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Poly-theorism in the field of residential child care.

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Abstract

This article discusses the use of professional theories in the field of residential child care. The initial part proposes that professionals by acquiring theoretical insight become more capable of providing adequate support for young people and that there is a need for a multitude of theories. Because care homes accommodate different young people, the professional must alternate between theories and because everyone is a whole person with multiple needs and dispositions, the professional should apply several theories in parallel. The second part substantiates these claims by presenting a number of theories that may be advantageous in the field of residential child care. Together the various theories cover a wide spectrum of issues in young people's lives. The concluding section proposes a new textbook-tradition. The author agues that there is a need for textbooks where most relevant theories are presented thoroughly, where the application of the theories are described and where it is explained how theories may be alternatives to each other or complementary to each other.

Keywords

Professional theory, theorism, poly-theorism, professional training, specialist literature

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Theory, theorism and poly-theorism

When using the word theory it is important to be aware this is an ambiguous term, i. e. a term that may refer to more than one concept. By theory is sometimes meant a tentative and unverified assumption, as in the statement 'it is only a theory'. Theory is then synonymous to hypothesis. In this article the term theory is not used in such a way. By theory is meant here a coherent description that holds a set of special concepts, axioms and explanations. Several theories also involve methods. There are large theories and small theories, main-theories and sub-theories. The former ones are often referred to as paradigms, grand theories or schools of thought.

Within the field of residential child care there is a widespread endorsement for theorism, the belief that action should be guided by theory. Many professionals have arrived at the conclusion that their ability to describe, explain, predict, and carry out relief measures increased through the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. The theories are not seen as alternatives to knowledge gained through practice, but as most valuable supplements.

However, in parallel with theorism there is considerable scepticism towards the application of professional theories. Some of those who oppose argue that it is difficult, or impossible, to verify theories about social life, human action and mental functioning. There is no guaranteed research findings. Another objection deals with validity. According to critics, there are hardly any universal truths about human beings. Consequently, the theories that may be true have a limited validity. Critics also argue that the use of theories may cause blindness for what

is unique with persons, social groups or situations. Furthermore, critics argue that theorism implies a technocratic attitude towards vulnerable people. By using theories, human beings are reified, transformed into objects.

The advocates of theorism are not a homogenous group. By making an allusion to sociology of religion, one can simplify and describe two variants of theorism: mono-theorism and poly-theorism. The former is the notion that in every subject area there is only one true and adequate theory. To acquire insight into this theory implies having professional knowledge. To acquire insight into any alternative theory implies delusion. Mono-theorism often becomes visible in harsh controversies over professional issues.

Poly-theorism, also referred to as eclecticism, is the notion that several theories may be relevant in one subject area. The professional therefore should learn as many as possible of these theories and regard each of them as a potentially useful tool. An important argument for poly-theorism is the fact that there are differences between human beings. While people have some qualities in common, on several variables there are differences. This implies that a theory that is valid for Tom and Jane may be inadequate to John and his problems. Differences between people may be the result of different environmental impact. Observed differences may also, however, reflect different genotypes, in other words differences in inborn characteristics, for example, differences in temperament.

Another important argument for poly-theorism is the fact that every person has several needs and dispositions. To formulate a theory is an abstraction process where some aspects are emphasised while others are disregarded. Because

theories are radical simplifications, mono-theorism implies reductionism. By combining several theories, the professional can grasp more of the complexity of the person he or she is trying to help. In other words, the professional can reach a more holistic perspective. The professional may also be able to meet more of the young person's needs and to help realise more of his or her dispositions.

As it appears, the arguments for poly-theorism take into account much of the critique against the use of theories. To further substantiate advice in favour poly-theorism, the next section includes a presentation of some theories that may be useful in the field of residential child care. To be able to present a sufficient number of theories the presentation of each theory is brief. Only the essence of the single theory and a few possible applications are described. Still, the selection of theories presented is far from complete. Some readers may miss theories they consider most relevant in residential child care. If so, this will just further underpin the advice proposed in this paper.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis was founded by Sigmund Freud and further developed as a theory of child development by successors like Anna Freud (1993), Melanie Klein (1975), Donald Winnicott (1987) and Erik Homburger Erikson (1980). Freud (1960, 2010) was a radical determinist describing how memories can be suppressed into the unconscious, and thereby tie up mental energy and determine thoughts, feelings and actions. Even though residential care professionals do not apply the free association technique as described by Freud, this method is an archetype for supportive approaches with some young people.

