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Social pedagogy, ethnography, and theoretical sources of inspiration: Analysis of empirical sequences from the social pedagogical context in Sweden

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Introduction

The social pedagogic perspective 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 2018a; Úcar, Soler-Masó, & Planas-Lladó 2020; Basic & Matsuda 2020). Individuals are given validation of their identities by participating in the community, and successful interaction between individuals is a fundamental prerequisite for the successful integration and reintegration of people who are marginalized in society (e.g., unaccompanied young refugees with experiences of war in institutional care in Sweden, and young people with drug and crime-related problems in institutional care in Sweden). Hämäläinen and Eriksson (2016) and Eriksson (2014) highlight the importance of interaction between the individual who is on the margins and those already established in the community. From a social pedagogical perspective, one of the most important

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4 Some parts of this text were published earlier in Swedish in a 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 2018a) 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).
dimensions is to analytically examine relationships between individuals needing assistance and the professional participants tasked with helping these persons.

However, there is a limited possibility in social pedagogy to analyze all social phenomena that are represented in the work with diverse client categories who receive help with inclusion and integration in the community from different professional actors (Eriksson & Winman, 2010; Hämäläinen, 2012; Úcar, 2013; Eriksson, 2014; Kornbeck & Úcar, 2015; Hämäläinen & Eriksson, 2016; Basic 2018a; Úcar, Soler-Masó, & Planas-Lladó 2020; Basic & Matsuda 2020). Common theoretical points of the study involve terms that help facilitate analyses of the context in which social pedagogues operate.

In this study, we focus on the experiences and stories told by: 1) young people who have experienced war, fled to Sweden, and been taken into care and placed in special youth homes, and 2) young people who have experienced drug- and crime-related problems. In addition, we focus on the accounts of members of staff at the institutions working with these young people. Employees at special youth homes in Sweden who work daily with youths who have undergone war, drug, and crime-related problems are engaged in several different identifications alternately or at the same time, such as their work-related identity, gender identity, or ethnic identity (compare with the concept of "intersectionality").

The current article underlines how these intersecting and corresponding identifications operate through a range of interactions in which the individual claims or is appointed identity categories
in various ways. Therefore, the study shows when, how, and by whom identities are created and how it occurs in relation to institutional care placement. When analyzing these ethnographic examples, we integrate the social pedagogical perspective with interactionism by focusing on the accounts, language, action, and gesticulations of the narrator. The purpose of this study is thus to expand on previous theory regarding ethnomethodology and interactions by integrating a social pedagogical perspective to the examples.

The connections between social pedagogy, ethnographic methods, and interactionism with regards to human interaction are analyzed through actions, language, gesticulations, and documents influenced by an ethnomethodological perspective on human narratives. The analysis primarily correlates with the discursive traditions of sociology, social work and social pedagogy in which descriptions are considered both experience-based and a narrative. Focused on the context of practical social and pedagogical work, the analysis is aided by empirical elements.

Firstly, the text accounts for the study’s typical analytical centers, with special importance given to the numerous symbols used in relational interaction, how individuals present themselves, and how individuals form and preserve their identities in the analyzed circumstances. Secondly, classifications and the moral content and contextual limitations of the classifications are analyzed. Thirdly, an account is given of the significance of the numerous theoretical concepts in ethnographic studies that frequently characterize one or more sweeping social pedagogical phenomena analyzed all the way through analytical chapters. Ultimately, there is a debate
regarding the levels of analysis in ethnographic studies and the link to empirical data, as well as the constraints of ethnographic analyses.

The social pedagogical perspective

In the Nordic countries, social pedagogy follows two developmental lines according to Hämäläinen (2012): pedagogical support for those with special social and educational needs (a line of social education supporting growth into membership in society) and social education for all (a line of social care and welfare activities preventing and alleviating social exclusion). The writings of Eriksson and Winman (2010), Hämäläinen (2012), Ucar (2013), Eriksson (2014), Kornbeck and Ucar (2015), Hämäläinen and Eriksson (2016), Basic (2018a), and Basic & Matsuda (2020) provide understanding of some of the expectations that come into play in the numerous social situations involving the role of a ‘social pedagogue’. A social pedagogue who works toward a specific and defined goal is described as an expert in the practical work with clients. The objective is to help or guide the client in conquering difficulties that hinder integration and achievement in the context in which they are working.

