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Being in tension: the dependent response in Social Education

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Being in tension: the dependent response in Social Education

Social Education implies a constant exposition to human experiences of vulnerability and suffering. From an ethical lens, inspired by Levinas's philosophy of alterity and, specifically, the notion of hospitality, this paper explores experiences of hospitality within educational relationalities in non-formal contexts. Methodologically, it is a hermeneutic phenomenological study of the lived experiences of eight social educators who are currently working with different vulnerable populations within non-profit institutions in the Spanish Social Sector. In a conversational format with testimonies offered by participants through semi-structured interviews, this paper explores how social educators face uncertainty and navigate different tensions regarding human relations in their work. Primarily, subjectivity as hospitality within Levinas's keyworks is approached, followed by how hospitality leads to infinite responsibility and being in tension. Finally, three key tensions are addressed, in relation to physical spaces, affection, and embodiment.

Keywords: social education, hospitality, hermeneutic phenomenology, lived experience

Introduction

Social Education¹ implies the exposure to human experiences of difficulty, and suffering: 'the practice initiates with the direct encounter with the other, who needs help' (Aasland, 2010, p. 48). Levinas's philosophy of alterity and his notion of *hospitality* are the main theoretical roots of the study, highlighting that any human relationship is an ethical encounter (Levinas, 1961/2002). While other studies focused on lived experiences of social educators regarding the establishment of the educational relationship (Arbiol, 2018; Gijón, 2019), this paper explores how it is possible to receive the Other ethically within Social Education. Looking at Social Education through an ethical lens will show up the complexity of approaching the Other and build up social relationships in different spaces and circumstances. Levinas's radical defense of relationality as the main origin of the subjectivity constitutes a powerful ethical ground to look at human relationships and

¹ Youth work, community work.

specifically, education in formal and non-formal contexts (Magendzo, 2005; Aasland, 2010; Idareta, 2011; Ortega y Hernández, 2017).

Methodologically, lived experiences of social educators are being explored through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach as ‘relationship-based approach[es] to knowing’ (McCormick, 2010, p.70). Exploring and sharing lived experience build up a way of looking at Social Education that moves away from ideas of singular ‘truths’ and straightforward narratives (Gale de Saxe, 2016). To do this, this paper first discusses subjectivity as hospitality within Levinas’s keyworks, followed by how hospitality leads to infinite responsibility and what I am calling *being in tension*. Finally, through a poetic, evocative writing style, since ‘poetry allows the expression of the most intense feelings in the most intense form’ (Van Manen 2016, 70), three key tensions identified during the interview are addressed in relation to physical spaces, affect, and embodiment.

Subjectivity as hospitality in Levinas

There is a fundamental core in Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy: the encounter of the self with the Other: ‘the order of meaning, which I judge primary, is precisely what comes to us from the interhuman relationship’ (Levinas 2001, 129). From this encounter, existence takes on meaning and direction: ‘the relationship of the self with the other, my reception of the Other is the ultimate fact in which things ensue’ (Levinas 2002, 100). This encounter constitutes the reference point from which Levinas articulates his conception of subjectivity itself.

Anything before the encounter with otherness is a gloomy existence, an eternal return to oneself. In one of his main works, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas states: ‘this book will present subjectivity, receiving the Other, as hospitality’ (2002, 52). Subjectivity is approached from the encounter with the Other that gives meaning to the existence of the self: ‘the word I means *here I am* responding to everything and everyone’ (303). It involves ‘that deposition of the sovereign self in self-consciousness, a deposition that, precisely, is responsibility towards the other’ (60).

