWs, budgetary advice centres, day centres, family counselling services, legal aid centres, juvenile courts, special child care committees, advice centres for child abuse, mental health centres, etc. In each of these, experience experts can offer a meaningful contribution.

The experience expert's concrete tasks differ according to the service or organisation where he works. He may perform casework in tandem, he may support group work, interpret poverty in administrative decision bodies, the board of a PCSW for example, and he may voice the perspective of the poor towards the organisation's policy institutions. In the long-term, it is of vital importance for the experience expert to be present in the organisation's different entities and at its various levels.

It is not the intention that the experience expert only be involved in the implementation, while the activities and processes are managed by qualified experts. The experience expert must also be involved in all aspects which are linked to his task and at the various levels within the organisation. With regard to his counselling function, this means that he does not only intervene as a caseworker, but is also involved in the team meetings, intervention and supervision and especially on reflection days and in reviving sessions.

In other words, the added value which experience experts have to offer can take shape in various ways.

5.5.2 Forms of Organisation

Experience experts can be employed both in first and second-line services, both on a regular and project basis, both autonomously and in tandem with a qualified expert.

5.5.2.1 A Permanent Contract

Based on the fact that the life history of the poor, and hence their problems, interpretations and solutions greatly differ from those of most qualified middle-class experts, it is best that experience experts work in tandem with qualified experts in *first-line* services. This specific position will also emphasise the experience expert's typical role. In this *tandem* formula, the experience expert's main responsibility is to constantly voice the own interpretations and solutions of the poor. The need for

an experience expert as a permanent link is felt most in organisations and projects dealing with the poor on a daily basis. Hence, the need for an experience expert who is employed on a permanent basis.

Practical experiences of De Cirkel have taught us that also in *second-line* services there is a demand for permanently employed experience experts. This concerns involving experience experts in scientific research, in the outline of policies at different levels, in training linked to poverty or in the policy of poverty organisations.

5.5.2.2 Outsourcing

Based on the experiences of De Cirkel, it is also possible to employ experience experts in *first line* services as *consultants*. This means that experience experts are employed for a specific project of an organisation which is confronted with poverty issues. Such a consultant can hold various functions, such as supervision, training, policy work at all levels, research, etc.

Theoretically, several practical organisational formulas are possible in order to realise this consultancy function: whether or not with specific specialities per life area or function, whether or not operating from a regionally organised team of experience experts, whether or not in tandem with a qualified expert.

In the framework of a training and supervision assignment, for example, a temporary tandem may be formed consisting of an experience expert from a regional consultancy team, and a qualified expert from the organisation. For a consultancy assignment with regard to policy work, for example, an existing tandem consisting of an experience expert and qualified expert from the regional team may be employed.

Generally, three types of consultancy assignments can be distinguished based on the duration of the assignment:

- Short-term consultancy assignments, such as assisting an organisation in reviewing the intake-procedure in use;
- Long-term consultancy assignments, such as the employment of an experience expert for one year to participate in a research assignment;
- permanent consultancy assignments, such as the employment of an experience expert for half a day per week in order to attend the organisation's weekly team meetings.

In the near future, it is advisable to establish regional or provincial consultancy agencies of experience experts. In this respect, De Link introduced the concept of Teams for Advice and Support (TAS). These teams would mainly meet the needs of services and organisations which

are only sporadically confronted with poverty issues. Apart from their consultancy function, which we mainly discussed in the previous paragraphs, these teams would also offer methodical support to experience experts in the field of practice, to their qualified colleagues and their organisations. This need for a methodical support has already been expressed within the field of practice.

5.6 Tandem Concept

Deep-level communication between the experience expert and his qualified expert colleagues is one of the crucial elements in the methodology. In this respect, the experience expert addresses his own experiences and history in an intense manner, including the emotions linked to them. This means that he constantly puts himself in a vulnerable position and exposes his personality to a great extent.

This vulnerability is very uncustomary in a professional context. Hence, it is not self-evident for experience experts to enter into such a deep and vulnerable relationship of co-operation with different colleagues.

The tandem formula is therefore promoted as an advisable model of co-operation between the experience expert and the qualified expert, since it takes into account that the function of experience expert constitutes a *psychologically heavy and burdening* function [Vandenbempt and Demeyer 2003, p. 30].

The tandem concept has been developed by De Cirkel [De Cirkel 1996]. Also De Link considers this concept as the most advisable form of co-operation in their own practice and in the training of experience expert.

5.6.1 Basic Requirements

In order for a tandem to function successfully both parties, the experience expert as well as the qualified expert, must meet a number of basic conditions:

- a deliberate choice to work in tandem;
- unconditional mutual respect for each other;
- an open, seeking attitude;
- authenticity;
- clear communication between the qualified expert and the experience expert.

Naturally, openness and honesty play an important part in this. This also implies that each of the tandem partners has faith in the correctness, significance and relevance of the contribution and interventions made by the other, even if these values are sometimes difficult to see. This often occurs in an initial tandem situation, where it can be tempting to question the partner's contribution or competence.

- clarity with regard to the partners' position;
The organisation in which a tandem functions must ensure that the position and relation between the qualified expert and the experience expert remains transparent at all times. The qualified expert is mainly responsible for the framework and structure. With regard to the training for example, this may imply: offering and structuring the contents and didactic work forms. The experience expert's main contribution is interpretation. This implies that the experience expert repeats, clarifies and interprets things from the poverty perspective. In this respect, it is essential for the organisation to create a basic climate in which a tandem can grow. In other words, both tandem partners must feel supported by the organisation. It also means that the organisation acknowledges the specific competences of both partners, as described above. It does by no means imply that their specific competences should be restricted or separated, since a separation would prevent exchange, and without any type of exchange a relationship, and particularly a tandem relationship, is unable to grow. In other words, there should not be a rigid polarisation of the tandem roles. And clarity with regard to each other's position is only meaningful if it stimulates the mutual acknowledgement of each other and if it offers the tandem opportunities to grow. This also implies that after a while their competences can grow towards each other in certain areas, while the emphasis on their specific competences remains.
- the willingness to work with elements from their own life history and to share these with others;
- the ability to question one's own evidences and to invest in critical self-evaluation.

When a tandem relationship fails, it is nearly always due to a lack of openness, a lack of basic trust, the inability to offer the partner sufficient space for his contribution, conflicts with regard to interpretations, a lack of sufficient time for communication.

5.6.2 Recognising Similarities – Acknowledging Differences

As was already mentioned, a tandem consists of a trained experience expert and a qualified expert. Together, they form a link of co-operation based on solidarity in order to render the fight against poverty more efficient and humane. They are *tuned in to each other* and complement each other.

The qualified expert is someone who chooses to:

- use his extended knowledge of society, strategies, regulations and methodologies which he acquired during his training and his personal and professional experience, in all areas and forms of the fight against poverty;
- commit himself to social assistance or policy-making with regard to the fight against poverty based on a desire and mission. This motivated choice is sometimes based on a feeling of guilt or a fundamental sense of injustice. Or sometimes it is based on the wish that every member of society should receive opportunities to function properly.

The trained experience expert is someone who chooses to¹:

- start coping with his own painful life history;
- extend his individual poverty experience and test it based on other poverty experiences in order to extend his own knowledge of poverty;
- acquire necessary attitudes, skills, methodologies and contents from an intrinsic recognition of the poverty issue in order to use his extended exclusion experience in all areas with which the poor are confronted and in all possible forms of the fight against poverty.

In this regard, respect for each person's specific point of view constitutes a necessary condition to achieve successful co-operation within the tandem relationship.

¹'To choose' essentially presupposes the availability of several options, several alternatives or several choices. Due to the living conditions of the poor, they are often unable to choose, simply because there are no real alternatives at their disposal. A choice to follow the training of experience expert may also be a choice due to a lack of alternatives: when it is the only way out with a certain prospect. In that case, the person involved is confronted with a dilemma: something or nothing? Hence, also the choice to start processing one's own painful life history during the first year of training becomes relative: those who start the first year commit themselves to doing so. The only alternative is to quit the training, which sometimes happens.

Tandem partners meet each other in this mutual complementary atmosphere. But on the other hand, there is also a considerable gap between them, because:

The qualified expert is someone who:

- did not grow up in an underprivileged environment, but rather in a more or less privileged setting. Due to this, he can mirror society to his tandem partner and people in poverty, enabling them to see the differences and similarities between their own life experiences and those of the middle class.

The trained experience expert is someone who:

- has been confronted with various forms of social exclusion from his early childhood. Due to this, he is able to provide his tandem partner and other colleagues with a deeper insight into the meaning of poverty.

In this respect, an open and seeking attitude towards each other and oneself constitutes a necessary condition for an optimal co-operation. Sometimes, it is even considered an *indispensable* condition.

In fact, much more is demanded from a tandem than any other form of co-operation. A tandem is not just a form of co-operation as in a ‘shared job’ situation, but rather a co-operation as in a ‘shared relationship’. A tandem consists of two units, two components complementing each other, but together they also form a new unit which is *more than the sum of the components*. Hence, entering into a tandem relationship is undoubtedly a drastic event.

5.6.3 Tandem Profile

Based on the (limited) experiences with the tandem formula, a tandem profile has been outlined (table 5.1 on the next page). In this profile, the role and function of both partners are clarified. Its purpose is to support the process of tandem formation, where both tandem partners must seek a complementary and balanced relation based on the acknowledgement of each other’s competences. This profile is not designed to create a polarisation between both tandem partners, since the exchange and dialogue based on this mutual acknowledgement are an essential element of the tandem.

Although a clear tandem profile and transparency of the position of both tandem partners are essential requirements for a successful tandem formation, experienced tandem partners often regard them as too rigid, too schematic and therefore not corresponding to reality. Experienced

TANDEM PROFILE	
EXPERIENCE EXPERT	QUALIFIED EXPERT
<i>Working together</i> in the fight against poverty	<i>Working together</i> in the fight against poverty
Entering into a <i>shared</i> relationship	Entering into a <i>shared</i> relationship
<i>Interpreting situations</i> and processes by means of recognising things from their own past -> by means of questioning social workers, policy makers and the poor	<i>Tactically and methodically translating</i> interpretations based on knowledge, skills and attitudes -> by means of mirroring society and the way in which the poor are perceived by it
<i>Questioning self-evidences</i> with regard to poverty and the poor	<i>Questioning self-evidences</i> and prejudices, which also exist among the poor
<i>Clarifying effects</i> with regard to poverty and the poor	<i>Offering</i> appropriate methodologies and making policy propositions
<i>Ensuring</i> that the poor acquire and maintain control of their own life and social decision-making	<i>Negotiating and mediating</i> with services and policy makers with regard to the personal choices of the poor
<i>Protecting</i> the interests of the poor	<i>Safeguarding</i> equality and respect for all parties involved

Table 5.1: Tandem Profile

tandem partners mainly perceive their relationship as an encounter between two people from different worlds where different interpretation systems meet, so that together they can seek meanings and backgrounds. The experience expert's speciality consists in the fact that he has experience in poverty, while the qualified expert is mainly specialised in the social order. But both partners involve their emotions and perceptions in the implementation of their function.