Eriksson (2014) and Hämäläinen and Eriksson (2016) demonstrate four crucial aspects of the social pedagogical perspective. The first aspect focuses on the ambitions to be achieved in the context by means of social pedagogy. The importance of the participants’ socialization in this dimension is foregrounded in the context by the integration and mobilization of all community forces with the aim of helping the individual on the margins of the community. The second aspect is a focus on the social pedagogic approach, especially the relationship between the
individual who needs help and the professional participants. Working in accordance with the social pedagogic perspective, while also being aware of the specific expectations of the professional role, the professional participants are empathic towards the individual requiring help. The third aspect focuses on suitable social pedagogic approaches when working with the individuals who are in need of assistance. Approaches thought to be suitable are the dynamic methods centered on the individual as an element of the group and part of a broader social context (e.g., environmental therapy). The last aspect focuses on social pedagogy as a resource for professional work together with the individual on the margins of the community and in need of help. The emphasis is on the significance of the aim in establishing an improvement in the relationship with the individual needing help by means of well thought-out dialogue (Eriksson, 2014; Hämäläinen & Eriksson, 2016, Basic 2018a; Basic & Matsuda 2020).

Using the analytical tools from Eriksson (2014) and Hämäläinen and Eriksson (2016), we can determine the following: 1) social pedagogic target groups, as characterised by youngsters in care and employees at special youth homes in Sweden who work with youngsters in care who were involved in war, drug, or crime-related problems and were later placed in special youth homes in Sweden; 2) social pedagogical arenas, as represented by numerous contexts that are brought to the fore in the study’s empirical material (e.g., war context, drug context, crime context, migration context while fleeing to Sweden, migration context during integration into Sweden, institution context, school context, and meeting context); and 3) social pedagogical roles, as characterised by many roles that are brought to the fore in the study’s empirical material (e.g., empathic social pedagogue, competent social pedagogue, incompetent social pedagogue).
An interactionist and ethnomethodological perspective

The general premise of the study is interactionist, i.e., people create meaning through social interaction. The study is further influenced by an ethnomethodological perspective of how people present their social reality (Blumer, 1969/1986; Garfinkel, 2002). Gubrium and Holstein (1997) indicated that ethnomethodology does not want to clarify what a social world is, but how it arises. With this perspective in mind, the accounts of unaccompanied young refugees and young persons with drug- and crime-related problems and the analysis of these accounts can be viewed as meaning-creating activities to be used in the development and improvement of social pedagogical activities important for including the individual in the community (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Basic, 2012; Björk, Danielsson, & Basic, 2019; Johnsson, Blivik, & Basic, 2021).

According to interactionists, to create an identity, the self (or the I) is a fundamental construction. An interactionist description of the self is centered around two essential ideas: self-reference and role-playing. Self-reference is a subject portraying oneself and describing objects of all kinds in a broader context, such as people in different groups, ideas, opinions, and attitudes (Blumer, 1969/1986). Being recognised in our roles is to be acknowledged in our identities. People in a society play a number of different roles over the course of their lives for different audiences; consequently, the self is shaped and changed in each social situation (Goffman, 1959/1990).

A symbolic interactionism perspective focuses on how the individual would define a situation, how the individual presents themself in different circumstances, how various situations are
combined with other situations to create social rituals, and how the individual’s identity is created, preserved, and re-created. The interactionists also investigate how symbols, such as language, documents, pictures, and films, contribute to the creation of a cultural context.

According to Blumer (1969/1986), symbols are social objects that are given a certain significance, which does not need to be the same for everyone. Various individuals understand each other’s symbols and try to give them meaning. Although various symbols can incite conflicts, they can also create cultural communities. Not only can the symbols be seen as building blocks for ongoing existence and advancement of the context, but also as fuel for conflict (Blumer, 1969/1986).

The actors analyze the individual’s identity not as something static, but as a dynamic field. The identity is not well-defined; it can be discussed and be at the borders between various categories. A single individual can use several different identities at the same time (e.g., gender identity, professional identity, and ethnic identity). The identity can be viewed as the name we give ourselves, and it can change because it is socially constructed (Blumer, 1969/1986; Snow & Anderson, 1987). The interactionist perspective has encouraged us to pay attention to and analyze how the individual creates and re-creates identities in the discussion of the social pedagogical context.

