Biographical Research of Youth Unemployment

Biografsko raziskovanje nezaposlenosti mladih

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Abstract

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The article analyzes how the young unemployed grapple with the experience of unemployment and how it influences the building of their identity. Since in the society of work, employment stands for the youth's identity centre, the experience of unemployment represents a risky situation for an individual. The author deals with the question of how social pedagogy can offer the possibility to form a 'non-professionally-oriented life course', where the young can try out new forms of social integration.

Key words: society of work, identity and unemployment, social networks, social capital.

Povzetek

Prispevek analizira, kako se mladi nezaposleni spoprijemajo z izkušnjami brezposelnosti in kako ta vpliva na graditev njihove identitete. Ker v družbi dela zaposlitev pomeni središče identitete mladostnika,

je izkušnja brezposelnosti za posameznika tvegana situacija. Ukvarjamo se z vprašanjem, kako lahko socialna pedagogika ponudi mladostnikom možnosti za oblikovanje nepoklicno usmerjenega življenjskega poteka, kjer mladi lahko preizkušajo nove oblike socialne integracije.

Ključne besede: *družba dela, identiteta in nezaposlenost, socialne mreže, socialni kapital.*

Introduction

The processes of societal modernization in the sense of 'reflexive modernization' (Beck, 1986) and 'late modern' (Giddens, 1991) manifest themselves in the de-standardization of the transitions between statuses in the course of life (Hurrelmann, 1994). In modern society, the transitions between education – employment – retirement statuses represented the normal course of an individual's biography. The foundation for the transition between statuses was employment, representing the basis for social integration. Nowadays, the flexibility between the labour market and education leads to the individualization and de-standardization of the normal courses of life, which means that the dynamics of transitions between statuses can no longer be understood within the categories of institutionalized normal life courses; it is the subjective perception and dynamic of the transitions that is in the foreground. For social pedagogy, it is important to understand the individualized ways young people cope with transitions, their competence and their sources. On a subjective level, individualization causes increasingly higher levels of uncertainty and breaks, which the individual has to control and reflect within the biographical course. Individualization is closely connected with self-thematization, where young people themselves have to establish their perceptions of reality, their decisions and their ways of dealing with uncertainty and be responsible for them. The biographical perspective of an individual is closely connected with existing institutional structures of a life course, and represents a biographical construction of reality. The increased complexity of the transitions is also reflected in the subjective coping strategies.

The subject-oriented research of transitions is concerned with the analysis of subjective biographical uncertainty and coping strategies, as well as the analysis of the socioeconomic conditions and institutional regulatory processes.

The presented research "The Concepts and Strategies of social-pedagogical Interventions in the Field of social Youth Exclusion"[1] sought to explore the ways in which work is subjectively experienced in the biographies of young people, what kind of experiences they had with unemployment and what the subjective coping strategies they used to deal with uncertainty. Twenty young people, both male and female, aged between 18 and 25 during the time of their unemployment were included in the research. Qualitative methodology was used, namely interviews, with the purpose of answering the following questions:

1. How do young people experience employment, what meaning do they attribute to it in their life biography?
2. What strategies do they use to cope with unemployment and how do they integrate them into their views on life?
3. What role does social pedagogy play in offering protection, support and aid to young people who have experienced unemployment?

Example:

Ivan is 22 years old and is currently unemployed. He has finished high school and was employed for a time. He had problems with drug use and lost his job. He finds it difficult to cope with unemployment because he has lost a lot of friends and is facing social isolation. The worst of it is that he 'does nothing' and feels that he is 'socially useless'. "You're nothing without a job," he says; this is why employment means a great deal to him. He lives with his parents. They offer him some support, but he has problems with his father who has lost faith in him, even though Ivan finds his loss of faith unjustified. He spends his time playing sports and looking for work. He has very high ambitions: he wants to go to university and become a translator. He sees the solution to all his problems in finding employment, which would enable him to no longer be dependent on

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his parents and lead the sort of independent life that he would find personally fulfilling – he greatly values the type of work that would be personally fulfilling and not only financially beneficial.

The experience of unemployment that Ivan is faced with is similar to the experiences of many unemployed young people nowadays. The fear of unemployment represents a substantial burden for today's youth. In a young person's biography, unemployment stands for a critical life situation because work represents the central element of an individual's identity.