Also the qualified expert is confronted with his inner self and his own wounds and emotions in the implementation of his task, particularly when working in tandem with an experience expert. If he is not aware of this and does not explore these wounds and emotions, they will subconsciously play a part in the implementation of his function and prevent him from using them constructively. When a person is unable to deal with his inner wounds, things will go wrong, even if he is willing to deal with them, since a tandem can also fail due to subcon-

scious matters which are not expressed.

The process of seeking meaning implies that both partners must examine themselves and listen to their partner's interpretation in order to question their own perception. If tandem partners do not evolve towards this complete mutual interaction, the tandem will only function on a technical level. According to experienced tandem partners, a tandem limited to implementing a technique is not effective. The reciprocal aspect of a tandem relationship takes shape through the frequent comparison of one's own perception with the partner's perception and through intensive communication. This requires a relationship based on mutual trust. As was already mentioned, this trust is not present from the very beginning, but may grow when both partners are willing to work together, to be open to each other, to believe that the other can make a valuable contribution and to regard each other as equal partners.

The reciprocity in the process of interpretation is based on two components: listening and giving the other something he can work with. This implies that trust cannot be won, but that it grows and results from an honest way of acknowledging each other's experiences and emotions. This does not only imply being able to follow the other's interpretation, but also being able to give him something in return. For example, asking a question to give the other the opportunity to look at his point of view and then go deeper into it. In other words, questioning things can create space and it does not automatically limit the other person's freedom, provided that it stimulates the partner to reflect yet it does not force him to give an answer.

Chapter 6

Training

6.1 Introduction

The function of experience expert requires training in order to use the baggage of experiences effectively, and to acquire the necessary competences and insights. The complete training consists of four school years, one basic year and three follow-up years. The basic year focuses on the coping process of life histories.

Candidate students must go through a selection procedure, which verifies whether the candidate has sufficient exclusion experience. The baggage which the trained experience expert uses professionally consists of his own life experience which he has dealt with. This constitutes his primary tool. The coping process of his painful history of constant exclusion in his childhood is essential and necessary for his growth towards a trained experience expert.

The training also focuses on the acquisition of a number of attitudes and skills, such as mirroring and removing the guilt, working in tandem with other experts, interpreting and confronting. These skills and attitudes are mainly acquired through a cumulative process of competence development.

Since the experience expert's function and methodology are geared towards the fight against poverty, the subjects in the curriculum focus on poverty and the fight against it. They also build on the students' experiences.

The training programme is built up gradually, because the subject contents are very heavy and particularly because the weight of the poverty issue must not be underestimated. School days are therefore shorter than for most other types of training. A full school day consists of 6 hours. In the first year, the students have 12 hours per week. In the second year, this is increased to 15 hours per week. From the start

of the second term in the second year, the students acquire professional practice in a work placement. The latter consists of a short introduction and observation practice of 80 hours. In the third year, the work placement takes up 160 hours per term and in the last year this is increased up to 200 hours, while the students still attend courses one day per week.

Although this is part-time training, combining this training with a part-time job has proved to be very difficult, especially in the second year, when the students must reserve three to four days per week for their work placement. This is virtually impossible to combine with a job.

6.2 Technical Profile

The training for experience expert in poverty and social exclusion is a type of training situated in *adult education*, more specifically in ‘*education for social promotion*’ at a secondary education *level* in the *branch* of ‘personal care’, *section* experience expert in poverty and social exclusion. It is a form of higher secondary technical training (TSO3) with a limited curriculum.

The training is part-time *vocational* training. It is recognised as a separate type of training within adult education and it is aimed at a position in the job market.

Those who complete the training successfully receive a certificate *experience expert in poverty and social exclusion*. This is a certificate of competence of technical secondary education of the third grade with a limited curriculum.

6.3 Target Group

The training for experience expert is geared towards a specific target group, namely *people who have personally experienced poverty and exclusion from their early childhood*. This is necessary, since experience experts must dispose of sufficient poverty experiences, in other words: baggage with regard to poverty and exclusion from their early childhood. Due to the huge impact of these childhood experiences on the persistence of the poverty issue, experience experts must be able to use these experiences in their fundamental role as an interpreter and as a bridging figure.

In other words, the students belong to the group of those who are *most excluded* and who have received the *least opportunities* in society. The more exclusion experiences people have, the more likely they will be able to function in a broad spectrum of various positions within the fight

against poverty. As a result, candidates who do not dispose of sufficient exclusion experience from their early childhood are not admitted to the training.

To ensure that the candidates meet the profile, each candidate must go through a selection procedure. The candidate's history of poverty constitutes the main criterion in this selection, which is based on the view on poverty discussed in chapter 2. The following questions are asked: which baggage with regard to poverty and exclusion experiences will the candidate be able to use in his position? Can the poverty experience enable the candidate to perform the function of interpreter and bridging figure after a successful completion of the training?

Additional selection criteria deal with the candidate's process and attitude, and the degree in which these may affect his chances of successfully completing the training. This is about the candidate's willingness to cope with his own experiences, to use them as an important tool both during the training and in the field of practice afterwards, his willingness to listen to the stories of others, his openness towards himself and his own imperfections, etc.

6.4 Foundations

6.4.1 Training Objectives

6.4.1.1 Personal Development and Acquisition of Knowledge

The learning route of the training for experience experts has a very specific character, since the students' own processed life experiences constitute the primary tool of trained experience experts. Their coping process with their own life history takes an important place in the first training year and, to a lesser degree, in the following years of training.

The training is aimed at a balance between the students' personal development, their acquisition of knowledge in order to perform the function of experience expert and their ability to implement this knowledge in the field of practice. Each of the training years has its own emphasis:

1. In the first year, the training focuses on the students' personal development and attitude.
2. The second year focuses on the subject contents which helps the students gain insight into and influence social and individual processes.
3. In the third and fourth year, the training focuses on practice and integration.

Apart from this, the training is built on a number of tracks to be followed:

1. The track of personal growth. Growing, coping and expanding are constantly and prominently present throughout the entire training.
2. The track of experience expertise. Also with regard to experience expertise the coping and expanding processes are indispensable.
3. The track of individual process coaching. This individual guidance occurs throughout the entire training.
4. The track of instruction and subject contents.
5. The track of practising skills.
6. The track of integration through supervision. Here, the training also focuses on themes, subject contents and experiences which are introduced by the students themselves, including work placement experiences.
7. The track of individualisation. It is important that the students remain challenged throughout the training. The nature of the challenge can differ according to the student. The training must respond to this need for challenge, for example by means of additional individualised assignments.

6.4.1.2 Acquired Skills

Due to the specific function of experience expert in the field of practice the training must focus on attitudes and skills which may be less important in other types of training. For example: interpreting, confronting, mirroring, removing the guilt and working in tandem with a qualified expert.

6.4.1.3 Removing the Guilt

An important thread throughout the entire training is the process of removing the students' sense of guilt, as part of their learning, developmental and coping process. They must stop blaming:

- themselves;
- others (family members, acquaintances, social workers, etc.);
- society.

The process of removing the blame from social workers may constitute a special point of attention, when the person involved has had negative experiences with social workers in the past.

In order for the student to be able to do this, he must learn throughout the training to:

- find links between his current situation and its context;
- take a step back and observe his own emotionally charged experiences and history, and question these in order to gain more insight. He must also learn to connect all this to the social context. Combining emotional involvement with the ability to take a step back is a difficult task. In order to do this, the student must be able to keep in touch with his emotions but at the same time he must question these emotions and possible prejudices which may come into play. His duty to take a critical viewpoint makes the spontaneous access to his emotions even more difficult;
- understand that he is not to blame, even if he did contribute to in his own situation;
- use his own experiences, based on his own intuition, and learn to translate them into the situations of others.

Hence, throughout the training the students must learn to remove their guilt in order to support others in their own process of removing guilt. In doing this, pity and superficiality can constitute important pitfalls.

6.4.2 Didactic Approach

6.4.2.1 Process-oriented Approach

The first basic year is very process-oriented. The students are supported by a qualified and an experience expert process coach working in tandem. A qualified process coach is someone who has never been underprivileged, but who has obtained a degree in social sciences. For example, a pedagogue, a social worker, an educator, etc. An experience expert process coach has his own poverty history and has completed the training for experience experts.

The first basic year focuses on this process coaching, which lays the foundation for the students' personal coping process. However, this process is not completed after one year. It is therefore important that this personal development is supported throughout the entire training. Hence, the process coaches also play a prominent part in the following three years of training.

The tandem of process coaches offers the students personal guidance throughout the entire training and also supports the students in their work placement. The qualified process coach teaches at least one of the technical subjects each term. Apart from this, at least one subject per term is taught by a teacher. This way, a group is never supported solely by process coaches, while the latter are able to closely monitor the group of students.

Process coaches do not only play an important part with regard to the students. By supporting the students in their work placement they also perform a sensitizing function with regard to the field of practice. By means of observing how a tandem of process coaches functions in practice, for example at a work placement meeting, people at the work placement location will gain more insight into the meaning of experience expertise and the experience expert's specific role and tasks.

6.4.2.2 Working in Tandem

In order for the learning process to take shape the training is given by a tandem of a qualified and an experience expert teacher. This is necessary, since the qualified teacher does not have any knowledge about the reality of extreme poverty and is therefore confronted with the missing link of poverty, which also plays a part within the classroom.

The experience expert can support students in making a connection between the subject contents and what it means to live in poverty. Also the teachers themselves find it important to be supported by experience experts in their assignment. Hence, the experience expert teacher performs a double function in class, which is partly teacher-oriented and partly student-oriented.

Apart from this, the intensity and complexity of poverty still take their toll in the students' daily lives. This also affects the class atmosphere. The constant presence of a trained experience expert in the group of students is therefore indispensable, even during the subject-oriented parts of the training. It also helps the students recognise certain influences which play a part, so that the experiences and emotions linked to it can be adopted in an active and constructive manner throughout the training.

It is also important for the students to see what their future function of experience expert involves, because they do not encounter this model elsewhere in society. The experience expert teacher also steers and monitors the students' growth towards experience expertise.

6.4.2.3 Experiential Approach

People who have grown up in a generation type of poverty lag behind severely in education due to their life history. The didactic approach

must take this into account. In this respect, an experiential orientation and adjusted pace are essential.

The subjects taught are aimed at offering the students a number of learning objectives. On the other hand, their own life history and experiences will constitute their main tool in their function as an experience expert. In other words, the training must succeed in connecting the students' experiences to the subject contents.

The students' personal experiences and the constant application of what has been acquired to the personal history therefore constitute an essential thread throughout the entire training. Life histories can also play a part in various subjects by confronting the contents and insights taught with the students' knowledge based on their own experiences.

This does not simplify the teachers' task, since they must constantly strive for a good balance between working from exclusion experiences and offering sufficient subject material.

