Narrations of Violence – Strength Approach in Youth Work

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Abstract The case of a delinquent hard-to-reach client shows the possibilities and limits of the strength approach in youth work with delinquent adolescents. Issues such as ‚How does information about the delinquency of a client influence social workers before even have started to attend to a case?' or ‚What is necessary to maintain a positive attitude in morally problematic cases?' are focused in the paper. The methods of strength approach refer not only to the cognition, sensations and action of the client but to those of the professional as well. In this regard the human concept social workers have developed affects the processes and dynamics of empowerment.

Keywords Strength Approach, Solution-focused Therapy, Youth Work, Delinquency, Violence, Moral, Attitude

1. Introduction

This paper mainly focuses on two questions. First, which starting points does the strength approach provide for youth work with adolescents who are known as delinquents? And secondly, which moral problem arises for social workers who are practicing methods of strength approach especially with this target group? The methodology applied for this study is participant observation. In this qualitative method the observer participates in an activity and then reports his observations. (cf. Spradley 1980, Jorgensen 1989) Participant observation focuses on one particular situation or phenomenon. Hence, one common criticism is the lack of generalisability. This method proves its worth especially for the subject of investigation of this paper as it does not only allow the representation of the client's actions, but also takes the part of the social worker into account. The author of the present paper works as a case worker with mainly delinquent adolescents and practices the strength approach first and foremost in the form of the solution-focused concept. This concept derives from the scientific work of Insoo Kim Berg

und Steve de Shazer, who laid in the solution-focused brief therapy the foundation for further branches of a similar nature.[1] The studies of the Milan school of family therapy, especially their knowledge about paradoxical interventions also find their way into the present paper. Their research also relied on methods of the strength approach.[2]

The text below first provides some information about the general circumstances of the represented case of a 17-years old delinquent adolescent, as the main participants, place, time and the intention of the youth welfare office. As a second step the case is reported chronologically from the preliminary phase, when the social worker gets the first data about Tom (changed name), over the first eye-to-eye contact between the social worker and Tom to the solution-focused interactions and their impacts on Tom. The last three chapters focus on special aspects of the solution-focused work with delinquent adolescents as they show up in the case. A.) The influence of pre-informations. B.) Following the adolescent. C.) Dropping an anchor as social worker.

2. Case

2.1. Information about the Case

The author attended to the represented case from July 2013 till December 2014 in Berlin-Marzahn. In Germany ambulant youth case work is a measure which normally takes up to two years, in which the young client is advised, motivated, accompanied etc. 3-5 hours a week. Berlin-Marzahn was a town construction showcase in East Berlin in the 1970s, where today mainly those people live who financially and socially suffered from the effects of the

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1 De Shazer's most influential works are: Patterns of Brief Family Therapy, Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy, Clues: Investigating Solution in Brief Therapy
2 The founders of the solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT), Mara Selvini Palazzoli, Luigi Boscolo, Gianfranco Cecchin and Guiliana Prata, spread the concept of the paradoxical intervention in their most important publication Paradox and Counterparadox, which was first published in 1975 in Milan.

German reunification. The author attended to a case that had been known to the youth welfare office for a very long time and already was held in bad repute. Tom was a 17-years old delinquent boy and a persistent truant who had not been in work for nearly four years. He was perceived as aggressive and showing little compliance with the interventions youth welfare had already taken. Furthermore the author was informed that Tom was right-wing and that he stopped the last reintegration program when an African client came to their weekly groups.

In Germany the youth welfare office is the main actor in administrating youth welfare cases and referring them to different programs, which include regular face-to-face meetings. The case manager who was responsible for Tom had a good relationship with him as she knew him since he was a little boy and she cared for his wellbeing. She was concerned that most of the programs she organized in the last years failed after a limited period because Tom cancelled them by simply staying away.

The main objective of the case the author took over was to help Tom to gain a foothold in the labor market. Another aim was to motivate Tom to resume the weekly reintegration group *XS*, in which he could learn how to write a CV and participate in leisure time activities.