For the majority of the interviewed youths, work represents the possibility of self-realization, social recognition and social inclusion. The consequences of unemployment that they experience are social isolation, surviving on the existential minimum and prolonged dependence on their parents: "Without a job you are nothing and you feel socially useless. I have lost a lot of friends and that's why it's all harder to deal with." (Tomaž, age 23).

It is interesting to find that with the growing level of unemployment, the meaning attributed to work, to jobs that are fulfilling and enjoyable to the youth, is also becoming more highly valued. For young people work represents both an existential foundation as well as meaningful fulfilment in life. The interviews showed that the majority is oriented towards traditional professional biography, where one's profession is the central element of identity; due to the current changes this results in a risky situation for young people.

For most of the young people that were interviewed, being excluded from work has a significant impact on their sense of self-worth: they feel 'socially useless'. The strategies young people employ to deal with the experience of unemployment can be divided into productive and unproductive. The unproductive approach is evident in Ivan's case: he says that he is haunted by the feeling that he 'does nothing', which shows that he has not organized his time and his activities, besides sports, which he sees as relaxation. He has subordinated all of his life goals to finding employment, but does not do anything to achieve this goal. His goals are idealistic – he wants to go to university, but he does not actually do anything to get there. The other group faces their problems in a more productive manner, particularly in trying to achieve better employment conditions by furthering their education or by retraining.

Social networks play a significant part in facing and conquering the experience of unemployment. For most of these young people, the main source of social support are their families; however, it is also evident from the provided example that the family is also a source of stress and strain, as Ivan's relationship with his father is not ideal due to his drug use and unemployment. He has also lost a lot of friends and feels socially isolated. He perceives his unemployment as his own personal problem, which he can solve by persistently looking for 'a job'.

Employment-oriented personal biography is a risky situation because young people who build their identity exclusively on the basis of gaining employment and have no other opportunities to develop their identities quickly find themselves in an identity crisis. They build their identity on the basis of a firmly fixed future goal; however, if for whatever reason they do not achieve this goal, they will most probably be faced with a great deal of disappointment.

Ivan is an example of a youth who built his identity on the idea of a profession, which is why unemployment is an extremely straining experience for him.

Identity is not something we are born with – it is something that develops in the process of living. We see identity as a progressive process of shaping one's own life, which is constructed anew in every daily situation. Additionally, identity is always a process of adapting, negotiating with different demands. Nowadays, the open identity project is at the forefront, where the identity project itself is an imaginary 'fixed point, which constantly changes' (Keupp, 2002).

At this point we are faced with the question of how a youth can establish a satisfactory identity at all. A satisfactory identity enables the individual to reach a certain level of coherence, authenticity, recognition and ability. Keupp (Ibid.) stresses the fact that subjective abilities and sources are necessary for a satisfactory identity. These are:

• A satisfactory identity requires material sources. In modern society, which is ideologically, politically bound exclusively to the regulatory power of the market, this causes social differences to increase. Because of the process of individualization, social questions have also become individualized; an individual must seek solutions for his situation in life on his own.

- A satisfactory identity requires social inclusion and recognition. Employment does not only mean acquiring material sources, but also achieving social inclusion, recognition, a social network. Because of the increasing erosion of traditional communities and increasing levels of unemployment, the significance of other types of social networks – friends, neighbourhood, self-help groups, who can offer a young person social inclusion and recognition – is also increasing. It is with people from the fringe that the lack of these sources becomes apparent.

- An individual in the modern world requires the abilities to negotiate with different possibilities and identities. Different partial worlds call for the individual to master different roles and behavioural patterns; he has to be able to handle different situations, roles, demands. This calls for a certain level of sensibility, reflexivity and the ability to resolve conflicts.

- An important psychological requirement for establishing a satisfactory identity is the subject's ability to continually adapt to different situations and people, and not function on the basis of the principle of 'all or nothing'.

An individual requires sources to establish his everyday identity. It does not matter what sources are available to him, but how he perceives them and how he is able to use them. Bourdieu (in Keupp, 2002) has developed the concept of sources as different forms of capital: economic, cultural and social sources. Economic sources are material sources, which an individual requires to build his identity. These sources are monetary, for example, money, salary, property etc. Bordieu describes three forms of cultural sources, namely incorporated, objective and institutionalized capital. Incorporated capital is represented by internalized characteristics and attitudes; acquiring such capital requires time and energy (for example, education). Objective cultural capital comprises of books, art; institutionalized capital is represented by awarded certificates and distinctions. Social sources represent the entirety of current and potential sources, connected with a network of more or less institutionalized relations of mutual acquaintance. For identity building it is important how each individual is able to transform certain forms of capital into others, for example, how he is able to use or exchange his social sources for material or cultural sources.