The experiential orientation of the training, translated into the fact that students are expected to connect their life history with the subject material, implies that, to a certain extent, the students must constantly expose their inner selves to their teachers.

6.4.2.4 Individualised Approach

Individual coaching sessions are organised throughout the entire training. A written report is drawn up of each session, containing the session's main points and a number of working points for the student. During the following session, these working points are followed up. The written reports are available for the students.

An individualised approach is required, because the group of students is often very heterogeneous, particularly with regard to their interests. Teachers must therefore offer them tips, such as suggestions with regard to literature and indications for students who wish to focus on a certain issue or a specific theoretical model. This need to acquire more in-depth knowledge with regard to a specific subject can be very strong in certain students.

6.4.2.5 Poverty-oriented Approach

Due to the fact that the function and methodology of experience expert is geared towards the fight against poverty, the subject contents throughout the entire training focus on poverty and the fight against it. Therefore, a number of subjects deal with themes which are specifically related to poverty, such as the 'social studies and poverty' subject.

For the same reason, a number of other subjects mainly focus on elements which are of specific importance to people who are poverty-stricken. For example, the subject of 'law' pays attention to the law

on child protection, the decree concerning special child support and the law on collective debt settlement.

Finally, a lot of attention is paid to a number of concepts and doctrines which can be very meaningful to people who have been confronted with exclusion and placement in care. Examples are: doctrines with regard to attachment and loyalty, systematic and contextual reasoning. These are some of the most important themes of the psychological and pedagogical subjects of the training.

6.4.2.6 Essence-oriented Approach

The training programme focuses on the essence of the function of experience expert. This is expressed in various ways, for example in the limited number of subjects, and in the fact that the subject titles and contents clearly visualise the essence of the training.

The teachers have experienced that the students are very good at integrating the subject contents offered, provided that they are not swamped with too many details. This implies that within their subject, teachers must focus on the elements which are essential to experience experts. However, this does not mean that the subject contents must blindly be adjusted to the students' alleged low level. Students are entitled to a minimum of essential knowledge and it is wrong to assume that their level is rather low.

Teachers have found that the students' critical view is remarkable. Due to their life experience they really know what it is about, and as a result they are able to give the subject content a concrete meaning. Acquired concepts and notions do not remain abstract, but receive a concrete interpretation and can be remarkably well applied. This, however, requires that the students must be able to relate to the subject content. They must first 'feel' the content in order to connect with it. If these conditions are met, students are able to acquire the subject content.

Throughout the training students evolve in the way they deal with knowledge and relate to it. At first, they mainly base themselves on their emotions. But later, their way of thinking and functioning is more and more based on insights and abstract knowledge.

6.4.3 Beneficial Circumstances

Students often have to overcome a lot of obstacles in their personal life in order to start the training for experience expert. It is therefore important that training circumstances do not put even more pressure onto the students, but radiate peace and security.

This requires:

- clear agreements with all the parties responsible and all the co-operative authorities, particularly with the organisations which monitor the students or offer them financial support. This is the task of the local training co-ordinator;
- for the students to receive clarity with regard to their social statute and all consequences linked to this statute, both in case they quit or continue the training;
- for the students to receive clarity with regard to every step they must take in order to comply with their statute or regularize it;
- for the local training co-ordinators to be well-informed with regard to each student's social statute and the specific requirements and consequences with regard to administration, linked to the various social statutes. It is the local training co-ordinators' responsibility to keep a close eye on this administration. This remains an important point of attention throughout the entire training;
- for the students to have a clear overview of all important aspects of the training, such as the lesson schedule, training contents, nature of the coaching, final attainment levels, evaluation procedures, etc.;
- for the students to be well-informed with regard to the consequences of absence and the procedures linked to it.

6.5 Training Programme

Table 6.1 on the following page gives an overview of the training programme. It consists of three components.

A first component is the growth process towards experience expertise. In this process the students cope with their own poverty experiences, based on the analysis of their own life history. They receive the opportunity to mirror and test their individual history, their insight into their past, the difficulties with which they are confronted and the solution strategies they tried to develop in relation to other poverty experiences and a broader social framework. Hence, individual experiences and responses are extended and deepened to general analyses and solutions.

The course subjects constitute a second important component of the training. They offer the students the required theoretical and technical background.

The professional practice is the third component of the training. It provides the students with the opportunity to learn how to use the acquired knowledge in the field of practice.

Training Experience Expert in Poverty and Social Exclusion			
Year 1 – Term 1			
Life Stories	120 h.		
Basic Communication Skills	40 h.		
Language and Expression	60 h.	220 h.	
Year 1 – Term 2			
Life Stories	120 h.		
Basic Communication Skills	40 h.		
Language and Expression	60 h.	220 h.	
Year 2 – Term 1			
Pedagogical Processes and Issues	60 h.		
Social Studies and Poverty	60 h.		
Communication Skills and Training	40 h.		
Expressive Agogic Skills	20 h.		
Specific Skills	80 h.	260 h.	
Year 2 – Term 2			
Psychological Processes and Issues	60 h.		
Legal Issues	60 h.		
Communication Skills and Training	40 h.		
Expressive Agogic Skills	20 h.		
Specific Skills	80 h.		
Supervised Professional Practice	80 h.	340 h.	
Year 3 – Term 1			
Psychological and Pedagogical Processes and Issues	40 h.		
Expressive Agogic Skills	20 h.		
Specific Skills	80 h.		
Supervised Professional Practice	160 h.	300 h.	
Year 3 – Term 2			
Psychological and Pedagogical Processes and Issues	40 h.		
Expressive Agogic Skills	20 h.		
Specific Skills	80 h.		
Supervised Professional Practice	160 h.	300 h.	
Year 4 – Term 1			
Ethics and Philosophy of Life	40 h.		
Expressive Agogic Skills	20 h.		
Specific Skills	80 h.		
Supervised Professional Practice	200 h.	340 h.	
Year 4 – Term 2			
Situation-oriented Training	40 h.		
Expressive Agogic Skills	20 h.		
Specific Skills	80 h.		
Supervised Professional Practice	200 h.	340 h.	

Table 6.1: Outline of the Training Programme (2005)

6.5.1 Basic Year

6.5.1.1 Core Contents: Life Histories

The first basic year of training fulfils a crucial role in the students' processes. In this year, the foundations are laid which the following years are based on. During this basic year, the students work at the conditions which have to be met in order to complete the training successfully.

The students' personal life, their own history, their experiences of poverty and their social exclusion constitute the source of the experience experts' engagement and inspiration. This personal life experience must be examined in-depth in order to gain more insight into the causes of their life story: the social and personal context of their life, the process they went through, the process their loved-ones went through, the concrete mechanisms of exclusion in their own life and the effects of it, and elements of their own life story waiting to be dealt with. The coping process of their own personal experiences is necessary in order to turn these experiences into an effective tool in the fight against poverty.

In the first basic year, the foundation is laid to implement these personal experiences. The students often have stories, emotions and thoughts which have never been heard, felt and understood by society. This is what the students first work with. Being able to share elements of their own life story, being listened to and understood is a primary condition to create the necessary space to develop as a person.

The students must initiate the coping process of their own experiences in order to be able to acquire knowledge, since the emotions and pain would otherwise prevent them from taking things in.

Listening to and discussing the stories of others constitutes an extension of their own personal poverty experience, stimulates the students to view their own experiences in a broader context and lays the foundation to constructively deal with the experiences and pain of other people who are poverty-stricken.

During the first basic year, the students also learn to see that the inner wounds inflicted during their life in poverty still affect their current life, to understand that another story is both different and the same due to the specific nature of each person's history and inner wounds. A contextual approach to the training is therefore essential, since it contains a number of insights and concepts enabling them to express this into words.

6.5.1.2 Methodical Emphases

The general methodology of the first basic year is one of experiential learning. Based on the students' personality and the composition of the student group, other emphases are put within the global framework of

the training programme in the first basic year.

Continuity in Guidance Due to the intense and personal nature of the process in the first basic year, the *stability* and *continuity* of the guidance is essential. Except for the ‘language and expression’ subject, the group is therefore exclusively *monitored by a tandem of a qualified and an experience expert process coach*.

Individual Attention From the very start of the training, teachers must pay attention to each student’s own *individual learning method*, which may be shaped by previous learning experiences or obstacles in the past. This is very important, since the students’ individual learning method may have a considerable impact on a negative or positive development of their learning process in the basic year and in the following years. This point of attention is mainly dealt with in the individual sessions, the resulting work points and the follow-up.

6.5.1.3 The subject of ‘Life Stories’

Creating Security Before the students can cope with their own experiences they must work towards a *basic sense of security* in the student group. But also sharing their history of exclusion with each other is beneficial to further develop this basic security. This is an important condition in order to complete the training successfully. It is therefore essential for the group to receive opportunities to develop this sense of security. Especially in this basic year it is important to focus on formal and informal *contact moments* among the students, between the students and process coaches, and between the students and other parties involved in the training. In the following years of the training, it is important to ensure that this sense of security in the group does not stimulate the students to isolate themselves from society. Practical tasks, observation assignments and contacts with students from other types of training, such as the training for social worker or teacher training, are concrete tools to help prevent this from happening.

It is not very surprising that in the beginning the students experience a very insecure atmosphere in the group. The process coaches must therefore offer the group sufficient time to create a secure learning environment. It is recommended to do this in September and October, and after the autumn holidays they can start with the life stories, so that everyone receives the opportunity to share their life story before the end of the first term.

It is favourable to start with an *introduction round*, allowing each student to introduce himself. After this, they can discuss a number of concrete work agreements. In this respect, learning to deal with time in

an appropriate way, which is not self-evident to many students, should receive sufficient attention. In order to let everything run smoothly, it is important that the students learn to understand why they have to be on time and why they must notify the teacher when they are not able to make it to class.

In a next stage, the teachers and students together can take a closer look at the *final attainment levels*. Students have a lot of questions with regard to what is expected from them to successfully complete the first basic year and they often have a lot of doubts about whether they will be able to meet the final attainment levels. Due to this, this part of the training may take some more time.

Apart from *effective and workable agreements* also the overall framework should contribute to the creation of the required atmosphere of security. In this respect, the general school context, a good infrastructure and the attitude and accessibility of the local training co-ordinator play an important part. With regard to infrastructure, it is essential, for example, in the basic year to dispose of two classrooms, so that students who at a certain moment experience difficulties in the group can be supported individually.

The general context of the training will also be experienced as a more secure setting when the students' direct environment and partner understand what the training entails. In order to achieve this, the partners are invited to an informative meeting in the beginning of the training when they are creating a secure environment. On this day, they do not only receive information on the training itself, but also on the social framework in which the training is situated and the view on poverty on which it is based. This broader social framework indicates that the methodology experience expert is supported by society. This has a motivating effect on the students as well as on their partners.

With regard to creating a secure environment, teachers must be aware of the fact that the students' view on education may be very limited and biased. Timetables, rules, examinations, etc. may leave a strange and threatening impression on beginning students.

