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Institutional Work in Total Institutions and the Perspective of the Persons that Have Lived in Residential Treatment Institutions

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Abstract

Institutional work includes all kinds of psychosocial assistance that offers, to people that need them, living environments and immediate environments adapted to their age, problems, disorders, and state. The diversity and dilemmas of institutional work represent the central theoretical discourse that the authors are researching in the explanations of the total institution, the exact answers regarding the help the youth that involuntarily find themselves in such institutions receive. The continued development of the discourse logically proceeds into *deinstitutionalisation*. Semi-structured interviews of adults that have spent their youth in such institutions represent the empirical part of the research. Extreme psychosocial pressures make the youth deviate away from goal orientation and the purpose of the institutions' operations. So, additionally, the authors have gathered a collection of good and bad experiences to bring attention to the many imperfections that should not be self-evident. The key problems that people that have stayed in such institutions a decade ago would like to give light to are the non-existence of logic and specific learning and practical competences that would benefit them in the life outside of the institution. They also stressed the lack of using the quality relations that had been established in the institution as support in post-treatment.

Keywords: institutional work, total institutions, residential, treatment, institutions

Introduction

Institutional work

In institutional education the educational conditions and interpersonal relationships of children are largely influenced by the characteristics of organisation: the division of labour, the highly formalised application of rules, and a complex hierarchy (Wolf, 1995).

The separation of household chores, therapeutic functions, pedagogical functions, and additional divisions of labour within those areas, is organised division of labour in institutional education. For example, people that are suitably qualified for household chores such as cleaning, doing laundry, cooking, shopping, maintenance, managing inventory, and gardening, are responsible for them.

This is also used by institutions that seem to allow completely normal living conditions - by the standards of institutional education. In this case, the participants are not necessarily aware of the scale of the division of labour. The division only becomes apparent when a new worker or participant enters the group. This is shown by Gnder (1995) in his example of a new participant who solves everyday problems as he would in real life: while grocery shopping, he buys a light bulb for the light in the common room, although the light bulbs are exclusively bought by the caretaker and are paid for from the collective budget.

What is institutional work? Weezel and Waaldijk (2002) suggest that it is a kind of psychosocial assistance, where living environments and immediate environments are adapted to the person's age, problems, disorders, and state are offered to those that need them. Institutional work is about:

- the cohabitation of a specific number of people that have not chosen each other as participants
- organised, more or less artificial immediate environment
- absence from home, whatever that constitutes for each individual
- slight or significant distancing from the local community
- the all-encompassing duality of the employees and the participants
- the dependency of the participants or visitors on the frame of mind, mood, presence, expertise, and strength of the staff that used to be undisclosed

It is important that we solve the following dilemmas (Weezel, L.G, Waaldijk, K., 2002, p. 22):

1. the division between two sides – openness and reserve
2. the definition of the amount of discipline and freedom
3. a strong focus on the group or a strong focus on the individual
4. the length of staying at an institution

5. prioritising the provision of a place to live or psychotherapy or educational services
6. working with an individual in the institution or working with an entire network, i.e. the family
7. the polarity between a spontaneous, more or less natural community or a detailed, carefully planned organisation
8. the polarity between questionable directions – the social exclusion of “bad”, “dangerous” individuals and the provision of a warm immediate environment

It is difficult to formulate what the main goal is and what the best approach is in institutional work for both theoreticians and those who put the theory into practice.

We can presume that residential treatment centres are still being ignored by the society, who cannot or does not want to try and find other ways that would allow them to integrate into the immediate environment better.

Total institutions

Goffman defines total institutions as those institutions that completely take-over the time and the activities of its members, so to say, all of the aspects of an individual's life (residence, work, fun, recreation, etc.). It is all-encompassing, which is also symbolised by the barriers that such institutions have, for example psychiatric hospitals, prisons, barracks, and convents usually have some sort of a barrier that separates them from the outside world (1991, 16-17). The inmates bring their culture, habits, and sense of self into the institution, all of which was taken for granted until the admission to the institution. After being admitted the inmates do not receive a new culture in change for their culture, so acculturation is not exactly the right term to describe this process. This is more a process of unlearning and “dis-culturation” so to speak, due to being absent from society for a longer period of time. The point of a total institution is not to defeat the culture of the inmates, as the tension between the home world and the institution world is the most important strategic lever that helps to manage the inmates (*ibid.* 23-24, Flaker 1988, 79). Admission to an institution robs a person of most of the stability that enabled a sense of an identity. With a series of systemic arrangements “the self” changes, mortifies, and severe changes in the person's moral career occur regarding personal beliefs about themselves and significant others. These are only a few of the changes that accompany the modification of an individual's story about himself.