2.2. Procedure of the Case

The case manager asked the author to accompany Tom to the *XS*-center in order to reconcile with them. On this first encounter the author met a calm and small boy whose appearance and gestures indeed seemed very aggressive. The meeting took place in the rooms of *XS* and one could perceive the deep disappointment of the two *XS* colleagues regarding the many efforts they had made while Tom was most of the time absent and had not answered phone calls for the last two months. The scene during the so-called *XS breakfast* was as follows. Tom was sitting far away at the end of the table staring rigidly at it while the two colleagues listed all the measures already tried. Not once during the whole conversation did Tom establish eye-contact with the two social workers. He looked a few times at the author, wondering what he would respond to the accusations against him. In the end the author was asked to take responsibility for Tom resuming attending the meetings of *XS*. After the meeting Tom looked very cramped, lit a cigarette and stood long silently at the author's side, waiting for him to comment. When he asked Tom what he thinks about *XS*, he shrugged his shoulders indifferently and said: „I don't care." After a while Tom added: „My mother is very angry with me because I don't go there anymore." Tom had a very close and intense relationship to his mother. He added: „I have to play table tennis there all the time and go to a breakfast that I don't want to eat. I never have breakfast!" Two days later the author opted for letting him decide whether or not he wanted to continue the *XS* measurement. The author was willing to accept Tom's decision without reservation and, if need be, to defend it to Tom's mother, the youth welfare office and *XS*. Tom answered that he did not want to go there one more time.

On the second encounter with Tom the author visited him at home. Tom showed him his room, where he had a big aquarium, a Playstation with a huge flat screen and some fishing gear. He also showed the author pictures of fish he caught on the mobile and told him that he had a fishing license. Tom's main occupation over the last few years had been to go fishing at the little ponds around Berlin-Marzahn.

For the next few months the author mainly accompanied Tom fishing, standing most time quietly beside him, every now and then inquiring about the sport's rules and techniques. They did not talk about apprenticeship or work. One day Tom brought a second rod for the author. After a certain time Tom told him that all his friends already earned money. Tom said that he also would like to make money, but because he had not graduated, this was not possible. On a home visit the author decided to ask Tom's mother about her attitude towards his joblessness. Until then the author had not directly included Tom's mother in the support process because the case manager had told him that the relationship between Tom and his mother was too close and that she had a tendency to pamper to Tom's needs. His mother did not give a precise answer to this question but instead called Tom into the kitchen and told him, that an old friend of the family needed help on a construction site. In fact, one week later, Tom was working there and he continued to work there for a whole year. As he always worked long hours, it became even difficult for the author to find dates to meet him.

3. Observations

3.1. The Influence of Pre-information

The information professionals get from case files or oral sources have an enormous effect on how they approach work with a new client. This information often has the tendency to polarize. There is the sympathetic, cooperative client who is presumed to do better if he would only try. And on the other hand there is the so-called ignorant client like Tom, who is refusing any contact with the welfare system. These two stereotypes mainly exist in the professional's preconception. Especially if hostility is involved, clichés and topoi of violence are likely to evoke an unclear number of effects on the professional's subconscious and consequently on his actions. When describing the functioning of strength approach with delinquent clients, there is a high degree of necessity to analyze the cognitive and subconscious processes on part of the social worker.[3] Terms like neo-Nazi, child abuse or domestic violence will make it harder to see the abilities and resources of a person whose behaviour has

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3 Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson termed this phenomenon *Pygmalion effect* and first described it in *The Pygmalion Effect in Classrooms*. Its mode of action can be summarized as follows. The pedagogue forms certain expectation of people or events. He communicates these expectations with various verbal and non-verbal cues. Adolescents tend to respond to these cues by adjusting their behaviour to match them. As a result the original expectation of the pedagogue becomes true. (cf. Rosenthal & Jacobson 1969)

been judged as morally bad. In the case of Tom, after what the author had heard and read about him, he had mixed feelings before meeting him the first time. The author's body language was influenced by caution. The long spatial distance between Tom and the author was hard to overcome when they met and talked for the first time and the author had difficulties finding the right words or topics. A similar body language could be observed in the two colleagues of *XS*. In this state caution, distance and dislike influence both the professional and the client – systemically speaking, they are stabilizing and reinforcing each other.[4]

