Inclusion and obstacles: a social pedagogical analysis of narratives concerning work with unaccompanied young refugees with experiences of war in institutional care in Sweden

Basic, Goran (Linnaeus University, Sweden, goran.basic@lnu.se)
Yaka, Matsuda (Kochi University, Japan, yaka_m@kochi-u.ac.jp)

Introduction

In the Swedish debate on social pedagogy, immigration issues have gotten a lot of attention, and social pedagogy has been seen as a relevant analytical framework for educational programs promoting social integration of immigrants (Eriksson, 2010; Winman & Palmroth, 2010). The practical function of social pedagogy is seen to deal with all kinds of social and psychosocial needs in all phases of life span in all kinds of educational and care institutions. It is about social-pedagogical know-how, which seems to be relevant for working with people in different, sometimes very difficult, life situations (Hämäläinen & Eriksson, 2016).

Since 2015, more than 35,000 children and young people have come to Sweden unaccompanied by a guardian (Swedish Migration Agency, 2018a-c, 2020a-c). Most of these unaccompanied children and young people were boys from war-torn countries, and most were placed in ‘HVB

---

1 Some parts of this text were published earlier in Swedish in the doctoral dissertation in sociology: "When collaboration becomes a struggle. A sociological analysis of a project in the Swedish juvenile care” (Basic, 2012) and in English in the articles "Social pedagogical work with unaccompanied young refugees with experiences of war in institutional care in Sweden: an ethnography-inspired analysis of the narratives of young persons and institution personnel" (Basic, 2018c) and "Inclusion and obstacles in the Swedish social pedagogical context: an analysis of narratives on working with unaccompanied refugee minors with wartime experiences in institutional care” (Basic & Matsuda, 2020).
homes’ (residential homes for children and young persons\(^2\)). This major influx of unaccompanied children and young people has been a substantial challenge for the Swedish welfare system, which is fundamentally based on the concept of all individuals being included and integrated into the social community. Unaccompanied refugee minors who arrived having fled war during 2015 now constitute an established group in Sweden. Considerable numbers have been granted permanent residency, others are waiting for a decision from the Swedish Migration Agency, while many are receiving various forms of social care. Against this background, it is crucial to study the social pedagogy of professionals working for the inclusion and integration of these young people into their new society.

Children and young people who have fled from such wars may have been involved in social communities, either directly or indirectly, which is likely to affect them for a large part of their lives. Survivors of wars are often influenced by what is known as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, recurring nightmares, emotional blunting and flashbacks to traumatic moments (Sanchez-Cao, Kramer, & Hodes, 2013; Majumder, 2016; Basic 2018c; Björk, Danielsson & Basic 2019). With that background knowledge, we can establish that the professional work of attempting to help and facilitate inclusion and integration of that client category in the Swedish community is not an easy task.

This study’s aim was to provide new understanding about: 1) personal narratives coming out of institutions regarding the day-to-day work of caring for youths who, having experienced war, \(^2\) A residential or care home is a form of institution in Sweden that provides treatment, care, support or nurturing. HVB homes can, for example, specialize in substance abuse problems or in unaccompanied children.
fled to Sweden and were taken into care and placed in institutions; and, 2) interactive patterns contributing to constructing and reconstructing the inclusion of the clients and the obstacles to inclusion during practical social pedagogy.

**General perspective of social pedagogical work and research**

According to Hämäläinen (2012), social pedagogy in the Nordic countries follows two developmental lines: social education for all and pedagogical support for those with special social and/or educational needs. The definitions for these lines of development of social pedagogy, according to Hämäläinen, are respectively: a) a line of social care and welfare activities preventing and alleviating social exclusion, and b) a line of social education supporting growth into membership of society. Hämäläinen means that in the Nordic countries, both of these lines exist in social pedagogical research, discussion and practice (Hämäläinen, 2012; Basic 2018c).