The described processes of modifications and adjustments an individual goes through when being admitted to a total institution touch upon the issue of the modification of identities and stories about yourself. Where do story-telling and shaping an individual's identity come together? Narrative structures allow us to express ourselves and the vastness of fragmented experiences that substantiate our lives; everything is put into some kind of order. There is no other mechanism for structuring experiences that would appropriately present the sense of time that somebody had lived in (Plummer 2001, Ricoeur 2003). Creating a narrative order is essential for

giving life a sense, keeping the feeling of self-consistency, and planning for the future. With establishing order and life events interconnecting, our life becomes easier to understand and more manageable. People construct and change their reality, build their identity, and direct their actions towards the future by telling their biographies. Making up stories about yourself is a part of the daily work with the identity of an individual in which the individual reflects his experiences from different perspectives of his identity. The identity of the self is not a typical trait or a combination of the individual's trait, but the self that the person reflexively understands within his biography. The narrativity of identity is the essential means of the individual with which he obtains the integrity of his identity (Ule 2000, 196).

Institutional stories repeat themselves and produce repetitive knowledge. With this they create an institutional memory, but at the same time this is a case of forgetting. By performing anamnesis, the experiences of the patients are left out with their power, story, and knowledge taken away. As Goffman explains, this is necessary for easier management of people.

Foucault states that the transformation of the individual into a, for example, person with a delinquent career enabled disciplines to create a system in which the individual is seen by the use of documentary objectification and visibility. We put the individual into a documentary field where he receives a record and thus becomes a case. With this, we achieve that the individuals become visible, and after their visibility is established they can be differentiated and sanctioned. The objectification of visibility duplicates in written reports. Each individual receives his document, identity card, and number; disciplinary institutions receive their registers, records, and so on (Foucault, 1984).

Behaviourally disturbed adolescents

The consideration of a child for this kind of care calls for familiarity with the child's biography. Psychosocial and hermeneutical diagnostics are helpful. Classifications of behavioural and emotional difficulties are necessary because they build a bridge between:

- detection and diagnostics,
- triage,
- the course of education or psychosocial assistance, and
- social integration as the goal of the assistance.

Systematic action calls for categorisation as the basis for data analysis and its systematic evaluation, where it is particularly important to examine the family system. Even if the expert does adhere to a specifically set type of classification or systematisation in his approach, he relies on his own knowledge, derived from experience. Post (1997, p. 79) calls these facts inescapable and unavoidable. In professional communication, even subjective concepts can be useful if it is clear how information from various areas was acquired. The necessary data is revealed by the

central question: on the basis of which reasons and in which particular fields is educational assistance required because the parents are not providing adequate upbringing? Along with the explanations of the current problems, finding links and explanations in the child's biography is always important (certain illnesses, preoccupation and strain, crumbling relationships and other relationship disorders, for example separation). In general, the status of the family, the social environment, financial, material, and housing conditions have a significant influence on the child's or adolescent's development. The educational style of the parents, their educational capabilities and upbringing in general must not be overlooked. The data must clarify evaluation concepts and educational goals, common points and differences, mistakes, drawbacks, and disturbances. Extra care has to be taken in evaluating the individuals' behaviour to establish that behavioural disorders are not just the result of the nature of a particular situation.

The following is a shortened presentation of Bregant's classification.