When sensing that a young person struggles from the impact of memories, the professional tries to bring forth a situation of confidence where the young person can trust himself or herself. Thereafter the professional tries to be a sensitive and supportive interlocutor. Heart-to-heart-talks over difficult issues take up much of the professional's working hours.

In his book *Civilization and its discontents*, Freud (1961) describes the structural model and humans' adjustment to cultural rules and expectations. According to Freud, the superego bears upon conscience as an inner regulatory mechanism. The structural model is a reference for residential care professionals describing how routines and expectations make up an outward structure that helps the young person to achieve ego strength and consequently self-control (Trieschman, 2010). The model is, however, also supporting arguments against too much regulation and strictness. The model illustrates that upbringing is a balancing act where one must try to find a reasonable middle course.

Attachment theory

Attachment theory is the synthesis of psychoanalysis and ethology, i. e. the study of animal or human behaviour and how adaptive traits have been selected through the history of evolution. According to the founder of attachment theory, John Bowlby (1989), children have an inborn disposition to seek proximity to a caregiver. The caregiver's responses during the toddler age determine the child's internal working model. This is a mental framework the child applies to predict how the caregiver will respond and to plan its own actions. Later the working model is generalised to new relations. Because of this, the quality of the first

relationships is of outmost importance for the child's future social development. While municipal child welfare professionals often apply attachment theory in revealing failure of care (cf. Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978), in residential care attachment theory is applied as a framework in efforts to give young people experiences that will enable them to have positive expectations to others. Through lasting patience and support from the professional the young person gradually forms alternative working models (Goldsmith, 2007; Taylor, 2012).

Behaviourism

Behaviourism is a theoretical tradition that supports two sub-theories, classical behaviourism and operant behaviourism. The former describes how emotional responses are established through stimulus association (Wolpe, 1958). Several young people living in residential care homes have fear responses that restrict self-expression and life chances. By applying methods from classical behaviourism, residential care workers can help these young people. Operant behaviourism deals with operant behaviour, i. e. intentional behaviour directed towards realising an objective (Skinner, 1969). From this theory residential care professionals can learn that efforts to reduce the frequency of problem behaviours may bring forth even more problematic forms of avoidance behaviour. Therefore, professionals should focus on young people's pro-social actions. Operant behaviourism can also inspire professionals to organise training where young people acquire knowledge about types of social situations and about adequate behaviours in the different situations. Role-play is advised in such training so that the young people acquire self-efficacy, i.e. the belief in the

ability to perform optimally to cope in real life situations (Goldstein, Glick & Gibbs, 1998).

Since the 1980s, cognitive behaviour modification has been an additional approach within behaviourism. Cognitive behaviour modification is a synthesis of operant behaviourism and social constructivism, a theory that is outlined in the next paragraph. Those young people who are helped by cognitive behaviour modification learn to identify thoughts that promote and maintain problem behaviour. They also learn to replace the thoughts with self-instructions and self-evaluations that promote and maintain alternative adequate behaviours. Hopefully, the young persons acquire a capacity for meta-reasoning and thereby in some sense become their own social educators.

Social constructivism

Social constructivism is a theory originated by Lev Vygotsky (1962). He proposed that our reasoning is carried out by the use of language. Most children can pronounce their first words when they are about one year old, and the child soon uses single words and short phrases to make contact and to express himself or herself. After some time the child discovers that it is possible to use verbal language as a tool to solve problems and to regulate one's own behaviour, meaning that one can formulate solutions and self-instructions in sentences. The language becomes a tool of thought. This implies that grown-ups can promote the child's cognitive development by stimulating the learning of words, concepts and syntactical form. Based on Vygotsky's theory several scholars have worked out manuals describing in detail how professional can

carry out compensatory measures to help young people who have linguistic and cognitive deprivation (Bodrova & Leong, 2009; Hayes, Landers & Dombro, 2006). Such manuals are applied by many residential child care professionals.

Contrary to those who claim the existence of an inborn linguistic structure (cf. Chomsky, 1968), Vygotsky argues that our language is an artefact, a cultural tool created and mediated by humans. He also claims that the concept structure in one language to some extent differs from the structure in other languages. Therefore, to learn a language implies adopting a social construction of reality. This aspect of Vygotsky's theory is the basis for linguistic hermeneutics where the professional tries to understand the client's reasoning by acquiring some insight into the language, or the particular language variant, the client applies (Parton, 2012). This is an approach applied by many residential care professionals, especially those working with children or young people from other countries.