The unexpected arrival of the Other constitutes a rupture of an egoistic existence that shakes all certainties and claims for an ethical response in form of an infinite

responsibility towards the Other. The self is challenged, accused: 'my self-position consists of being able to respond' (Levinas 2002, 228). When facing the Other, the self is suddenly involved in a commitment that 'in its ethical urgency, postpones or displaces the obligations that the questioned self owes to itself' (2001, 275). The self is exposed to the Other. The infinite and inescapable responsibility assumed by the self in the encounter with the Other defines *the human* and constitutes what we call *hospitality*:

There is no intentional experience that, here or there, made -or not- the circumscribed experience of something that came to be called, in a decisive and determinable way, hospitality. Intentionality opens from the threshold of itself, in its most general structure, as hospitality, [...]. Since hospitality is not a region of ethics [...]. It is the ethic itself, the whole and the principle of ethics. (Derrida, 1998, 71)

Levinas reiterates throughout his work the infinite nature of the self's responsibility towards the Other: 'a growth of responsibility as it is assumed [...]. The better I do my duty, the fewer rights I have' (2002, 258). In this way, there is no possibility of being satisfied. The response is never enough: 'when I say 'I do my duty' I am lying since I am never liberated in front of the other. [...] Responsibility is never absolved' (2014, 84). The existence of the self translates into always having *something else* to do:

Responsibility is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if it already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not *for itself*; It is, once again, initially for another. The proximity of the other is [...] the fact that the other is not close to me simply in space, [...] but approaches me essentially insofar as I feel - as long as I am - responsible for him. (Levinas, 2000, 57)

Levinas describes his conception of the subject arising from the encounter with the Other: 'it is about describing the very identity from responsibility' (Levinas, 2000, 60). This responsibility is related to the disarmament and questioning of the self that takes place in the encounter with the Other. The self leaves behind a selfish existence, to take ethical responsibility: 'every relationship with another is a relationship with a being towards whom I have obligations' (2014, 83).

Hospitality as passivity

The encounter with the Other is always an unexpected event: ‘this visitation *disturbs*, as in the case of an unforeseen, unexpected, feared visit’ (Derrida 1998, 86). The self cannot – nor be expected – to anticipate it. When the Other arrives, an infinite responsibility is instantly assigned to herself. The self does not decide to commit to such responsibility. Therefore, Levinas defines subjectivity as radical passivity, as ‘a passivity more passive than all passivity’ (2003, 59), referring to the *inactive attitude* of the self: ‘the answer that is responsibility resonates in this passivity [...], passivity of the accusative’ (59).

It is an assigned, external, unchosen responsibility: ‘a have-been-offered-without-reserve [...] and it is not generosity of self-giving, which would be an *act*’ (Levinas 2003, p. 133). It is not an initiative, but a *response* to the ethical claim. Levinas defines the visit of the Other as *accusatory*: ‘subjectivity is only this unlimited passivity of an *accusative*’ (2003, 180). Since an unexpected visit cannot be premeditated, the only option is an *on-site* response: ‘the responsibility towards the other cannot have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from outside my freedom’ (54).

Such responsibility is *welcomed* by the self, but it is not a *conscious* action: ‘the neighbor imposes himself on my responsibility before every commitment on my part’ (2001, 75). The fact that responsibility towards the Other is not chosen by the self but is an external accusation through which the existence of the self acquires meaning in relation to the Other, is what allows Levinas to articulate what he calls the heteronomy of ethical obedience: ‘The conversion of the for-self into for-another of responsibility could not again be played out in an autonomous for-self. [...] heteronomy of ethical obedience [...] it comes from the face’ (2014, 41). The origin of ethics is the Other.

Welcoming the other as an active passivity: *being in tension*

Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy revolves around *human relationship* using concepts such as *self*, *Other*, *alterity*, *hospitality* or *welcome* to describe its dynamics. However, Levinas does not establish a concrete model of relationality, nor describe a set of rules or a *right* path. On the contrary, Levinas focuses on *metaethics* as a *social relationship*, that is, the assumption of the encounter with the Other as the only origin of

ethics. In this way, there is a sort of *aporia*: while Levinas points out the *origin* of ethics – the Other – there is no indication on *how* we should act. Therefore, it can only *be embodied* in a specific, contingent instant (Todd 2016). The only certainty is that we need to respond: Levinasian passivity should be understood in terms of the self's response always being *an answer*.

