

## Biographical Approach and the Effectiveness of Help to Young People in the Resocialization Process

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### Abstract

*The article stresses the importance of biographical research in dealing with young people facing difficult circumstances of socialization, who are in residential care institutions. The author particularly foregrounds the fact that the effectiveness of help planning depends on the adolescent's internal motivation and the significance of choosing concrete life changing goals in order to achieve a successful re-socialization. The article advocates the need for a pedagogical method founded on a biographical approach, on empowerment and on the participatory role of the adolescent using a collaborative method. This new approach, based on a good comprehension of an individual's biography, the experiences of his/her social reality, signifies a departure from standardized and ready-made forms of help and represents a move towards participation-oriented help in residential care institutions.*

**Keywords:** Biography, Motivation, Residential Care

### 1. Introduction

Changes in modern society are reflected in people no longer being bound to traditionally-defined forms of life. Shaping one's life is becoming more open, depending on the individual, who becomes the director of his own life's course (Beck 1986). The question of biography as the formation of an individual's life is today becoming very central. Fulfilling pre-existing social and life patterns is no longer at the forefront; its place has been taken by the shaping of one's own life, where the individual seeks the purpose and goals of his own life, while constantly striving for a balance between conformity on the one hand, and personal self-assertion on the other (Bitzan, Bolay, Thiersch 2006). New demands made on the economic, consumerist and social life of an individual require the development of new coping patterns; the individual is no longer able to construct his biography on the basis of pre-existing traditional institutionalized patterns. In the post-modern age, biography is becoming a conglomerate of different types of experiences of different life situations; these the individual constantly re-interprets according to his or her situation in life. In constructing these interpretations, the individual uses his/her imagination, dramatization, as well as other defence mechanisms of suppression and rationalization. In terms of research concerning juvenile educational institutions, biographical research remains largely unexplored in our specific scientific area. The following presentation will attempt to present the theoretical and foundations which warrant the need for such research in the field of the re-socialization of children and adolescents facing social integration difficulties. Social pedagogy as a profession deals with young people in difficult material, social and psychological situations. Understanding an adolescent and offering assistance requires an "internal perspective" (Ibid.) of the subject – his views, resources, problems of coping with and the subjective processes of internalizing assistance. Our starting point is the thesis that the biographical reconstruction of social reality serves as the basis for understanding and planning the process of assistance; it represents the foundation of effective aid. The telling of life stories provides an insight into how a certain "case" came into being; this involves deepening our understanding of the adolescent's situation as well as gaining an insight into the story itself.

In this way, we can come to understand individual meanings, manners of feeling and the process of sensemaking. The stories always include the social and institutional contexts in which the life story took place, thus they provide insight into the socially-conditioned dimensions of one's situation in life, including ethical and gender identity (Schefold 2004). In this way, biography represents a leading concept for the scientific reconstruction and thematization concerning the factual formation of the adolescent's life within the framework of the life course (Ibid.).

The process of assistance should be based on “communication about biography” (Ibid.), beginning with the resources rather than the deficits of the individual, while at the same time making it possible for the adolescents to become aware of their own needs and motives as this is the only way to achieve successful re-socialization through participatory assistance planning.

Social as well as expert groundwork supports biographically-oriented research in the field of social pedagogy. Researching the users, their views and experiences, brings the question of the biographical competence and the subjective reshaping of the expert assistance on offer to the forefront. Many research results (Bitzan 2006; Schwabe 2008) confirm the thesis that for adolescents, professional assistance becomes genuine socialization and educational assistance only when it enables the adolescents to have different experiences than they have had thus far, when it supports them in expressing their own needs, establishes new and different patterns of facing situations in life and supports them on their way to achieving a desired “normal biography”. Telling and explaining one's own story to others has an added significance for marginalized groups: it enables them to leave behind the “culture of shame” (Freire 1973), in which they were faced with many negative experiences of discrimination, social exclusion and violence. The significance of narration lies not only in the course of life, but also in the social construction of reality, where on the basis of narrating past events, the individual also establishes and seeks future ways of living (Keupp 2006). Biography always also means looking to the future. In this way, the narrator becomes the producer as well as the product of the story, which changes together with the altered perspective of looking at the past (Herriger 2002). Understood in this way, biography becomes more than just a diagnostic instrument; it enables the narrator to re-construct the continuity and discontinuity of his life's path and in looking back, experiences his own self-worth, coherence and the sense of his own strength (Ibidem.).