Existentialist pedagogy

Existentialist pedagogy is a theory inspired by the works of Søren Kierkegaard (2001) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1992). Carl Rogers (1960) and Jens Bay (2005) are scholars that have made important contributions in preparing this as theory useful in residential child care. Instead of a cause explanation, as with most other theories, existentialist pedagogy offers a motive explanation of human behaviour. According to Rogers and Bay, humans are not objects determined by causes, but acting agents. Residential care professionals oriented towards existentialist pedagogy invite young people into discussions where an alternative

to determinism is offered. The professional argues that through sincere deliberation on moral and social issues one can realise free will. The young people are urged to consider possible consequences of different actions. During the discussions, the young people are introduced to concepts like determinism, hypothetical thinking, autonomy, subject, object, causal explanation, motive explanations and fatalism.

Empowerment theory

Empowerment theory is based on the work of Paulo Freire (2003). It offers an alternative to the widespread deficit-perspective where the client is regarded as unable and helpless and where long-lasting or permanent relief measures are proposed. According to scholars in the empowerment tradition, the deficit-perspective is self-fulfilling. The client becomes what he or she is said to be (Solomon, 2006). The alternative offered is to transfer the initiative to the client by expressing a belief in his or her ability to judge and to cope. In several residential care homes, young people are encouraged to reflect on their own situation and to propose solutions. An advanced approach in the empowerment tradition is called *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1979). Here the juveniles are invited to take part as actors in a play dealing with problems they experience in their own lives. The young actors can cut off the play at any moment to propose measures that will bring an alternative course of events in the play and hopefully also in real life.

Logical constructivism

Logical constructivism is a theory formulated by Jean Piaget (2001). According to Piaget, the child's development is a movement through a series of universal stages. By proposing a stage model Piaget emphasises qualitative changes more than quantitative changes. He describes how the child when reaching a new stage comes into possession of new capacities. The child also leaves out ways of perceiving and reasoning characteristic for the previous stage. Logical constructivism has been thoroughly revised because of critiques from many quarters (Bidell & Fisher, 1992; Donaldson, 1978). The revised version (Piaget, Henriques & Ascher, 1992) is recognised as a relevant theory and as an invaluable source for those who should carry out qualified assessments and therefore need to know children's competences and challenges at different ages (Sloutsky 2015).

Piaget describes young people as active beings that move towards a realistic construction of reality through the process of accommodation. Equipped with this insight professionals can promote cognitive development by providing access to nature, built environments, toys and tools that invite exploration. The professional can also promote development by the using the Socratic method, i. e. asking questions that invite truth-seeking reflection and discussion.

Kohlbergian psychology

Kohlbergian psychology is a term often used to designate a theory formulated by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984). The theory is a further development of Piaget's logical constructivism but is also heavily influenced by the Kantian tradition on

normative ethics (Kant, 2010). According to Kohlberg, moral reasoning is the central source of pro-social actions: The more mature the reasoning the stronger the inclination to act in a pro-social manner. Kohlberg describes how one can promote young people's moral development by letting them take part in discussions over dilemma situations. He has formulated a number of small stories that can be used in group discussions. When the young people reach a conclusion about how the main person in the story ought to act, the professional should apply the Socratic method. The professional should forward a question that reveals the limitations of the young people's conclusion. This will work as an incitement to re-think the problem and the proposed conclusion. Hopefully, this will lead to accommodation and consequently a more mature reasoning. Several residential child care professionals have been introduced to Kohlberg's theory through the ART-program (Goldstein et al., 1998). This proposes an updated description on how the Kohlbergian approach can be carried out in groups with young people with behavioural difficulties.

Narrative theory

Narrative theory describes how we all formulate a life story, that the story affects our self-image and thereby our ability to meet the challenges of life. To some extent, narratives are realistic accounts holding numerous facts concerning events and persons. However, personal histories also contain mental constructions. A person's narrative is his or her version of what has happened. When formulating a narrative, people are assigned roles and episodes are linked in a chronology of claimed causes and intention. Some narratives are biased in ways that cause problems for the actual persons. Professionals in residential

care homes can initiate a process where young people deconstruct problematic elements of their narratives and formulate alternative parts. As described in the methodological literature the professional here should use a variant of Socratic questioning (Hall, 1997; Madigan, 2011).