In order to create this secure atmosphere, the students' life story is not systematically used. However, elements from their own life history are used to give concepts such as gossip, privacy, respect, etc. a concrete meaning. These concepts must be clear to the students and they must be able to use them correctly in order to create a secure atmosphere in the group.

The Actual Life Stories When a secure atmosphere has been established and in order to make the necessary agreements, the life stories subject can start with discussing the students' life history.

In this respect, the process coaches do not offer any subject contents.

They do, of course, support the students in placing their life history in a broader framework.

The Student as Director Each student has to focus on his life story twice for a period a half a day. The student bringing his life story is the director of his half day. He determines how much he tells and how long he speaks. For some, this may only be 15 minutes. Others will talk almost the whole time. Also the content is completely determined by the student himself. It is therefore important for the students to know that they can set their own boundaries with regard to their life story. In other words, they only share things which they are ready to share with others. Students should not be forced to push the boundaries they have set for themselves, since this can cause considerable damage.

Since the students themselves determine how much time they spend on their life story, some will have more time left than others. If there is still sufficient time, the process coaches can link elements from the student's story to other students' experiences and thus expand their story to a larger context.

Initially, the process coach does not have to go deeper into the contents of the student's story.

It is mainly his *task* to enable the students to tell their story, to pay attention to the effect of the story in the group and safeguard the secure group context. He can however ask the students: "Would you like to say something?" By means of a similar invitation, the other students are stimulated to share their own experiences with the speaker.

Being Acknowledged By telling their story, a lot of grief often surfaces. Because the other students recognise similarities with their own story, this can cause a lot of grief for them as well.

Emotions play an important part in working with these life stories. Due to their past, people who are poverty-stricken often develop a strong sense of empathy. This helps them to understand and relate to what fellow students have gone through. This enables them to acknowledge their fellow students and this connection makes them feel less lonesome.

It is striking how fellow students tend to emphasise the strengths of the story. Being heard and understood, receiving recognition and not being condemned are extremely important to the speaker. They help him overcome his sense of guilt and they have a healing effect. For the other students, this secure atmosphere contains an important message: "When I share my own story with them, they will not condemn me either." Thanks to this sense of security, students even tend to tell parts of their life story they have never told anyone before.

Through the life stories, the students also acquire another *important insight*, i.e. the fact that they are not the only ones suffering such deep

pain caused by poverty and exclusion. And they also learn to see that they should not blame themselves for their own situation. Due to these insights the students are able to increase their sense of self-esteem.

Two Rounds The students share their life story in two rounds. Each student has his turn in the first round. There is no fixed order. This gives the students some space to determine themselves when they are ready to tell their story.

First Round In the first round, the student gives his colleagues a *first outline of his life history*. This can be a chronological story or a story based on an object which holds a special meaning to the student.

In this first round, the student should have the space to give a first chaotic outline in order to gain more insight into the chaos and create some order in his own story. It is important to understand that ‘lying’ does not really exist in this respect. Students often try to tell their story in different ways. This is an expression of the fact that they try to find a way to understand their story. The process coach must always assume that the student tells the truth and must enable him to bring his story. It is not really important whether the story is completely accurate. The process coach must focus on the student’s perception which is expressed through the story.

Each story has its own value and cannot be compared to other stories. It is therefore important that students do not minimise their story in comparison to stories of their fellow students.

Second Round A second round *focuses on a number of matters* which the student himself has indicated. The students receive the following task: “When you look at your own life history, which part do you wish to discuss more into detail. It must be something you are still questioning, something you do not really understand or something you are still struggling with.”

A possible alternative approach in the second round is to draw up a list, together with the students, of themes they would like to talk about with regard to their life stories. From this list a number of themes will already be discussed in the subject material. But a few themes will remain. The process coach may ask the students the following question: “Who wants to share a part of his life story based on this theme?”

Both ways result in a more *theme-oriented discussion*, in which the students introduce the theme themselves. Since they have often been confronted with the same issues, there will be more opportunities for dialogue during this discussion.

In this second round, some students choose not to talk about a theme, but about another part of their life story. Sometimes, students

who shared their story in the beginning might realise after having heard other stories that they forgot important elements in their own story which they still want to share. Sometimes, students may need some time before they are ready to share a certain aspect of their history with the group. It is therefore important that students clearly know that they can reintroduce aspects which they feel have not been dealt with sufficiently, or with which they are still struggling.

For this second round, each student receives another half day.

6.5.1.4 The subject of ‘Basic Communication Skills’

The subject of ‘basic communication skills’ and the subject of ‘life stories’ are strongly connected. Both subjects have a parallel structure and complement each other. Both subjects must therefore be given by the tandem of process coaches. The subject of ‘basic communication skills’ offers more knowledge contents than the ‘life stories’ subject. When people focus too much on their emotions they are unable to acquire knowledge. The subject of ‘basic communication skills’ is presented as a separate subject and its content is not incorporated in the concrete content of the ‘life stories’ subject. As a result the former subject offers the students the necessary inner peace and security to stimulate their learning process. However, the themes of this subject are closely linked to the main themes of the ‘life stories’ subject.

In this subject, the process coaches start with the Goldstein method. This method has been developed in order to train social skills in socially weak groups. According to the Goldstein method, communication skills constitute an important part of social skills and this is what this subject focuses on. The method is mainly inductive. Through imitation and intuition the students acquire their first knowledge and insight into communication skills, in order to name and structure this knowledge, and therefore reach the theory, in a later stage. Because this method is very practice-oriented, process coaches are able to gain a clear overview of each student’s specific qualities and gaps.

Initially in this subject, learning is very inductive. In a second stage, the learning content can be resumed in a more systematic and deductive manner. For this purpose, the process coaches use the book *elementary social skills* [Van Meer and Van Neijenhof 2001] as a manual, since this contains very basic knowledge and because the structure of the book is similar to the group’s process in the first basic year.

This subject also deals with basic skills with regard to functioning in a group. Throughout the further training, these basic skills can be discussed more into detail. But it is important to pay sufficient attention to this in the first year at a more basic level, since a number of students have not been able to acquire these skills in their daily life. A possible

point of attention may be: how do you feel in the group? Are there things which bother you or which make you feel uncomfortable?

In this respect, *practicing listening and communication skills* and *learning how to apply theoretical insights* constitute important points of attention. But also *being able to stand up for oneself* is a relevant attitude in the training group and is therefore an important aspect of this subject during the first months of training.

The acquisition of a number of *attitudes and basic communication skills* during the first months of training contributes to the development of a secure atmosphere in which the students feel comfortable to share their life stories with each other. Later, the subject explores a number of basic concepts, notions and frames of reference which can help the students gain more insight into their life stories.

6.5.1.5 The subject of ‘Language and Expression’

Through exercises, the ‘language and expression’ subject is aimed at helping students overcome possible anxieties with regard to reading, writing and working at a computer, and at teaching them how to express themselves orally and in writing. Here, language is mainly regarded as a communication tool and a means to express oneself. Throughout their past, many people who are poverty-stricken have developed a number of inhibitions with regard to language. If students are able to lose some of these through small success experiences, they will often make huge improvements with regard to reading and writing in the first year. This subject must therefore fulfil a functional role and offer the students opportunities to experience success and lose their inhibitions.

This is the only subject in the basic year which is taught by a subject teacher instead of the tandem of process coaches. It was a conscious choice to separate this subject completely from the ‘life story’ subject.

Contrary to the ‘life story’ subject, in which emotions play a central part, the contents of the ‘language and expression’ subject should not be emotionally charged and must offer the students the opportunity to recover. This does not mean that this subject is to be regarded as insignificant or unimportant, but it should simply have a relaxing impact. The students can work with language in a pleasant and mind-broadening atmosphere. Around New Year, for example, the students can write each other a New Year’s letter, or they can do word puzzles, write a poem, etc.

It is not the intention to determine the contents of this subject in detail beforehand, so that there is space left to meet the group’s needs. This is necessary, since the starting terms differ from student to student and their personal needs must be taken into account. Various skills can be practised, but also elements with regard to attitude can be discussed.

With regard to the subject's structure, it is important to incorporate a lot of playful activities and liberating play forms at first. At a later stage, more serious assignments can be given, such as learning how to make notes, to keep and consult a diary, etc. The teacher must always give the students constructive feedback which stimulates them to continue their efforts.

In this respect, it is advisable to work towards small results and small success experiences at first. Simple expressive language exercises can constitute an important tool. They can offer the students strength and the feeling that they are able to pick up new things rather quickly and that what they learn is useful. They can also help them acquire more confidence with regard to reading and writing.

An important part of this subject is dedicated to practising basic computer skills. In the second term, this subject can focus on more specific language skills.

6.5.2 Follow-up Years

The first basic year is followed by three follow-up years. These are built on *three cornerstones*:

- a further development of expertise based on the students' personal experience. Their own experiences and the constant link between the acquired knowledge and personal history constitute the main thread throughout the entire training;
- a subject-specific training containing technical subjects. In order for the students to acquire technical skills, the training focuses on the specific function of experience experts in the field of practice, based on the professional profile;
- professional practice.

Experiential training combined with work placement in the field of practice and complemented with supervision and individual guidance prepares the students for the field of practice. Despite the fact that the training is aimed at providing the students a position on the job market, the students also consider the training to be valuable with regard to their self-development.

Students are able to *grow* towards *experience expertise* by extending their own poverty experience.

Experiences with the first training groups have taught us that this should remain an important point of attention throughout the entire training. If not, this aspect is not deepened methodically and is insufficiently tested.

A specific aspect of the training is that the growth with regard to experience expertise takes shape throughout the various training blocks. In principle, this point of attention plays a part in each subject and can take shape in a practical way through the constant presence of an experience expert during the training.

6.5.2.1 Technical Subjects

It would take us too far to give a detailed description of the learning content per subject in the three follow-up years, as we did for the first basic year. Generally, the contents of the various subjects is determined by the following two questions:

- Which insights, skills and attitudes must an experience expert master?
- What is the content of poverty?

Hence, also the subject content contributes considerably to the development of experience expertise.

By gearing the content of the taught subjects towards the profession of experience expert, the students clearly understand the relevance of the training in function of experience expertise.

The technical subjects can be subdivided into a number of blocks.

A Psychological Block This block contains the various subjects of psychological and pedagogical questions and focuses on the aspects of the inner side of poverty. The knowledge presented must contribute to a better insight in the students' personal life history and that of others.

A number of important contents are: developmental psychology and attachment theories, the basis of systematic and contextual reasoning and a more in-depth approach to this, practising a number of contextual skills, for example: how do I implement the principle of multilateral partiality in a conversation?

A Structural Block This block focuses on the structural aspect of the poverty issue and on the poverty policy. The 'Social Studies' and 'Law' subjects are part of this block.