Ethnomethodology is a perspective with a strong interest in the everyday and practical aspects of social life (Garfinkel, 2002). As an ethnomethodologist, the researcher is not primarily interested
in what a social world is, but rather in how it comes about and is designed. The ethnomethodologists, in other words, believe that speech and interaction create the social world instead of simply being examples of social reality. In particular, ethnomethodologists highlight the importance of the world’s creation centered around its members’ communication, as well as drawing interpretations about those interactions. The ethnomethodologists also point out that people in any position try to comprehend and use this comprehension when they put together their own actions (Garfinkel, 2002). According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), people interacting with one another attempt to make their social reality comprehensible and, in doing so, construct their identities. Here, typification fulfills an important function. Dividing and categorizing individuals and events into types – identifying them – is necessary if we are to navigate myriad everyday interactions. Typification is not a static process but changes from one situation to the next. One person’s actions (such as various exercises of power) provide a motive for and an answer to the actions of others, thereby shaping, modifying, and validating the allegiances and self-images of those involved.

For the purposes of present study, this implies that wartime and refugees’ experiences, drug- and crime-related problems, institutionalization, and various types of power dynamic in interaction are less interesting in terms of static baggage and more so in terms of institutional and material interactions in the here and now. Agreeing with the ethnomethodologist’s perspective, the members’ statements develop separate meanings depending on the context in which things are expressed and depending on which individual is speaking. This perspective has stimulated us to focus on analyses of descriptions of reality that members provide concerning the social
pedagogical context and about participation in the practice by the other members in the context (e.g., young refugee/young person, personnel/social pedagogue, social pedagogical context/social community).

For this study, this context means that experiences with war, drug, and crime-related problems and being placed under care are investigated as interactions in which a person’s behavior constitutes a motive for and a reaction to the other people’s behavior. Provided by the social community (Swedish society), perceptions of the treatment are also studied as a cause of an interplay between the participants involved. In this study, ‘role’ is used not only as an unambiguous analytical instrument, but also as an ethnomethodological spirit, an investigation of how the interviewees themselves use role and identity when expressing their own and other’s living conditions and experiences.

**Ethnographic methodology and variation in the empirical material**

As the theoretical focus of this study is social interaction and how people present their social reality (Blumer, 1969/1986; Garfinkel, 2002) the analysis is based on two empirical studies that are qualitative in nature (i.e., recorded conversational interviews, ethnographic observations, and documents). Methodological and analytical inspiration for these studies is found in ethnographic research (Bryman, 2015; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Ethnographic research is characterized by a variety of analyses of different types of empirical material such as for example observations, photographs, interviews, and/or documents (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983;
The conversational interviews and ethnographic observations for these studies were obtained at several special youth homes in Sweden during two research projects: ‘Youth with war experiences in institutional care. A sociological study of young immigrants’ stigma and social comparisons’ (Basic, 2018a; Basic & Matsuda 2020) and ‘Conflicts in youth-care - accounts, comparisons and alliances’ (Basic, 2012, 2018b, 2018c, 2019). The empirical materials for this analysis consist of recorded conversational interviews with 162 project participants (youngsters and various professional categories) and 134 observations of meetings, informal get-togethers, and visits to special youth homes in Sweden, Social Services offices, and the head office of the National Board of Institutional Care in Sweden. In addition, we analyzed media reports and documents produced by the National Board of Institutional Care concerning the unaccompanied young refugees with experiences of war in institutional care in Sweden, and the young persons with drug- and crime-related problems in institutional care in Sweden (Government Offices of Sweden, 2006; Swedish National Board of Institutional Care, 2006, 2009; Aftonbladet 2016, 2018; Sveriges Television 2016, 2017a,b; Upsala nya tidning 2016; Nyheter 24 2017; Expressen 2018).

The analytical starting point of the research project, ‘Youth with war experiences in institutional care. A sociological study of young immigrants’ stigma and social comparisons’, was that, in situations of war, civilians are often a direct target of, and sometimes even participants in, acts of
war. Young people who have come to Sweden after fleeing a war zone have been directly or indirectly involved in the war, and will most likely be affected by this for a substantial part of or the rest of their lives. The aim of the project was to analyze the stories told by young people who have experienced war, fled to Sweden, and been taken into care and placed in special youth homes (“HVB homes”); as well as analyzing the stories told by staff at the institutions working with these young people at special youth homes. The research project’s empirical material consists of eight conversational interviews with nine members of staff at special youth homes; five conversational interviews with six young people in care (from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria); 15 ethnographic observations during visits to special youth homes in Sweden; and eight media reports in the form of newspaper articles and televised reports. The empirical material was collected between 2016 and 2018 (Basic, 2018a; Basic & Matsuda 2020).

