

Imagination through ordinary crisis

The protection of the Nantez' "spending spree"

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Introduction

The Nantez story told here lacks insanity, lacks imagination. The same events have repeated themselves over the last ten years : unprompted moving, attempted divorce, ongoing compulsive spending and never ending misunderstandings with doctors and social workers. However, this story has clung to me when I wanted to make a contribution on "Imagination in the mental health care system", as if imagination could make sense of these crises struggling to find meaning. Even if the same events have repeated themselves over the last ten years, an acute observation of the interconnectedness between the personal, interpersonal and social level, reveals that these crises can take on different meanings. From an imaginative angle, it is the agency of health care users and practitioners that we will explore here, agency being defined as the way people can be involved in an action that concerns them (Jouan, 2008). In this story, agency is being more specifically played out in the way protagonists manage their money and their spending.

With this story, we can attempt to question new healthcare practices in the community and more precisely those of the professionalized guardians. The institutionalised system of guardianship in France, now called "guardianship services for the protection of adults", has participated in the last 30 years in setting up a new configuration of mental healthcare practices in the community (Eyraud, 2010). It is rather common to petition a court to appoint a legal guardian for persons having serious mental health disorders. Psychiatric services, social services or members of the family may file these requests. In any case, a guardianship entails a psychiatric evaluation. Once a court rules that a person is not capable to take decision in his own interest, guardian is appointed for that person. The legal guardian has the legal authority (and the corresponding duty) to care for the personal and property interests of another person. They represent or assist vulnerable people in many aspects of their life. To do so, they have at their disposal several constraining judicial tools that mainly focus on the protection of the person's spending.

The professionalized guardianship sets light on the question of money, issue of great importance when thinking about mental disorders. It is generally a dimension that is little explored by mental health sociologists and anthropologists even though Floersch states for example: « It can be said that money is the measure of successful deinstitutionalization. » (Floersch, 2003, p.125).

Three reasons push us to further explore the role of money :

Money raises the question of the means that people have at their disposal to provide for their needs and question the forms of social solidarity. Many people suffering from psychological disorders don't have access to the work force and cannot provide for their needs. Today, several countries have set up specific social benefits. By looking at the resources that we allocate, we touch upon the sensitive issue the role that is socially given to people with mental disorders (Estroff, 1997).

Money, a means that can be used for different ends (Simmel, 1987) shows the capacity of oneself to govern his or her own life and to have an autonomous life. Taking a look at household budget management reveals a person's most intimate part of life (Cottureau, 2010). Negotiations in regards to spending between the person being legally incapable and their guardian thus raises the crucial issue of personal autonomy.

Lastly, certain psychiatrists or jurists deem that the estate and household budget management has a therapeutic vocation (Carbonnier, 2002). This dimension hasn't been explored in any elaborate clinical research, the issue of money being a relatively marginal theme of psychiatrists' interests. However, the link between the qualification of excessive spending and of mental disorders are frequent. The French term "folle dépense" (crazy spending) refers to unreasonable spending. In the law, lavish expenses are traditionally treated with the same legal measures as for crazy people, these measures being entirely intertwined without ever completely blending themselves.

Spending spree and their prevention thus constitute a particularly pertinent research matter to grasp the reconfiguration of mental healthcare practices and the relationship

between mental health and social problems, and more generally the way in which we nourish the autonomy of people with socio and psychological problems.

This paper focuses on the crisis provoked by these spending spree and on the role taken on by guardianship in mental healthcare practices. The hypothesis developed in this paper is that “spending spree” is indicative of their instigators’ agency and of the limits faced by practitioners involved in guardianship. It enlightens us more generally on the role of money management in mental healthcare public policies.

This story of “spending spree” and of their protection has been elaborated on the basis of an ethno-biographic approach developed in my thesis (Eyraud, 2010). It compiles information that has been gathered from the Nantez couple court records, from observations made by their guardians and from ethnographic interview conducted with them.