Bregant's etiological classification schematic of dissocial disorders is based on the research findings and models of dissocial disorders found in A. Aichorn, G. H. Brandt, F. Redl, I. Bennet, A. Dührssen and E. Künzl (In Bregant 1987). Bregant (1987, p. 8) divides the etiological classification of dissocial disorders into five groups:

1. situational, reactively caused disorder caused by severe strain with a normal personality structure;
2. secondary peristatic disorder caused by disruptions in emotional development
3. with a neurotic personality structure,
4. with a dissocial personality structure;
5. primary peristatic disorder caused by direct environmental corruption and deception;
6. primary, biologically conditioned disorder caused by a damaged central nervous system and psychosis;
7. developmental impairment without the presence of dissocial disorders.

Indicators which influence behavioural and emotional disorders that are explored in the majority of the research (Blandow 2000, Bürger 1998a, Farrington 2001b, Myschker 2002, Ule 2000) have been divided into the following groups:

- socio-economic circumstances (demographic characteristics, population density in the region, unemployment, housing conditions and spatial concentration of social deprivation);
- family (structure, relationships, lifestyle, single parenthood, education, migration);
- school (productivity and efficiency – criteria for children's success rates (Thiersch 1998), education as risk (Beck 2003), reinforcement of social differences (Ule 2000);

- personality characteristics (differences in constitution, particular personal features, endogenous specifics of a person's reactivity (cannot be classified as mental illnesses or as organic brain dysfunctions). Intelligence is also often singled out as a factor. Elliott (2002) claims that intelligence varies with delinquents in the same manner as with the general population.)
- Peers (youth subcultures, aimless groups, supportive groups... (Ule 2000).

Children that have grown up separated from their families have been due to the separation deprived of certain rights that are otherwise guaranteed to children and this makes them particularly vulnerable (Žižak and Vizek Vidović, 2004).

Žižak, Koller Trbović and Jeđud (2005) talk about the triple transition of this particular group of children. The first is the transition on a personal level, that is, a child becoming an adult, and the second is a social transition that is related to the broader circumstances of the society in which we live and is so marked by insecurity. These two transitions are typical for all youth, while the third transition is characteristic of the youth that live separated from their families and is related to the transition from living in an institution to living independently. The point when young people leave their families and gain independence is getting more and more delayed and young people in Western societies begin independent life in their late twenties or even early thirties. Arnett (2007) talks about a new phase of growing up that he calls emerging adulthood. The youth that grow up separated from their families do not have this luxury or as Mržek and Krajnčan (2010) say – the system of social interventions does not follow these social changes.

Methodology

The goals and the methods

The following research is based on a qualitative approach that enables the understanding of the daily lives of individuals. The research mainly focuses on how individuals understand and experience themselves, their environment the surround world, which allows a person to discover a new reality (Mesec, 1998).

The general goal of this research is to gain insight into the perspective of youths who lived in the residential treatment centre, while focussing on their admission, the relationship of the institution and on their independent lives after leaving the centre. Aside from the general goal, the specific goals are as follows:

- To strengthen and describe the experiences of youths related to life in the residential treatment centre
- To acquire the competencies required for an independent life after leaving the residential treatment centre

The participants in the research

The selection of the participants in the qualitative research is based on a random sample. Because the focus is on the experiences of a person's independent life after

leaving the residential treatment centre, the key informers are those who have previously lived in a residential treatment centre. The research involves seven individuals from three different residential treatment centres in Slovenia (*Vzgojni zavod Veržej*, *Vzgojni zavod Višnja gora* and *Vzgojni zavod Logatec*), four of them male and three female. They lived in a residential treatment centre for a period of two to seven years. The participants' average time spent living in a residential treatment centre is 5.11 years. When the research was conducted, five individuals, all of whom were female, already lived independent lives. One individual lived with his parents, while one was in prison. The average age of the participant when the research was carried out was 29.7 years.

The method of acquiring the data

The data have been gathered by means of a semi-structured interview, which was composed specifically for this research. Prior to this interview, an informal talk was held in which the participants were introduced to the goals and methods of the research. All of the participants gave consent for participating in the research, and the interviews, all of which are recorded, were done individually. All interviewees were able to check the transcribed interviews with the possibility of expanding, clarifying and correcting the transcription. None of the interviewees chose to do so. Most, however, have expressed the wish to see the interviewer a second time and to be informed as to the results of the research.