The research project, ‘Conflicts in youth-care - accounts, comparisons and alliances’, analyses a collaborative project/intervention in Swedish institutional care of young persons. The intervention was initiated by the Swedish Government through a commission to the Swedish National Board of Institutional Care (NBIC), or Statens institutionsstyrelse (SiS). The intervention was dubbed ‘Counteract Violence and Gangs’ (‘MVG project’), and its goal was to improve the collaboration between social services and the NBIC in order to streamline the interventions for young people taken into care and their families. The intervention took place between 2007 and 2008. The process and the effects of the intervention were reviewed externally

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5 Residential homes for children and young persons in Sweden. 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.
by two research groups at Lund University and Stockholm University in Sweden (Basic, Thelander, & Åkerström, 2009; Lundström, Sallnäs, & Vogel, 2012). The overall goal of the research project at Lund University (which was not part of the practical intervention) was to analyse conflicts that have been described and observed, alliances and explanatory comparisons observable during interviews, observations, and documents collected as empirical material as part of and following the process evaluation of the intervention. Lastly, analytical discoveries are put into a more general collaborative context, which is represented by earlier research as the societal phenomenon ‘collaboration’. The research projects’ empirical material consists of conversational interviews with 147 project participants (young persons in care, their parents, and different professionals from social services, the NBIC, and the project); 119 ethnographic observations of organized meetings, informal encounters before and after interviews and meetings, and visits to institutions, social service offices, and the main offices of the NBIC; and 10 documents published internally and on the Internet by the NBIC as part of an intervention (Basic, 2012, 2018b,c, 2019).

Empirical sequences presented in this study were categorized in the empirical material as social pedagogical work-interviews, social pedagogical work-observations, and social pedagogical work-documents. Our choices of empirical examples for analysis were guided by the study’s purpose to analyze the analytical connections between social pedagogy, ethnographic methods, and interactionism with regards to human interaction through language, action, gesticulations, and documents influenced by an ethnomethodological perspective on human oral narratives. Furthermore, the choice of empirical example was guided by the analytical quality of the
sequence (i.e., the extent to which the example clarified the analytical point we wanted to highlight).

The empirical material for both studies was collected and analyzed based on ethical aspects important for planning and implementing research projects. The informants were notified of the intent of the studies and were assured confidentiality and the opportunity to leave at any time. The names of people and places and other information that could be used to identify the informants (municipalities, regions, institutions, districts, or methods of transportation) were altered or excluded throughout the work on the empirical material, and in publications and presentations of the results of the studies. There was no reason to document personal data, as the interest of the study relates to experiences as general social phenomena.

**Conclusion**

Ethnographic studies are characterized by the researcher’s active pursuit to create a variation in the empirical material, which is necessary to discern and subsequently analyze social phenomena. For example, the researcher poses open questions that cannot be answered with a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answer during interviews and/or communicates with informants during fieldwork in order to stimulate narratives. Another way of creating variation in the empirical material is the collection and analysis of different types of qualitative empirical data, such as interviews, observations, documents, photos, videos, media reports, and blog communications.
This study considers the analytical connections between social pedagogy, ethnographic methods, and interactionism with regards to human interaction through language, action, gesticulations, and documents influenced by a ethnomethodological perspective on human oral narratives. The analysis mainly relates to the discursive traditions within sociology and social pedagogy in which descriptions are regarded as both experience-based and narrative. The analysis is aided by empirical elements focused on the context of practical social and pedagogical work.

Accounts of unaccompanied young refugees and young persons with drug- and crime-related problems are viewed as meaning-creating activities to be used in the development and improvement of social pedagogical activities important for including the individual in the community. The text accounts for the general analytical basis of ethnographic studies, with an emphasis on the various symbols used in interpersonal interactions, how individuals present themselves, and how individuals create and maintain their identities in the analysed contexts.

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