

Adulthood of children's residential care leavers - biographies and identities. The Polish case

„From facility to an independent life“

Innovation in residential institutions and quality of life after leaving care
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I. The project

„Institutionalized identity? The processes of identity development on the basis of biographies rendered by adults raised in child residential care”, Lodz, Poland 2011-2014

The main aims:

- 1/ conducting the analysis of life-stories of adults living in institutions in their childhood and/or adolescence**
- 2/ conducting the analysis of identity development processes within the framework of residential care institutions and identity work in interviewees' adult life**
- 3/ conducting the sociological analysis of children institutions' social world**
- 4/the improvement of the quality of social services for children in residential care and „graduates” of child care institutions**

The method

- 40 narrative/ biographical interviews with 35-50-year-old adults who graduated from children's institutions situated in Lodz
- Personal data file analysis (20 accessible files)
- 3 FGI with professionals (employees of the child care institutions and juridical system , professionally active in the years of narrators' institutionalization)

The children's residential care system in the PPR

- The system of residential care for children created after 2nd world war within the framework of Ministry of Education („school-centred” system) for natural post-war orphans
- 1970. - 381 institutions in Poland with 23.000 children and youngsters
- 1980-90 - over 400 institutions for 17.000 children, some of them with 80-100 places
- Typical traits of total institution - forced stay, the schedule of daily activities carried out in the company of a group, restricted contact with the world outside, staff-inmate split, basic level of fulfilling biological needs in some institutions
- Staff with differentiated professional skills and personal capacities - the whole range from deeply engaged persons to cruel, violent individuals

The interviewees

- Institutional leavers born in 1959-1980, Lodz inhabitants
- Coming from low status families (parents' poor education, bad living conditions, dwelling in pockets of poverty)
- Coming from multi-problem families (alcohol addiction, instability on the labour market, violence, parents' mental illnesses, SEN siblings, child neglect, siblings' adoption, parents' suicides and early deaths, parents' criminal behaviour and imprisonment, unknown parents)

II. Biographies....

Narrators' most important biographical experiences:

All narrators:

- Biographical uprooting from the families of origin and from the primary environment (abandoned or rejected by parents and often by other relatives)
- Institutionalization in childhood and adolescence: *I was raised by the state*
- Difficulties in social integration at the beginning of adulthood

Differentiation of life-course in adult life: 10 cases of biographical success, 12 cases of relative success and stability, 5 cases of „unstable equilibrium, 4 cases of individuals fighting constantly for stability, 6 cases of „biographical defeat”, 1 uncategorized case

Biographical success:

- Stabilised life course in all basic dimensions: labour, partnership, parenthood, friendship, participation in civic society;
- Satisfied with their life and with the economic situation
- Oriented at self-development
- Well adjusted to the mainstream society

Relative success and stability:

- Stabilized life course in all basic dimensions: labour, partnership, parenthood, friendship, participation in civic society;
- Lack of serious risk factors
- Well adjusted to the mainstream society
- Problems with self-esteem, other emotional problems

At risk of marginalisation – unstable equilibrium:

- Stabilised life course in some dimensions (e.g. better education, proper vocational training, constantly active professionally)
- Endangered by the risk of entering a new trajectory (loneliness, destructive partnership, poor living conditions, dwelling in pockets of poverty, emotional problems, alcohol addiction in an earlier phase of life, etc.)

Constant fight for stability:

- Instability on labour market
- Financial difficulties
- Temporarily supported by social welfare agencies
- Difficulties in partnership or (and) in parenthood
- The experience of everyday coping with minor and major life problems

Biographical defeat - at the margins of the mainstream society...

- Unemployed, social welfare agencies clients, living in the neighbourhoods of relegation in low standard dwelling, episodes of destruction (alcohol abuse, imprisonment, domestic violence, poor health) limited relationships with others, not interested in religion, not interested in politics
- The cases of intergenerational transmission of poverty and intergenerational transmission of trajectories of suffering

„Turning point - settling into independent life (1)

- Lack of basic life skills – cooking, mastering personal income, paying rents, etc.
- Strongly experienced lack of institutional and emotional support (and at the same time the absence of other support „sources”) at the beginning of independent life, the experience of unexpected abandonment contrasted with the previous sense of safety provided by the institution



The danger of the biographical defeat – debts, unemployment, emotional problems, accidental or destructive partners, lost of the flat – the beginning of biographical trajectory

„Turning point”- settling into independent life (2)

- Housing transition- mostly municipal, very small, low standard flats, often placed in the pockets of poverty with some basic equipment (i.e. old couch from the institution, 2 knives, forks and spoons, new bed-clothes); in some cases no interest of the institution in the leaver's future accommodation/ come back family home,
- School-to-work transition: mostly unaided attempts in organizing vocational career
- „Domestic” transition - early partnerships, structural homogamy

III. The identity

Narrators' consensual self-references in interviews and TST

Consensual self-references – roots in social categories, groups, collectivities

Mainly self-references describing participation in the family of procreation (fathers and mothers, rarely husband/wife/partner, sporadically mother/father in law, daughter/son in law)

Sporadically self-references to natal family

Sporadically self-references to informal groups (peers, friendship)

Rarely self-references to institutionalised social worlds (e.g. occupation)

Almost no self-references to religion, nation, locality, social structure and also referring to body and gender

Frequent self-references to „normality” and averageness; normality = access to the mainstream society

The relationship between the narrators' life course and *biographical* and *identity work*

The life-story plots and the identity development and transformation occurrences congregate in two interpenetrating phenomena of *biographical work* and *identity work*.