Being the Other who gives meaning and direction to our ethics, its arrival uncertain and unpredictable, subjectivity as passivity awaits the call of the Other. We are *waiting*. We leave an opened door, an empty chair (Ruitenbergh, 2011). We cannot think 'she's not coming anymore' and close the door. Waiting in a *maybe*, from a position of *sensibility*, from uncertainty. Going forward this Levinasian radical passivity, this act of *waiting* can be considered an *active passivity*. We are not describing a *passive waiting*, a non-caring attitude about who could come. The self is *paying attention*, is awake. It is a *tensioned* waiting, watching out for what could happen and being *exposed* to the other.

It is not that passivity is merely in-active in its non-consciousness, but it indicates instead an 'exposure' to the other that lies prior to consciousness. In this sense, passivity is a kind of radical susceptibility. The subject's passivity does not mean that one ought not to act, or that one's actions in the world are unimportant; rather it means that even to consider action one is already presupposing a profound exposure to the world. (Todd 2001, 70)

Hence, there is a *standby* existence before encountering the Other where the self *leaves space* for a *signal* - that may come up or not - to respond in the exact instant it *sounds*. She is waiting for an Other that could (or not) arrive, she *is* in tension. We do not know what is going to happen, but we accept that it *might* happen, the Other *might* arrive. Existing in tension, *waiting* for the first step of the other, for his/her call. Never quiet, never calm. Always alert. Tension keeps us alive, literally. But what can we do when the Other actually arrives?

Un/conditional hospitality

Levinasian hospitality configures subjectivity and allows a meaningful existence through the encounter with the Other. Levinasian hospitality is limitless, never-ending, always uncompleted. Derrida (Dufourmantelle 2008) describes it as *unconditional*

hospitality, offered ‘before any anticipation’ not only to the stranger, but ‘to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other [...] without asking him neither for reciprocity (entry into a pact) nor even for his name’ (81).

Following Derrida, *unconditional hospitality* implies ‘the impossibility of controlling, of deciding, of setting a limit’ (Dufourmantelle 2008, 54) so it faces with an actual, practical, political hospitality, that is, *conditional* hospitality. Derrida (1998) draws a symbiotic relationship between unconditional and conditional hospitality: conditional hospitality is the human *attempt* to operationalise unconditional hospitality in life. Without unconditional hospitality, there would be no attempt at all, while without the existence of conditional (limited, partial) hospitality, unconditional hospitality would remain alien to human life.

Absolute hospitality can never be (and should never be), by definition conquered: ‘it is, indeed, practically impossible to live’. Derrida (2003) states: ‘I am aware that this concept of pure hospitality cannot have any legal or political status. No state can inscribe it in its laws’ (187). Therefore, *unconditional hospitality* is not an *ideal*, a Kantian categorical imperative²², but an *impossibility*, since our existence is criss-crossed by an intrinsic *human condition*. However, it constitutes the *sine qua non* of *lived* and *human* hospitality:

Without the thought, at least, of this pure and unconditional hospitality, of hospitality itself, we would have no concept of hospitality in general, we would not even be able to determine any norm of conditional hospitality. [...] Unconditional hospitality, which is neither juridical nor political, is nevertheless the condition of the political and the juridical. (187).

When the Other arrives, the disarmed self *must* respond, and infinite possibilities of response arise, without knowing which one is *the proper* response. Hospitality depends on the very *in situ*: the concrete Other, moment, and space. It is based on singularity: ‘there is no universal practice of hospitality’ (Ruitenbergh 2016, 56). Therefore, education ‘cannot be based on the principle of unconditional hospitality; it always remains caught in the tension between this principle and the cultural and political conditions that limit its possibility’ (Ibid, 42). Apart from those wider, abstract conditions that shape our society and daily life, other specific, smaller conditions arise from the *here* and now. The *human*

2. See, e.g. Mélich [2009] on this subject.

is the most complex and determinant condition. So, how can we deal with the human condition when facing the Other? How is it possible to *be there* when the Other is suffering? How is it possible to practice social education in an ethical relationship with the other?