According to Eriksson (2014), Swedish social pedagogy is described in three models which are: adaptive model, mobilizing model and democratic model (Table 1). These models were established from interviews with social pedagogues.
Table 1: Three models of the Swedish social pedagogical meaning (2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adaptive</th>
<th>Mobilising</th>
<th>Democratic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tools</strong></td>
<td>Relation</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methods</strong></td>
<td>Treatment methods targeted to the individual</td>
<td>Structural methods targeted to society</td>
<td>Animation targeted to the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitudes/approaches</strong></td>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>Collective, change</td>
<td>Practical wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concepts</strong></td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Emancipation, empowerment</td>
<td><strong>bildung</strong>, citizenship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the *adaptive model*, the main goal is adaptation to society, and there is an underlying, sometimes implicit, assumption about an existing ‘good’ society. It means that this society functions as a gathering community for all individuals and that the only way to become a human being is by participating in the community. These statements involve the idea that individuals or groups that have been excluded by society for various reasons may become participants in the ideal ‘good’ society through social pedagogical interventions. This social pedagogical work is based on ‘good’ relationships between the personnel/staff and the client.

The goal of the *mobilization model* is the emancipation of the client. This model illustrates a more radical interpretation of social pedagogy. The social pedagogue wants clients to reflect upon their own situation and to be aware of the impact of societal structures and processes on their everyday lives.

The *democratic model* emerges from statements made in the interviews and is based on humanistic democratic thinking. This model reflects the perspective that individuals can reach some type of ‘citizen bildung’ through support and ‘education’ from social pedagogues. This
perspective takes a mobilisation approach, but it is less radical than the mobilisation model. A ‘good’ dialogue is central. The belief holds that if one is involved in a true dialogue, it changes their understanding (Eriksson, 2014). In this article, the adaptive model and democratic model have been focused on more than the mobilisation model. In this study, the processes of empowerment of young people at the institutions and how the personnel care and construct the relationship with them have been highlighted.

The social pedagogical work methods were described as being multifaceted, although the most prominent methods were creative methods, community development, and community work. Community development is understood as a collective method that strives to mobilise groups of people in need of support to play active parts in their own or their group’s lives (Eriksson, 2014).

The social pedagogic perspective is one of the perspectives in social sciences that stresses the importance of including the individual in the community (Eriksson & Winman, 2010; Hämäläinen, 2012; Úcar, 2013; Eriksson, 2014; Kornbeck & Úcar, 2015; Hämäläinen & Eriksson, 2016; Basic 2018c; Úcar, Soler-Masó, & Planas-Lladó 2020). Individuals are given confirmation of their identities by participating in the community, and successful interaction between individuals is a fundamental prerequisite for the successful integration of unaccompanied children and young people in Sweden. Hämäläinen and Eriksson (2016) and Eriksson (2014) highlight the importance of interaction between those already established in the community and the individual who is on the margin. One of the most important dimensions from a social pedagogical perspective is to analytically investigate relationships between individuals
needing help and the professional participants tasked with helping these individuals as part of their professional role (Basic 2018c).

The writings of Úcar, Soler-Masó, & Planas-Lladó (2020), Hämäläinen and Eriksson (2016), Kornbeck and Úcar (2015), Eriksson (2014), Úcar (2013), Hämäläinen (2012), and Eriksson and Winman (2010) provide insight into some expectations that come into play in the various social contexts of the role of a ‘social pedagogue’. A social pedagogue is portrayed as an expert who works toward a specific and defined goal. The goal is to help or guide the client to overcome obstacles that hamper integration and success in the context. Analysis in Basic (2018c) reveals major variations in what is expected of a social pedagogue working in institutional care in Sweden with unaccompanied young refugees who have experiences of war. A common denominator is that the mission of and context in which the social pedagogue operates appear flexible enough to enable an individual to play the role in a variety of ways. Only when the individual social pedagogue adopts an active, assertive, independent, personal and relatively strong posture will there be a chance of being important to other professional categories and for the client. In practice, therefore, only when the individual social pedagogue transcends the expectations of the conventional role will there be a chance to be appreciated by other collaborators.

Hämäläinen and Eriksson (2016) and Eriksson (2014) illustrate four important dimensions of the social pedagogical perspective. The first of these focuses on goals in the context to be achieved by means of social pedagogy. In this dimension, the importance of the participants’ socialisation
is foregrounded in the context by, among other things, integration and mobilisation of all community forces with the aim of helping the individual on the community margins. The second dimension focuses on the social pedagogic approach, especially in the relationship between the professional participants and the individual who needs help. The professional participants working in accordance with the social pedagogic perspective are empathic towards the individual requiring help while also being aware of the specific expectations of the professional role. The third dimension focuses on appropriate social pedagogic methods in working with the individual who needs help. Methods considered to be appropriate are the dynamic methods based on the individual as part of the group and part of a wider social context (such as environmental therapy). The fourth dimension focuses on social pedagogy as a resource for professional work with the individual on the community margin and in need of help. In this dimension, the emphasis is on the importance of the goal of creating progress in the relationship with the individual who needs help by means of well-thought-out dialogue (Eriksson, 2014; Hämäläinen & Eriksson, 2016; Basic 2018c).