Biographical work is defined as self-interactive “effort to interpret biographical experiences in relation to one’s identity, self-image, behaviours, actions taken or not taken”, undertaken especially in biographical turning points and other difficult situations and conditioned by (*significant*) *others*’ influences and generally by the socio-cultural context.

Identity work is related to the work on the self-concept development undertaken by the individual who perceives him/herself as the unique, developing entity (Gestalt), considering the conditionings of this development process and reflecting on its directions and ways of realization.

(Kaźmierska 2008, Schütze 2009)

Stigmatising identity work

- 1/ *Formalised identity work* – officially formulated psychological, pedagogical, psychiatric assessments and opinions about the inmates
- 2/ *Internal institutional stigmatisation*
- 3/ *External institutional stigmatisation* (within the framework of other institutions)
- 4/ *Non-institutional stigmatisation* (by “everyday” participants of social life)
- 5/ *Positive labelling* of the inmates as persons with “special psychosocial needs”
- 6/ Acts of *self-stigmatising*

Narrators perceived as „victims” of social/genetic inheriting. Socially classified as non belonging to mainstream society and belonging to the marginalised groups.

Biographical work and identity work on the inheritance of family of origin:

- Decision made consciously in the adolescence about developing into “somebody different than the parents”
- The acts of physical and symbolic detachment/separation from the family of origin and by opposing to the content of stigmatising *badge of inability*
- In adulthood: work on the relationships with parents perceived as *destructive significant others* via:
 - real or symbolic location outside the family system,
 - *reconstruction biographical work* and the act of forgiving the parents their guilts,
 - taking up an effort to reconstruct mutual relationships, despite of parents’ destructive life-style

Only sporadically the narrators functioning within the framework of mainstream society did not take up the effort to interpret the family of origin inheritance and their relationships with parents. The lack of *biographical* and *identity work* results in this case in *biographical incertitude* accompanied with *identity incertitude*.

The work on the child care institutional leaver stigma

- Opposing to the secondary status of institutional inmate (assigned as a consequence of the primary status ascribed to the dysfunctional family of origin) and to the feeling of *abnormality* associated with this status
- The attempts of being socially classified as the member of the collectivity of “normals”; during the institutionalization period: “normalizing” practices, in “post-institutional times” differentiated strategies of disclosing their past and the identity of the inmate (mostly open awareness context)

Other dimensions of biographical work and identity work

- The identity and biography normalisation (construction of positive self-concept) based also on the development of personal potential:
 - a/educational career, new skills apprehension and taking new, significant social roles due to the *orienting significant others* imitation,
 - b/ taking advantages from narrators' own serious mistakes, founded on the conscious trials to function in another way the parents did,
 - c/initiating the *auto-therapeutic biographical work* - book readings, film watching and introducing into practice the conclusions resulting from this activities.
- Practices oriented at attained normalisation protection: physical detachment from destructive parents and/or siblings, limitation in frequency of family meetings, opposing to *the destructive significant other* attempts to influence directly the narrators' life. Also: avoiding any activities associated with the activities undertaken by parents, being especially cautious in the situations of perceived similarity of narrators behaviour with the anormative parents behaviours, staying away from the social world of child residential care institutions.

Negative identity work and negative biographical work

- *Negative identity work*: the individual takes in depreciating classifications formulated by other participants of social life (Erik Erikson works: the classifications from the adolescence and the beginnings of the adulthood are crucial in this process) and finally defines her/himself as not fully fledged or even incapacitated social actor
- *The negative biographical work*: regressive in character, it sustains some elements of self-concepts, which hinders the personal development. The reflection on the individual life-story is directed at looking for the foundation of present (and “misguiding”) self-concept in an unfavourable development of life events, in interpersonal but also structural barriers, in others’ attitudes and behaviours
- The thesis which needs further testing: both *negative biographical* and *identity work* and also the *lack of biographical* and *identity work* are the factors related to the inheritance of preceding generations’ low, stigmatised status and with the stalling into biographical trap.

Final remarks: institutionalized practices in residential care homes for children as risk factors in the process of intergenerational transmission of poverty and social exclusion

- Particular traits of institutional upbringing: differentiated and divergent staff members' influences and educational strategies, the poor level of emotional needs fulfilment, impersonal treatment, lack of individualised therapeutic treatment → emotional problems, lower self-esteem
- Collective rearing: common standard application, lack of individualised approach and uniformity → identity problems
- Rearing towards learned helplessness - lack of life-skills training → passiveness, decisive problems
- Inter-institutional labelling by staff members and labelling by other professionals → identity problems, lower self-esteem



Influence on individual's identity, his/her emotional life and the capacity to take control of one's life in adulthood

- Standardised focus on vocational education, accidental educational choices, inadequacy in an individual child's capacities and interests → low self esteem, problems or instability on labour market, (temporary) unemployment, illegal jobs → limited chances of economic stability/poverty limited chances for the next generation(s)



**Intergenerational transmission of poverty
and social exclusion**

Wychowało nas państwo

Rzecz o tożsamości dorosłych wychowanków placówek opiekuńczo-wychowawczych



Thank you for your attention