In the subject of 'Law', the students receive an introduction to the judicial system, based on questions with which the poor can be confronted. Important topics are for example: the pro deo system, child protection and debt mediation. A historical perspective of the judicial system based on the aforementioned topics is an important aspect of this subject. It helps the students realise that the judicial system is not

invariable and that society can be changed, which is crucial in light of the war on poverty.

The 'Social Studies' subject starts with the history of the struggle against poverty and situating the methodology experience expert. Then, a number of structural components of the poverty issue are discussed, such as the right to housing, the right to health, etc., based on the current situation and linked to aspects which are important to the specific student group. This is also linked with a problem analysis and the way in which society deals with it.

The Communication Block This block focuses on the acquisition and practice of the specific communication skills which are important to experience experts. This subject builds on the foundations of the first basic year and systematically deals with a number of relevant theoretical concepts, such as the axis. Also elements of group dynamics are discussed.

Apart from this, this block also focuses on practising skills with regard to listening, asking questions, observing, non-verbal forms of communication, etc.

The students must master communication skills in order to be able to acquire a number of specific skills with regard to the profession of experience expert, such as interpreting, mirroring, confronting, questioning, etc. The communication block also creates the foundation necessary for the development of a number of attitudes which are of vital importance in the profession of experience expert.

The Expression Block This block contains the subjects of 'Expressive Agogic Skills' throughout the different years of training. This subject fulfils a supporting function in a number of aspects.

In the first place, they support group formation. In this subject the students relate to each other in a completely different way. Hence, they receive the opportunity to get to know each other in a different way, which stimulates processes and group formation.

This subject also supports the attitude of an experience expert. A student can only become a good experience expert if he is able to develop self-respect. The subjects re: expression contribute to this in a considerable way. Students learn to discover qualities within themselves, to become familiar with the unknown, to enjoy art and culture, for example by participating with the group in a cultural event, etc.

Finally, these subjects have a supporting nature, since they train a number of skills which are useful in the implementation of the function of experience expert. For example, expressing oneself and adopting a self-conscious attitude.

An Integration-oriented Block This block contains a number of subjects which are aimed at enabling the students to integrate the knowledge and skills of the various subjects.

Particularly the subjects ‘Specific Skills’ and ‘Situation-oriented Training’ are integration-oriented, since the students go through a learning process of insights, skills and attitudes linked to their work placement.

Also the subject of ‘Ethics’ has a very integration-oriented character and this is why it is taught at the end of the training. This subject stimulates the students to adopt a broad view, by showing them that every matter can be seen from different angles. This subject is also very important with regard to forming a view on people and society. The students have already acquired practical experience and based on these experiences they are stimulated to develop their own view with regard to poverty, racism, exclusion, etc.

6.5.2.2 Professional Practice

The training for experience expert gradually builds up the students’ practical experience. Therefore, the first years mainly focus on the subject content, while towards the end of the training the emphasis is put on professional practice.

During the students’ work placement, they must put what they have learnt in class into practice. But at the same time, the work placement experience makes them aware of the fact that they still need further training, resulting in a more conscious use of the training offered.

Because practical experience plays an important part in the extension process of the poverty experience, the students have to go through a work placement in a location where they are put in direct contact with people in poverty. For this reason, their work placement cannot be situated in a policy context, since this would not extend their poverty experience.

Special attention is paid to the possible culture shock with which experience experts may be confronted during their work placement, since they suddenly become a colleague (social worker) instead of being a client. But also the work placement location itself can be faced with such a culture shock. If this is the case, it has to first deal with this in order for the student to be able to adopt his function of experience expert.

Throughout their training, the students’ work placement must be situated in at least two different locations. The reason for this is that the experience expert can perform a broad range of activities and there are huge differences between the organisations active in the field of practice. By means of working in different locations, the students are able to gain

more insight into the field of practice from within.

First, the student must become more familiar with the organisation of his work placement. This first stage therefore focuses on observation and reporting. In a second stage, the student must try to adopt the function of experience expert in poverty and social exclusion. This is the stage of active participation and experimenting.

Together with the student and supported by the work placement coaches, the organisation must find an appropriate position, assignment and function for the experience expert within its services. This requires an open attitude not only from the entire organisation but also its framework and policy, as well as the experience expert in training.

Each training year has its own final attainment levels with regard to professional practice, so that they can develop their competences throughout the training. The final attainment levels are defined per training year and thus per pair of two terms. This emphasises that the students receive a certain amount of time to acquire, practice and consolidate their competences, which are outlined in the final attainment levels per training year. The various interim work placement visits and evaluations are appropriate opportunities to monitor the students' learning process and check whether there is sufficient evolution in their acquisition and mastering of the expected competences.

The work placement supervisors are responsible for the evaluation of the students' professional practice. However, both the student and placement location are involved in this evaluation during and after the work placement. Hence, the supervisor is able to take into account the way in which the organisation assesses the student in the evaluation process. This can also have a positive effect on the organisation's view on experience expertise and the way in which it supports the student during his work placement.

Behavioural aspects take an important place in assessing whether a student is capable of being a good experience expert in practice. Someone who is not able to listen, who often adopts a judgemental attitude, who cannot view things from a different perspective or puts himself above others, will probably fail for the professional practice block.

Students who are still struggling with certain issues and adopt a seeking attitude, must however receive opportunities to learn. A seeking attitude usually helps them to evolve in a positive way with regard to a number of aspects. Suppressing issues which are still difficult is the opposite of a seeking attitude and is more problematic. But if the student realises and understands why he is still struggling with a number of issues, this indicates that he is striving for a seeking attitude. The work placement supervisor must realise that each student will keep on struggling with a number of issues and that this will affect his behaviour and functioning as an experience expert. It is important to find out how

big these obstacles are: do they only surface sporadically or do they play a central role in each situation and in each form of communication? In the latter case, this will have an important impact on the quality of the student's functioning as an experience expert, which may cause the student to fail for professional practice.

6.6 The Growth of Students

Throughout the training the students acquire a number of insights, skills and attitudes which they need in order to perform the function of experience expert. But the training also affects the students' personal growth, since it is very personal in nature, particularly in the beginning.

Each candidate student who passes the selection and the first basic year has a lot of inner strength. But the following three years of training enhance this strength even more, in the sense that the students learn to channel this inner strength, so that it becomes much more effective.

In the beginning of the training, some students are already able to stand up for themselves. But they often do this in an unacceptable manner. Throughout the training, students learn to stand up for themselves in an acceptable way. In other words, the follow-up years of the training contribute considerably to the students' growth with regard to adopting a healthy assertiveness which is socially acceptable.

Thanks to the training, the students' *self-knowledge* and *self-management skills* increase considerably. While in the beginning some students are unable to get to the training location by public transport, at the end of their training they are often even able to get to the other side of the country, for example to attend a workshop as experience expert and talk about the meaning of the missing link with regard to the poverty issue.

They used to call me an idiot
They never gave me a chance
There was no point in studying
Nobody appreciated me anyway
All my efforts were in vain
I was just a horny bitch, they said
We fought to get somewhere
Half-way this journey
With still some difficulties to overcome
But now we receive a pat on the back
Colleagues treat us with respect
It gives us an odd feeling
What's the purpose
I don't always know what to do with it
Still, it does make me feel good
Both colleagues and clients encourage us
And feel comfortable with us!

*Three students in the news letter of De Link,
Year 2, n° 1 (March 2003).*

Chapter 7

Operation

7.1 Introduction

The methodology to train an experience expert in poverty and social exclusion arouses high expectations, not in the least for those who are poverty-stricken but also for experience experts themselves.

“The training will change a lot in the field. I am certain of that. The access which we, as experience experts, have to people who are poverty-stricken, the deep conversations that we have with them, the trust they put in us are very important elements. And apparently we are also very good at offering them our trust. Exactly how all of this works, I don’t know, but I do know that we are one of them.”¹

The first experiences with experience experts in the field of practice indicate that they can make a fundamental difference in the daily practice of the fight against poverty. A few striking conclusions are:

- The assistance is much more geared to the true needs of the poor. This is also the case for the other instruments in the fight against poverty.
- Less wounds are inflicted, incomprehension and inefficient interventions as well as policy measures have decreased.
- Mutual blind spots have been made visible.
- A more efficient and humane fight against poverty is made possible.

¹The quotes in this chapter are taken from conversations with experience experts, their colleagues and their supervisors.

7.2 Value of the Methodology

Although the input of experience experts in our daily practice can often be found in small and less spectacular matters, it does prove to be of great value. In the following paragraphs, we will focus on the various aspects of the value of the methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion.

7.2.1 Contact with the Target Group

It is striking how strong experience experts can relate to people who are poverty-stricken and how well they can show this in their behaviour. This enables them to establish a *deeper contact* with these people.

“We notice how quickly the experience expert receives the trust of his clients. They interact smoothly and spontaneously and relate to each other in a way which is unfamiliar to us. The gap, of which we knew that it existed, suddenly becomes visible and this can sometimes be a disappointment to us. Because we sometimes feel very involved with a client and we have the feeling that we are on the same wave-length, but when we look at the experience experts, we notice that their contact is much deeper.”

In some organisations, this contact with the target group is considered to be the most important contribution of the experience expert, and as a result he receives the space to proceed in his own way.

“The experience expert’s quality lies in the fact that he is able to approach certain people, while his colleagues are not. The underprivileged sense that the experience expert understands them better and that he can relate to them. In this respect, the experience expert’s role consists in helping people re-establish contact with a number of elements in their environment.”

It is striking how, despite his good intentions, the qualified expert’s contact with the target group often remains superficial. The experience expert however succeeds in establishing a *deeper contact* with the target group and he more easily gains insight into what is important to them.

“One day, someone approached me with serious financial problems. I found out that he hadn’t received any kind of income over the last couple of months, because he was too ashamed to apply for welfare. He thought people would consider him a profiteer and he didn’t want that. I accompanied

him to the PCSW and helped him apply for unemployment benefits. But we also talked and I explained to him that someone who has lost his job is entitled to this type of benefit, so that there would no longer be a reason for him to feel ashamed.”

A qualified expert also runs the risk of falling back into his habit of interpreting situations from his own perspective. And he may also be inclined to take solutions out of people’s hands, because he does not agree with their solutions.

“As social workers we are often confronted with other ideas, values and norms. We must always carefully consider how to deal with these in our role of counsellor.”

It is striking how the experience expert is able to obtain a lot of information from people in poverty, which they had even concealed from the qualified expert.

“I frequently deal with people who run the risk of being suspended by the National Employment Office. This is often due to the fact that the office has not been informed of certain matters. If that is the case, I try to gain insight into these circumstances and try to prevent these people from getting suspended due to a lack of information.”

The experience expert is also very good at stimulating people to come up with their own solutions and in recognising their ability to implement these solutions themselves. He is also good at addressing people’s capabilities and developing them.

“The experience expert is able to share his own experiences with the client and as a result they establish a close relationship. This enables the experience expert to adopt a clear position between the client and the social worker. The presence of an experience expert at meetings with the client also has a reassuring effect. He can offer the clients support in trying to find their own responsibilities and those of others with regard to their situation. The experience expert is very good at reinforcing the client’s strengths. He often gives positive feedback.”