3.2. Following the Adolescent

It cannot be the client who takes the first step to overcome a deadlock situation as described in the chapter above. The professional is in charge. In Tom's case the situation changed when the author visited Tom and his mother for the first time at home. Tom showed him his room, which was dominated by a Playstation and a flat screen. When Tom started describing the different game missions of his new ego shooter, the author could have asked him how many hours a day he plays – weary of a possible addiction. But this would have stalled the enthusiasm that led Tom to tell the author more about his belongings as the aquarium or the fishing gear. Fishing was something that Tom really mastered, while on the issues school, apprenticeships or work he always found himself in a loser's position. During the fishing trips the author sat – Tom had organized two camp chairs in the colours of the German flag – at the shore watching Tom fishing, not trying to motivate him for an internship or something similar. Referring to a principle of Steve de Shazer's solution focused approach – if something works, do more of it! – the author went fishing with Tom every week for nearly three months. The ideas for their following activities, as driving go-cart, eating at fast-food-restaurants etc. also came from Tom.

Children and teenagers have an enormous drive to show their world to grown-ups. Although it is possible for them to find like-minded persons in peer-groups, it is often very difficult to find an conversational partner in the world of the grown-ups, as parents or teachers are often very critical about exactly those things that are most interesting and important for children as e.g. the detailed re-telling of movie plots or video games, pranks, guns, engines, offensive song lyrics, amusement parks etc. In the beginning Tom told the author many stories about his criminal acts and showed him the places in the district where they had taken place. Although the author put across to Tom, that he did not like what he had done, he was listening to his explanations and always asked Tom for details. In the first place Tom's acts were the attempts of a physically weak and thin adolescent to

prove to himself and to his peer-group, that he was capable of performing certain notions of masculinity. Or as the author Bell Hooks writes about his days as a hostile young man: "We were proud of ourselves, proud of our willingness to transgress the rules, proud to be courageous." (Hooks 1994, p. 24)

Of course the aim of every strength-based intervention is to prevent any act of violence. But the necessity lies in not putting a moral stamp on these acts or on the actor. The latter would have made Tom feel bad and useless again. Concepts of morality influence professionals in ways they are often unaware of. Heinz von Foerster, a developer of radical constructivism, says that moral appeals have a primary role in maintaining a hierarchy. He notes that hierarchy is a „pseudo-solution […] to which one always defers the responsibility for judgement in order to avoid one's own". (von Foerster 2003, p. 322) This hierarchy prevents the person, e.g. the pupil, delinquent etc., from achieving self-awareness and assuming responsibility. In other words, a teenager does not have to reflect about the consequences of his actions when there is always another person or a system around him that is telling him right from wrong. The same applies for explaining hostile adolescents what respect is about. A teenage boys' group was working on how to be more respectful. Most of them said that they respected their grandmothers. (cf. Franklin 2012, p. 137) Delinquent adolescents are able to explain precisely what respect is about. In the case of the boys' group they were not told what respect means, but explained it themselves. This makes a small but important difference. As soon as the authoritarian teacher leaves the classroom, the class gets crazy. It will not learn to take responsibility as long as the teacher takes all of it. When the teacher leaves the room and the group has to wait there for his return, it is overstrained and acts chaotically.

When Tom told stories of his delinquency, the author could feel his pride, but also a tone of astonishment about all the "crazy" (quoted) things he had done. After having listened to these stories the author said: *"It is impressing that you don't do these things anymore!"* And the author added: *"How did you manage to get away from it?"* Both sentences express an appreciation. There is no hidden criticism or moral justice. The solution-focused approach has an affinity with language and communication. (cf. ibid. 2012, p. 144) It is often mainly about finding the right statement or question. To the author's question how he had managed to put an end to his series of assaults Tom answered: "I don't know. My mother worried about me a lot around that time. So I stopped."