Materials and methods

Approaching hospitality as a research object implies a great deal of uncertainty and complexity itself. As a human experience, it can take place anywhere, at any time. Therefore, narrowing down and conducting a *certain* research problem implies accepting partiality and specificity (Altheide & Johnson 2011). The aim of the study was to explore experiences of *hospitality* within educational relationalities in non-formal contexts. I contacted eight non-profit institutions from the Social Sector of the Region of Murcia (Spain) and informed them about the aim of the research and the requirements of participation of the social educators: five years of professional experience working within assistance or companionship programs with diverse population groups.

After a reflective process on their workplaces and considering the equal participation of men and women, eight social educators were selected by purposive selection. Regarding the different work contexts, they included, first, shelter houses specifically for adults, women, or teenagers. Second, other educators worked in an office, developing the first encounter with users. There was an intention to select social educators who were working with different groups of people, in order to get different experiences.

I contacted all participants individually by telephone, to create a first encounter and introduce myself as the researcher. The main intention was to explain the kind of interview which was going to be conducted and to answer any questions about the process. Even if it seems to be a technical and *easy* step, it was difficult since I felt I had an ethical responsibility with them and the research to be *hospitable*. I did not want to introduce myself as ‘The researcher’, but as another person who was trying to map (*the right?*) words onto a certain reality. Even if they were provided in advance with the research information sheet and informed consent, verbal consent was also asked of each social educator just before starting the interview. I also communicated to them that they

were to feel free about interrupting the interview or skipping any of the questions if they needed it.

The interviews had a semi-structured but loose format, since there was an open interview script which allowed participants to drift in different directions that came up during the conversation (Martin 2017). The interviews were focused on social educators' lived experiences regarding their encounters with different people in their professional day-to-day 'as concrete demonstrations of wisdom, sensitive insight' (Van Manen 2016, 120), since hermeneutic phenomenology 'becomes more about manifestations than about essences' (Vagle 2016, 30).

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and assessed from the audio records. The audio records played an important role in contextualizing the testimonies from the transcripts and pay attention to voice tone and detailed expressions. The extracted quotes exposed in the text have been translated from Spanish. The actual names and workplaces of the participants are not named to preserve privacy.

The analysis was conducted from a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach, which aims to 'reveal a totality of meaning in all its relations' (Gadamer 2013, 487) and allows 'the experiences of the respondents to be presented in a direct and evocative manner, encouraging the reader to enter imaginatively into the experiences described' (Wilcke 2002, 7). The analysis followed a structure inspired by Van Manen (2003) and Gadamer's hermeneutic circle (Gadamer 1977, 1999; Alsaigh & Coyne 2021).

The first step was exploring my pre-conceptions as a researcher regarding the research object. Then, I conducted a holistic analysis of all the experiences, followed by a more detailed observation of meaningful aspects and the identification of themes and connection between experiences. As a result, a prereflection/reflection exercise was developed, to 'show rather than tell' (Adams & Van Manen 2017, 788). Therefore, an open, flexible, cyclical, and emergent process, an attempt to 'listen' to the hidden structures of social educators' experiences was developed, so different tensions regarding physical and affective issues arose.

A depending on response: place, affect, embodiment.

How it is possible to welcome the other? How is it possible to be hospitable, to *embody* hospitality within Social Education? (McCormick 2011). Through listening, looking at, feeling, reading the testimonies of eight social educators who work with different populations, the utmost complexity came up during the process, reminding us that human beings are made by infinite layers and contradictions, revealing the impossibility of describing what hospitality is/could be from a normative and linear perspective, since that would lead to a closed and totalitarian discourse of a notion which is by nature contingent and emergent.