According to Bourdieu's theory (in Keupp, 2002), one thing that is important for the unemployed young is under what conditions they are able to transform their social capital into economic capital –the possibility of employment or other forms of ensuring their own existence that are unrelated to work.

Unemployment is a straining and stressful experience; how can the experience of being unmotivated and the experience of risk be counteracted by different forms of positive experiences, developing new levels of competence for dealing with risks productively? The ways in which unemployment will affect an individual on a psychosocial level depend on the interpretation patterns and value orientation of an individual, as well as on positive activating sociability patterns. The essential finding of recent studies is that subjective experiences of unemployment cannot simply be mechanically mirrored from an objective structure of the strains and stresses. Studies of unemployment that have thus far focused mainly on the strain discourse are turning out to be very limited and insufficient in view of the realization that the levels of strain are very different. Focusing on sources and researching social networks is brining the concept of social networks as socio-political ways of dealing with youth unemployment to the forefront.

Modern societies have established a cultural model, according to which professional work is the subjectively purposeful centre of life activity. Consequentially, professional work has become the central medium of social inclusion, recognition, contacts and identity development of an individual. On the other hand, this process of establishing a cultural model of a society of work has made the exclusion from the society of work not only the basis for more poverty, but also for the loss of identity (Scherr, 1991). Unemployment results in the loss of material existential security and social position, and precisely because these economic and cultural models have been joint, unemployment also represents an existential risk to an individual (Ibid.). Due to the appearance of individualization and the erosion of collective patterns, unemployment is perceived as a person's individual fate.

Within the context of increasingly de-standardized transitions, the concept of social networks is becoming ever more important; it stresses that the socially unevenly divided sources can be mobilized. If in making transitions young people can no longer rely on traditional institutional forms of support such as school and family, they still

have social networks as a place of support and protection. Scherr (Ibid.) has developed a concept of social networks for working with the unemployed. He points out that social networks can be used as a new direction for working with the young unemployed. A social network is a composite of social relationships in which a person is included (Hurrelmann, 1994: 239). We differentiate between personal networks which concern a specific person and his relationships, and social networks which concern an entire system of relationships – a neighbourhood, a community. The basic ideas of studying social networks are founded on the following concepts:

- The more a person is invested in relationships with other people, who are important to him, the easier it is for the person to overcome critical situations in life, and the ramifications of straining situations are reduced.

- A social network functions as protection when straining situations occur; it functions as a 'social immune system' (Hurrelmann, 1994). Social networks can act as a protective system and offer the youth help in dealing with his everyday difficulties in life.

When working with young unemployed people, the relevance of social networks is apparent in the following areas:

- The development of group work, for example mutual help. Its purpose is to promote valuing non-professional work, for example upbringing and education.

- Social networks can represent an innovative and experimental field, where socially accepted, matter of course policies and behavioural patterns become relative.

- Social networks can establish new relationships outside the workplace, family or partnership.

- Within social networks, a 'non-professionally-oriented life plan' can become materially supported and socially accepted.

Within a social network, it is possible to conquer individual unemployment much more successfully because of the mobilization of social capital. Our research has shown that in conquering their unemployment, young people cite their family and friends as the main source of social protection. When it came to finding strategies for dealing with unemployment, it became apparent that they perceive unemployment as an exclusively individual problem, which can

be solved by 'working harder, being diligent and studying'. The awareness of their role in the community and alternative movements did not become apparent in our research. This can be explained by the fact that alternative forms of work for young people that would enable them to reflect on their experiences of unemployment and help them to find new forms of social inclusion are not yet organized in our area.

In his research about the effect of unemployment on identity, Keupp (2002) found that:

- In modern society, the de-standardization of professional biography is occurring. A normal professional biography as part of a professional identity almost no longer exists. A work identity is established through various projects, which continuously reinvent, change and improve.

- During the time of the erosion of those instances that would enable young people to find purpose, work is playing an increasingly important role in the formation of identity. Young people want work that would fulfil them.