The story

We do not know much about the life of Mr and Mrs Nantez before their wedding more than 15 years ago. Few biographic information have been written down in the medical or judicial case files. Mr and Mrs Nantez keep very quiet about their past. We only know that neither of them come from rich families and that they have no diplomas. Mrs Nantez receives the Incapacity social benefit and Mr Nantez is unemployed.

Less than two years after their wedding, they are faced with major financial difficulties, they have more than 15000 euros in debt. The social services are worried about their ability to raise their two children. Receiving social benefits, the children are placed under the supervision of a social worker. The situation does not improve; the custody of their children is withdrawn. The social worker and Mrs Nantez decide to request a guardianship protection measure for Mr Nantez. Mr Nantez’s psychiatric practitioner proceeds to an evaluation and recommends a guardianship because of “psychosis” that affects the patient. The court appoints a public guardian. The situation still does not improve and Mr Nantez’s guardian requests a protection measure for Mrs Nantez : guardian esteems that she can not manage Mr Nantez’s

budget while Mrs Nantez continues to take care of the family budget. The expert doctor approves this request. His evaluation is that his patient is “emotionally fragile” and “immature”. It states that “she maintains a fairly pathological relationship with her husband she describes as violent, manipulative, and frightening”. The specialist recommends that the same guardian be appointed to Mr and Mrs Nantez, request that the judge grants. A Professional guardianship is appointed to protect the estate and person of Mr and Mrs Nantez, however the guardian is faced with many difficulties in accomplishing this task. Mrs Nantez files for a divorce. The mother of Mrs Nantez complains that her daughter that stolen her personal checks. Also, the guardian has to deal with the unauthorised purchase of a 3000 euros encyclopaedia. Unable to establish a cooperating relationship with the Nantez family, the guardian asks to be relieved of his duties. This request to be relieved of her duties echoes similar requests made by other professionals working with the Nantez’ family.

The judge appoints a new guardian. This latter is quickly propelled into the Nantez’ intimate life. Only a few weeks after into his guardianship, he is led to announce to Mr Nantez the death of his third newly born child. As their guardian, he takes care of all the arrangements for the funeral. He also tries to deal with the aforementioned difficulties by using a different approach than his predecessor. While his predecessor wanted the family to give back the encyclopedia, the new guardian is more favourable to the idea that the company should come and take it back themselves. He writes a letter explaining the situation and has it signed by Mrs Nantez: the salesman never comes back to pick up the encyclopedia. According to Mrs Nantez who justifies the purchase of the encyclopedia on the account of her children’s education, her guardian’s support completely justifies the trust that she tells he has earned.

This trust does not prevent the Nantez from purchasing some more without the permission of their guardian. Soon enough, a new problem comes up. Mr Nantez’s father complains that his son has stolen his entire earnings on his credit card that Mr Nantez’s father had lent him while being hospitalised. The entirely family goes to the guardian’s office. The situation is difficult. Both men are angry but the father, who comes from Spain, speaks very little French. The family collusion is breaking down. The guardian feels helpless. His sole intervention lies in his request that Mr Nantez put his baby down, the one he is holding in his arms while gesticulating and

screaming, on his wife's knees. The guardian has very little grip on the situation. There needs to be a reparation, at least symbolic, even though Mr Nantez is not legally obliged to give the money back to his father that has willingly lent him his credit card. In the end, the guardian will take decision on M. Nantez's behalf to reimburse his father and make sure that his decision is acknowledged by a third party. The Nantez spending is re-established in the symbolic order. A few months later, the grandfather dies.

The guardian is struck by the Nantez spending and by the Nantez' family violence that he has witnessed. The Nantez seem to have a different point of view. Mrs Nantez, as usual, justifies her spending due to her children's education. She also considers that Mr Nantez's father didn't tell the whole truth. According to Mrs Nantez, the father had agreed that Mr Nantez could use the credit card without the guardian's authorisation. Mr Nantez keeps to himself but indicates that the sense of those spending in his eyes. As I visit the apartment, he proudly shows me their high definition television in their living room. A few seconds later, it is again with much pride that he shows me the computers in the children's inhabited bedroom.