Instead, by listening to eight social educators from different institutions, hospitality came up as a phenomenon widely structured by multiple tensions which constrain them to make decisions without even knowing if they've made *the (proper) response*. However, there was a constant if implicit reference that caught my attention, and since 'interpretative inquiry...begins by being 'struck' by something... and goes on to explore what understanding this instance makes possible' (Jardine 1998, 40-41), I decided to pursue this in my analysis: every response they made was *depending on* what they felt the other *needed* here and now.

Social educators do not even know who or when a person is coming to them, in which conditions, or with which needs. They are 'dancing in the dark' (Pirrie, Fang & O'Brien 2021). Some of them carry an emergency mobile phone in their pockets during certain days of the week, *living their lives* but knowing that a call could arrive anytime. Some of them work in a building with specific opening hours and norms, such as a homeless shelter. However, they confess the door is always *open*: 'you were supposed to be able to enter [the centre] until 11pm but I have opened the door at 3am'.

The words we use matter (Caronia 2011). Talking about a *dependent response* is an attempt to linguistically express the uncertainty that configures Social Education. A feeling of *never-knowing* is perceived through the testimonies. There is an acknowledgement that their response to the other is a trial, an endeavor that can only be *approved* by the Other. Social Education is thus seen as an *unsettled practice* (Rossiter, 2011), as 'a practice of ethics defined by a conscious and deliberate commitment to working in full view of the tensions and contradictions' (p.981).

Building up a hospitable place

Social educators find themselves *in movement*, out of balance, trying to situate themselves somewhere that they do not even possess (a community centre, a hostel, etc.) to make the other feel *at home*. They are not the ‘proprietor of the place open to hospitality’ (Derrida, 2001, p.85). However, an effort to *find* a place can be perceived, an attempt to open up a space where the other does not feel imprisoned or treated as a stranger or outsider. Pablo, who works with teenagers in socioeducational projects, is shows his concerns about how to *receive* them:

‘Each case is different [...] I have even gone for a walk... ‘let’s go for a walk, just a walk’, in a garden, in a park, to have a coffee, to have a refresh in a... in a different atmosphere. I like doing that [...].’ (Pablo)

Pablo is currently working with teenagers. He already knows how asphyxiating a simple office could be for them. Four apparently innocent walls that could be felt as a cage. The conception of *receiving* someone *in a place* is completely shifted. Following Massey (1994), ‘places have single, essential, identities’ (p. 9). Now the place of hospitality is *nowhere*, an open space which is felt like a *safe place* only due that a human presence who *is actually here*, giving them an invisible space where they can show who they are.

Claudia works in a social project with adult women. The way she talks about her routine in the institution, keeping a smile on her face, is completely inspiring. She is concerned about the way *each* person who comes to the centre is received. As she was speaking, something caught my attention: she had a conception of *welcoming* as a collective action, which reshapes completely the traditional conception of an institution:

‘We can easily know the name of everyone [...] I always say I do not welcome [...] on my own [...] *we all* welcome [...]. If a colleague is walking down the corridor with a woman, I also greet her. Hospitality has to involve everyone, the whole project, all the people who come, [...] as well as the volunteers. I want people to have the whole institution as their reference, not just me.’ (Claudia)

There is a palpable ego-less intention of *sharing* hospitality, the desire to weave a net that could hold whoever is coming in. As intertwined hands, ready to help, ready to lift them up. Therefore, hospitality can be nowhere in particular, can be felt or *breathed* in the atmosphere. Confirming how the *hospitability* (Ruitenberg, 2016) of a place is

related to how this location is lived and not about the space itself. But, what about an actual house? Paula is currently working in social house with young adults who have been in care. Therefore, the day they come to the house is always the day of their 18th birthday.