Environmental Psychology

Environmental psychology is a theory about how people experience and are influenced by psychical surroundings (Cold, 2001). Most people seem to be heavily influenced by both nature and built environments. The surroundings have an impact on quality of life, psyche, and behaviour. Although it is possible to identify individual differences, differences between cultures, and changes over time, there seems to be some universal appraisals about aesthetic quality. When it comes to the design of buildings there seems to be a preference for a certain extent of complexity combined with some symmetry. If the design is too plain, the building appears as monotonous, boring and unfriendly. If the design is too complex in form of material combinations, colour combinations, projection and canopies the building appears confusing and annoying. Also, when it comes to interior design, there seems to be a universal or widespread preference for a certain degree of complexity. Some interiors provide too little sensory stimulation while others provide too much. Another universal aesthetic preference is about greenery. Most people enjoy staying in green settings, both natural environment and parks or gardens. Green settings also seem to have a mentally restorative effect on humans (Faber Taylor & Kuo, 2009). Because of these and many other insights from the field of environmental psychology, it is possible to design and furnish residential care homes with aesthetic quality.

Professional can also provide aesthetic quality through daily efforts. Cleaning, tablecloths, curtains, candles, pot plants, vases and jars are some key words. There is reason to believe that such efforts have a major impact on the quality of the care provided.

Anthrozoology

Anthrozoology is a theory about interactions between humans and animals (Melson, 2001). Several scholars oriented toward this theory have sought to identify and measure positive effects of human-animal relationship. For some people the company with an animal can improve quality of life by reducing the feeling of loneliness. Contact with dogs and other animals that have an affectionate and social nature can make vulnerable persons feel valued. Anxious persons may feel more secure when they are together with an animal. Animal husbandry may prevent health problems among physically inactive persons because taking care of an animal implies activity. Mastering challenging activities like horseback riding or dog mushing may strengthen vulnerable persons' self-confidence. For some young people contact with animals may be a training venue for caretaking, a venue that is particularly important for boys from typical patriarchal families. These boys may have their first nurturing experiences because animal care is considered a gender-neutral activity. It is not 'girlish' to hug and stroke the dog or cat. Several residential care professionals apply anthrozoology and try to realise positive effects of contact between young people and animals.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a theory about subjective experience (Houston, 2014). Edmund Husserl (1970) has formulated the basic parts of the theory. Kant (2007) and Husserl argues that our perceptions are not neutral representations but processed versions. Beyond this consensus there are, however, substantial differences between the epistemology of Kant's and Husserl's theories. While Kant describes a set of universal a priori-forms shared by all humans, Husserl argues that two persons may experience the same thing differently. According to Husserl, the psychical, cultural and social environment we have spent our childhood and adolescence in determines how we perceive. An implication of this claim is that the residential child care professionals can reach insight into young people's subjective experience by learning about their social and cultural background. This can be done by visiting families and communities, but also through reading sociological and anthropological texts. As we see, phenomenology brings a link between residential child care and the social sciences. In a multi-cultural and heterogeneous society, this link is of utmost importance.

Polytechnicalism

Polytechnicalism is an educational theory that represents a compromise between liberal art education and narrow vocationalism. According to the theory, a natural human life is a productive life. For citizens in modern countries a professional occupation brings self-realisation, self-esteem, social integration and a more general ability to manage life. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1977),

John Dewey (1900), Nadezhda Krupskaya (1957) and Anton Makarenko (2005) formulated the basics ideas of polytechnicalism. Makarenko (1951) also put these ideas into practice in an orphanage where he developed an educational system with high quality teaching and job training. Several contemporary researchers have revealed that looked-after children and young people are in high risk of educational failure and that such disadvantage predicts unemployment and other social problems later in life (Berridge, Dance, Beecham & Field, 2008; Francis, 2008; Jackson 2001; Simon & Owen, 2006; Vinnerljung, Öman & Gunnarson, 2005). There is also methodological literature describing how professionals can carry out efforts to promote young people's ability to cope with academic challenges (Cameron, Connelly & Jackson, 2015; Roopnarinen & Johnson, 2009).