The method of processing the data

In relation to the processing of the data, what has been used, aside from the research, is a qualitative textual analysis whose goal is to summarise, structure, understand, and explain the empirical material gathered in the process of data acquisition (Novak and Koller Trbović, 2005). The data has been processed in accordance with the following steps:

1. A reading of the transcribed interview
2. Assigning codes to original statements
3. Combining codes into abstract categories
4. Merging the categories under superordinate fields
5. Interpreting the data in accordance with the fields and their respective categories

Displaying the results and discussion

The data are displayed on the basis of the field and its subordinate categories, where the participants' quotations are used to support the results. The processing of data has highlighted two larger fields; or rather, it has been shown that individuals speak about two phases in their lives, the first relating to the time spent in the centre and the second to their subsequent independent lives. The youths describe their independent lives through concrete experiences, as well as through their expectations.

Living in the Centre

Anxieties about what it is going to be like / problems on arrival

On arriving, I knew nothing. What living was going to be like was described to me on the tour, but I didn't remember anything about the building. What's more, everything seemed different to me. I didn't know where this place was and, in the end, I thought it was at the end of the world. I didn't know anyone in the group and I thought that I was getting on everyone's nerves. I felt as though everyone was judging me, or that everyone wanted to do something bad to me, or steal something from me. My room was wonderful. I had wonderful feelings about the bed that I would be assigned and about how everything was neat and tidy. I also remember the TV. And everything was so tidy.

1. Being ill-prepared for the system
2. Having a positive attitude to the living conditions (even if they are bothered by the distance from home)

Problems pertaining to understanding rules

Everything we had to do was utterly illogical. On 21 December and 21 June we had to be in bed by 21:00! We had no influence over the rules. The rules there have been the same for the past 30 years, according to older residents. The rules are also very untrue to life. I don't understand why we had to do everything so rigidly; even some of the educators were baffled. We worked not knowing what for, and cleaned only because it was time to do so despite everything being spotless.

The rules are not true to life and aren't accepted by the residing youths

Problems with other youths / violence and initiation

I had to be in the same bedroom with a girl who I didn't like at all. I immediately felt that others were plotting against me. I had the feeling that someone would do something bad to me. I couldn't close my eyes throughout the whole night. When I heard of the initiation, I was scared. I got diarrhoea. Then they told me who was boss and that I shouldn't even think of doing anything without telling him prior. The initiation comprised of me searching for sausages blindfolded. I'd never been so humiliated in my life. They acted aggressively towards me and took everything nice I'd brought with me. Things eventually started settling down, but the beginning was hard.

Institutionalised initiation rituals

Accepting and rejecting educators, who ranged from very good to those who punished without cause

I was lucky because I got an educator who was like a mother to me. Another educator was new and young and inexperienced. I couldn't get used to him wanting something from me, as he was weird. The educators were cool, even though some of them

humiliated us whenever we did something not to their liking. The educator was a great help to me, I liked him very much. It's a pity he wasn't there when I left the centre. I was lucky not to fall in the clutches of the boss, who was the scariest person ever. Some of them even beat us. My two educators meant everything to me after I'd accepted them.

I soon got the hang of everything – what I needed to say to someone, how I needed to behave in front of someone, and how to treat the other residents. I knew completely the ins and outs of the centre. As much as I wanted to go home, I equally afraid, afraid of my parents, afraid of the group of people I used to hung out with and with whom we did everything imaginable, and afraid of boys, who now saw me differently. At the centre, you only needed to know when to be quiet and when to speak up, when to be at the right place, etc. Everything I learnt at the centre was completely useless once I started living independently. The centre was the world to me. When I was seven, I was so scared of leaving – I couldn't even imagine what it's going to be like, even though I wanted to go home.

1. Educators play an important part in the development of a child. One of the main drawbacks is that they cannot continue being as supportive after the child leaves the institution
2. Learning to leaving at the centre, inadequate skills after leaving the centre
3. A wish for and fear of leaving
- 4.