‘The idea is to generate a welcoming space [...] those little details... [...] Their room is arranged, their bed is made, they have a present on the bed [...] They have a cake. And we talk to the housemates too, so that they try to be available on that day, at least to blow out the candles, right? So, they are there.’ (Paula)

It is hard not to feel a twinge in the gut after learning that these kids are moving house and life, arriving in an unfamiliar place, on the day of their birthday. Considering that, Paula talks about their *welcoming ritual* with a sweet yet broken voice:

‘First, give them some space to arrive, ask them what they need. If they need to take some time alone in the room, arrange their things and then talk... if they need us to stay with them... [...] the question is ‘what do you need, what do you need now?’’ (Paula)

Am I necessary now? Should I leave? Do you need me? Those are questions that require the acknowledgement of the fact that we are not *always* required, that maybe we are not *that* important. Paula explains how she tries to deal with that emotional space, trying not to be invasive but without seeming to be cold, distant, or aseptic. Trying to say ‘I am here’ without words, trying to make them *feel* it. She also states how important it is for her that they feel that new and strange house as:

‘A safe place, a refuge, a place of... [...] That they feel they are in a safe space, right? I don't know, I think that maybe it's more unconscious, right? And it depends a bit on how each person is, but in our team, we tend to have that attitude, like... welcome to your new home, or welcome to your new home...’ (Paula)

The capacity of transforming a house into a home – a space into a place (Massey, 1994) – is complex and extraordinary, and something intrinsically human. How four walls are perceived, no more as a cage but as a refuge where we can shelter from the rain. Even if Social Education is developed in so many different spaces, contexts, and circumstances, it is possible to *see* the huge power of human presence which can transform the way a place is *felt*.

Affectively here

Our existence is necessarily embodied, and so is Social Education (McCormick, 2010). All social educators affirmed, with different words, that it is inescapable to generate a bond: ‘social work practice is relationship-based’ (Ibid, p.69). However, being corporeal implies emotional and ethical challenges: ‘human embodiment is novel independence that is at the same time heightened vulnerability, a duality of bodily intentionality’ (Joldersma, 2012, p.442). What about *emotional exposure*? Eva, who used to work in a homeless women’s shelter, firmly states: ‘At work... I get involved... I go all out. If I have to cry, I cry’. Being able to show their *broken* self should not be taken for granted. Through uncovering their souls, they are *being* vulnerable and human, they are getting rid of the protection of neutrality, and being in *proximity* (Levinas, 1982/2000).

There are numerous questions related to that inescapable emotional bond: *to what extent should I be close to them? Am I surpassing a limit (and what is the limit)? Am I being too close or too cold?* That bond is completely full of doubt and constant reflexivity since having a relationship (any kind of) to people has lights and shadows and implies a constant *making-decision* progress depending on the current situation. I asked Pedro, who worked in the past in a homeless shelter, how was possible to react, to behave, to *be* in front of a person who is suffering:

‘Listening, many people just want to talk and... [...] also... I think that almost all my clients know about my personal life. I don't know if it's good or bad...[...] I try... you give to me, I give to you. You tell me about your life - which often... it's still your intimacy, which is the only thing we all have... we may not have money, but our personal life is ours.’ (Pedro)

It is difficult not to get struck by his words. They need to be read twice. Pedro, without even being aware of it, is showing how *violent* (Levinas, 1974/2003) a first common interview within an institution of the Social Sector could be. An interview in which a total stranger asks about the other’s full life story, about ‘the only thing we all have’, our only private treasure. Pedro, while sharing *his own* story, is resting one knee on the ground, and acknowledging that violence. And after that, he is trying to counteract that violence showing himself as naked, giving to the other his own vulnerability.