System theory

System theory has been an influential tradition in child welfare for almost half a century. The essence of this theory is that the individual is determined by systems (Bertalanffy, 1969; Nichhols & Schwartz, 1998). The cause of the person's problems is not inside him or her, but in systems like the family, the neighbourhood, the school class, the leisure activity group, or the street gang. Therefore, to help the individual the helping efforts must be directed towards these systems. Cybernetic (Bateson, 1972), strategic (Haley, 1990), structural (Minuchin, 1974), ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and postmodern system theory (Cheon & Murphy, 2007) are the most important sub-theories within the systemic tradition. Several residential care professionals apply system theories when trying to integrate the young people in the local school or in after-school

activities. These theories are also useful when the professional tries to better the young person's relationship to his or her family, when a return to the biological family is decided, or when a foster care placement is proposed. System theory is included in other theories relevant for residential care. For example, in attachment theory cybernetics is used to describe the interaction between the child and the caregiver (Bowlby, 1989).

Resilience theory

Resilience theory is a theory focusing on why some young people succeed despite adversity (Greene, 2009). The theory's proposer emphasise the fact that most causal explanations dealing with social problems are non-universal, and therefore predictions based on such explanations are uncertain. Often protective factors within the young person or within his or her family and network obstruct the fulfilment of pessimistic predictions. Textbook presentations of typical protective factors can inspire professionals to identify, utilise and in some cases amplify such factors. There is a wide spectre of factors that may prevent future problems, as example caring parents, dedicated teachers, exiting leisure time activities, self-efficacy, an easy-going temperament and good cognitive capacity. To some extent, there is an analogy between resilience theory and empowerment theory.

Mentalisation theory is a reformulation and further development of attachment theory (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist & Target, 2004; Bateman & Fonagy, 2016). Compared to attachment theory mentalisation theory is more heavily inspired by cognitive psychology, especially social constructivism. To mentalise is to

apprehend one's own or other's reactions as manifestations of mental states. This capacity is a prerequisite for affect regulation and for the ability to adapt to the needs of others. The infant-caregiver interaction is the starting point for the child's development towards a capacity to mentalise. When the infant is upset, the parents normally attune to the infant and mirror his or her emotions. This enables the infant to experience emotions more clearly, and activates the child's latent system for meta-cognitive activity. Some parents fail to initiate such a developmental process, which may have negative consequences for the child's social development. In such cases professionals can carry out compensatory measures through patient and authentic presence and through candid and sincere discussions on empathetic reasoning and emotions. The imparting of relevant concepts should be included in these efforts.

Conclusion

As we see, professional theories make up a reservoir of ideas that may be advantageous to provide adequate support to young people in residential care. Many aspects of human development and the human condition are dealt with in the various theories. Because residential child care professionals meet different young people and young peopleare individuals with several needs and dispositions, there is need for a multitude of theories. The professional should not regard theories as competing parties, but see each theory as a cognitive tool that might shed some light over a multifarious reality. While a particular theory may be the best alternative in one case, other theories may be more relevant in other instances. Most often, however, several theories are complementary and should be used in parallel. By having a loaded toolbox of theories, the

professional is more able to tailor an arrangement adjusted to the young person concerned, or to the actual group.

Even though there is an extensive use of theories in the field of residential child care, there still is an unrealised potential. To promote poly-theorism there is need for textbooks where most relevant theories are presented thoroughly, where the application of the theories are described and where it is explained how theories may be alternatives to each other or complementary to each other. Students in training for residential care work need such books that can also be valuable support for professionals. However, if one makes a search in the catalogues of the academic publishing houses one will struggle to find the recommended kind of textbooks. There are several well-written and useful books on residential care. There are books holding a comparison of residential care in different countries (Courtney & Iwaniec, 2009) and books with a thematic description of different aspects of residential child care (Anglin 2002; Berridge & Brodie, 1998; Trieschman, Whittaker & Brendtro, 2010). In addition, there are books where one theory and its application are described in detail (Barton, Conzalez & Tomlinson, 2012; Bertolino, 2015). The textbooks called for above are, however, hard to find. This fact can be contrasted with the state in developmental psychology where there is a long tradition for poly-theoretical textbooks. A large number of psychologists have written books where there are chapters for the different developmental areas and where each chapter holds accounts of several theoretical perspectives on the area in question, such as, for example, Bee and Boyd (2010), Berger (2005), Berk (2006), Lerner (2015) and Siegler, Deloache and Eisenberg (2006). These authors demonstrate intellectual candour and encourage a pragmatic attitudes towards theories. Hopefully, some

academic scholars and experienced professional in the field of residential child care will emulate this textbook tradition and thereby supply an already solid corpus to the benefit for vulnerable young people.

About the author

Terje Halvorsen has a background from the residential care sector where he worked for more than ten years. He is now a professor at Nord University in Norway. Most of his research is on social pedagogy.

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