- Employment defines the social position of people in society and remains the basis of an individual's identity. Unemployed people do not form their identities around their families or their free time; they base them on the absence of work and the resulting loss of purpose and social inclusion. This can have psychosocial consequences and manifest itself in destructive forms of behaviour, as well as in a rigid fixation on subjectively meaningful work. It is precisely because of a lack of work that the relevance of work for identity development increases.

Because of the high level of importance work has in the formation of a young person's identity and the simultaneously occurring erosion of the society of work, the question arises concerning possible alternatives to the society of work.

The pedagogical concept of a 'non-professionally-oriented life plan' (Krafeld, 1999) aims at enabling individuals that are excluded from work to distance themselves from a biography oriented towards a society of work. In this instance, instead of helping a youth with the integration into work, social pedagogy tries to help a young person productively cope with the situation of unemployment and enables the youth to develop his non-professionally-oriented life plan (Scherr, 1991). This type of assistance focuses on young people as productive

agents in reality, who have at their disposal the ability to 'actively shape their lives'. We have to distance ourselves from the problem of deficits, which sees the underlying cause behind unemployment in socialization and qualification deficits. These are first and foremost selection criteria, and not the cause of unemployment (Galuske, 1999). This represents a shift from focusing on the problem to focusing on the development of sources. Focusing on the problem increases a young person's feelings of helplessness and his need for help.

In this sense, assistance should focus on:

- projects focused on life rather than on the labour market;
- enjoyment and interest in becoming involved (these have to stem from the project itself and not from some imaginary future on the labour market);
- helping young people in their search for a life model (even ones that are not work-related);
- building a community and social networks, involvement in socio-political discourse about the division of labour and wealth, material security and the patterns of social inclusion (Ibid.).

Social pedagogy that is oriented in these directions should offer young people the space and support to find new patterns of social integration into society. In this sense, social pedagogy can be seen not as helping young people to integrate into the society of work, but as the answer to the social processes of modernisation and the risks of reaching adulthood.

Conclusion

The changes in the transitions of young people call for new forms of professional perception, where the differences in comparison to standardized transitions can no longer be seen within the categories of deviation, an individual's deficit and the corresponding compensation-oriented form of help. For subjectively-oriented and de-standardized transitions, a social pedagogy of transitions is required (Walther, 2007), which would create a new socio-pedagogical view of the transitions between youth and adulthood. This form of social pedagogy focuses more on biographical competence and potential for dealing with uncertainty, than on deficits. Pedagogically, social

pedagogy of transitions represents a shift away from compensational upbringing and education and towards helping with acquiring biographical competence. We see biographical competence as the reflection and formation of relations between social demands and possibilities, particularly on the labour market, and personal needs and interests in the framework of an individual's life course (Ibid.).

The basic premise of this kind of social pedagogy is the participation of the users, their own motivation and involvement in their transitions. Participation means:

- voluntary involvement and the possibility of choosing between various options, where the individual can identify with his own choice of profession and his own manner of transition;
- the flexibility of the offers for the individual formation of educational processes;
- the availability of time and space for the individual to test, develop informal learning;
- recognizing the individual as a unique subject with his own professional demands and life plans, instead of perceiving him in terms of socialization deficits;
- the key relevance of trusting the experts, who are open to various biographical courses;
- perceiving the young person as a 'social partner' in the socio-political institutions of the market and help providers. (Ibid.)

The subject-oriented research of transitions sheds light on and analyzes biographical perceptions and transition strategies, as well as institutional and socioeconomic processes. De-standardized transitions call for the competence for independence, for self-formation, for choosing between various options, where young people have to arrange their transitions independently. For this they require the type of protection and support that will take their requirements seriously.

The subject-oriented research is based on the individual's sources, which are overlooked within traditional institutional logic of help if the assistance is based on a traditional understanding of social integration where only employment is necessary to achieve successful integration. This form of help overlooks other possibilities of social integration that concern transitions, as well as the individual's subjective biographical perceptions and ways of coping.

The biographical research of young people's situation in life and their manners of transition, their sources and coping strategies opens a door for the possibility of a social pedagogy of transition, which would integrate into its repertoire of provided assistance a reflection of social changes and the subjective perceptions of young people, where the way institutions function is reflected in the biographical perception of reality. Compared to more traditional forms of employment assistance, when dealing with the transitions of young people, this kind of social pedagogy focuses more on the needs and subjective experiences of young people and on offering institutional forms as opportunities for social integration regardless of employment.

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