If we borrow analytical glasses from researchers above, we can read the following from this study: 1) social pedagogic target groups – as represented by a personnel at HVB homes who work with young people in care who have experiences of war and who were subsequently placed in HVB homes in Sweden; 2) social pedagogical arenas – as represented by various contexts that are brought to the fore in the study’s empirical material (migration context while fleeing to Sweden, migration context during integration into Sweden, institution context and school context, among others); and 3) social pedagogical roles – as represented by various roles that are
brought to the fore in the study’s empirical material (such as empathic personnel, competent personnel, incompetent personnel).

**Theory and method**

The study’s general theoretical points of departure are interactionist, though influenced by an ethnomethodological perspective of how people present their social reality (Blumer, 1969/1986; Garfinkel, 2002; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Goffman, 1959/1990). Beyond this general starting point, the concepts of social comparisons, stigmatisation processes and collaboration are especially relevant components in the specific narratives we have analysed (Simmel 1908/1965; Goffman 1963/1990; Snow and Anderson 1987; Scheler 1992; Merton 1996; Willumsen 2007; Lotia & Hardy 2008; Åkerström & Jacobsson, 2009; Hesjedal, Hetland, & Iversen 2015; Sundqvist, Ögren, Padyab, & Ghazinour 2016; Oppdal, Guribye, & Kroger 2017; Basic 2018c; Sirriyeh & Raghallaigh 2018; Majumder 2019; Ryen, & Reinertsen 2019).

The study was conducted based on inspiration from ethnographic tradition (Becker, 1970, 1998; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Gubrium & Holstein, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 156). During an interview, those involved communicate based on day-to-day knowledge of the social context (Riessman, 2008; Silverman, 2015). During the fieldwork in this study, an effort was made to give interviewees space in the discussions so that they could talk about topics of immediate interest that they themselves considered to be important (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The objective was for the interviewer to adopt the role of an interested listener who wanted to find out more about young people who had experienced a war and who had taken refuge in
Sweden, and also about the professional participants who work on a daily basis with these young people in care in Sweden. Conducting interviews in this way created the variation in empirical material required to differentiate – and in the next stage to analyze – those phenomena that are relevant to achieving the study purpose.

The interview material consists of qualitatively oriented interviews with nine employees at HVB homes who work with young people in care who had experiences of war and who were later placed at HVB homes in Sweden. Those interviewed in this study are not trained social pedagogues. Field work has revealed that five out of nine respondents have studied or are still studying at university – three as social workers, one as a social psychologist and one as a teacher – while the other four respondents are educated to upper-secondary level. One of these four has undergone a short training course – an Integration Consultant/Pedagogue Diploma (an online distance course arranged by a company in Sweden) – in conjunction with working at a HVB residential care and family home. During field work on the comparative study, the following job designations for staff at HVB homes working with young people with wartime experience were encountered: “housing support officer”, “coach” and “supervisor”. In the Swedish context, there is an expectation that, just like staff working in other contexts intended to assist and facilitate the individual’s inclusion and integration into society, all staff at HVB homes base their work on the presuppositions that characterize a special-needs education perspective. During the interviews,

---

3 The interview material of this study consists also of qualitatively orientated interviews with six young people in care (from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria) who had experiences of war and who were later placed at HVB homes in Sweden (Basic, 2018c). This part of the study's empirical material is not analyzed within the framework of this study.
an effort was made to obtain detailed descriptions of professional work with these young people, and to find out whether special ideas and/or working methods have been developed.

The following topics were discussed during interviews with personnel at HVB homes: 1) work with young people with experiences of war; 2) treatment (advantages, expectations, results, drawbacks or difficulties); 3) suggested improvements – resources; 4) cooperation with other authorities/authority personnel; and 5) the young people’s accounts of the contributions of social services, the Swedish Migration Agency, the custodian and the school.

The interviews lasted from about 1 to 2 hours and were recorded because the interviewees gave their consent. An interview guide designed around the above analytical interests was used as a basis before and during the interviews. In the course of the interviews, an effort was made to achieve a conversational style, known as ‘active interviewing’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), with an emphasis on openness and follow-up questions rather than the question-and-answer model. All interviews were transcribed from speech to text prior to the analysis work (Potter, 1996/2007; Jefferson, 1985).