Independent life

An unpromising life without a job, without positive age mates and a lack of money

When I started living independently I felt completely lost. I thought I wouldn't be able to cope with it. I think I would've left with the first man who'd tell me he'd have me. I thought everyone knew that I was a kid from a residential centre. No one wanted to give me a job. I thought of going back to Ljubljana, but I didn't know where exactly I'd go to and how I'd do it and I didn't have any money. My ex-schoolmates where either students or already working, while I thought life was over for me after five years of being away. I wanted to start living at the residential centre again, and I even considered suicide. This wasn't the life I was imagining – it was a nightmare. It was horrible – only after five years was I able to prove myself as being capable of (car) refinishing. It was easier after that. If my brother hadn't supported me, I'd definitely have gone astray again. They should have given us someone who we were used to. This was the hardest time in my life, even harder than when I had first arrived at that damned centre. I didn't see my social worker once. That Centre for Social Services was good for nothing else than giving me a ride and officialising my release. They function as nothing other than an end in itself.

1. In the post-treatment period, youths are insufficiently helped by both the centre and the responsible persons on the one hand and by the professional Social Services on the other
2. The youths lack financial, as well as human, support

What is apparent is that despite modernisation, progress, and research results, post-treatment care is still the weakest kind of intervention (Koller Trbović and Mirosavljević, 2005), which should be improved upon in the future.

In a study conducted in Great Britain (Amanfo, Bowley and Miller, 2008), the youths state the following factors they see as important in connection with growing up in out-of-home care and the time spent living independently: the support by and relationships with important persons (that is, knowing that someone cares for them) that they can trust, ask for advice, information, encouragement, and motivation. They also cite a feeling of certainty and control over their lives and choice being a possibility. The authors of the research believe that the key factor for the youths is those experts who truly cared for them. A similar claim is made by Žižak et al. (2012), who conducted research on children living in foster care. The researchers emphasise the importance of the relationship between a child and an expert, and consequently require that an expert, aside from being formally competent, be capable of showing true human regard for a child and his or her life. Other studies based on youths in foster care have been done that emphasise the importance of such a relationship (e.g. Greenen and Powers, 2007). Aside from respecting the importance of the relationship between experts and youths, what is important is strengthen and encourage the youths' ability to establish other relationships outside of the confines of an institution (Sladović Franz and Mujkanović, 2003).

Conclusion

On the basis of the available literature and results of this research, we can justifiably speak of the importance of researching the youths' transition from out-of-home care into independency, with such research being especially focussed on authentic experiences (that is, the users' perception). We believe that such data are especially helpful in the sense that they are authentic information about experiences and feelings that researchers and experts can only speculate on. The insight into the users' perception of independent life shows a multi-layered attainment of independence, which is, on the one hand, difficult, and on the other, filled with feelings of success and a real, on-going, confrontation with daily life. Such research familiarises us with the parts of a person's daily life, shows us that children see institutions positively in spite of criticism and a trend towards deinstitutionalisation which is affecting many institutions. It is not only important where a child is living, but also how he or she is living. If he or she has the chance of establishing a healthy relationship and get the feeling that he or she is important to someone, an institution can be an effective springboard for his or her future life.

The results of our research (as well as those of others) unveil the relatively inadequate nature of social networks mentioned by the youths. In connection with this, it is believed that the youths have, aside from formal interventions, the help of experts whose objective is to offer them support and help them expand their social networks. For this reason, certain foreign practitioners employ the so-called alumni – groups where former users can meet and whose goal is to offer help and mentorship and ease the transition into independence. One of the mentorship programmes for youths leaving care is the British *Prince's Trust Leaving Care Initiative* (Leaving care Mentoring, b.d.), which offers youths the chance to understand their mentors as an integral part in their independent lives – the mentors, in turn, offer their wards accessibility, attention, and informality in comparison with experts. The youths have especially emphasised the importance of a mentor's help in connection with issues pertaining to interpersonal relationships, a feeling of self-respect and an emotional well-being. We highlight the importance of investing in the strengthening of an active participation on the part of the youths with the aim of increasing the feeling of responsibility and control over their lives. We also believe that the youths' inclusion in projects exploring their perspective and the changing (i.e. improving) of their lives further strengthens the possibility of an active participation in society.

An important realisation is that the network should be homogenised so as to offer actual support to youths leaving institutions, to those coming from specific furrows of total institutions, and that accept their new home and new important people but find themselves alone upon leaving.

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