The guardian would like to decipher the wife and husband's respective responsibility in the dilapidation of the father's credit card savings. He also knows that it will be an impossible quest and that he would probably have to take someone's side that it would probably be Mr Nantez's side. Because Mr Nantez' kinship with his father should be preserved and nourished and also because he suspects Mrs Nantez of being manipulative, he would probably take Mr Nantez's side. That's when Mrs Nantez offers him an opportunity to deal with this dilemma. She asks him to file for a divorce again. The guardian sees in this request the opportunity to be dismissed and relieved from his duties of guardianship for Mrs Nantez. The judge will effectively appoint a new organisation to oversee the guardianship of Mrs Nantez. This separation is supposed to facilitate a better understanding of the distinctive and respective interests of Mr and Mrs Nantez. However, the guardians have a hard time clearly deciphering these interests, all the more that Mrs Nantez continues to see Mr Nantez's guardian with him and that the couple has made new spendings together.

A few years later, a new guardian is appointed to Mr Nantez. The new guardian discovers that they have subscribed to cable TV and mobile phone services by opening a bank account under their children's name. The young guardian is very upset to discover this act. She summons them to come to her office. Before the appointment, she is very furious. Her righteous anger is due to the fact that Mr Nantez has used his children's bank account not only to subscribe but also to pay off some bills. She is completely scandalized by Mr Nantez's capacity to use his children to this extent. But she realises that she is completely powerless both technically and legally. Mr Nantez has all the rights to open a bank account under his children's name. The guardian is destabilised and doesn't know what to do. She is very nervous about the upcoming meeting. When the meeting starts, you can sense the tension in the office; the guardian isn't sure she can keep calm and professional when all she feels is disgust. She tries. She takes some bills out, points them to him and asks Mr Nantez to explain, she wants him to say what he did aloud. Mr Nantez frowns, his wife is embarrassed. Finally, he confesses. "I'm not able to read". The guardian is startled. "How do you sign your subscriptions?". This is when the wife, until now left aside, starts to participate in the discussion. She's the one that takes care of all her husband's paperwork. Does that make her responsible for all their mistakes? Mrs Nantez intuitively figures out the explosive nature of her intervention and then starts to complain about everything, the antidepressants, her request for divorce, her stigmatisation, her husband's violence, her suicide's attempt. "I can't take this anymore, I need to calm down or whatever, but (turning towards her husband), it's not him...".

The guardian listens. She suggests to start on a new basis and explains how Mr Nantez will proceed thereafter for his own spending. Mrs Nantez approves and tells her husband "you see, it's good, you were stressed out, but now it's all better...". Before leaving, she tries to ask for a little extra money "to buy flowers for my son's grave". The bank account is empty. The guardian hesitates and tells Mrs Nantez to make her request a little later. She explains that it will be easier to take care of the flowers when all the expenses for Mr Nantez's father burial will have been taken cared of.

Comments

The Nantez story shows paradigmatically the blur between social issues and psychological disorders (Furtos et Laval, 2005), and how treatment and care are redistributed in the community during the post-asylum era. These “ spending spree” seem to be a liminal object, which psychiatric aspect is debatable, and yet, the capacity to manage a household budget is often the first obstacle to be faced by anyone suffering from serious psychiatric disorders generally living with a scarce budget. The spending spree of the Nantez reveal the power and the powerlessness of the actors involved in this situation, in other words, their agency. From this story, four comments can be brought forth.

1.The repeated spending spree and the social crises it provokes express the Nantez’ powerlessness over their own life as well as the practitioner’s helplessness to cope with the situation

The Nantez family doesn’t have the means to set forth most of their aspirations. They want to work but they do not. They want to raise their children but their children are placed in foster care. They would like to buy cultural goods but they can’t afford them. They can’t manage their household budget nor anticipate the consequences of their actions. Their powerlessness is reinforced by a series of social and legal protective measures, which limit their range of action.

As far as the social workers are concerned, they find themselves desperately helpless in changing things. They fail to prevent the recurrence of these lavish spending expenditures or even to stabilise the situation with an educational approach or even with constraining measures. This helplessness tends to burn out the professionals involved who end up withdrawing from the situation.

2.Spending spree is inseparably a socially deviant act, psychologically pathological but it also has its own justification and meaning.

In certain circumstances, the Nantez’ spending spree can be related to their psychiatric pathology (psychosis, immaturity, easily influenced people, depression). In other cases, lavish spending can be related to their social situation (poverty, unemployment). And in other cases, they can be related to the educational sphere (learning hardships, handicap). It can also be articulated with a set of moral judgments

formulated by one spouse to the other (manipulative, contemptible, lack of respect for values). In regards to all of these judgments of “deviance” (Moreau, 2008), the Nantez actions seem particularly unreasonable and not in their own interests.

However, these actions are not devoid of reason. They aspire to feel socially integrated in social codes that value consumerism. Their tricks to spend without the guardian’s authorisation are constitutive of tactics (De Certeau, 1980) allowing them a certain agency and to act upon it. The use of their kin’s money is a way to create kinship ties, as can show the stirring collusion between the spouses and between generation (the grandfather who recommends to use his bank account to avoid the guardian’s control over the Nantez’ resources). In their very reiteration, lavish spending denote the aspiration to act “as anyone else” and to govern their own lives, as if they were putting to the test their own capacity to act. It is an opportunity seized to experience and feel their grasp over their own life, to empower themselves over a social reality that they usually have no grasp over. It is a tentative to emancipate themselves from a stigmatised social situation considering their distance from the job market and the custody of their children.

3. In spite of their relative helplessness, the guardians succeed in securing some assets, they are capable of bringing some appeasement and breathing space.

The guardians surely can’t prevent the Nantez from their ongoing lavish spending or from their chaotic relationship. They can, however, be there when anger or grief needs to be expressed. This presence comes with practical money troubles to deal with: the dilapidation of the grand father’s earnings, non-authorised subscriptions, requests for extras. These practical pretexts renders the guardian available for the expression of anger or grief. The management of money issues help share the burden of grief and suffering. The help provided doesn’t limit itself in the office space. It translates itself also by a shared responsibility of lavish spending. Of course, the sharing leads in part the guardian to prevent the lavish spending taken on by vulnerable people. However, it also backs up the social meaning of these actions by participating to them. They share with them, and in part for them, the consequences of their acts, even to change things, to erase or to repair. A psychoanalytic reading would

lead us to note the passage from the imaginary to the symbolic made possible by the implication of the guardian in the lavish spending (Lacan, 1966).

Instead of waiting for results with time, the “success” of healthcare perhaps needs to be assessed in the achievement of those breathing spaces (Pols, 2004; Ravon, 2008).

4. More broadly, what these crises reveal is not only the personal helplessness of users and practitioners involved in these situations, but the paradox of a society that values personal autonomy making unhindered consumption its keystone and at the same time develops control measures for those to whom society doesn't give the means for this autonomy. Despite the social benefits that are supposed to give the Nantez some “autonomy”, they don't have the social means allowing them to act like “anyone else”. These spending spree reveal the powerlessness of those whom, in a society where social existence is realised through consumption, don't have the means to participate to lavish norms (Gotman, 1995). The Nantez's spending spree turns them into tricksters (Van Dongen, 2002) of a consumer society. They consume while mocking the rules of consumption, and are object of fascination and disgrace in the community. In doing so, they question the sense of the values that this community promotes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this contribution has focused on the ways that a certain imagination is at work present in these mental health crises that repeat themselves over and over again and that give such a great impression of chronicity for the practitioners involved. By taking the example of the crises of spending spree and of their protection, we have examined the place of money in mental health care. We have thus shown, that spending spree can be interpreted as an attempt to act upon reality. For inseparably social and psychological reasons, it is an imaginary and disjointed attempt, however the meaning of this attempt can be socially elaborated. This intertwining of which professionalized guardianship constitutes an excellent example, forces us to invent health care practices that question the traditional boundaries between health care and social work. More generally, this intertwining questions the psychological consequences of the promotion of personal autonomy based mainly on economic freedom.

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