Paula shows in a few words how hospitality can also be more than something *pronounced*: ‘We have to be very aware of what our role is, to listen. We cannot... you just listen. Listening and holding. And being there. They don't need much more, that is, to be there, to be present’. Holding the other in an active, fully given exercise of *listening*

(Williams & Standish, 2016). Listening not only with the ears but with the whole body: our posture, our gaze, our energy. That is, hospitality could also be a *meaningful* silence (Sciaccia, 1957). Just because sometimes there are no words and there is only a need of a presence, an *intentional* existence of letting the other know that *we are* there.

‘I have apologised many times... because I have treated users with maybe too much confidence... and I have approached them as I would approach a friend if I were angry [...] If I have made a mistake in my intervention, and I have had to apologise... ‘I am sorry if I have spoken badly to you’ I am human and I make mistakes. It has happened to me [...] And then I’ve thought ‘you’re supposed to be the educator, Pedro’. (Pedro)

Is there any other expression which exposes vulnerability more than ‘I am sorry’? How difficult is to say these words? How difficult is it being *the* educator in a system in which mistakes are not accepted? Apologising is certainly an act of courage, an act where we disown ourselves, uncover our scars and acknowledge, in this case, a loss of control. It is an act of *humanity* that reminds us that we are *only* human beings trying to *work*, exist, live. Through apologizing, he is representing how being an educator is not the absence of mistakes but the proud acknowledgement of them, verbally and publicly.

Embodying hospitality

Returning to the human response to suffering but moving away from the linguistic world, gestures come up as a crucial factor within that emotional bond which is established through a corporeal existence inside educational relationalities: ‘the question of the sensible body (is) an eminently pedagogical one’ (Todd, 2016, p.410). Listening to Clara, who worked with youth population in a probation centre, is it easy to understand the power of our embodied experience and how it is possible so say something without pronouncing any sound.

‘I remember a boy who came to the centre, who was... he was always kicking things, he had a lot of outbursts of rage, and... I remember, he was in his room and I was upstairs, supervising the first floor. He had just punched four times, the walls, the bed, and so on... I went into the room, he was so tense, and I grabbed him, I hugged him... [...]. He was a different person from that day on. A hug, what he needed was a hug, and looking into his

eyes and saying: 'don't worry, you're not alone'. Because he was a person who had been alone all his life. Extremely lonely.' (Clara)

That was a hug which put all his pieces together. A hug which re-built a broken soul. A muted 'here I am' which picked him up off the floor and recognised him in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the *insomnia* (Levinas, 1982/2000) that characterizes loneliness. A brief but meaningful gesture that had the power to create a *before* and *after*. So simple and complex it also overwhelms. A similar episode also came up through the testimony of Claudia: 'I think at that moment there were no words, there were no words to console her... [...] So, a hug'.

Sometimes there are no words even speaking the same language, as Pablo related: 'I think that beyond language, there is also that connection without.... I don't know, with gestures, right? Without the need to use a common language. I don't know, smiles...'. However, sometimes there are no words because there is no common spoken language. In those moments, *being physically* is the only language we can speak. It can be seen very clearly through the words of Ana, who works with homeless people:

'Accompanying. I mean, sometimes, as we don't even understand each other... It's simply about companionship [...]. I think of a boy who had cancer and we had to accompany him to chemo... He was alone. I didn't understand him, and he didn't understand me either, but I went with him to the chemo, and I held his hand and caressed his leg... there I was. I couldn't do anything else, because I'm not going to take the cancer away from him and talking to him... he wouldn't understand me. But, well, I smiled at him, I held his hand, I caressed him...' (Ana)

Certain experiences, such as the one mentioned above, are indescribable. They speak for themselves and raise all sorts of questions. How many invisible ways of communication exist? How is it possible to actually *speak* without words? How powerful is a movement of the body? The power of experience surpasses the capacity for linguistic expression. However, physical contact has its own challenges, as Paula describes:

'Physical contact... I always ask beforehand. Especially because they are usually children who have been physically abused or... always psychologically abused, physical in some cases. And even situations of sexual abuse. So, I always ask beforehand: 'can I give you a hug?' or 'do you need a hug?' or 'do you want me to come closer?' (Paula)