How can social workers maintain a positive attitude towards their clients when being confronted with narrations about people being severely physically or mentally damaged by their clients? The next chapter, 'Dropping an Anchor as Social Worker', focuses on that demanding endeavor.

3.3. Dropping an Anchor as Social Worker

In the case of Tom the author tried to find certain aspects

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4 During the meeting at the *XS* center Tom was asked some of the following question: "Tom, do you think that you have a chance in the labor market, if you do nothing further finding an internship?" Or: "We have done so much for you. Now it is your turn. But if you act like in the last months, we are not willing to organize anything else for you. You have to take the initiative now!"

about Tom as a person, his everyday life and biography that he really liked, in order to concentrate systematically on them. He was impressed by Tom's discipline to get out of bed every morning and to follow his hobbies despite having no obligations to do so for the last four years. Besides that, Tom had not been drinking or taking drugs in this period. Due to his personal political point of view the author generally had a problem with extremist right-wing ideologies. Nevertheless he decided to take over Tom's case, telling Tom his personal point of view about xenophobia, but not making it a subject of discussion. The positive anchor that the author dropped in order to remain able to work in a benevolent way with Tom was as follows: "If it is able to reintegrate Tom into the job market, it is likely that he will reduce unloading his frustrations on other people." Dropping a positive anchor is not only a method for service users, but also for professionals dealing with difficult cases.

File documents described Tom's mother as a very problematic influence on her son's development: she would pamper him by giving him regularly money and so keeping him away from work. The author took this into consideration and decided to work only with Tom, trying to support his autonomy and ability to move out of his mother's accommodation. Half a year later when, rather coincidentally, Tom's mother mainly contributed to the reintegration process of her son, when she told both him and the author that a friend of hers was looking for help on one of his construction sites. The friend had known Tom since his childhood and was familiar to him. On one of the fishing trips namely Tom had told the author that he was afraid of strangers, afraid of groups he did not know and even was scared of using public transport. Tom had never told this the social workers of *XS* or anybody else. Later the author found out that Tom had left the table-tennis group not because an African teenager had started to go there, but because of his social phobia that was caused especially by groups and new participants he did not know. All measures taken by the employment agency during the last four years were doomed to fail because of this lack of information because each reintegration initiatives was organized as a group. Tom's shame of having a phobia that his peer-group would regard as cowardice was responsible for the fact that he did not tell anybody the reasons for his absence periods. He simply stayed away and did not answer calls or letters. Many professionals blamed Tom for laziness and an unwillingness to take any initiative to find work. They often regarded his aggressive appearance as a personal offense. In fact Tom's refusal to cooperate was a desperate but viable solution to protect himself from pathological fear and panic. As the details of Tom's mental disorder were not revealed, the effects of the reintegration programs even worsened the personal development of Tom.

4. Summary

A basic assumption in strength-based youth work should be the belief that every child or teenager tries to do the right thing. The negative consequences of violent actions are a matter, that cannot be ignored and the social worker has to decide individually in which way and to which degree he wants to communicate them. In the primary phase of casework though communication should be genuinely positive, which does not mean, that clear rules cannot be framed or consequences from problematic behaviour cannot be drawn. The advantage of a rule is that it does not imply any moral appeals. Referring to the author's experience, after a certain period the client is likely to mention spontaneously his issues with violence, drugs etc. At that the client claims the counseling and reflection from the caseworker by himself.

Strength approach is directly related to the way the professional feels towards, thinks or talks with a client. Empowerment becomes an empty technique of constructed phrases or so-called miracle questions, [5] if the social worker's positive point of view lacks authenticity. Social work science mainly focuses on the part of the clients – their feelings, actions and development – assuming that the supporting actor is tabula rasa. Indeed the social worker is as complex and problematic as the client – or in the words of Milner & Myers: "In solution focused assessments 'resistance' is regarded as an inability on part of the counselor to recognize the client's unique 'way of cooperating' and an indication that more careful listening needs to be done." (Milner & Myers 2007, p. 134)

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5 The miracle question is a strength-based method that was developed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg.