Title: Working with Children at Risk in the Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism (IS) and Situational Action Theory (SAT)

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Abstract

This paper indicates how practice (treatment, social work) may benefit from the application of notions deriving from symbolic interactionism and Situational Action Theory. I conducted interviews with therapists from a day care treatment centre. The centre offers educational assistance and counselling to children and youth aged from three to eighteen. In the article I present four methods of treatment of children and youth at risk (including juvenile offenders), which I draw from the analysis of in-depth interviews. The professionals who would benefit from applying the ideas presented in the article are probation officers, social workers, counsellors, street workers, and therapists.

Keywords: *children at risk, social work, treatment, symbolic interactionism, Situational Action Theory*

Introduction

While working among street children (juvenile offenders, neglected and abused children, who spend most of their leisure time in the street environment out of adults' control), I found a therapeutic meaning of talk and observation (listening, commenting on emotions expressed by children, setting boundaries, giving clear instructions) held during everyday activities and games organized by day care centres in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. People are symbolic creatures.

Therefore, human behaviour is often caused not by objective facts that result from a particular social situation, but by concepts that people attribute to those facts (Lynch, McConatha, 2006) and by the *perception-choice process*. This process can be either automated (expressing a habit) or reasoned (making a judgment) (Wikström, Oberwittler, Treiber, Hardie, 2013). From the perspective of symbolic interactionism (IS) and Situational Action Theory (SAT), the processes of treatment and social work may be perceived as a particularly important kind of social interactions that, if properly planned, decide about the stocks of knowledge and actions of social service clients. Meanings, definitions of the situation, social stocks of knowledge (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Thomas, 2002; Stryker, 2002; Keller, 2011) are derived from interpersonal interactions. Personal change is an aspect of a larger social process and setting; self-change, in fact, is expected as the nature of important social relationships shift (Meddin, 1982; Stryker, 2002; Wikström et. al., 2013). Meanwhile, SAT theory aims to integrate individual and environmental perspectives by proposing that behaviours are the result of a perception-choice process guided by the interaction between a person's propensity to behave in a certain way and their exposure to settings (Loader, 2013). Humans are the most important part of the environment, which is why a social worker could become a creative power in the settings.

It may be said that a child at risk defines situations without respecting commonly acceptable social rules. Thus, an opportunity to steal, abuse somebody weaker or avoid school duty becomes a chance for a problem child, which s/he willingly takes advantage of, whereas for other children (so-called conformists), it is either a temptation they must overcome or a possibility they do not perceive as an alternative action. The main reason why most people, most of the time, do not engage in most acts of crime is that they generally do not perceive crime as an action alternative (Wikström et. al., 2013). If a problem child notices a wallet left through inattention, s/he will not consider long whether s/he can appropriate it. The child would feel 'a pang of conscience' (would feel guilty) if s/he did not do that. Simply such a definition of this situation activates in her/his mind; a wallet activates a significance of money and potential benefits that the child can derive from it. The child will boast among her or his peers that s/he has "cash," will buy necessary things, "will buy her/himself" a temporary approval and respect of the community. The mind of a conformist will activate a reverse pattern of the interpretation in such a situation. This thinking pattern demands that s/he will restrain a natural inclination to ill-gotten gains since the money belongs to somebody else, so – regardless of potential benefits that the profit could bring – the conformist is aware of the fact that it would be theft. Even if the conformist succumbed to

temptation, s/he would feel pangs of conscience. The feeling of guilt would make the conformist give the wallet back. Juvenile offenders have a set of definitions of situations different from the rest of society who obey socially adopted rules. People mostly respect specific values and comply with socially adopted rules neither because they feel a moral responsibility that is inherent in them nor because they have a general inclination for appropriate or inappropriate conduct; they rather do so because other people made them aware (or not) of the significance of those values and rules. Socialisation – understood herein as an intentional transmission of specific definitions of situations – denotes creating a human being.

Research Methodology

I interviewed four therapists (T1-T4) from the Association for the Help to Children and Youth – *The Guardian Angel Home* in Katowice (Poland). I applied purposive sampling. The people involved in the study are leaders and founders of this organisation, which has gained domestic and international recognition. The organisation was granted the PRO PUBLICO BONO award as the best citizen initiative in Poland in 2011. Day care treatment centres offer educational assistance and counselling to children and youth aged from three to eighteen. Besides helping children and their parents by means of educational and therapeutic work, the Association also cooperates extensively with the local social assistance institutions, schools, and the local government in order to provide children, youth, and their parents with even more effective assistance. The therapists involved in the study also have experience in street work with children and youth who breach rules of conduct (including those stated in the law). I interviewed each of the therapists once. The interviews were tape-recorded and loosely structured.

The method of corrective presence

The presence of a counsellor among deprived and depraved children/youth is a corrective method. The counsellor, with their physical presence, brings in their own social stock of knowledge, their own definitions of the situation and, above all, their own attitudes towards a client, all of which have an influence on the social experience and resources of concepts or significances activated by the problem child. Corrective presence should concentrate not only on the cognitive reconstruction of a client's consciousness but also on the fulfilment of his/her needs and

creating new normative orientations, which activate a desired significance and, as a result, a positive social action. In such a way, more and more outside world referents gain positive significance, which consequently activates proper social behaviour. Thus, the child – even subconsciously – adopts the counsellor's world of values and the definitions of the situation. The method of corrective presence activates the processes of identification with a role model, modelling, copying or emulating.

We model, especially if there is already some relationship with a kid, e.g. girls often want to have the same hairstyle as we do. Or they speak in the way that we do, they use similar expressions that they often do not understand. (T3)

Obviously, we are much more ideal counsellors than people because, let's admit it, we pay much more attention to our behaviour at work or to the way we function there, in order to make our behaviour a model. It is clear that, for example, a therapist who sits with his client for an hour is a very positive, ideal model since he focuses only on his patient; but at home, he does not necessarily always focus on his wife. So, obviously, we always pay particular attention to the way we behave, not only in the sense of behaving well, but behaving reasonably, in order to model by means of what I do, say, how I solve conflicts in a group, how I react to arguments, e.g. in a group, or how I respond to requests. (T2)

I have experience that a child at risk cannot really rely on an adult. (…) there is nobody who protects the child, who teaches them different things, who supports the child, is older, and has more experience. Most of our children's relationships with parents are more like partnerships and children treat their parents as friends, so actually they cannot rely on their parents. We mostly have mothers bringing up their children, who treat their daughters as friends and put them in a position in which the children become confidants whom the mothers tell about personal problems with guys, which is often too much for the children. (T3)

A good counsellor saves the authority of an adult since this authority has degraded among juvenile delinquents and problem children. An adult should invoke associations with responsibility, safety, initiative; however, these associations are often reversed. The theory of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969, Stryker, 2002) explains the way people gather and adopt the meanings which precede and determine human behaviour. This process takes place not only as a result of adopting the social perspective (*generalised other*) by the person

– which is the last stage of socialisation – but mainly because of the phase of the observation of social roles performed by the people in the immediate settings (interactionists talk about the "play stage" and "game stage"). The internalisation of the value system and the rules of social life may also occur as a result of an accidental meeting that may turn out to be significant for the life trajectory of an individual. I am referring here to the contiguity and bonds with the so-called significant others.

The positive feedback method

Words have a performative dimension. Interpretations and definitions are formulated in order to understand diverse social situations and activate social actions. One of the most important definitions for our performance is that in which we do not refer ourselves to objects of the outside world, labelling them with particular meanings, but we ourselves become such objects to which the outside world attaches significance. The point of treatment lies in the assumption that it is possible to redefine the self of a problem child. However, even the same personal traits may be treated as either liabilities or assets. It is important that a counsellor or a social worker believes in the possibilities of a child/young person and is able to guide him/her towards proper social actions. One therapist describes how one can undertake that kind of verbal intervention based on the communication of significance:

> *I notice that somebody is a leader in a group. So I tell him – you are a leader, you have leadership abilities, you eagerly get involved, you organise something well. Taking this into consideration, when I talk with a child and he tells me that he is the greatest rascal of them all, I can tell him: »Man, you have such a predisposition that you can become a very good manager and sales representative.« You know, 'cause he is efficient. For example, here children collect chestnuts and sell them to a passer-by and say: »'scuse me, sir, will you buy it? I need money for a pencil case.« This is an excellent sales representative, who makes money on nothing, on any worthless product, thanks to his work. But this is blameworthy because children say: »You beg, you trade, you cannot do that.«And I say, »Why not?« He meets new people, gets to know them, makes contacts. Of course there are some boundaries (…).* (T1)

The above theoretical analysis indicates that in methods applied in social work it is very important to praise these personality traits exhibited by the child in

learning situations which may constitute a constructive element of their self – the element (one's resources) that they will later invoke while making life decisions.

The method of the organisation of new social experiences

Organising intentionally planned social experiences constitutes the third method of treatment, which can be derived from IS and SAT. If due to poverty of his/her family, a child has been humiliated so far (sneering, rejection by peers at school), a counsellor should – not always being able to solve this problem directly – change the social experiences of that child by means of showing him/her respect, giving individual attention, and appreciating his/her personal talents. On the one hand, the new social experiences are created by changing objective living conditions (social work), but on the other, by cognitive reorganisation of the hitherto social experiences (new definitions of the situation). Perception and action of an individual depends not only on the features of the setting in which the individual takes part, but also on his/her relevant previous experiences and personal characteristics (Wikström et. al., 2013). Below, one of the therapists describes his own interventions. The first part of his statement concerns social work. The second part refers to an action category that – following SI – may be called the definition of the situation:

1. (…) everyday work, these daily interventions, constitutes equalisation of opportu-nities. (…) we have a washing machine, a dryer, a shower and a toilet, soap, washing powder in all centres. Actually, we do not have problems with children school attendance anymore; mostly due to the fact that children have an opportunity to have a shower, do the laundry, and they are clean when they go to school the next day. Another problem is when they are not understood by teachers, which is a slightly different problem. But when they have a good appearance, there is no such a chasm, so they go to school willingly. This is the first step when you change the child's world. It is giving the child support in his or her reality, education, work, family, so it is the family support. I believe the actions aimed at family support are most successful. We have most failure if for some reasons we do not manage to cooperate with the family.

2. I will not tell an eight-year-old boy that he cannot rely on his parents. To a fifteen-year-old, I can already say: »Man, I know one thing – you can rely on yourself.« I can ask him: »Who else can you rely on?« And he will mention child welfare institutions, maybe something else, and I can have a serious conversation with him when he can

feel frustrated that he cannot count on his parents. When I tell him »You know, your parents' life is maybe not necessarily as they have planned it.« I can seek understanding. I can stir certain emotions in him. I will not do it with an eight-year-old. Children do not talk about problems, but about facts. Corrective social work, within an individual or a group therapy, starts when somebody acknowledges that he has a problem and knows what it is. (…) These children have crises. They have a problem when, e.g., they get a bad grade at school. And these are the topics we talk about, making them aware that there are different situations and one does not have to receive only As; you start to teach them adequacy. (T1).

It is very important to hone an identity of children/youth at risk. The adoption of important social skills, such as the ability to "ask others for help," without which nobody can function optimally in our world, depends on the comprehension and definition of one's abilities. Below there is a description of an organisation of social experiences for people who at a particular time show exaggerated self-esteem:

In a sense, I 'catch out' these megalomaniacs at a different moment. For example, somebody says that they are very good at something, that they can manage, that they will improve these fifteen Fs on their own, they do not need our help. »OK. You have two weeks. We will see what you will be able to do. Let's try.« Or a guy tells me he will cook a delicious dinner as it concerns various aspects of life. Now I am providing such trivial examples. He does not need anybody's help, we should get off his back, he can repair his bike. I say: » OK. Let's arrange for some time that you will try to do that.« And only such experiences teach them when, e.g., somebody messes up dinner or a cake […] and then we talk about it but not in a way »Well, didn't I tell you« but »you see, what was the use of it? It turns out that you cannot cook but what would have happened if you had said that you couldn't do it?« (T3)

A day care residential centre is a place where children and teenagers can meet after school – if possible, in similar age groups – to spend their free time with their counsellors in a planned way. So, it is a perfect place to implement the social and corrective work methods described above. Besides a group therapy during which children sit in a circle and talk about their personal problems and conflicts with their peers, they can do homework there, prepare meals, cook, and clean. All these activities enable counsellors to influence children constructively. The children residential care provides optimal conditions to use the corrective presence method, allows for the application of the positive feedback method as well as the organisation of social experiences.

Corrective community for children and teenagers

A residential treatment centre is a place for organising "joint actions" that include common cleaning, learning, having fun, preparing and having meals, trips, common discussions about common and mutual problems during meetings of the so-called "corrective community" (group therapy). Apart from the notions, such as the self, an act, a social interaction, and an object, the concept of "a joint action" is a central element of Mead and Blumer's analyses, and thus, of the whole symbolic interactionism (Da Silva, 2006). These common activities can be called "joint actions" because collective social actions are the result – which is high-lighted in SI – of a mutual adjustment of social actors' lines of actions. Initially the lines of children's actions in a residential treatment centre, which are often characterised by rivalry for social attention, selfishness, fear, sometimes aggression, do not match the lines of counsellors' actions. A residential treatment centre is an institution created to help problematic children adjust their own actions (lines of actions, interpretation schemes, normative models; cf., Lyman, 1988) to the lines of actions of counsellors and to the behaviour of other children. The effect of this adjustment is a common, collective, harmonious joint action. Problematic situations, conflicts are inevitable in a residential treatment centre. The planning of joint actions imposes the unity of individual lines of action. Children have to adjust to the requirements of joint actions, which include the norm of cooperation, non-aggression, self-activity or the obligation to tell the truth. Work with the use of the "corrective community" method is an example of a joint action in a residential treatment centre. One of the respondents talks about it:

We also have a corrective community that does a lot of work. What does a community do? First and foremost, the group exerts an impact on an individual, on peers. Teen-agers, at some age, when they are listening to an adult, they are thinking »Whatever you say…this stupid a… is again picking on me,« etc. But you cannot escape peer pressure. These destructive children, on the one hand, have a different sense of justice, but on the other, when they already realise these norms that are required here, when they experience that actually these rules protect them at certain difficult moments, they are able to fight for these rules and they will themselves maintain order here. And such a 'migrant' who comes here and cheeks and tries to cheat, is quickly readjusted by the group, if it is really a corrective community (…). The rules are made together with children. And there are some norms which are undisputed, about which we do not talk with children, such as the rule of non-aggression in the centre. And there are

rules that they establish, and the truth is that whatever they make, they identify with it; they comply with it more because it is theirs. We do not have cooks or cleaners here, so they together arrange work, e.g., if you do not cook, you cannot eat, there is nothing for free, if you do not clean, you must not enter this place. If you clean, you are kindly welcome. It is amazing how children know which rule they should set for whom; for example, when there is somebody new, they are more lenient, they make allowances for those who are in crises but when somebody cheats and plays tricks, they can be very strict. (T3)

A residential treatment centre becomes a place where children learn to coexist with others and follow certain rules and norms. It is not an effect of some sudden magic awakening of altruistic motivation here, but it is because children start to realise a beneficial behaviour strategy in those pro-social actions. One of the respondents, who works in this institution that has been bringing up and socializing the same children for many years, starting with a residential treatment centre (first for kindergarten children, then primary school children and later for high school teenagers) and then in a youth club, highlights this evolutionary developing process of the adoption of certain social attitudes in the centre (e.g., the importance of keeping a promise, conscientiousness, responsibility for a set task, consistent action). These are the social attitudes that determine the development of vital life skills at a later stage of life (competence in action, professional offer of services):

(…) graduation from a school, education, some job – these are commonly accepted determinants of success; however, in order to achieve it, one must change one's attitude towards these issues. There will not be any long-lasting effects if basic skills are not developed. If somebody cannot work, if they cannot be conscientious, if they do not take responsibility for cheating, even if they finished the best vocational classes or schools, they will simply not make any use of it. At a first chance, they will spoil everything. I do not know how, they will cheat their boss, they will go mad, shout at somebody, get drunk. These are the problems they cannot solve. So, our work with children focuses on the change of their attitude to each other, to people, things, education, different issues and then on the development of their skills or, if there is enough time for it, we try to do both simultaneously. (T2)

Conclusion

Some lawbreaking and antisocial behaviours are strictly of biological provenance, so they do not have a symbolic basis. However, even in such cases, individuals who thoughtlessly orient their social actions have a chance to change their attitudes with the help of certain people, so that they can obtain a different perspective, adopt proper definitions of the situation, activate the significance that will dramatically change their behaviour. A counsellor as a significant other is able to instil definitions of the situation in his/her clients, the ideas of how one can and should take social actions in accordance with social standards. The four methods described in the article in the field of interventions and social work are ways of creating personality and as such these are the methods that the application of SI and SAT helps us understand better.

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