Being in tension. Sometimes it is about physical contact, sometimes about not-touching, about *leaving space*. Facing the constant decision of *to what extent*, even having asked for permission. Always moving, trying to find a balance on a tightrope. Nevertheless, it is possible to see how to deal with the non-contact, as Claudia states: ‘there are people who don't accept physical contact and closeness... so you communicate more with words, with gestures, with... *Do you want a coffee? Do you want a glass of water?*

From the physical contact to the single word, and vice versa. Always in movement. Dealing with contingency, needs, communication, sensibility, proximity. Pushing themselves - their bodies, their souls, their emotions, their energy - to the extent that they perceived they *should*, without never being sure it is the *right* thing to do, the adequate response to the Other. Doesn't it sound exhausting?

‘Many times, when I had situations like that... at the end, I had to go out to the door to smoke a cigarette and cry, to unburden myself. I would say: ‘*I just can't go on*’. Either I cry and unload or I cannot finish the shift, and I have 15 hours left’ (Clara)

Every job implies both physical and emotional effort. Each concrete task requires more energy for one, another or both types of effort. It is undeniable that Social Education is completely immersed, developed, and *experienced* within people's lives. It is actually a human relationship made into a job. And it is undeniable that it is gruelling: ‘by getting so involved, I get tired. I mean, I am physically tired’, Paula states.

‘This job is sometimes emotionally taxing, and we are not always able - or at least I am - to perform at one hundred per cent. So yes, sometimes I have been questioned whether I was doing the best or the most I could give. Yes, that happens too, that happens. And then, of course, with cases that are particularly vulnerable... [...] *You try to do a little bit more, or stay a little longer, if your time is up... Whatever is necessary.*’ (Pablo)

Whatever is necessary. Whatever it takes. Even if they are tired, even if they do not feel like it, even if they *cannot*. Their body, their mind, their soul, their energy. Whatever it takes. They *give* everything they have, even their *intimacy*, which is the only thing we all possess. An eternal attempt to make the other feel *at home*, whatever *home* means. An infinite responsibility materialised in as many forms as moments of encounter. Being *here* to the other, constantly being in a *human* tension.

Conclusions

The upmost important feature of hermeneutic phenomenological research is the power to *touch* the reader (Jordán, 2008) through the immersion in the other's experience. Along the testimonies of the social educators, the impossibility of *being sure* can be perceived. Their only *pre-disposition* is an active passivity which consists of a humble attempt to provide a *hospitable* welcoming. In this way, it is observed how hospitality is not anything *concrete* that can be learned or taught: 'hospitality is not 'intrinsically' anything' (Ruitenbergh, 2016, p.51). Hospitality is something to *live through*. It is not about *giving hospitality*, it is about embodying it, inhabiting it. Being hospitable as a *response-ability*, that is, an attempt of the self to respond in that specific moment in which she arrives.

Conditional hospitality is actually the *human* way of being hospitable, that is, being hospitable under the *human* condition: a certain *here* and *now*. Social educators are human beings trying to give their best in a certain cultural, political context, in a specific moment and under certain conditions, moving within *ambivalence* (Månsson & Langmann, 2011). Even if Derrida (1997/1998) refers in his work to a political and cultural background in terms of those *conditions* of hospitality, here we can see the more specific, the smaller but significant tensions and circumstances that compose Social Education and limit human intentions: 'even if hospitality is offered without conditions, the context [...] still conditions hospitality' (Ruitenbergh, 2016, p.53).

In this way, the main expression of *being in tension* is actually trying to represent, to put words to a way of existing based on eternal uncertainty. The (necessary) acknowledgement of our ignorance about what is going to happen, *who* is going to come. The only truth is that the Other will come or not, and when she does we will have to give a response. Therefore, hospitality in Social Education arises as an attempt to be *here and now* for people that are *asking for* liveable lives in an hostile world.

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