## ***2. The Significance of Life Stories***

In the reconstructions of life stories provided by the adolescents in juvenile educational institutions, violence, neglect and separation often have a central role in the biography – and it is precisely the reconstruction of these experiences that enables them to process and normalize them. They can envision their future life paths and wish first and foremost for a “normal biography”: education, employment and family. Straining life situations that young people in juvenile educational institutions are faced with often lead to feelings of powerlessness, lack of prospects and limited possibilities for participation; therefore, one of the central goals of assistance is to empower the adolescent, and this is closely connected with participation. Despite many experiences of vulnerability in the biography of an individual, these are not emphasized in the pedagogical assistance programme. The focus is mainly on coping strategies, learning processes and those experiences which offer new prospects for better opportunities in life (Herriger 2002). Of course this does not mean that the real difficulties are being ignored. Violence is real. The experience of social exclusion is real. However, it is important that the self-image of the adolescent is not being built upon his problems and deficits, but rather on the categories of his capabilities.

Both participation and empowerment call for a professional attitude, which should be reflected anew during every intervention; it means giving every individual time, taking him, his biography and his problems seriously, and knowing how to sense even what the individual is unable to express. In order for experts to utilize the host of existing and potential resources, the relationship between the expert and the user must be based on equality and participation. The necessity of having faith in people's capabilities (even though they can have substantial problems and deficits in certain areas) and the development of capabilities through cooperation, denote the essential underlying attitude and the altered perception of social problems that a professional expert must develop within himself if he wants to encourage and develop the processes of empowerment in different fields (Stark 1996).

Throughout their lives, adolescents in juvenile educational institutions have been faced with many experiences of social exclusion and social vulnerability, which is why they often do not have at their disposal social and cultural capital that would enable them to achieve a higher level of social inclusion. If we want these adolescents to be able to realize their legal rights, then we must establish a type of social climate in juvenile educational institutions, where an adolescent will feel like an equal partner, responsible for the fulfilment of his interests. This type of research signifies a move away from forms of assistance aimed predominantly at narrow definitions of deficit, clichéd and standardized assistance, and towards a more flexible and individualized form of aid. The socio-ethical goal of these forms of assistance is to re-establish the autonomy of the users' way of life. Biographical research broadens the horizons and encourages self-reflection both in the experts and the users.

### 3. Help Effectiveness

Assistance effectiveness depends on numerous factors. In his mathematical formula, Horejsy (1976) attempted to set down the complex conditions which influence the effectiveness of the assistance.

$$F = \frac{(MXCXO)S}{P}$$

F stands for the desired change and depends on motivation (M), capacity (C) – meaning skills and abilities –, opportunities for change (O), and on social services (S). P stands for the problematic situation the individual seeks to change. The formula can be read in more ways than one. The more problematic the situation is, the more substantial the level of protection and support offered the individual must be. The motivation of the individual is one of the important factors when it comes to realizing changes, but it often gets overlooked in the planning process. How can we even motivate an adolescent for change? Should we first and foremost establish the conditions for self-motivation? Motivation depends on the subjective goals and prospects on the one hand, and on the subjective conviction that one's own action will lead to the achievement of these goals (Schwarzer & Jerusalem 2002). If the individual has had a lot of negative experiences in trying to cope with difficulties, the acquired feelings of powerlessness reappear and become generalized – they transfer onto other areas of the individual's life and also affect their future. Consequently, the person's motivation and trust of one's own abilities and resources for facing problems, become more and more reduced, which in its final stages leads to social withdrawal, depression and hopelessness (Herriger 2002).

The participation of adolescents in planning the course of assistance and the course of their daily lives, is the fundamental factor of re-socialization. It is based on empowerment, the improvement of self-image and the gaining of self-confidence, all necessary conditions for brining about change. In this way, participation encourages intrinsic motivation in the adolescent and the ability to cope with life's difficulties. Cognitive psychologists define motivation in terms of two elements: on the one hand, the need and desire for change, on the other, the evaluation of the goal's attainability. Motivation is based on past experience: the feelings of powerlessness and the lack of prospects demotivate the adolescent from achieving the desired changes and offset internal motivation. We can speak of a “motivational career”, in which the subjective feelings of monitoring successfulness and self-efficiency are reflected (Stauber 2007). Although the feelings of the motivational career are subjective, they are based on objective and structural features, so that motivation always reflects structurally-conditioned social inequalities – access to types of experience that would foster internal motivation and strengthen the feelings of self-efficiency in the adolescent (Walther 2007).