Most of the interviews were conducted individually, although one was completed in a group of two interviewees. A dictation microphone was used at all interviews. The collected material was not directly transcribed but was transcribed a few weeks or a few months later. Interviews were conducted from June 2016 to May 2018.
The interview material was analysed based on traditions in qualitative methodology (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; Silverman, 2015). In interviews with institution personnel, the following themes were crystallised: a) previous chaos in reception centres in Sweden that are now more orderly; b) young people singled out and stigmatised by society; c) importance of empathic attitudes and humanity; d) no treatment is offered or given in the institution; e) main task: to help young people to integrate in society; f) there is collaboration with other professional categories, but it is limited (no more than what is essential); g) young people’s age as a problem; h) young people are described as greedy (reason for coming to Sweden); i) maltreatment in institutions; and j) (in)competence of personnel.

Empirical sequences presented in this study were categorised in the material as: ‘young people singled out and stigmatised by society’, ‘importance of empathic attitudes and humanity’, ‘young people’s age as a problem’, ‘young people are described as greedy (reason for coming to Sweden)’, ‘maltreatment in institutions’, ‘(in)competence of personnel’. The choice of empirical examples was based on the study’s purpose and the ability of the examples to elucidate the analytical points.

The interviewees were informed of the purpose of the study and were guaranteed confidentiality and the opportunity to withdraw at any time. In publications and presentations of the results of the investigation, names of people and places and other information that could be used to identify the interviewees were changed or omitted. During the work on the empirical material, not only were the names of individuals omitted or changed but also the names of regions, municipalities,
institutions and districts, as well as means of transport and anything else that could link individuals (the institution) with various cases. The interest of the study relates to experiences as general social phenomena, so there is no reason to document personal data (Ethical vetting, 2016).

Conclusion
In the Swedish debate on social pedagogy, immigration issues have received a lot of attention, and social pedagogy has been seen as a relevant theoretical framework for educational programs promoting social integration of immigrants. The practical function of social pedagogy is seen as a way to deal with all kinds of social and psychosocial needs in all phases of life span in all kinds of educational and care institutions. It is about social-pedagogical know-how, which seems to be relevant for working with people in different, sometimes very difficult life situations.

This study purpose was to provide new understanding about: 1) personal narratives coming out of institutions about the day-to-day work of taking care of young people who experienced a war, fled to Sweden, and were cared for and placed in institutions; and 2) interactive patterns contributing to constructing the category ‘social pedagogue’. The material was gathered through interviews with personnel who work with these young people at residential or care homes.

The general perspective on social pedagogy and research emphasises the importance of recognising the various identities that are actualised and re-actualised during interpersonal interactions in the various social contexts in which the individual acts or is expected to act.
According to Eriksson (2010), historically, the principal use of social pedagogy in Sweden was as a method and attitude for personnel working with children and young people in various institutions.

This study demonstrates that recognition, or the lack thereof, of the young peoples’ various identities may impact on their opportunities for inclusion in Swedish society. The recognition and loss of identity that occurs in various contexts in which young people act or are expected to act is crucial to integration into the new society.

This study shows that success in the inclusion dynamic can be achieved with a ‘good’ dialogue between young people and staff (something that in previous research was highlighted as being central to social pedagogy). In this context, a ‘good’ dialogue is one characterised by intimacy, an interest in the other person’s perspective, openness, and downplaying the power dynamic between the participants in the dialogue. It appears that a ‘good’ dialogue improves the staff member’s empathy and lays the foundations for success in the collaboration with other stakeholders that is an important point of departure for facilitating the inclusion of these young people in their new society.

The study also shows that success in the inclusionary dynamic is not easy to achieve. Stigmatisation and the exclusionary dynamic at a personal, organisational, and societal level, as well as the incompetence of staff, has a negative impact on the young peoples’ self-image that in the next stage may risk crushing their self-esteem. The young peoples’ wartime experiences and
sometimes precarious situations in the new society may also lead to a lack of self-esteem. When there is a failure to facilitate mutual interaction between young people, staff, and the community and the young people lose social recognition from others, this can undoubtedly present an obstacle to self-fulfillment, a stable identity, and integration into the new society.

References