Still, it is often difficult to demonstrate this difference in effects, and it sometimes only becomes clear to those who have witnessed the changes and who are able to see the elements which play a crucial role. In order to see the effects, one must have an open mind. A context in which the

added value of experience experts is not recognised can make it very difficult for them to have the necessary space and time to establish a good contact with the target group.

This contact with the target group does not only constitute a key aspect of experience expertise for the organisations. It is also vital for the experience experts themselves:

“When you work with people who are poverty-stricken, you constantly feel that you are needed.”

Without this contact, it is very difficult to function as an experience expert. In that case, the experience expert’s role must focus on analysing situations, formulating hypotheses, presenting possible interventions, providing tips, suggestions, recommendations, advice, critical remarks, etc. The experience expert can also fulfill a very valuable role in this respect. But when he works at such an abstract level without any contact with the target group, chances are that the deeper meaning of the experience expert’s words will not register.

7.2.2 New Values

The emergence of experience experts on the job market means great progress in the valorisation of a number of values which are increasing in importance, but of which the meaning is not always clear in our society. It is therefore normal that they are frequently confronted with limitations of these values.

For example: when you are, like an experience expert, open to people in poverty, you notice that they come to you with all kinds of difficult problems as the typical chaotic tangle. It may take a lot of time to look for solutions together with them. But time pressure and a heavy caseload often do not allow such an investment. Apart from this, the provision of social assistance is organised in such a way that services only offer limited assistance with regard to specific subproblems, such as housing, unemployment, etc. You cannot really ask them to help you with such a chaotic tangle of problems. In other words, the way in which social assistance is currently structured is not really geared towards the needs of those who are poverty-stricken. Experience experts in the field of practice will not only provide organisations with this insight, but will also give them the opportunity to improve their approach in this respect.

“A lot of the people who contact us have financial and other problems which make it impossible for them to work. As an experience expert, I try to find solutions to those problems together with them. For example, I accompany them to the

PCSW, or I support them in their search for social housing, etc.”

Another aspect of gearing the demand and supply of social assistance to one another is the nature of the relationship of the social assistance. A qualified social worker has learnt to maintain professional distance between the client and himself. An experience expert often does the contrary, because he knows that the poor approach you in the first place as a human being and wish to be approached by you in the same way.

“An experience expert is often occupied with the most self-evident principles, which are often violated however. He is engaged in a constant battle for his clients’ basic rights. For example, a family which we assisted years ago, still often approaches me to support them in their contacts with other services. These people are frequently confronted with the fact that all kinds of services do not (want) to listen to their story. While listening to someone’s story is the least you can do!”

This example leads us to another possible meaning of experience expertise. Experience experts are very sensitive to injustice. Each time an experience expert is confronted with some kind of injustice, he feels a deep urge to do something about it, even when the unjust situation does not resort under his organisation’s authorities. According to the experience expert, not reacting to injustice means: not taking the side of the poor. The experience expert is frequently confronted with unjust situations and people who are not understood.

“I dream of joining forces one day together with colleague experience experts from other organisations. Maybe then we will succeed in signalling and dealing with large-scale forms of injustice. For example, the fact that patients can be requested to pay a deposit before they are admitted into hospital.”

Experience experts also find it very difficult when they see how the needs of people in poverty which are not met or ‘cannot be met by their own service’, as the qualified expert would express this, because they also regard these kinds of situations *as injustice and exclusion*. A qualified expert on the other hand, is usually not inclined to deal with situations for which he is not qualified in his function. Also for the organisation’s leaders it is difficult to go beyond the boundaries of their authority, while an experience expert finds it very difficult to leave things as they are, because he regards this as taking a step back and not being involved.

“When we are confronted with a request for help which does not fit into our operation we refer them to another organisation without helping them ourselves. But we are often confronted with voids in the social assistance framework and, due to waiting lists, people do not have immediate access to the assistance they need or they do not receive any help at all and are left out in the cold. I notice that this arouses a great sense of indignation in experience experts, when they are confronted with their organisation’s limitations. The latter is often of the opinion that they have to abandon the idea that they should help everyone, regardless of the nature of their clients’ problems.”

There is a clear difference in perspective. The difference between the experience expert’s approach and the approach of social assistance services again illustrates how providing services is not yet completely geared towards the way in which people in poverty experience their problem situation.

Through his function, the experience expert appeals to a number of values which are crucial to the target group. These values are not completely unknown by the organisations providing social assistance, but they are often ignored due to the different perspective they have.

7.2.3 Qualitative Contribution

In the previous paragraphs, we highlighted two aspects of the possible value of working with experience experts. It is of course self-evident that the presence and input of an experience expert is clearly valuable in many more respects, both with regard to *case work* and with regard to *questioning the qualified expert’s functioning*.

“As an experience expert I always try to put myself in the client’s position and I ask myself how the situation must make the client feel. From that perspective I try to approach the colleagues in my team.”

The experience expert can also contribute to making his colleagues become aware of things *which never occurred to them*, but which can lead to practical results.

“The experience expert clearly has his own point of view. He brings elements into the discussion which have never occurred to us before. He also succeeds in formulating new hypotheses as part of a client’s files.”

At the same time, working with an experience expert creates the opportunity to acquire *a much deeper understanding* of what the concrete function of *experience expert* can be.

Contacts in the field of practice show that experience experts usually fulfil their function in a *qualitative manner*. They adopt a seeking attitude, are open to feedback, they tend to check whether their intuition is correct and they are very good at implementing communication skills.

“Those who follow the training for experience expert develop a lot of communication skills, such as not being (mis)guided by one’s appearances, good listening, letting someone finish what he’s trying to say, using body language or summarising things to show that they are listening, etc. Also learning to have more patience is an important skill. This allows the parties to reflect for a moment and put things into perspective, so that the response is not too emotionally charged. These communication skills were taught at first, but they have become a habit throughout the training.”

The experience expert is able to raise matters in a team meeting which have touched him in his daily function. He can also adopt *a critical perspective* without being offensive.

“We notice that experience experts question us with regard to many aspects: our actions, our intentions, the rules we adopt, matters which are self-evident to us, etc. This is not always easy, but it is manageable because they do this in a respectful manner.”

Experience experts are often good at asking questions with regard to how and why the organisation makes or made certain choices and they are also good at questioning its views and approaches.

Usually, the experience expert’s input is perceived as *complementary*.

“The experience expert offers us another way of thinking and another way of looking at clients which we can add to our current approach. In fact, we mutually complement each other without fighting a battle about who is right or who is closest to the truth.”

Experience experts are able to voice *their client’s perspective* without entering into a conflict with their colleagues. This is because they can appreciate the *qualified expert’s* perspective, while they make their own contribution from their position alongside the client or while they question matters from this position.

“As an experience expert I try to make a connection between the client and the social worker. Sometimes, I notice that the social worker’s priorities differ from the client’s. In that case, I try to make sure that also the client’s priorities can be expressed.”

The field of practice indicates that experience experts mainly provide insights with regard to their clients based on their own experiences, but not on *their personal history*. Hence, the client’s story remains central, while it enables one to get a deeper insight into it.

“It is observed that the experience expert has learnt to keep in touch with his own emotions and use them in a respectful manner. This makes him very good at interpreting: if someone is trying to express his feelings, the experience expert is able to help him get things across.”

Finally, experience experts often combine their deep commitment with a calm approach in order to adopt an appropriate position towards all parties involved and to adjust their insights and methods, if needed. These qualities are also expressed in team work.

“The experience expert is good at working together with various colleagues in the organisation and it is remarkable how easily he is able to adjust to them.”

7.2.4 Significance with Regard to Qualified Experts

Working together with an experience expert can be very valuable and enriching for the qualified expert, regardless of the co-operation model. However, the chances of an in-depth exchange between both parties can vary according to the model used. Especially a tandem formula increases the chance that the qualified expert, influenced by the co-operation with an experience expert, will develop a better insight into his own functioning, will get to know his own blind spots and succeed in working towards his own process of liberation.

But regardless of the co-operation model, qualified experts indicate that working together with an experience expert contributes to *a more in-depth knowledge of the poverty issue*.

“The experience expert is able to closely relate to his client. He often sees and understands nonverbal communication in conversations, which enables him to clarify certain aspects for me afterwards. As a result, things can suddenly get a different meaning or they are put in the right perspective.”

Colleagues also indicate that experience experts help them see issues in a broader perspective. The co-operation also results in the fact that providing assistance focuses more on the *client's perception*.

“At the team meetings, I noticed that the social workers tended to discuss everything that the client had told them. I asked my colleagues whether their clients were aware of this. I also asked them whether they knew how this would make their clients feel. Due to the fact that I asked these questions, my colleagues started reflecting on this and they had to admit that they did not know how it would make them feel. It was just something that they had always done and they had never questioned it.”

Qualified experts indicate that experience experts can stimulate them to reflect on their own approach and to question matters obvious to them.

“I consider it to be my duty as an experience expert to be constantly alert, so that I can help my colleagues to see things from a different perspective and to shift their boundaries.”

The fact that experience experts work from their own history, stimulates qualified experts to realise that it may be useful to show more of themselves in their function.

Finally, the field of practice indicates that the experience expert's input can provide his colleagues with a greater sense of security with regard to signalling certain issues to policy makers.

“Contacts with clients had taught the experience expert that there were a lot of conflicts among the residents of a certain social housing complex. We raised the matter and a residents' committee was established.”

7.2.5 Significance with Regard to Clients

Organisations notice that the input of experience experts can have a positive effect on the client and on the guidance he receives. The mere fact that these organisations can now work together with someone who could have been a user of its services in other circumstances often results in *a more client-oriented approach*.

We sometimes notice that it takes a lot of effort to understand each other, because a social worker and an experience expert speak a different language and see things from a different perspective. Due to the fact that we are now aware of

this, we also understand that our clients will sometimes have difficulties understanding us as well. But they probably do not want to be impolite and therefore simply nod and give us the impression that they are with us. In this respect, we mainly think of conversations which we thought were going very well, but which did not seem to be of any use to the client. And as a result, we sometimes concluded that the client did not make an effort because he was unwilling.”

Organisations notice that experience experts work with their *own experience* which contributes to enhancing the relationship with the clients and that gives them more space as well.

“It is clear that clients feel related to the experience expert’s own experiences. Clients often feel as though none of the social workers really understand them: ‘they don’t know what it’s like, they haven’t been through it.’ Often they also have to deal with so many different social workers. Conversations between the experience expert and the client can sometimes create an opening and pave the way for social assistance.”

Clients feel *related, heard and understood* by the experience expert and often ask for his help.

“A client asked me whether I wanted to accompany him to the National Health Service. During our conversation with its employee, I asked several times: ‘How does that work exactly? I don’t really understand what you mean. Could you explain it to me again?’ I also regularly checked whether the client understood everything. Afterwards, he told me: ‘I’m really glad you joined me. At first, I didn’t understand a thing of what he was saying’.”

The experience expert often succeeds in building a strong relationship of trust with his clients. Organisations are struck by how well experience experts are able to relate to clients’ feelings of being misunderstood. Colleagues also notice how good the experience expert is at addressing the clients’ *positive strengths* and at stimulating them towards *positive action*.

“The experience expert makes us aware of the importance of approaching clients in a positive and respectful manner, of noticing the positive aspects in people instead of immediately condemning them.”

People in the field of practice are touched by the fact that the experience expert's own experience, complemented with observation, enables him to get to know new clients fairly quickly. But the experience expert also considers it his duty to voice his *clients' perspective* to the organisation and to clarify it.

“During team meetings I often remark: ‘I am paid to act as a counterbalance’. I don’t find it difficult to adopt my role of experience expert and express the client’s voice. I also try to safeguard the way in which colleagues talk about clients during team meetings.”

By voicing the clients’ views the experience expert also stimulates the organisation to adopt a *different* approach to their clients.

“The experience expert treats his clients in a very respectful manner and he accepts them. He is also good at confirming clients. This is something we should do as well, because we see it as a way to put the empowerment ideology into practice.”

When experience experts function in a tandem style of co-operation, it is noticed that they are really good at sensing when they should intervene.

7.2.6 Significance with Regard to the Organisation

An asset of experience experts which is not easily put into practice is the fact that their perspective is not only valuable to the clients and their direct colleagues, but also to the organisation as a whole and to the way in which it functions as well as to how it is structured.

Experience experts often feel as though they have to fight a double war and that they do not only have to convince their colleagues of the value of their perspective, but also the organisation’s management, while their training has not taught them how an organisation thinks and feels and how this is translated in the culture of the organisation.

Still, experience experts can perform useful work with regard to the organisation. Their role often consists in questioning obvious matters and prejudices, apart from giving tips in order to reach the target group more effectively.

For example: it often strikes the experience expert that, at an abstract level, the organisation is willing to acknowledge the involvement of the poor, but that it does not succeed in translating this view in a constructive approach, where an actual person in poverty is fighting an actual battle against the actual injustice with which he is confronted in his actual situation. At this practical level, the poor are still easily defined as rude and difficult. Experience experts can certainly contribute

to the fact that organisations gradually adopt a *different view* on the poverty issue and change their *approach*.

Another signal of the broader impact of the value of the experience expert's function is the fact that after a while external organisations, which are closely connected with their organisation, start using the experience experts' expertise. Experience experts often find it easier to work with these external organisations than to try and change things within their own organisation: they go to the external organisation, do the job they can do and leave. But in their own organisation, they are constantly confronted with things that should be worked on.

7.2.7 Significance with Regard to the Missing Link

In the field of practice, the experience expert constitutes a valuable force which can provide a specific contribution to various aspects of the functioning of the organisation and to an increase in the quality of the services provided.

This significance of experience experts can be reduced to their essential role in bridging the missing link.

"I see the experience expert as an enormous help with regard to translating the client's perspective to me. He helps me understand the client's communication. This can sometimes shed a different light on matters. The experience expert succeeds in clarifying the feelings and social patterns of people in poverty and he is able to voice their needs and interests. He provides enormous support and brings a lot of clarity and insight into situations. He does not hesitate to indicate and discuss prejudices that I have."

In order to fulfil his role, the experience expert must clarify his own social world to the qualified expert and vice versa. By means of this process of mutual acquaintance with each other's social world, both parties can enter into a dialogue with regard to the social worlds of the underprivileged and the privileged. At first, *the huge difference* between both worlds will emerge and the wide gap caused by poverty will then be emphasised.

"It is striking how we, experience experts, tend to look for someone's inner side and focus on it, while others are led by appearances."

Later in this process, both parties can develop a much more differentiated view on each other's social world. And the image of poverty will also become more differentiated. Seeing each other as the underprivileged or privileged is then regarded as a stereotype kind of approach.

They will tend to see each other in the first place as two different persons, each with his own specific life history. This paves the way for a *differentiated* approach to the missing link concept.

Working together with an experience expert in the context of the missing link requires a *specific form of communication* and an increased *sensitivity to the meaning of each person's life history* within the organisation. This will offer the organisation opportunities to gain experience and to give these specific aspects a central place within its entire functioning. Instead of holding on to the idea of a rigid division between the professional world and the personal world, some organisations develop a greater sensitivity to the fact that personal experiences play a role in the professional world and can support the quality of the professional activities instead of hindering them. From a professional motivation, the organisation and its employees can therefore invest more attention and care into the personal aspect. In this respect, experience experts create opportunities to bring a more humane attitude into the organisation.

With regard to the missing link, experience experts stimulate their organisation to adjust its view on professional conduct. The introduction of an experience expert into an organisation also often stimulates a *reflection on organisational structures and culture*. For example, a big organisation employed an experience expert to fulfil a consultancy function with regard to the organisation's different entities, which functioned as small-scale teams with their own autonomy. But after a while, they realised that the consultancy function did not really work. When they tried to look for reasons, they were confronted with the fact that the employees did not often consult each other and that there was no culture of critical reflection on their own actions.

In another example, an experience expert asked De Link for help, because he felt that he was not able to perform his function within an organisation. With every attempt he made, he felt as though he had his back against a wall. It was soon clear that his powerlessness was caused by a lot of structural problems within the organisation. But because the experience expert was so focussed on the fact that he did not succeed and because people within the organisation could or would not question their own functioning, nobody noticed the immense opportunities which were left untouched.

Experience experts can undoubtedly contribute to an increase in the quality of the services provided. At the same time, they offer the entire organisation opportunities to grow. However, it remains a challenge to grasp these opportunities with both hands. And in order to do so, a number of conditions must be met.

An important condition for the organisation is to offer the experience expert and his qualified colleagues a caring framework, so that the organisation can fully benefit from the methodology.

But the most important condition is an *open and seeking attitude* in each of the organisation's employees. Where there is openness, solutions can be found. If this condition is and remains fulfilled, the organisation will also be able to meet the other conditions, so that the employment of an experience expert may become a success. Difficulties and obstacles can of course occur along the way. But these should not necessarily be regarded as negative. Intense seeking processes can also lead to intense moments of growth for an organisation.

7.3 Pitfalls and Challenges

The methodology to train an experience expert in poverty and social exclusion is new. Still, we have already mentioned that it has already proven its value. However, since it is a new methodology people in practice are still seeking for ways to implement the function of experience expert in a realistic and concrete way with workable co-operation models and an effective organisational framework. A seeking attitude can help meet the inevitable challenges and avoid getting permanently stuck in a pitfall.

7.3.1 The Function of Experience Expert

The previous paragraphs indicate that the observed positive effects should not only be ascribed to the experience expert but also to dialogue and co-operation.

When the added value is mainly attributed to the experience expert's person and function, perverted effects may occur. People might be tempted to regard the experience expert as the only one who holds the truth, knows how it should be done and does it all by himself.

Working with an experience expert is a difficult assignment, and chances are that incorrect or too high expectations will result in people overestimating and excessively questioning his capabilities, so that he must constantly push himself to the limit and adopt a leading role in supporting his colleagues in all circumstances, etc.

People might also be tempted to take advantage of the experience expert and for example assign him the role of messenger of bad news because he should be better at that or because he can relate better to the target group.

Pushing the experience expert into a certain position that becomes a caricature of his function is not useful. Nor is it useful to push the experience expert into a position which is too close to the qualified expert's position. There is also no use in expecting the experience expert to fully and unconditionally support the organisation's social function. If this is the case, chances are that the experience expert will not have

the space to adopt his own role of experience expert. And then he will probably not be able to help the client overcome his sense of guilt and seek backgrounds, contexts and an understanding of the situation. He may also be tempted to start judging the client and forcing certain solutions upon him and thus renounce his function of experience expert.

The expectations with regard to experience experts may also be dominated by top experiences and not by everyday experiences. One should be constantly aware of this. By employing experience experts and by organising training for them prospects are offered and people's self-value is addressed. But if the experience expert is not able to live up to these unreasonably high expectations in the field of practice, how will that affect his personality? And how could that possibly contribute to the fight against poverty?

Visualising the experience expert as the driving force for change is therefore a realistic pitfall. In this respect, the tandem concept is a suitable concept to counterbalance this, since it implies a shared effort and shared responsibility. In other words, efforts are also required from the qualified expert and the entire organisation in which the tandem functions.

It would also be dangerous if the methodology of experience expert in poverty and social exclusion were to be seized to question the use of the dialogue method in the fight against poverty. Would it still be useful to listen to the poor and their organisations if there are experience experts who also know and can tell us? This may be a tempting thought, since addressing experience experts might seem easier than entering into a difficult dialogue with the poor. If this idea were to gain ground, it would question the entire dialogue method. In that case, we would risk introducing a new exclusion method in which only those are heard who are capable of following the training for experience expert.

A last pitfall is the risk of using experience experts only in cases where things are going wrong in the fight against poverty. In that case, they would be regarded as crisis managers, as a temporary methodology which is only useful until most of the obstacles have been overcome. Then the experience expert and his perspective would no longer be regarded as an indispensable permanent partner in the fight against poverty.

7.3.2 The Relationship of Co-operation

In practice, people are sometimes insufficiently aware of the fact that entering into a relationship of co-operation with an experience expert also presents a number of challenges. At first, people often do not realise that the function of experience expert is very specific and completely different from any other function, and as a result people are not really

aware of the challenges linked to it.

In this type of relationship the qualified expert may find it difficult to respond in an appropriate way to the experience expert's *enthusiasm*. According to the experience expert, the entire poverty issue can be reduced to one major element: injustice. Based on this view, an experience expert who is confronted with his client's problems and who feels that he can do something about them, often tends to take action. His main objective is to stop the injustice.

It is a challenge to get this enthusiasm in tune with the boundaries between services and organisations. It is mainly the experience expert's challenge to find a way to clarify the background of his enthusiasm and to use it as a means to signal the need for structural changes. In a good working environment, he will be supported by his colleagues. It is their challenge to take the signalling value of his enthusiasm seriously, so that together they can find its deeper meaning and find a way to put it into practice.

When parties enter into a relationship of co-operation all aspects of the approach to the poverty issue must be regarded as *the shared responsibility* of all parties involved.

In practice, people may be tempted to place part of this responsibility exclusively in the hands of the experience expert, because of his profound knowledge of the issue. For example, it may be tempting to consider the contact with the target group as an exclusive task for the experience expert.

People who are poverty-stricken easily tend to accept the experience expert as one of them. This results in a smooth and close contact between the experience expert and the target group. It is a challenge to use this as a driving force to improve the contact between the entire organisation and the target group.

In every professional setting, the experience expert must receive sufficient space to give *topics, sensitivities and signals* their rightful place with regard to the poverty issue, based on the way in which he experiences a certain situation. The experience expert must receive the opportunity to clarify their meaning and importance. This implies that he and his colleagues must receive sufficient time to enter into a dialogue about this.

People must be aware of the fact that this input is part of the experience expert's function. All parties involved must have the space to find a way to deal with this specific function in a constructive manner. This presupposes secure relationships. When this aspect of the function of experience expert is fully acknowledged, it will be easier for the latter to remain both loyal to his colleagues and to the target group.

Each set of tasks and each function, including that of experience expert, is limited. But no one is perfect and *boundaries* are some-

times crossed. This also applies to experience experts. When they have crossed certain boundaries, experience experts need sufficient space to look for reasons and to enter into a dialogue. This means that they must feel comfortable to reveal their inner side: the tendency to cross certain boundaries can be related to their past in poverty.

Offering a sufficiently secure context is not the same as avoiding confrontations with the experience expert. For example, the experience expert may be asked which feeling caused him to cross the boundaries. Such a question is a type of confrontation, but it does not create a sense of guilt or a battle in which he must defend himself or surrender.

A similar *questioning and seeking approach* makes it possible to deal with the challenges linked to the co-operation between experience experts and qualified experts in a process-oriented manner.

This *process-oriented approach* also creates opportunities to deal in a constructive way with difficulties and painful obstacles with which the experience expert is confronted. However, the latter is not the only one dealing with difficulties. Every person has his own weaknesses. But we have not yet developed a culture where these weaknesses receive their own place. It is as though we had to wait for the introduction of experience experts to become aware of this.

People often have difficulties relating to the way in which experience experts deal with the pervasive and urgent nature of the poverty issue. By approaching a problem in their typical way, experience experts often tend to deal with everything at the same time in order to solve the entire problem at once. According to their colleagues, this approach is not very practical, while the experience expert finds a fragmented approach very unsatisfactory, because it only enables him to deal with part of the poverty issue and not the whole issue at once.

7.3.3 The Organisational Framework

If people in the field of practice are insufficiently prepared to work with experience experts, chances are that high expectations will lead to failure. Apart from the cultural differences, also the workload and lack of strategy can cause difficulties in practice, while the experience expert will probably be left with the short end of the stick. It is therefore very important that experience experts receive a position where they are able to use their qualities and where their colleagues do not only concentrate on their weaknesses. In some cases, their life history has inflated these weaknesses. And therefore some experience experts may find it difficult to deal with differences of opinion, while others have difficulties in dealing with inequalities, or in thinking in an abstract way instead of focussing on details. These are concrete difficulties with which the field of practice may be confronted and which must be taken into account.

Services and organisations which are willing to apply the methodology, have to examine whether the required conditions are sufficiently met. Sometimes, unexpected obstacles may occur.

Due to the decree on quality care, social workers are for example stimulated to question themselves and justify their professional actions. They often experience this as a signal of the fact that they have not been doing things right. This will make it extra difficult for social workers to question themselves and expose themselves to their experience expert as a colleague. This methodology can also increase their feeling of not having done things right.

Organisations that wish to work with experience experts must realise that this will require a lot with regard to management and that they may need external support. They must also be aware of the fact that this will constantly require extra efforts with regard to flexibility, communication between the different parties and support of the experience expert and his colleagues.

7.3.4 A Seeking Attitude

The previous paragraphs indicate that the methodology experience expert requires an open, seeking attitude of all parties involved: the experience expert himself, his close colleagues and their organisation.

The necessity of a seeking attitude is mainly inspired by the missing link. This concept clearly indicates how large the difference is between the world of the middle class and of that of the poor. It implies that communication between both worlds is not self-evident and that the development of mutual understanding constitutes a long-term project requiring a lot of effort. A seeking attitude constitutes the main cornerstone of a better understanding and a more in-depth knowledge of poverty.

This seeking attitude must also be translated into the way the organisation functions. From the organisation's perspective, it could be regarded as a form of self-reflection towards a more efficient and humane fight against poverty. From the experience expert's perspective, the organisation's seeking attitude is contained in its own critical function based on the professional profile of experience experts. This function consists in questioning all aspects of the way the organisation functions from the perspective of the poor. However, the potential constructive value of this crucial function will disappear if it is regarded as a battle about who holds the truth rather than an expression of a collective search.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

An Innovative Methodology

The methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion is a very innovative methodology with regard to the fight against poverty. The fact that the methodology has been developed at this specific moment in time, is probably not a coincidence. The introduction of experience experts in the field of practice is clearly related to important current social movements. For example, phenomena such as active citizenship and social participation are regarded as increasingly important. Apart from this, the growing attention for tailored care and quality care have undoubtedly stimulated the implementation of the methodology of experience expert.

There are also very remarkable parallels between the ideas and strategies of the empowerment movement and the training and employment of experience experts. For example, in her book *'Ervaringsdeskundigen in Armoede'*¹ [Van Regenmortel et al. 1999, p. 7], Tine Van Regenmortel refers to Paolo Freire's work *'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'* [Freire 1972] in her search for a broader framework for the methodology of working with experience experts. Freire was a pedagogue and realised that the oppressed need knowledge, insights and skills to be able to participate in society and thus to overcome their status of being oppressed. Based on his experiences in the field of practice, he formulated that the oppressed can only acquire this knowledge, insights and skills through methodologies based on the analysis of their own world of experiences.

Freire is therefore often regarded as the founder of the empowerment movement which states that social problems, and social exclusion

¹note of the translator: 'Experience Experts in Poverty'

in particular, can only be overcome by those who are directly involved, possibly together with and supported by people who feel drawn towards a sense of solidarity with them. The empowerment philosophy states that similar problems can never be solved by others without involving them. Belgium was one of the pioneers with regard to the implementation of these principles in the policy concerning the fight against poverty.

The methodology experience expert in poverty and social exclusion offers remarkable opportunities with regard to the fight against poverty. Thanks to the methodology, a superior knowledge of the poverty issue is made available.

Social Obstacles

The social challenge consists in implementing this new knowledge at all levels, as well as implementing the methodology through which this knowledge is accessed.

This is not so obvious.

A number of human and social barriers and a lack of the necessary means can constitute possible obstacles and stumbling blocks.

Conceptual Obscurity

A first stumbling block may consist in the fact that there isn't any full unanimity yet with regard to the concept of experience expert in the field of practice. For example, some people still doubt whether full training is necessary. Their perspective is based on a view on the fight against poverty which only assigns the experience expert a very marginal role. Based on this view, it is not really necessary to invest considerable means in the training.

Blindness to Complementary Methodologies

Another stumbling block may consist in the fact that not everyone realises that the methodology of experience expert is complementary to other methodologies in the fight against poverty. From this perspective, people tend to think that the methodology of trained experience experts is not the right approach. According to this view, the poor mainly need to be heard as a group, in the capacity of organised citizens, and they should enter into a dialogue in that capacity. It is the poverty organisations' task to organise these poor citizens voluntarily and offer them a voice. Advocates of this opinion would rather define experience expertise as a form of voluntary engagement, as a kind of civil function.

Misconceptions

A third obstacle is formed by the idea that following training and adopting a professional function changes the person so fundamentally that the trained experience expert can no longer be regarded as poor and that he will even gradually lose the connection with his own poverty experience. In other words, it is believed that the experience expert's memory of his own poverty experience will slowly fade.

However, the limited experiences in the field of practice with trained experience experts contradict this view. Extreme poverty is so penetrating that the person will carry this experience with him for the rest of his life. The training simply helps him learn how to cope with the pain and helps him to see the fundamental components of the exclusion experience of poverty through the unique aspect of each story on poverty.

While for some sceptics the loss of connection with the own poverty experience constitutes a central point of criticism, other sceptics mainly emphasise the alleged loss of the status of underprivileged of those who follow training for experience experts. Experience experts would lose their status of underprivileged due to their training and their increased chances of regular employment. As a result, they would no longer be poor amongst the poor, and thus they would not be regarded by the poor as a fellow-sufferer. However, this does not correspond to reality. According to the organisations, one of the main advantages of working with experience experts is their threshold-lowering approach and their better contact with the target group, thanks to the fact that they regard the experience expert as one of them.

Regardless of whether the assumptions on which this criticism is based correspond to reality, the starting points should be questioned fundamentally.

On the one hand, it seems as though some people refuse to admit that people who have been living in poverty from their early childhood have unique competences which society so desperately needs in its fight against poverty. This raises the impression that some people cannot resign to the fact that other groups of the population can have competences which they themselves do not possess. Moreover, the occasional scepticism and resistance against training experience experts also raises the impression that some people question the right of certain parts of the population to develop their competences through training.

On the other hand, the scepticism raises the impression that the fight against injustice and exclusion is really not that serious. In light of the fact that poverty must be regarded as a fundamental injustice, nobody should be subjected to this injustice any longer. And if the training for experience experts is able to break through the circle of

social exclusion and fundamental injustice within the life of the trained experience expert, justice is finally done with regard to him, and society has merely performed its duty by investing in breaking through the exclusion dynamics which it preserves. In that case, the training leads to a situation where both parties, trained experience expert and society, are even. In other words, a situation where a long-lasting injustice is finally overcome. The fact that at the same time society also receives professionally trained experts, who can offer an added value in the fight against poverty, gets thrown in with the bargain.

The reasoning in the previous paragraph implies that the training for experience expert can also be regarded as a valuable methodology to attain a major breaking point in the students' lives, which can enable them to escape from the spiral of poverty. Research has confirmed this function of the training [Thys et al. 2004]. However, the effects with regard to personal growth do not necessarily lead to a solution for the structural aspects of the students' poverty situation or enable them to bridge the existing gaps with regard to skills.

Rigid Structures

Another obstacle is formed by the fact that structures are often not easily adjusted to new insights and needs. This problem occurred when it became clear that it was not at all self-evident for the authorities to provide the necessary means to finance the costs of the training for experience expert, which are higher than other types of training in adult education, due to the fact that the students have a very long history of poverty and social exclusion. This is hard to understand, particularly when it is placed against the background of a rather difficult and not very successful democratisation of the access to education. Apart from this, scientific research recently indisputably indicated yet again that poverty constitutes a dominant factor in the determination of an academic career [Nicaise 2001]. In this respect, one would not expect a rigid attitude of educational policy makers. On the contrary, one would expect a strong willingness to welcome new initiatives, such as the training for experience experts, since they can open up new prospects of better accessibility and thus pave the way to structural adjustments.

The Challenge

The previous fact illustrates that it does not suffice to create a framework by means of a decree concerning the fight against poverty and its decisions for implementation through which experience experts can be engaged in all sectors of the fight against poverty. Also the required financial means must be sought and reserved in order to implement this

framework in the field of practice with properly trained professional experts.

The fight against poverty remains, more than ever, a question of human, social and political goodwill, while the methodology of experience expert in poverty and social exclusion can increase the effectiveness of the efforts that have already been made.

Did the European Commission not express the ambition to eradicate poverty in the Union in the near future? In any case, the methodology described in this book offers an important tool in order to reach this goal.

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