In cognitive motivation theories, the course of a motivational cycle is presented by the well-known Rubicon model (Heckhausen 1989), in which the decision phase is followed by determining a goal, and then by execution.

Need	Motive	Intention	Pre-handling	Handling
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We are aware that this model is accurate when it comes to less difficult decisions; meanwhile, in the education process itself, we time and again come across agreements being made with the adolescents that have not come to fruition. Here we are faced with the question of what the adolescent *really* wants and does not want. Grawe (1998), a renowned psychotherapist, pointed out that the majority of psychical processes takes place unconsciously.

Needs and motives are produced in the brain's lymphatic system and are stored there as experiences. These emotionally-conditioned experiences, unconscious needs and dispositions then confront conscious motives and conflicts. Damasio (2001) has proven that emotions connected with physical reactions and sensitization to the perception of the body is utilized for the perception of unconscious motives and needs.

This happens by way of somatic markers, which inform us whether our decisions are in accordance with our unconscious motives or not; whether we will achieve our goals or not also depends on them. Whether we cross the Rubicon does not depend only on a conscious decision, but also on the physical sensations of certainty and favourableness (Storch 2007). These new findings are also important for working with adolescents with problems.

From the point of view of social pedagogy, it is necessary that the assistance process is founded on and informed by the needs and interests of the adolescents. This takes place through games, creative design, photography, physical activity, all of which serve to increase awareness of needs and experiences (Heiner 2004). Similarly, participation is based on the adolescent's capability to cooperate in shaping his everyday life, with his wishes, needs and motives serving as input for the way of life at the institution. This is the only way that the adolescent can gain the experience of being in control of his own decisions, of being able to creatively influence both his own development, as well as external factors.

In her work, Maja Heiner (2004) stresses that in order for them to be attained, the goals set out for the adolescent in the process of providing aid should be set in a concrete, specific, attractive, measurable, realistic and temporally defined manner. All too often the desired changes are defined too abstractly (e.g. "increased level of independence"), or the definition is negative, where the goal is something the individual should not do (e.g. "stop using drugs"). On the basis of these findings concerning motivation, it is essential that we bring the unconscious needs and wishes of the individual to the surface in the initial phase of providing help. This can be done using different techniques, such as exploring the imagination and visualization. In this phase, setting out activities would be too sudden and could conceal the individual's actual needs, desires and interests. Only when we are certain that we have uncovered the real needs of the adolescent (taking into account the body language), can we – together with the adolescent – ascertain concrete, attractive, real and temporally defined goals.

The standards set up for determining goals in German areas are the so-called SMART-Goals. The SMART concept means that once we have ascertained the needs and motives, the next phase calls for the concretization of goals according to the following standards:

S – specific – are the goals sufficiently concrete and unambiguously formulated, so that the tasks set out are clear?

M – measurable – have we established the criteria according to which we can determine if and which goals have been achieved?

A – attractive – are the goals positively defined, attractive and stimulating for the individual so that they will have a motivating effect?

R – realistic – are the goals attainable?

T – temporally defined – is the time period within which the goals are to be achieved established? (Heiner 2004)

#### **4. Conclusion**

It can be concluded that the adolescents should prepare an individual programme, together with their care worker and parents; in every case, it has to be focused on completing their education and abolishing problematic behavioural patterns. In spite of this, we can also say that the goals are often set too generally and are removed too far into the future. There is a lack of a participative planning system of assistance in juvenile residential institutions, where such remote goals would be split into a number of concrete goals and their achievement would be systematically monitored. The conclusion concerning motivation is highly significant for the planning process of offering assistance to young people in problematic situations. On the basis of a biographical approach in assistance planning, where the starting point is the adolescent's own understanding and experience of life, it becomes necessary for the forms of aid to be more flexible and focus on the individual's specific resources, needs and motives.

A real comprehension of an individual's biography, his experiences and explanations of social reality, signifies a departure from standardized and ready-made forms of assistance and a move towards participation-oriented assistance, based on dialogue and agreement.

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